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INFORMAL SUPPORT SYSTEMS FOR THE AGED:
LIMITATIONS AND ISSUES

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The need for community social services to enable older persons to remain in their homes has been well documented (Gold, 1974; Lohman, 1978; Atchley, 1977; Blenkner, 1977). In spite of a growing service industry and professional corps of helpers, it does not reach the growing numbers of elderly, especially the older-elderly who are most likely to be frail (Gold, 1974; Lohmann, 1978; Heyman and Polansky, 1977). The aged share of the population has grown relative to the younger age group. In 1900, 6.4% of the U. S. population was 60 years or older; in 1975, it had increased to 14.8% (U. S. Bureau of the Census, 1976). The ratio of older "dependents" to those in their productive years, age 20-59, has also increased. In 1900, those 60 and over to the younger group were 13 in every 100; in 1975, the number was 29 to 100, with predictions that the growth will continue (U. S. Bureau of the Census, 1976).

INTEREST IN NATURAL SUPPORT

With this gap between needs and available services for the elderly and with the evidence pointing to an ever widening of the area of need, it is not surprising that the gerontologists are looking to family, friends, and neighbors to sustain the aged as a priority in the delivery of services. The Social Research Planning and Practice Section of the Gerontology Section has established a Task Force on Natural Support Systems for the Elderly. Writers giving attention to this topic are: B. Hess, 1976; E. Bowles, 1976; and H. Lopata, 1975, among others.

The natural support systems, as means for delivery services to the elderly, meet several important criteria. It has been the traditional manner through which the elderly have been maintained; helped by the family, relatives, and neighbors; and older people are comfortable with it. Researchers have described the affection, attention, and assistance which children provide to elderly family members. After the spouse, and adult children, the sibling offers the logical source of primary relationship (Hill, 1970; Shanias, 1968; Streib, 1968; Blenkner, 1965; Sussman and Burchinal, 1962).

Friends and neighbors are an important source of primary relationships. They provide help, serve as confidants, and extend contacts to the outside world. More friends are retained and new friendships made in long-time residential neighborhoods and in high density areas of older people. Women have more friends than men among their peers; but more women are widowed, while men live with spouses. Older people tend to withdraw from formal organizations and to seek out interpersonal, expressive activities limited to small groups of close friends with like interests and socioeconomic status (Payne, Payne, and Reddy, 1972). Therefore, help from family members or friends when one needs reassurance, meals and minor nursing service in times of illness, housekeeping help and shopping assistance, and clothing repair or remodeling is a natural and comfortable manner for meeting needs.

LIMITATIONS TO HELP FROM FAMILY

Treas (1977) has presented data showing that societal changes which have come about make it difficult for the immediate family, usually the daughter, to fulfill the hoped for support for an elderly parent. This article will discuss factors which deter friends or neighbors from providing assistance of any sustained extent, although their presence makes them a natural source.

The older relative today is more likely to be a woman, and very old. The ratio of men to women has steadily changed to the disadvantage of the older woman. In 1930, there were almost an equal number of men and women age 65 and over; by 1975, there were only 69 men for every 100 women in this age group. Looking at the very old, the imbalance is even greater and the prediction is that it will continue (U. S. Bureau of the Census, 1976). Older couples can help and care for each other, but the single woman must look outside her home for assistance.

There are more of the older old. At the turn of the century, 4% of those 65 years and over were age 85 or older. This percentage of the very old in the 65 and over population had doubled by 1975 (U. S. Bureau of the Census, 1976). Advancing age is associated with a decreasing capacity for health and independence.

In spite of better health and capacity to survive, the continued decrease in fertility has resulted in aged persons having fewer and fewer children to count on for help. The picture for the future is no better. Moving into old age are cohorts for whom the Depression cut short marital aspirations and childrearing plans. They are also the women for whom

AGE OF WOMEN Years	No. of Children Surviving by Age of Women in Three Decades (Neugarten, 1975)			
	NO. OF CHILDREN SURVIVING			
	55	65	75	85
1970-1974	2.40	2.12		
1980-1984	2.84	2.35	2.02	
1990-1994	3.06	2.75	2.24	1.80

World War II, by its destruction of men, further reduced the ratio of men to women. About 7% of women 60-64 in 1970 had never married, and of those who had wed, an unprecedented 20% bore no children (U. S. Bureau of the Census, 1972, 1973a). Shanas and Hauser (1974) explore the implications for the aged if the present rate of fertility is sustained and conclude "those aspects of housing, recreation, health care, and income maintenance now provided by younger generations for their elderly parents and grandparents will need to be provided by society at large."

Treas (1977) further points out that the middle-aged woman today has a husband and children. In addition, during the post-war years the married woman has entered the job market for income. In 1940, there were 11.1% of the married women age 45 to 54 living with their husbands employed outside the home. By 1970, the percentage had increased to 47.8% (U. S. Bureau of the Census, 1973b). For all of these reasons both families with older parents and the older person must look to increased governmental provision of services.

