FOREWORD: MEETING THE DIVERSE NEEDS OF THE POOR

*Harry Specht**
*David Link***
*Gregory Evans****

Forums such as this develop our understanding of current efforts to bring about positive change for America's poor. The *Journal*'s compilation and dissemination of important, thoughtful essays on poverty is laudable.

The one thing that is clear about the poor and the homeless is that their problems are multi-faceted. No one theory or group can provide all the solutions. People are poor and homeless for a wide variety of reasons, and they need different kinds of help. Providing more income assistance will not cure poverty, and providing more housing will not remedy homelessness. Neither the public nor the private sector can find solutions without the cooperation of each other. Since the sources of poverty and homelessness are varied, the poor and the homeless have needs that are personal to each individual or family. Basic needs are food, shelter and clothing. Some need medical care, mental health counseling and medication, legal aid, benefits counseling, job training, job and housing placement assistance, alcohol and other drug abuse counseling, literacy and other education assistance, day care and a wide variety of other social services. The obligation to provide for all of these needs is not simply based on charity or government largess. The obligation is a matter of justice, remembering that justice is not simply treating everyone equally, but treating everyone according to their needs.

There should be little question of the right of every individual to an adequate standard of living, and the duty of every citizen to support that communalistic value. Our Declaration of Independence states clearly that certain truths are self-evident: that all men "are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness." The Universal Declaration of Human Rights makes much the same guarantee; "Everyone has the right to life, liberty and the security of person." That same Declaration defines the right to life; "Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and welfare of himself and his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control."

---

* Dean, School of Social Welfare, University of California, Berkeley. B.A., City College of New York, 1951; M.S.S.A, Western Reserve University, 1953; Ph.D., Brandeis University, 1964.

** Dean, Notre Dame Law School. B.A., J.D., University of Notre Dame, 1958, 1961.

*** Deputy Counsel, National Coalition for the Homeless. B.S., University of Southern California, 1984; M.S.W., University of California at Berkeley, 1986; J.D., Notre Dame Law School, 1989.

You will see in the pages that follow that much research focuses upon poverty and its consequences. After reading the following papers, one could understandably conclude that because the needs of the poor are so complex, poverty is an intractable social condition about which little can be done. Indeed, the more complicated something becomes, the less likely it is that a consensus will develop that will allow the community to take steps to secure relief. Complexity thus becomes an excuse for inaction or acquiescence.

For example, there now exists in our country mass homelessness so pervasive that it is unprecedented in American history. Not since the Great Depression have we been confronted with over two million homeless people in our nation. Today, the homeless include children and families, deinstitutionalized mental patients, Vietnam veterans, chronic alcoholics, the unemployed, and other unfortunate people. Yet while the solution to pervasive homelessness is not simple, complexity should not become an excuse for inaction.

Hopefully the solutions and proposals offered in the following articles will elicit debate and criticism and, ultimately, positive action. Many people who abhor injustices such as homelessness or poverty may sincerely disagree about practical approaches to achieve justice. Although the following papers present divergent views, the changes they propose in social welfare policy merit consideration. It would be a shame if some of the innovative proposals contained in this issue of the *Journal* go unused because poverty seems implacable.

You will see in this issue of the *Journal* articles dealing with many complex questions of law, morality, economics, wage policy, and human development. The authors of these papers lean toward a communalistic view of social welfare; that is, they tend to believe strongly that the community is responsible for the welfare of its citizens including, for example, seeing that children are properly cared for, that able-bodied welfare recipients work, and that low-wage earners are protected. There are many other legal scholars who would take a more individualistic perspective: for example, that welfare programs encourage too high a degree of intrusiveness by the state in family affairs, that it is best to leave the determination of wage levels to the free market, and that workfare programs deprive poor mothers of freedom of choice.

Whatever one's views on these matters, all would certainly agree that social welfare in modern society is now a major institution that confronts us with such difficult questions of public social policy that human service professionals, administrators, and policy makers who design and implement social welfare programs will increasingly deal with complex questions of law, economics, and morality. These questions are not, however, unanswerable.

