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SOCIAL SERVICE AND URBAN RENEWAL: A CASE ILLUSTRATION

by

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Introduction:

The city of Stamford, Connecticut has an Urban Renewal project as have most Urban centers. The Family Relocation Division of Stamford's Urban Redevelopment Commission (URC) entered into a contract with the Family and Children's Services (FCS) to provide one day a week consultation to the Relocation staff and client services to the families in the renewal area. This consultation involved in-service training programs geared toward helping the relocation staff increase their skills in identifying problems within families and in assisting families to obtain help. As a result of this consultation, the relocation workers frequently would discuss the problems of the families referred to the Family Service worker and accompany the caseworker to the initial interview.

It was the result of one such referral of a couple living in a building taken over by the URC in an area slated for redevelopment, a building euphemistically called "The Cumping Grounds", that the Family Service worker evolved a group work approach. The group included all the tenants in the building. This paper will highlight the development of this group over a two year period, focusing particular attention on the impact of the experience on the behavior of the participants. The group which developed included: Blacks, whites, Puerto Ricans; (single and married), elderly and middle aged members. Although the group work was a reality-oriented problem-solving endeavor, the therapeutic gains for the individuals were very dramatic.

Group Formation:

The social worker and the relocation worker visited Mr. and Mrs. Jones* who lived in one room inadequately furnished with a small sink, hot plate, refrigerator, 2 chairs and a mattress on the floor. This couple had contact with F&CS eighteen years prior when, as a result of Mrs. Jones's hospitalization, their infant daughter was placed in a foster home. They ultimately lost custody of their child and drifted about the community until they fell under the aegis of URC and were given shelter in their present room. At the time of referral, the Jones' were far in arrears with their normal rent to URC; they had no regular source of income and had been begging from local churches for food and money. They both had serious medical problems and had not had medical attention. Following their introduction by the relocation worker, the social worker assisted the Jones' in applying for Aid to the Disabled for which they both were soon found eligible, obtaining furniture and getting medical attention. While working

on these problems, the Jones' began to talk about the dplorable conditions in the building. They noted that the other tenants were equally upset and the neighbors were fighting with each other.

The worker asked the Jones' whether they thought the other tenants would want to get together to discuss their concerns. Having experienced some significant changes in their own situation, Mr. and Mrs. Jones were beginning to feel a sense of hope that other things might also change. They were able to risk themselves, albeit tentatively, in trying to tackle problems which seemed much more difficult and compcated to them. (Scheidlinger, 1964) As a beginning, they introduced the worker to some of their neighbors to discuss the idea of a group meeting which could explore what might be done to improve conditions in the building.

The building had three stories. The first floor was a six room apartment occupied by Mr. and Mrs. Cortez and their 12 children. At this time, Mr. Cortez had been designated superintendent of the building by URC. He later separated from his family. The second floor had six aingle rooms, five of which were occupied by individual tenants, and 2 bathrooms, one of which was inoperable. The third floor was unoccupied at the time.

The Jones introduced the worker first to Miss Dean, and their conversation took place in the second floor hallway. Curiosity brought the other tenants out of their rooms to see what was happening. The worker introduced himself to the others and indicating he was interested in whether they would like to meet together to discuss their concerns about conditions in the building.

The first meeting took place in the Jones' room. Mr. and Mrs. Jones played the role of host and hostess. The other tenants brought additional chairs and the worker brought coffee. Attending this first meeting were, in addition to Mr. and Mrs. Jones, Miss Dean, Mr. Frank and Mr. Mendoza. The other two tenants on the floor, Mr. French and Mr. Ross were not available. At this point, the tenants projected much blame for their living conditions upon Mr. Cortez, the superintendant, and his family. They would not agree to inviting him to the meeting.

The focus of the meeting was a detailed listing of all their concerns about building conditions. Rats, roaches, broken windows, faulty plumbing, dirty hallways and excessive noise by the children downstairs were among the topics discussed. The worker tried to help the members develop suggestions for coping with these problems. (Goroff, 1971) The anger felt by those present resulted in suggestions ranging from revenge to keeping the Cortez family on their own floor.

