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MODEL FOR LANE COUNTY SERVICE CENTERS

Neighborhood service centers are an integral part of the Community Action Program. These centers are established in target areas where poverty predominates. They bring members of low income groups together with representatives of agencies which have the resources to help them. From a convenient central location in the neighborhood, they extend a variety of services to nearby families. Centers may house as well as integrate such varied activities as a day care program, a health service, an employment information and testing unit, adult literacy classes, classes for home makers, legal aid services and a housing clinic.

Neighborhood service centers are generally staffed by local managers who are assisted by aides recruited from the poor. Centers are the focal point of effective Community Action Programs and headquarters for the neighborhood workers who serve as a vital link between the program and the poor.

Theory of a Service Center

In principle, each neighborhood service center should do the following:

- (1) Work in close cooperation, as far as feasible, with all services existing in the neighborhood.
- (2) Offer space for the use of workers from other agencies.
- (3) Extend "reaching-out" services to the residents of the neighborhood.
- (4) Depend on the participation of deprived neighborhood residents in the planning, development and conduct of the center's programs.

In establishing the center, the staff will set up a base of operation, develop working relationships with the residents of the neighborhood, begin to locate resident leaders and recruit neighborhood aides. Neighborhood centers must have physical proximity to the people they serve. They must be located in the neighborhood at a convenient focus of the community.

Pooling Services

The development of neighborhood service centers should be coordinated with appropriate federal, county and local agencies as well as community action groups. Such pooling of services will make available to citizens a meaningful

program to improve their vocational, economic, and social status.

State services in the center could be drawn from the following elements of government: Employment, Rehabilitation, Veterans Affairs, Corrections, Motor Vehicles, Fair Employment Practices Commission, Public Health, Apprenticeship Standards, Office of Economic Opportunity, Youth Authority, Mental Hygiene, Social Welfare.

Every effort should be made to encourage participation by appropriate non-State agencies. Examples of agencies which could place useful representatives in the multi-service center include the public schools, law enforcement agencies, county welfare departments, private social service agencies, community action projects, legal aid, health departments and housing authorities. Local service agencies should be invited to join in the multi-service center operation. In any case where this is not feasible center managers should work to promote mutual understanding of the available services of each such agency and integrate State and local operations as closely as possible.

In the centers service workers should be grouped into functional teams which include representatives of employment, rehabilitation, health and welfare. Such teams will provide a coordinated approach to the multiple problems of individuals. These teams should be aided by a support group including liason aides or staff workers from other State departments and from local governmental or volunteer agencies.

Functional teams are designed to eliminate the endless referral of persons seeking help and the demoralizing effect of repeated and fruitless interviews with a never-ending series of specialized workers. Direct services will be provided in most centers to accomodate the individual's problems and counseling and referral services will be available from those agencies which do not provide direct local services, such as Social Welfare.

The Agency Problem

The purpose of the neighborhood service center, and its primary focus, is the provision of services, not merely the coordination of agencies. The service center must exist primarily as a vehicle for people and not as a convenient clearing house for agencies. It is important for agencies to recognize that what is best for the individual and his family is most important--not what is convenient, customary, or easy for the agency.

Agencies have become institutionalized. They are no longer responsive to needs. So the neighborhood service center must take a step backwards and concentrate on providing services--and satisfying needs. Each neighborhood service center must be prepared (and equipped) to change the institutional pattern of services provided by community agencies--to break out of the old institutionalized way of doing things--which is largely mechanical and by rote, and concentrate on fulfilling needs. This necessitates changing the way in which agencies operate. When a poor woman needs shoes for her children, the center must not send her to another agency. It must get some shoes for her.

These must be "can do" people.

The establishment of service centers must have top priority. These are the one agency that can coordinate all programs directed to the poor, and which can bring the poor to the poverty programs and channel information back to their directors on problems and effectiveness of their programs. This is the grassroots level, where organization is paramount.

Operating the Service Center

In supplying services, the neighborhood service centers might want to adopt the "Welcome Wagon" approach and act more like a grange than a community agency. Besides the usual services, the service center might provide a big, friendly, overblown welcome room where neighborhood residents could gather. The center might also be provided with simple things such as a bank of extra shoes and clothes. At all peril it is necessary to avoid a service center which looks like the waiting room of an airport--a big impersonal room with rows of little cubicles on one side representing different agencies competing for service.

Consistency is important, too. Programs and institutions must be continuous and continuing. In too many programs there is a lack of permanency. Clients say, "Yes, but how long will you be here? I have lived here all my life and in six months, or a year or two, when you are gone, where will I be? Who will look after me then?" The service center must be a permanent establishment. It must become, for the people in the neighborhood, "Our creation, our place, our service center."

The center should be open day and night, 7 days a week if possible. It cannot simply keep agency hours (9 - 5). At the very least there should be an emergency 24 hour phone. If a woman calls late Friday night with a sick child, the center must have the facilities to do more than note down that information and wait for Monday morning, when the regular staff is in, to act.

The center must provide programs which will overcome the natural apathy of the neighborhood. But people in the neighborhood must develop these. Programs should be kept loose and unstructured, informal, to start. Friendliness and openness are prime requirements. Programs of the center will be best reviewed and evaluated by the people in the neighborhood. The manager should get them to tell him what is wrong, and let them be the ones to make things right. They must be involved if the center is to be a success.

In the long run neighborhood service centers will stand or fall on the degree to which they succeed in satisfying long-established unfulfilled needs. If centers and their staffs are not accepted by their neighborhoods, if they do not succeed in providing necessary services and satisfying needs, then the most ingenious programs and gifted staff cannot save them from failure.