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# SETTING FUNDING PRIORITIES IN THE VOLUNTARY SECTOR: A CASE STUDY FROM THE JEWISH FEDERATION COUNCIL OF GREATER LOS ANGELES

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*Resource scarcity has emerged in the 1980's as a dominant theme in the human services. Although we are acutely aware of the impact that funding cutbacks have had upon human service agencies and their programs, relatively scant attention has been given to the funding body itself as the focus of analysis. The ways in which the funding body addresses the issue of resource distribution under scarcity conditions is of critical concern to the social welfare field. This paper analyzes one model adopted by a large voluntary fundraising and funding organization—planned priorities-setting—to provide a strategic and rational framework for guiding allocations decisions.*

## INTRODUCTION

Resource scarcity has emerged in the 1980's as a dominant theme in the human services. Governmental and philanthropic funding for human service programs has diminished in various degrees and has resulted in serious pressures and disruptions in human service agencies. Human service managers and administrators are confronted with challenges of designing creative strategies to ensure organizational survival and promote program enhancement and growth even during these austere times. Similarly, the human service worker, engaged in day-to-day interaction with clients, has needed to adapt to restrictive eligibility criteria and service regulations brought on in part by declining agency resources.

This phenomenon of human service agencies reacting

and responding to funding cutbacks, both at the organizational and professional levels, has received considerable attention recently in the professional literature (Finch, 1982; Friesen and Frey, 1983; Levine, 1980; Pawlak et al., 1983). Undoubtedly, the issue represents a do or die proposition for many human service providers. For some, the skills, tenacity, and strategies developed by agency administrators has made the difference between program stagnation and decline and program development and growth.

As a consequence of the funding crisis, the funding body, either governmental or philanthropic, inevitably becomes the target of considerable agency frustration. However, the funding body itself is caught in a seemingly inextricable predicament of rarely, if ever, having sufficient funds to satisfy the wants and dreams of its beneficiary agencies. Whether funding bodies are conscious of it or not or whether they wish to admit it or not, their allocation decision-makers are inevitably thrust into predicaments wherein some form of priorities-setting is inescapable and mandatory. The ad hoc priorities-setting might be very informal, whimsical, and principally the exercise of instincts, gut reactions, and informed intuition but nevertheless the expression of priorities is an unavoidable part of the allocations game. Allocators are constantly pressed and pressured to apply their value judgments to guide decisions about which programs and agencies should receive increased, the same, or decreased funding support. Without exercising some priorities judgments, however imperfect, allocators would conceivably be paralyzed by a form of "allocations gridlock" in their inability to distribute the relatively limited funds entrusted to them.

Although we are acutely aware of the impact funding cutbacks have had upon human service agencies and their programs, relatively scant attention has been given to the funding body itself as the focus of analysis. The funding organization is also a victim of insufficient resources. It faces agonizing choices about allocations decision-making which impact an entire network of human service agencies dependent upon it for support. The ways in which the funding

body addresses the issue of resource distribution under scarcity conditions is therefore of critical concern to the social welfare field.

The challenges that present themselves to voluntary funding organizations are direct and profound. How have these bodies responded to this critical dilemma of finite resource levels and unbounded agency aspirations and needs? What strategies have they adopted to affect a satisfying and equitable distribution of limited funds among beneficiary agencies? What have been the consequences of these new strategies for the funding bodies themselves and the network of agencies under their support? While these issues are not altogether new to the voluntary funding sector, they have become more immediate and urgent in light of the prevailing political and ideological climates which have generated a revolution in the role of government in meeting the basic human needs of the American population. As a consequence of this revolution, pressures are being placed on the voluntary sector to enlarge its responsibility for the support and delivery of human services. However, the significant retreat of government support has not been replaced by the voluntary sector. This reality has intensified the struggle among voluntary funding and allocating bodies to stretch funds among beneficiary organizations in a fashion that strives to yield the maximum impact on the needs of the community. Thus, voluntary funding bodies inevitably face difficult choices as to which organizations and programs merit funding support and at what level.

This paper focuses on one model adopted by a large voluntary fundraising and funding organization to address these complex dilemmas. The model centers on planned priorities-setting to provide a strategic and rational framework for guiding allocations decisions. Specifically, the paper considers the priorities planning model designed and implemented by the Jewish Federation Council of Greater Los Angeles (JFC). This priorities plan, the Community Priorities System (CPS) is discussed in terms of the following dimensions: 1. rationale and premises, 2. goals and objectives, 3. methods

and procedures, 4. outcomes, 5. application plan, 6. implications for the JFC system. The paper concludes with some general thoughts on priorities setting and its place in human services planning within the voluntary sector.