"Do you think it would be helpful if the director of URC Family Relocation could attend our next meeting" asked the worker. The director had the responsibility for property maintenance. The members could not believe he would want to come to talk with them. Assuring them the director would come, the worker asked if anyone would want to ask him. The group was completely immobilized. They could not accept that someone as important as the Director

would come to talk with them, they felt they did not warrant his attention and they certainly could not bring themselves to call him. To help the members obtain some sense of their significance, the worker offered to arrange to have the Director present the following week. The group agreed. (Goroff, 1967)

It was important for the worker to begin to deal with the sense of powerlessness and orwrthlessness indicated by the members of the group. Their feelings, coupled with the reality of the conditions in the building, made them extremely angry. Frequently, they would express this anger by further breaking windows, tearing plumbing out in the bathroom and either ignoring one another or fighting with each other. Some of them teased Mr. French, "a crankly old man," by knocking on his door and running into their own rooms. This was a classic example of alienation and the displacement of anger.

The Director and Mr. Cortez were present at the next meeting. In contrast to the each with which the group members enumerated their problems at the previous meeting, this meeting was very "difficult and painful." They had difficulty verbalizing their concerns in a coherent way and the worker tried to support them by recalling what they had said the previous week. An agreement was reached that the second floor tenants would take care of their own hallway, the Director would have window screens put in immediately, have exterminators to deal with the rats and roaches and repair the bathroom plumbing. The meeting ended on a note of cautious optimism.

Between this meeting and the next week, all of the commitments made by the Director were fulfilled. The group took upon itself the task of developing a schedule for cleaning the hallway. Thus began in June of 1970 a group experience that was to have tremendous ramifications for those involved.

Group Membership: Before proceeding further, a description of the group may be useful. Mrs. Jones had a history of hospitalizations for mental illness extending back for more than twenty years. Her major symptoms included inappropriate and bizarre dress in public and hysterical episodes involving screaming and crying in the middle of the night. She was 56 years old when the group started. Mr. Jones was an alcoholic with a very spotty work history. He had cirrhosis of the liver. The Jones had not seen their own child since he was placed in a foster home. In recent years, they supported themselves by "panhandling" and doing odd jobs.

Miss Dean was a 39 year old alcoholic with cirrhosis of the liver. She had a common law marriage for nine years before it was dissolved. She had no children. Miss Dean was moved into the building after the Relocation Agency removed her from a previous home because of complaints about her cussing, fighting and being a general nuisance. About a year after the group started, it was discovered that she had grand mal epilepsy.

Mr. French was 71 years old when the group started. He was a very

pleasant person, always well dressed, spry and outgoing. Although he never married, he had fathered several children. On occasion, Mr. French would become intoxicated, fall and injure himself requiring hospitalization for several days. He could never hold on to his money for more than a few days after receiving his Social Security check.

Mr. Mendoza, a middle-aged man, was an alcoholic with a severe heart condition. When drinking, he would sometimes become enraged and destroy things in the building. When sober, he was pleasant and seemed a friendly man. He was widowed.

Group Development:

The group primarily focused on problems the members were experiencing in the "here and now". Flushed with a feeling of success, they began to establish a schedule for cleaning the hallway. During this process, the problem of drinking and now functioning well at those times came up. The members demonstrated considerable understanding and arranged for a system of substitutes when the person's schedule was not "functioning well." As their awareness of each other increased so did their concern.

The group turned its attention to the problems created by the one bathroom which had no shower curtains and had clear glass windows facing the street. Three sessions were given to this problem. One suggestion was that they each put in a sum of money to buy a curtain. Miss Dean offered to buy it and the group members suggested she hold the money. She refused saying, "No, I can't because I'll probably go to the liquor store for a bottle before I can the curtain." They suggested that someone else could hold the money and then go shopping with her. Miss Dean's frank and honest statement to the group helped establish the norm of being honest about one's problems. This pattern continued and allowed the members to discuss their concerns openly. Before any final action was taken, Mr. Mendoza surprised them by bringing in a shower curtain and donating it to the group. He also assumed the responsibility for spraying an opaque paint on the bathroom window.

