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Project Aurora
Elyria, Ohio

PROJECT AURORA, ELYRIA, OHIO

Project Aurora was designed to test library service by caseload. Caseload is a word that has social work connotations, but the intent was only to employ a social work technique, not a social work philosophy, to library service. Funds for the project were provided by the State Library of Ohio under Title I of the Library Services and Construction Act. The test site was Elyria, Ohio, a city of 56,000 twenty-five miles west of Cleveland. A socio-economic cross section of this city was selected for the project including 1,000 families totaling approximately 3,600 to 4,000 people. The rest of the city functioned as a control group.

A professional librarian, Joan Schmutzler, was hired as project director, together with a secretary and four fieldworkers. No money was allocated for rent or building and only a limited amount of office equipment was purchased; investment was in people instead. Each of the four fieldworkers, following their training period, was assigned 250 families to serve directly. The fieldworkers operated out of the main library as an interface between the library's professionals and their caseload.

None of the fieldworkers were professional librarians. They had a variety of backgrounds and experience. Their main characteristics were an interest in people and a similarity to the people with whom they worked. In contrast to other outreach programs, they neither floated in a neighborhood nor were they assigned a fixed base of operations like a storefront or a community center. They were client-centered in their service philosophy.

The operating procedure was simple. The fieldworker would visit each family, determine interests, explain the resources and services that the library offered, and make an appointment to return approximately one month later. This was not to be a pick-up and delivery service. If clients needed something quickly it would be mailed to them, otherwise it would be brought during the next appointment. Reference questions would be referred directly to the reference department, which would telephone the answer to the patron.

The project was not aimed solely at the disadvantaged. It sought to determine whether service by caseload had broad, general

application, particularly in communities which were experiencing rapid change either through urban renewal, highway construction, or dynamic growth.

Often a branch library could change within a few years from an active, heavily used service outlet to one which was poorly used. This could result in a continuing financial drain for a library system and a reduction in its flexibility in meeting the challenge of today's shifting, urban population.

While bookmobiles offer greater flexibility than a fixed branch, many people's need for library service does not fit the bookmobile schedule. Bookmobiles also have limitations in their collections and the range of services they are capable of offering.

There have been numerous projects involving library personnel assigned to float in a neighborhood. Usually these personnel only asked patrons to visit their local branch libraries. Project Aurora differs in the sense that its personnel were trained to meet their patrons' commonplace and everyday library needs.

While professional librarians generally would have the best backgrounds to select and explain materials for a specific clientele, it would have been too costly to attempt to use them as caseworkers. In addition the question arose of whether the professional would be able to develop the necessary rapport to be fully effective. As a result, it was decided to hire people from those neighborhoods selected as targets, or people with similar socio-economic and educational backgrounds.

Those selected were trained in general library resources, services, and interviewing techniques. Following their training, they worked directly with a professional librarian coordinator who did the selection and guidance, using the information gathered by the fieldworkers. Specific questions were referred to the departments; e.g., a question involving juvenile material could be dealt with by the children's department. In short the fieldworkers specialized in people, maintaining records of reading interests and hobbies or attempting a selective dissemination of information, while the professional staff focused on materials. The fieldworker and the professional working as a team, it was hoped, would satisfy the needs of the patrons more accurately than would a chance confrontation over a service desk inside the library.

In practice the fieldworkers would start their day at 8 a.m., and spend between an hour and a half and two hours at the main library. The coordinator would aid them in selection of materials for their appointments that day. Normally, each fieldworker visited approximately 10 families each day—between 36 and 40 people. The coordinator, during that period, could in effect reach 40 families—between 120 and 160 people.

One of the features of the project was its relation to other service

agencies in the community. It was realized that the fieldworkers would encounter problems which could not be solved with library resources, so in addition to six weeks' training concerning the library and its resources and interviewing, each of the workers attended eight training sessions with United Community Services designed for labor union counselors. It was hoped this would enable them to make referrals to qualified agencies—welfare, social security, family or children's services or any of the social and educational agencies.

The anticipated need for referral has not arisen despite these precautions. To date, after more than a year's field experience, only three referrals have been made, all to the regional library for the blind. Part of this could be the result of a failure to achieve complete rapport, although the cause may be a combination of two factors. The first is the simple fact that the cross section to whom the fieldworkers were assigned did not have the blend of problems anticipated. If they had worked with a largely disadvantaged group, perhaps their experience would have been different.

The other factor concerns an element which gave the project more trouble. Librarianship is in the process of going in two directions simultaneously: (1) it is trying to simplify its procedures and requirements as much as possible, for economic reasons as well as to attract more users, and (2) librarians are becoming increasingly conscious of their need for more in-depth information about their clientele so they can more accurately meet their needs. Only the greatest care ensured that the staff gathered only enough data to do its work, so that an involvement and dependence did not develop. Contrary to common belief, people are only too willing to supply information about family and financial problems. In the fieldworkers' efforts to avoid overstepping their role, they may have purposely avoided making a referral. In many cases, the rapport achieved with their clients was hard won and to suggest a family service counselor to save a marriage would promptly destroy the relationship they achieved. On the other hand they retained sufficient knowledge of social services to supply answers to questions asked. The records are confidential, and they only contain information on interest, people in the family, their ages and names, as well as any information needed for selective dissemination of information.

In discussing the role of Project Aurora as an information service, one is not talking about an information center in terms of brick and mortar as a tangible place and so it differs considerably from other information centers. A visitor will see neither a building nor equipment—all the money is in people and their training. Their selection and training is perhaps the most crucial element in a project of this sort.

Among the major concepts learned was the shift in reference needs as rapport is gradually developed between a fieldworker and

client. Initially the questions were fairly general and traditional in the sense that they were the sort received over the reference desk every day; but as the relationship between fieldworker and client grew, the client was better able to articulate questions, and the information center was able to locate more specifically the answers to those questions. Part of this was undoubtedly due to the gradual educational process the client went through. While the fieldworker learned more about the client's library needs, the client was learning more about what the library had to offer. This leads one to believe that our present technique of reference service—the in-library call desk—is not at all suited to today's needs.

Cost must also be considered. The number of 250 families, one fieldworker for 750 to 1,000 people as a caseload, was rather arbitrarily selected. For most libraries this is not economically feasible. As the project gained experience, the members realized they were conservative in one sense, but too optimistic in another. In the particular given cross section, in neighborhoods which fall into the middle income and median educational category, the caseload could probably be expanded to 500 families (1,600 to 2,000 people) and be within the realm of economic feasibility. In disadvantaged neighborhoods a caseload of 250 families is almost too great and smaller caseloads mean more workers and hence added cost. In these areas greater familiarization with library materials is also needed, and gaining rapport is more difficult even for people who live in these neighborhoods.

Project Aurora is a worthwhile experiment in librarianship, and those who have worked on it feel it will make a meaningful contribution to the literature as more experience is gained with its technique. At the beginning of its second year, it is reaching out, and winning.