#### JEWISH FEDERATION COUNCIL – AN ORGANIZATIONAL OVERVIEW

Before delving into the specifics of the Jewish Federation Council's priorities plan, it would be helpful to present a brief overview of the Federation and its functions. The Jewish Federation Council of Greater Los Angeles serves the Greater Los Angeles Jewish community as the central fundraising, planning, budgeting, and administrative body for a broad array of agencies and institutions. The Federation is a voluntary association of contributors, agencies and organizations dedicated to the promotion of Jewish welfare and unity. The JFC communal agency network encompasses sixteen direct beneficiary agencies which provide a wide range of health, educational and social welfare services. Beneficiary agencies retain their individual autonomy but their budgets and programs are subject to annual review and approval by the JFC Planning and Budgeting Committee. Final approval of allocations is made by the JFC Board of Directors.

The challenges presented by the huge geographic dispersion of the Los Angeles Jewish community have engendered a unique regionalized dimension for the JFC. The five regional offices of Federation engage in campaign, leadership development, outreach and community relations activities, and cooperative planning with beneficiary agencies operating within the local geographic areas. In addition, the regions' Planning & Budgeting Committees provide input into the overall Federation allocations process through the review of selected agency budgets.

#### RATIONALE FOR THE COMMUNITY PRIORITIES SYSTEM

The process of distributing limited dollars often forces agonizing and Solomon-like choices upon well-intended volunteer allocators. The pain associated with making difficult

choices among competing claims on communal resources coupled with the growing frustration wrought by the allocations process itself gradually led to an increasing interest within the JFC for systematic priorities planning. In addition, there were emerging trends within the Los Angeles Jewish community which were not perceived by Federation leadership as yet influencing and stimulating new service priorities and directions on the part of beneficiary agencies. The 1979 *Los Angeles Jewish Population Study* had documented some of the major changes. The Jewish community was growing in population size, but household size was shrinking; the single and elderly populations were increasing; Jews were dispersing over tremendous geographic areas; and Jewish identification was eroding.

The constellation of problems and needs facing individual Jews and the Jewish community had also become more diverse and complex. New target groups in need of both traditional and new types of services were identified. Changing social and economic conditions had, in some cases, exacerbated the problems of certain groups, particularly the more physically and emotionally vulnerable and at-risk populations. Jewish educational needs, both formal and informal, demanded new and creative initiatives.

These changing demographic patterns and needs demanded that the JFC systematically re-examine how to most effectively service the community with the limited resources at its disposal. Limited campaign growth was a constant and sobering constraint reminding everyone involved that the allocations system could not anticipate a significant infusion of new dollars.

In 1981, the JFC officers determined that these changing demographics and expanding needs, coupled with the increasing resource limitations and pressures facing the organized Los Angeles Jewish community, necessitated a new approach to the allocation of JFC dollars. In response to this state of affairs, the JFC officers recommended that a comprehensive Community Priorities System (CPS) be developed outside the context and time frame of the allocations process

to provide formal guidelines for disbursing Federation funds within the community. The overall goal of CPS was to develop a rank ordering of current and potential services which would be applied in a direct and formalized fashion in the yearly JFC allocations process. The Planning & Budgeting Committee was mandated to provide overall direction and guidance to the priorities setting project as well as to design the specific methods and procedures for priorities development.

Priorities alone, however, were never envisioned as a panacea for the difficult process of determining agency allocations under conditions of inadequate resources. Nor were priorities heralded as a substitute for that process. Rather, the development of a validated list of community priorities was viewed as a tool to guide the annual allocations review process in the most informed, systematic and creative fashion possible.

#### PRIORITIES PLANNING – PAST EXPERIENCES

Over the years both the government and private sectors have implemented a variety of strategies to develop funding priorities among competing programs and agencies. These efforts were motivated primarily by resource scarcity pressures and accountability concerns. In the 1960's and 1970's state and federal government entities introduced elaborate and complex budgeting and planning models, most prominent among them Planning, Programming and Budgeting Systems, or PPBS, and Zero-Based Budgeting. Essentially, these tools were attempts to develop cost-benefit analyses of alternative program approaches for accomplishing stated objectives. Program alternatives would then be ranked in priority order based on these evaluations. These program rankings would thereby guide allocations decisions. While in theory PPBS offered the rational ingredients for introducing priorities-setting into budgetary calculations and decisions, its demise was hastened by overwhelming technical and measurement problems and a strongly resistant political environment among the various government agencies and

bureaucracies involved. In the final analysis, the primary goals of changing budgetary procedures and influencing actual resource allocation decisions were never achieved (Wil-davsky, 1979, p. 19-6).

Local United Way organizations have led the way in the voluntary sector in implementing a host of priorities-setting models. These models range from the formulation of policy statements giving high or low funding priority to particular elements in the community, to the more common format of rank ordering of program services, agencies, community needs and problems, geographic areas, population groups, or some combination of these factors.