LIMITATIONS TO SOCIAL SERVICES

With full recognition that many of the services have been life sustaining and have permitted the person who is not acutely ill to remain in the community, there are limitations. One is that sufficient services do not exist to meet the needs in every community. Securing funds for the development of such services is one difficulty; and another is the limited supply of personnel who will take these jobs which are demanding in patient understanding and in physical work. In order to employ workers it is necessary to give them full employment and therefore scheduling cannot be as flexible as the occasional need for help required by many older people. The programs provide a follow-up service after hospital care for a defined number of hours per day and for a definite duration. The program may not be able to adapt to the particular needs of the individual for the extent or kind of service that is needed and desired.

Sections of communities are uncovered by Meals-On-Wheels. This program has been organized by voluntary groups and they serve areas for which they have the volunteer coverage.

There is a bureaucratic quality to some of the services which elderly persons, accustomed to very personal relationships, find strange and hard to accept. Recruiting enough women who will work in other people's homes, understand older people, and accept minimal wages is increasingly difficult, as women enter non-traditional jobs at higher wages.

NEIGHBORS AND FRIENDS AMONG THE YOUNG-OLD

Where else can one turn? What about the young-old? They are increasing in number; they are better educated by each successive year; they are in better health; and they are retired (Neugarten, 1974). Only 9% of the females continued to work beyond 65 years of age (Hendricks and Hendricks, 1977). Less than 27% would consider taking a job. It is estimated that this trend will continue. Continued retirement has been supported by Binstock (1974), the Harris Poll (1975), and Neugarten, 1974.

The extent to which the young-old are interested and willing to help provide service to others is not well understood from a review of the literature. An optimistic question is raised by Neugarten (1974):

If our portrait of the young-old is correct, then, with their relative good health, education, purchasing power, free time and political involvement, they are not likely to become the neglected, the isolated or the expendables of the society. Will they, instead, become the social contributors, as well as the self-fulfilled? Will they be the first to create, on a large scale, new service roles, and to offer their services to the community without regard to direct financial remuneration?

Through ACTION the government has fostered several volunteer and partial pay programs. Foster Grandparents and Senior Companion programs pay the minimum wage for a limited number of working hours each week. The Retired Senior Volunteer Program reimburses the participant for certain out-of-pocket costs. The service is given through agencies on a regularly scheduled plan. They have been evaluated as very beneficial to provider and recipient alike (Bowles, 1976). Jacobs (1976) described the homemaker who no longer has family to nurture as being under a special stress. Could occasionally helping a neighbor be a replacement for the loss of the nurturing role?

Contrary reporting of participation in organizations by older people, also exists. Atchley (1977) reports that church attendance is reduced as people get older. Religious groups, however, are the most

common voluntary associations for older persons. Participation in voluntary organizations appears to lessen with age. Some of the deterrents to participation are: lack of transportation, limited finances for dues and other expenses incurred in organizations, and fear of going out at night.

The question is to what extent could the young-old living in close proximity to other older persons be encouraged to temporarily help out. The services are frequently only wanted for a short period of time and the older persons have indicated for the most part that they do not want employment. In spite of the fact that the Harris poll showed only 2.5% of the elderly mentioned seniors helping seniors, it would appear that more than that percentage do help other older people. Volunteers in the Meals-On-Wheels programs are seniors. In the study of the Rent-Subsidized Housing, this writer found that next to daughters, friends in the building came to help during emergencies. This occurred even when the two parties had not previously been close friends. To have this kind of help (clothing repair, delivery of meals, help with a bath, trimming toe nails, occasional transportation, minor housekeeping done as a helpful hand service), promotion would be needed. Those willing and capable would have to be known to their neighbors. It would be an outreach service that would need some external initiation.

FEAR OF LOSS OF FEDERAL SUBSIDIES

A deterrent to this kind of help was discovered in a survey conducted in a subsidized apartment building. The survey was conducted to disclose the means which the residents had developed for meeting human needs in a location where there were very limited social services. Neighbors had helped one another to a limited degree. Recipients wanted to pay for the services that they received but the helpers would not take money for fear of jeopardizing their federal housing assistance, Supplemental Security Income, Food Stamps, or bus tickets. The fear was perhaps greater than the reality. Most of the women were on the rent subsidy program. The market value of one-bedroom units with a \$25.00 utility allowance was set at \$228.00 by the Housing Assistance Payment Program of the West Virginia Housing Development Fund. With an income of \$400.00 a month, which was higher than most of the tenants had, one would be receiving a subsidy of \$128.00, a large sum for an older person to lose.

People feared that someone might suspect them of earning money and would report them. This would involve a reevaluation of their financial status and lead to a rent increase. They had experienced a long wait to be certified for the program. Should they earn money, and be recertified at a higher rent, a long time could pass from the time the employment was discontinued to the time the rent would be reduced. The same experience could occur if they were receiving food stamps or Supplemental Security Income.

Most older people have been self-supporting before their retirement or the death of the spouse. They have expected to pay for services, perhaps not at today's rate but at least at the value they were used to. They would not accept repeated assistance from another person without making a contribution.

CHANGE IN POLICY IS NEEDED

This problem deserves further study. A policy change may be called for that would exclude reimbursements for services for older people on a temporary basis from the income used to figure eligibility for financial assistance to older persons. Such a change might open the way for the beginning of developing more temporary help between the young-old for the old-old. Given the need for the service, the unavailability of families or social agencies to meet it, a new course should be tried. Outreach workers might undertake to develop such a program in neighborhoods with a concentration of elderly, in addition to their present role of referral to existing services which often do not meet particular needs.

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