

The Changing Perspective of the Public Welfare  
Agency in Planning for its Senior Citizens

by Jerome Kaplan

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In June, 1950 there began an experiment by a local public welfare agency in pioneering a position unique in the United States, group work consultant, in order to implement opportunities for older people to lead more satisfying lives. The two year findings are based on the results of the leadership exercised by the Hennepin County Welfare Board, Minneapolis, Minnesota, through observation and experience, social group work process recording, and social casework records.

The task of the group work consultant was to meet the gaps in services to older people. By so doing, it has become an integral part of agency philosophy to include within its goals the additional responsibilities for preventative and rehabilitative social services not necessarily connected with direct economic and medical need as a primary public welfare function. Consequently, concrete planning focused on developing opportunities for companionship and social usefulness as well as sheer enjoyment apart from any utilitarian purpose; opportunities for working and earning commensurate with ability to do the job; and opportunities for initiating or continuing creative activities and guidance in the positive use of leisure time.

The report which reads, "Mrs. K. is lonely; very much interested in some old people's activity", is a repetitive theme crossing all economic barriers or other social distinctions. Among the goals of a public assistance agency are those designed to enable the individual to maintain his dignity, prevent the loss of needed manpower to society and to keep assistance expenditures from rising unnecessarily. These are intimately related to work opportunities. Yet, the challenge of an older age cannot be dealt with merely through meeting the economic wants of man. We should also bring the much needed sense of usefulness to older people through recreational as well as work programs. The public welfare agency

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is entrusted with working with all its old age assistance recipients beyond monetary aid. When the need is established, their interests are explored and stated - then the agency should promote the meeting of these needs.

On the other hand, the public agency has imposed upon it the responsibility not to segregate the recipient of old age assistance from the community. Rather, in promoting their social needs, the agency should recognize that all people - regardless of economic status - have these needs in varying degrees. Any implementation by the public assistance office to meet the desires of people on old age assistance toward awakening or reassuring a feeling of social usefulness should carefully focus toward integrating these people into the regular channels of community life.

Thus, our agency has theorized that to meet the social needs of only old age assistance recipients is to set up an artificial and harmful barrier; that to decrease the economic load of those on old age assistance a comprehensive approach must be undertaken to include all older adults; that to insure mental well-being and utilize our knowledge of psychogenic illness, there can be no separation of the economic indigent from the mass.

The public welfare agency through its old age assistance program is in an advantageous position to spot the needs of a large segment of the population past 65 years. Its social workers are keenly alert to clues pointing toward community progress. Subsequently, reacting to these clues, the group work consultant took the role of community organizer, stimulator, coordinator and group worker to interest existing organizations to evaluate present programs and initiate group activity for people after age 60. Within two years the number of community senior adult clubs rose from 3 to over 30, the number of participating members from 250 to over 3,000; the number of camps offering senior age camping periods grew from 1 to 6 - while campers increased from 30 to 300, and two day camps were organized. The number of nursing homes being visited on

a weekly scheduled basis increased from 3 to 15; the number of home-bound older adults being visited on an organized basis apart from sectarian or fraternal auspices increased from none to 50. Upwards of 10,000 old age assistance referrals were made to these group type outlets in two years. (The average county OAA case-load has been 12,000.) Approximately 15% of these referrals are now active in groups. Almost the same number (1500) and 50% of the total participating in clubs are self-supporting apart from public assistance. The number of people receiving public aid in the various groups ranges roughly from 5 to 75% of the membership of each respective club. It is especially important to note that the welfare agency is not a sponsoring body, but is the stimulator for recognized institutions like the recreation commissions, the churches, the schools, the libraries, the settlement houses.

Qualitative associations for older people are perhaps even more important than quantitative opportunities. The announcement of the opening of a multi-purpose community senior citizen center to coordinate, supplement and improve existing group and individual opportunities in Hennepin County (Minneapolis), Minnesota, is a further step to achieve this goal. Again, the group work consultant, acting on behalf of the Hennepin County Welfare Board, served as the catalyst in the joining of the two sponsoring organizations.

Since a further mandate upon the public welfare agency is research in the aging process, an experimental design titled "A Study of the Effect of Adequate Leisure Time Activities for Old Age Assistance Recipients on the Medical Costs for Old Age Assistance Recipients" is being contemplated this coming year, based on the previous year's development. This is a step to prove or disprove the belief that medical costs will level off or decline if a thorough social casework and social groupwork approach were used. Case records have pointed to instances like Mrs. N., who had no incentive to live, refusing to follow medical advice for both her physical and imaginary ailments until she became interested in a

neighborhood club. Group records have demonstrated how some older people have 'found their place' through the group, like 74 year old Mr. O., who turned a latent interest in photography into his secondary occupation.

It is impossible for a person to adjust to a group if the group refuses to adjust to him. A major group in society is industry. With the philosophy of the Hennepin County Welfare agency aimed toward meeting a challenge prior to its development into a problem of major dimensions, it was inevitable that the group work consultant would devote some time to industry and its aging worker. Included among the subjects discussed with local personnel leaders were compulsory retirement, research into the type of jobs in which older workers function effectively and pre-retirement and post-retirement counseling. Group type activity for their retired employees and those nearing retirement has been especially appealing to the 25 firms visited to date. Several are now laying the foundation for this type of program.

Experience has demonstrated that a public welfare agency is in an advantageous position to promote activities for older people, to coordinate existing community facilities, and to establish new services where the need arises. As a result, opportunities for quantitative and qualitative associations through group life have been enormously increased in the county; the many and specific organizations of the community have become more aware of the phenomena and challenge of aging; industry has increasingly recognized its responsibility in planning with the older adult.

The public welfare agency must accept the challenge of aging and activate its philosophy of serving older people, through cooperation with the entire community and through providing leadership wherever necessary. This is its changing perspective.

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