Needs Assessment Instrument Follow-Up

Throughout the training seminar in Amara there were various references to the design and use of needs assessment instruments. A translated example of a needs assessment instrument was provided in the package of seminar materials from the Thurrock Community Mothers Programme and the Ministry was given hard copies of the needs assessment instruments from the Swedish and Italian models for informational purposes. At the end of the seminar a summary was provided of the characteristics of good practice needs assessments used by the model programs. This was presented as an alternative to the Ministry’s “social inquiry” instrument that is used “for the granting of the emergency aid.” The “social inquiry” is primarily designed to gather information on eligibility to cash or social services based on data about family membership and income, housing, need, and access to other resources. Several comments were made by the participants that the purpose of the “social inquiry” instrument is, indeed, to determine eligibility and to prevent fraudulent claims for benefits. The issue of fraud, as it relates to needs assessment and eligibility, generated vigorous discussions among the participants as a major concern and problem.

The design and use of the “social inquiry” instrument sharply contrasts with the approach of intake and follow-up needs assessments used in the model programs. In the model programs, the assessment instruments used at the initial application and follow-up interviews have multiple purposes: 1) encourage open discussion with the applicant to enable a self-assessment of needs based on the applicant’s personal circumstances, 2) establish a constructive rapport between the applicant and service provider, 3) determine eligibility to agency benefits and services, 4) determine capacity for self-help, 5) assess the capacity for formal and informal support, and 6) establish individual and aggregated baseline data to be used in personal and program planning. In sum, the model program instruments are aimed at helping the applicant to feel comfortable in participating in the process of assisting her in making decisions about what she needs, what she can do for herself, and how the social service provider can assist her in helping herself. In other words, the instrument is designed to empower the applicant while assessing her needs and exploring options for both formal and informal support given her personal situation. Engaging the applicant as a full partner in the decision making process is also an effective way of reducing the incidence of fraud because there is greater likelihood that she will provide more accurate information on her situation.

A suggestion for a follow-up on needs assessment is to conduct a careful examination of the design and purpose of the “social inquiry” instrument (and any other instruments being used at intake). The examination would use the instruments made available from the Amara seminar as models of good practice. It would be most effective if any such examination included structured input from the social assistants and social workers who are engaged in direct service with mothers and families.