As an introduction to the articles in this issue, we want to comment briefly on the development of the institution of social welfare in the United States. At the beginning of this century, the business of social welfare in the United States was largely a concern of private charities, with government involvement limited to the local level and dealing primarily with criminals, paupers, derelicts, the insane, and the feeble-minded. Up until the latter part of the nineteenth century these people were cared for indiscriminately with systems of outdoor relief (i.e., alms) and indoor relief in almshouses, lunatic asylums, and jails. Thus, the state hospitals for the mentally ill, county farms, orphan asylums, poorhouses, and charity societies represented social reform of a system that perceived dependency

and mental illness to be caused exclusively by sin, demons, and sloth. These nineteenth-century ideas form the roots of the modern welfare state and the helping professions (e.g., social work and health education) that deal with the problems of poverty and dependency.

The body of law that regulates social welfare—whether public or philanthropic—is ancient. It began in Western society with labor legislation designed to regulate the freedom of movement of the poor and working classes. A system of entitlements based on law (as distinct from charity based on obligations of the privileged classes) developed rather late in the United States. The Social Security Act of 1935[1] created a national system of entitlements to social insurance, public assistance, and unemployment insurance, and later on, for disablement and medical care for the aged, and publicly supported medical care for the poor.

The 1935 Social Security Act entitlements dealt primarily with income supports. Since 1935, however, there has developed in the United States a different but parallel set of entitlements for personal social services. Here we refer to nonmonetary provisions which are given directly to individual persons to help them carry out tasks of daily living. Such provisions include child care, foster care and adoptions, home help services, counseling (e.g., for child abusers and those with chemical addictions), and services for the invalid elderly. Until the 1960s, these kinds of personal social services were offered primarily by locally-based non-profit and for-profit agencies. However, over the last twenty-five years the government's role in the provision of these services has grown considerably.

Now that we have briefly outlined the parallel growth of income support and social service programs in the United States, we think it will be helpful in studying the following articles to draw a distinction between income support programs and personal social services. The distinction is important because it suggests that different approaches must be used in the development of social policy in respect to each of these kinds of social benefits, and that different delivery systems and systems of accountability are needed for each of them.

Income-support programs differ considerably from personal social service programs. Income-support programs involve resources that are easier to deal with than social services resources. Issues of adequacy, equity, and equality notwithstanding, *money* is a convenient, concrete resource; it is a universal medium of exchange. Dollars are dollars no matter from whom you get them or how you get them. That is not the case with the resources offered in personal social services. Social service is provided in ways that are highly symbolic and personalistic, such as support, advocacy, affection, trust, empathy, and self-sufficiency, and interventions such as counseling, home helps, and child abuse prevention.

Because of these differences between the resources used in social services and those used in income maintenance, the principles to be followed in developing and evaluating income-maintenance programs differ from those that should be followed for social services programs. These differences can be illustrated by examining four issues: financial efficiency versus social effectiveness; centralization versus decentralization; freedom of choice versus social control; and public versus voluntary and for-profit financing.

---

1. Pub. L. No. 74-271. 49 Stat. 620, 42 U.S.C. §301 et seq.

First, *effectiveness* and *efficiency* are more easily measured in income maintenance programs than in social service programs. One can calculate, for example, the financial cost and benefits to society of lowering or raising the age of retirement, or of raising or lowering a welfare benefit. However, there is no way to calculate the benefits of, say, increasing the sense of self-efficacy of frail, aged service users or of preventing child abuse. The financial *costs* of social service programs are calculable, but their *benefits* both to persons and to society are not because they are based primarily on values, beliefs, feelings, and morals.[2] Similarly, one can debate income-support decisions but not social service decisions in terms of concepts such as equity, equality, and adequacy. For example, there is no way to argue to how much happiness, mental health, self-efficacy, and self-esteem people are entitled. Even means tests aren't helpful here because the provision of social services, by definition, requires coordinated and integrated community activities that bring together facilities, professionals and other workers, and supplies and equipment into programs. The small proportion of people who could, as individuals, organize and finance these services on their own obviously don't need *socially*-provided services. Moreover, charging fees for the use of social services most often defeats the purpose of the service, which is to provide socially useful resources such as mental health and social support. These are resources that people would ordinarily not be motivated to purchase on their own, even if they could pay the price.

