

COMMON HUMAN NEEDS

AN INTERPRETATION FOR STAFF IN PUBLIC ASSISTANCE AGENCIES



FEDERAL SECURITY AGENCY
SOCIAL SECURITY BOARD
Bureau of Public Assistance

PUBLIC ASSISTANCE REPORT No. 8

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United States Government Printing Office
Washington : 1945

FOREWORD

The Social Security Act establishes a framework for the partnership of the Federal Government and the States in providing financial assistance to large groups of individuals who temporarily or permanently lack the means of livelihood. This is an expression of a democracy's concern that its human resources be conserved, that opportunities for self-development and contribution to family and community life be safeguarded. It is a recognition of the destructive effects of economic deprivation upon human achievement. The objective of meeting need in a way which will be acceptable, and therefore most helpful, to the individual requires a staff with conviction regarding the social purpose of this government service based on human rights and an expanding recognition of common human needs.

Providing assistance sympathetically and using the agency's and other community resources fully to meet the individual's needs in his social situation require that staff understand the effect of economic need on other areas of an individual's normal life. In a money economy, loss of the usual financial resources and application for assistance can immediately affect the individual's capacity to deal effectively with everyday affairs of his life and can modify his opportunities for physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual development. Changes associated with his need for assistance may alter his status and role in the family group. A public assistance program, therefore, must understand and deal with the whole gamut of different reactions of people to a situation which threatens their basic independence and the normal pattern of their family and community relationships.

It is, therefore, essential that public assistance staff have a general understanding of common human needs and behavior as well as of economic and social factors in the community which affect the individual. Supervisors and training consultants in State agencies have emphasized the need for training materials which would widen and deepen the staff's understanding of individuals and would form the basis for developing skill in administering services which intimately touch people's lives. To meet these urgent requests, the present discussion of common human needs has been prepared by Charlotte Towle in consultation with the staff of the Bureau. The document was developed in Technical Training Service of the Bureau of Public Assistance as a part of its regular services to States in promoting the training of staff. Supervisory personnel and persons with special responsibility

for staff training will find the material of particular value in planning and conducting training sessions as well as in the less formal day-to-day individual and group conferences. Only as this content stimulates study, becomes a basis for discussion, and is thoughtfully applied, will it fully realize its educational aim.

April 1945.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Grateful acknowledgment is made to Jane M. Hoey, Director, Bureau of Public Assistance, who read this discussion and gave thoughtful criticism. I wish to express deep appreciation to Agnes Van Driel, Chief of the Technical Training Service, and to the members of her staff, Cordelia Trimble, Dorothy Lally, and Thomasine Hendricks, for clarifying discussions in our many consultations. I am particularly indebted to Miss Hendricks who has given much time and thoughtful help in the final assembling of the material and in the preparation of the bibliography. I am indebted also to Martha Phillips, Helen Dart, and other members of the regional public assistance staff in Chicago, as well as to staff members of the several divisions of the Bureau in Washington who made very helpful suggestions. I acknowledge also the invaluable help of Mary Ross, Chief, Division of Publications and Review.

I am under obligation to Karl de Schweinitz, American Council on Education, as well as to several colleagues outside the Social Security Board for careful reading and thoughtful comments: Jeanette Hanford and Mary E. Rall of the Family Service Bureau, United Charities, Chicago; Helen R. Wright, Dean of the School of Social Service Administration, University of Chicago; and to Dr. Thomas M. French, Associate Director of the Institute of Psychoanalysis and Instructor in the School of Social Service Administration.

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University of Chicago,
April 1945.

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This statement is based on the conviction that public assistance services achieve their broad social purpose only when those who administer them understand the significant principles which make for sound individualization in a program based on right. Public programs are administered by humans for humans. Therefore, among other orientations, some understanding of common human needs and some comprehension of basic principles of human behavior are essential. In attempting to discuss this complex subject in summary fashion, the author had many reservations. It was thought, however, that there might be certain values in a presentation oriented to public assistance services and their meaning to people.

The general purpose of this discussion is threefold: to convey a limited content of knowledge of normal human behavior; to encourage consideration of the import of some of our statutory provisions and agency policies in the light of this understanding—not merely what we are doing *for* people but what we are doing *to* them is a question which should be uppermost in the minds of persons responsible for administering public assistance; and within the framework of public assistance, to help supervisors and workers better understand people, so that they may administer assistance services with reference both to right and to need. Insofar as the worker's understanding of human needs and human motivations is deepened, she may be stimulated to evolve ways of helping which strengthen the individual.

From administrator to case worker, we are administering a program in which many of the statutory provisions have been inherited from the past and in which agency policies are colored by outmoded conceptions of what is good for individuals and for society. If the institutions and agencies established to serve mankind are not to lose identity with people, becoming self-perpetuating and rigidly unsuited to human needs, then they must continuously have the breath of human life breathed into them. What is this breath of life? It is a basic understanding of individuals, a growing comprehension of their common needs, of their behavior motivations, and of the factors and forces which shape men to socialized and unsocialized ends.

It is to be hoped also that this discussion will point the need for creative effort to make the most of our more progressive statutory provisions. Frequently, statutes intended to safeguard the individual's and the community's welfare have been interpreted in such a way as to defeat their purpose. Interpretations have sometimes been restrictive, and sometimes there has been rigid adherence to the letter of the law, rather than regard for its spirit. Understanding of the common needs of the individual and of the decisive import of individual well-being for the good of society may lead to the formulation of policies which

more adequately interpret the law's intent. Since some aspects of our statutory provisions, and perhaps more often our entrenched policies, have not kept pace with social change or with current understanding of human nature, we have struggled to administer misconceptions from the past in as corrective a way as possible until the time when we can effect basic changes. Perhaps this discussion may reinforce such efforts in the direction of basic change, through leading to critical evaluation of the effect of legal provisions and policies on our services and on the people for whom our help is intended.

If this discussion gives greater significance to the relationship between public assistance programs and the growth of the individual, it may enable supervisors to help workers use the agency more positively, more flexibly, and more resourcefully, from the initial service of helping the applicant establish eligibility through all the other services indicated in individual instances. Insofar as it contributes to an understanding of basic needs and problems that grow out of human relationships, and to an appreciation of the various appropriate ways in which different people meet and deal with the same events and circumstances, it should help the worker to individualize the process of establishing eligibility and to differentiate need for other services. A worker with this understanding should be less inclined to impose services and to interfere with the recipient's right than one who has little comprehension of the meaning of the individual's response or of the significance of what he says when he applies for assistance.

Furthermore, if this presentation deepens the supervisor's understanding of human motives and of principles of personality growth, it may contribute to the supervisor's understanding of the worker's response to the impact of work which at times makes heavy emotional demands on the worker. This understanding may throw light on the worker's learning response and thus enable the supervisor to advise and to guide the worker more patiently and more objectively. In a discussion of qualities needed by workers in public programs, it has been said, "What is involved is not a detached or abstract interest but an attitude and a feeling that can be the basis of a disciplined skill exercised in a setting of policy and organized procedure designed for human service."¹ "Liking and concern for people" which hold amid "disadvantageous circumstances" in which the individual may respond in baffling ways, ways different from the worker's conception as to how he should respond, may represent, in a few people, an inherent capacity for understanding. By and large, however, a "quick and vivid interest" in people, together with a liking for them regardless of circumstances or response, derives in part from, and can be greatly increased by, understanding that is based on knowledge. The purpose of this presentation is to contribute in some small measure to that understanding.

¹ de Schweinitz, Karl. "Education for Social Security," *The Educational Record*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (April 1944), pp. 142-153.