The group then turned its attention to Mr. French, who used the bathroom to express his anger. He would lock himself in the bathroom for long periods and it was well known that when angry at any of the neighbors he would dirty the bathroom or be destructive to the facility in some way. They verbalized a great deal of the resentment they felt toward Mr. French. During the course of the discussion, the worker helped the members recognize how their harassment contributed to his behavior. They were able to recognize that the old man was "doing childish things" and their anger turned to sorrow.

Miss Dean, at the next meeting, informed the group that she had told Mr. French "I'm not fighting with you anymore. You're a poor old man and I'm going to take care of you." He slowly began to talk to the others when they passed in the hall. His behavior in the bathroom changed. Although we were invited to all the meetings and parties, he never attended. Yet he brought a

bottle of wine for one of the parties and gave it to Miss Dean.

In late August, the meetings shifted from the Jones' room to that of Miss Dean. This shift resulted from Mr. Jones comment that Mrs. Jones was becoming increasingly agitated and he was concerned about her upsetting the group. Miss Dean offered her room saying it wasn't fair to place the total burden on the Jones. The approach of late fall helped turn the group's attention to planning for a Christmas party. This raised the problem of a more permanent meeting place.

One of the rooms on the floor was not occupied. Mr. Jones suggested they try to obtain permission to turn it into the permanent meeting room for the group. This was unanimously accepted and Mr. Jones volunteered to go to the Family Relocation Director to ask permission for the use of the room. (Goroff, 1967) It is important to note the contrast between this situation and the earlier one during which the group members became immobilized when they were asked to invite the Director of U.R.C.

The following week, the worker was greeted in the hall by all the members and ushered into the newly cleaned and furnished community room which they had created. This marked the turning point in the group members assuming responsibility for self-direction.

The Christmas Party was a highly emotional affair. Miss Dean broke down and cried saying that in all her life this was the first Christmas tree she could say was her own. After the holidays, Miss Dean started drinking heavily and was hospitalized. While in the hospital, the group agreed to put the tree in to Miss Dean's room. (Scheidlinger, 1966)

Within six months, this collection of individuals who were initially isolated, antagonistic and powerless had developed into a cohesive group of empathetic human beings for whom life had begun to take on new meaning. The group members had become very important people to one another. (Scheidlinger, 1966) This was graphically illustrated by the feeling of guilt and mourning following the suicide of Mr. Mendoza.

Immediately after the holidays, Mr. Mendoza left to visit his brother in New York City. He returned after six months and resume his interaction with the others. The tenants in the building had now become aware of each others patterns of behavior. One Saturday, Mr. Mendoza was heard banging nails into wood. The following Sunday morning when he did not leave to go to Church, the group members called the police. After the police succeeded in breaking down the door which Mr. Mendoza had nailed shut the previous day, he was found dead of an overdose of drugs.

The group members experienced a long mourning period. Although there had been some difficult times with Mr. Mendoza only the good things were remembered. There was much concern about what problems would make a person so unhappy he would commit suicide. The worker encouraged the members to talk

out their feelings, to share their viewpoints and in the process to reaffirm the value of living. The room is still empty and is referred to a Juan's room.

The group learned in the summer of 1971 that the Relocation Agency was planning to move a Mrs. Kelly and her eight children into the third floor. They became very upset at this prospect, envisioning themselves becoming overwhelmed by children. There were already the twelve children of the Cortez family living on the first floor. They were concerned with noise and disruptions. Now their negative feelings were projected upon this new family.

During the several weeks between the time it became known that the family was due to move in until they actually arrived, group meetings were completely concerned with "kids today," "lack of discipline," "parents don't teach their kids manners," "something had to be done," "who does Urban Renewal Commission think they are to do this to us." The worker slowly began to help them recall their own earlier experiences and relationships before they organized their group. He suggested one way they might prevent problems from developing was to invite Mrs. Kelly to the group and discuss some of their concerns with her. After some initial resistance, they agreed to invite her to a meeting. There was some discussion whether to invite her before she moved in, but circumstances made the decision for them. The family moved in before the anticipated date. She was invited to attend the next meeting.