Because social services must be made more socially effective, policy decisions about social service programs must be supported on the basis of humanistic, communalistic, and social-nurturance values. In recent decades, there has been a considerable decline in our commitment to these values. Ideas such as *caring*, *dedication*, and *commitment* are currently more likely to be espoused by clergy than by political leaders. The community is moved considerably more by the pleas of Mother Theresa and Bob Geldof than by professionals in the social services, who are suspected of being overly generous bureaucratic dispensers of public resources.

This decline in commitment may also be occurring because local leaders are failing to become strongly involved in developing social services. To remedy that deficiency requires that those who are concerned about social services devote considerable energy to cultivating and supporting communal leadership for them. The hard, dry, scientific, data-oriented approach of social administration and appeals to large solidary groups in the national electorate will be insufficient for this task.

Second, income-support programs, unlike social service programs, are organized most effectively on a *centralized* basis. Bureaucracy and efficiency should be the hallmarks of such programs. National governments can deal more effectively than local governments with income-support problems such as regional and local differences in costs of living, because such decisions require national information and data. Special income-support needs (e.g., crises and emergencies)

---

2. Of course income support decisions are also based on values, beliefs and morals. But there are many concrete causes and consequences of these decisions to look at, which is not the case for social service decisions.

are in reality personal and family problems that should be dealt with as a social service concern locally.

In contrast to most income-support programs, social services programs are best organized locally because the resources involved tend to be personalistic and symbolic. Granted, social services programs may require national financial support to equalize costs to local communities. But high citizen participation, coordination of interagency efforts, and involvement of families, voluntary associations, and local social and political leadership are necessary for the development of such programs. In recent years there has been a great deal of interest in fostering more citizen participation in the planning and implementation of social service programs. However, most of this concern has been directed at increasing the involvement of service users and the underclass. Unfortunately, the participation and leadership of community elites (the wealthy, prestigious, and politically powerful) have been neglected, and this has certainly not served to build the kind of social and political support that is essential for the development of social services.

Third, whereas *freedom of choice* should be maximized in income-support programs, social service programs involve high degrees of *social control.* Income support programs are most efficiently and effectively organized when benefits are given in cash with a minimum of conditions. Thus, for example, the universal child benefit is the most efficient and effective means by which to prevent poverty among families that have single parents, unemployed parents, and many children. However, social services inherently require many discretionary judgments about intervention by professionals who attempt to integrate knowledge of the law, social policy, human development, and practice.

Over the course of this century, the obligations of family membership, particularly in respect to marriage and care of children and parents, have changed profoundly. These changes require increased state intervention in family affairs. Social workers and other human service personnel are vested with increasingly greater legal authority to intervene in family relationships. Social services professionals have always found such social control aspects of their work to be unattractive. These professionals have been much more strongly inclined to identify with the individualistic and autonomous role of the psychotherapist, the social critic, and the political advocate. But since the personal social services involve large elements of social control, professionals must come to terms with this function if social services are to develop.

Fourth and finally, in order to promote efficiency, equity, and adequacy, income-support programs should be *publicly offered*, whereas voluntary and for-profit financing may justifiably play a larger role in social service programs.[3] The coordination of sponsorship by government, voluntary associations, and other communal groups is necessary for the development of social service programs.

---

3. The exception for special income-support needs applies here too. Some special income-support needs—for example, in respect to particular religious, racial, and philosophical beliefs and contexts—ought to be offered voluntarily. They are more like social service programs than income-support programs.

Thus, distinctions between the income maintenance and personal social service functions of the social welfare system show that these functions should be treated quite differently in developing welfare policies and delivering services. Since the problems associated with poverty and homelessness are so complex and the solutions must be tailored to individual needs, it is unnecessary to choose sides when exploring methods of providing a just life for everyone. We need many approaches in combination. We undoubtedly need both income support and personal social service programs. We need federal, state and local governments working with for-profit and not-for-profit agencies. We need what President Bush has referred to as the "thousand points of light," remembering that the government must provide a guiding (but not blinding) beacon.

If we are to win the war on poverty, and provide every citizen with a decent standard of living, we must all pull together, constantly looking for another solution to another part of the complex puzzle. We hope the following pages make some contribution.