Mrs. Kelly came late to that meeting. While the group members were awaiting her arrival, they talked about her children running around. When she arrived and had been introduced to the others, she began by saying that she knew she could not always watch her eight children and that she would welcome any of them telling her children to behave. Mrs. Kelly added that if anyone was having difficulty with any of the children to talk to her because she generally believes the adults. She immediately picked up on the few tentative suggestions that her children were a little too noisy, recognizing how annoying it could be to others, and assured them she would try to take care of it. The impact of this was immediately evident. The tension evaporated and Mrs. Kelly was incorporated into the group as a full fledged member.

In contrast to the Cortez family, there has developed a very close relationship between Mrs. Kelly's family and the members of the group. Mr. and Mrs. Jones have "adopted" Mrs. Kelly's two year old daughter. They look after her, buy her things, and take her for walks. Miss Dean has done baby sitting with the Kelly children so that Mrs. Kelly may go out. Whenever the group has a party, they make certain there is food for the Kelly children. The older adolescents have visited hospitalized members of the group. They also run errands for group members. The entire building shared the excitement of the Kelly's adolescent daughter's first date which was to a formal prom. The problem of obtaining a gown for the girl became the concern of all. A social work assistant from Family and Children's Services was helpful in obtaining a gown for the girl. On the night of the prom, the entire building shared in the excitement of this girl's first date.

In January of 1972, Mr. Frank died of a heart attack. His death was discovered when they went to his room to get the cart on which they usually serve the refreshments during their meeting. Mr. Frank's death did not have the same impact as that of Mr. Mendoza's. Although there was a great deal of sorrow, there was none of the guilt. Several of the members went to the burial. There was considerable confusion concerning his funeral. He was buried in Potters Field in a hospital robe in sharp contrast to the nice way he dressed while alive. At Easter time, the group jointly purchased a pot of artificial flowers and visited the grave. This shared experience had deep meaning for them. They were able to affirm each other's worth and dignity. As they were on the way home Miss Dean remarked, "At least everyone who sees those flowers will know that Bill had friends."

Summary:

As individuals, each group member had experienced immense deprivation in his personal life. Individually and collectively the group members had many reality problems. All the members of the group had been known in the past to a variety of social service agencies. The worker assessed the situation as requiring a group approach rather than casework because of the tenants' social isolation amongst themselves and from the broader community.

Although the group was focused on reality problems, the therapeutic gains for the individual members was most graphic. (Jacobs, 1964). All have consciously tried to control their use of liquor. Miss Dean stopped drinking except for beer and has not been intoxicated since her hospitalization in the winter of 1971. Mr. Jones had stopped drinking. Mrs. Jones became more aware of how to dress appropriately and rarely dressed in the old bizarre way. Her hysterical episodes were much less frequent.

Before the group started, the tenants did not visit with one another. They were now helpful to one another and mutually supportive. Several group members had no income although eligible for public assistance. Now all had a means of financial support. Previously, all of the tenants were behind in their nominal rent payments to U.R.C. All now pay their rent and as a result have a better chance of relocation to more adequate housing.

The members expanded their involvements in the community. On numerous occasions, group members brought others to group meetings to meet the social worker in an attempt to have her help them with their problems. There has been a significant social action and advocacy component to the group. Some members have participated in activities of a welfare rights organization. Several members attended a public legislative hearing on welfare. With the worker's help, the group composed a letter to the Governor expressing their opinions about the proposed welfare flat grant.

Most recently, the members of the group were beginning to discuss the kinds of places they would like to live in. There has been an increasing sense of pride in themselves as individuals. They know they have rights and

feel they can ask for things to which they are entitled. They gave a sense of rootedness and belonging which is based not just a feeling of belonging in the building in the immediate neighborhood but is expanding to a greater feeling of belonging to the larger community and state. As a result, they feel more able to cope and less victimized.

These unique resources to help people grow, available only groups, (Goroff, 1972) were utilized by the worker and the members of the group to help change a "dumping ground for derelicts" to a place where people could develop a sense of hope, belonging, rootedness and purpose.

NOTES

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