The increasing popularity of formal priorities plans in the early 1970's prompted the national office of the United Way to produce a monograph entitled *The Painful Necessity of Choice: An Analysis of Priorities Plans and Policies in the United Way Movement* (1974). This valuable document combined theoretical considerations and descriptions of the nature and types of priorities plans with very practical guidelines, procedures and criteria for the design and implementation of a formal priorities planning project. *The Painful Necessity of Choice* focuses on priorities plans as "a method of systematizing value judgments and making them explicit in the expectation that the results will influence allocations decisions. There is no standardized format or single method that is inherently best or universally applicable because the essence of a plan is judgmental" (United Way of America, 1974, p. 3). The JFC's priorities plan shared this special interest in priorities development as a strategic tool to influence the allocation of JFC funds. The design of CPS was particularly influenced by the lessons and guidelines summarized in *The Painful Necessity of Choice*.

Unlike its United Way counterpart, the Jewish federation movement across the United States has had limited experience with developing formal priorities plans. While the constraint of limited resources and the reality of expanding community needs have brought the term "priorities" into focus among local federation leadership, only a few federa-



tions have actually turned to formal priorities setting as a potential solution to the allocations dilemma. The Cleveland Jewish Federation established one of the first and most systematic priorities-setting processes. The priorities-setting model ultimately adopted by JFC incorporated proven elements of other priorities plans as well as specific features designed to accommodate the unique structural dimensions and value orientations of the JFC and its leadership.

## CPS METHODS AND PROCEDURES

### Committee Structure

The development of community priorities by JFC represented a community effort with extensive lay and professional participation from leaders of JFC, principally the Planning & Budgeting Committee and subcommittees, the JFC Regions, beneficiary agencies and other individuals with expertise in long-range planning and service delivery. It served as an important vehicle to promote greater accountability and responsiveness of JFC to its various constituents and publics in the allocation of funds and delivery of services. A diagram of the CPS committee structure is shown below. The Planning & Budgeting Committee established the Community Priorities Committee as a special subcommittee to provide overall leadership and direction to the priorities development project. Two technical subcommittees were also created and their functions are noted below.

### Community Priorities Committee

#### Services Classification Subcommittee

1. Identify and define the service categories constituting the components of the classification system.
2. Develop specific definitions for the service categories.

#### Criteria Subcommittee

1. Identify and define the criteria utilized for establishing priorities.
2. Develop procedures for applying the criteria to produce the priority rankings.

## Work Plan

The Community Priorities Committee adopted a work plan to guide the priorities-setting process. The plan laid out the specific steps for the development of community priorities and the application of these priorities to the annual JFC allocations process.

1. A decision of the items to be *ranked*, i.e., identification and definition of the components of the classification system.
2. Determination of the explicit criteria to be used for the ranking process.
3. Design of the method by which the criteria are to be applied, i.e., the ranking procedures.
4. Determination of the nature of the rank order to be produced, i.e., a single continuum, groupings from high to low priority.
5. Determination of the composition of the group(s) which will carry out the ranking process, i.e., ranking teams.
6. Development of a format for presenting to the ranking teams demographic and needs assessment information and any other community input data.
7. Implementation of the ranking process by the ranking teams.
8. Design of the plan for the application of the community priorities to the JFC allocations system.
9. Completion of the Community Priorities report and presentation to the overall JFC Planning & Budgeting Committee, Executive Committee and Board of Directors.

Twenty-eight service categories and definitions were developed by the Services Classification Subcommittee. These covered the range of direct services provided by JFC departments and agencies as well as a few services not generally part of the ongoing JFC delivery system. These twenty-eight service categories became the "building blocks" for the priorities setting process.

Criteria selection constituted the most important and time-consuming component of the Criteria Subcommittee's work. Criteria essentially represent value judgments of individuals which are made explicit for the purpose of judging the relative merit and priority of a variety of services. The JFC Community Priorities System, as with other priorities plans, can be distinguished by virtue of the criteria selected. They provide the plan its uniqueness and special character.

After extensive examination of alternative criteria, the subcommittee recommended four criteria to be used for ranking the service categories:

1. Does the service address a vital need?
2. Does the service have an impact on the problem/need it is designed to resolve/address?
3. Does the service strengthen the Jewish community?
4. Does the service represent a fiscally sound and appropriate investment of JFC funds?

A number of subcriteria were delineated for each broad criterion to provide the ranking groups a clear frame of reference when undertaking the service rankings. A key word was developed for each criterion to facilitate speedy recall.

### Design of the Ranking Procedures

The Criteria Subcommittee, utilizing a modified Delphi process, decided that the four criteria would be given equal value in the ranking process. Therefore, the criteria were not weighted one against the other. The assessment of each service category on each criterion was expressed along a four-point scale with the following choice of designations: *Not At All*, *Minimally*, *Adequately*, *Substantially*. These four designations were assigned corresponding numeric values, ranging from 1-*Not At All* to 4-*Substantially*.

The adoption of these terms and their corresponding numeric values promoted uniformity and consistency of approach by the various groups that undertook the ranking process. The numerical values were used as a way of determining the final recommended priority ranking level.

Adopting the Los Angeles United Way approach, the

Criteria Subcommittee determined that each service category would ultimately be assigned to a recommended priority ranking category. The four categories represent different levels of JFC funding support:

*Preferential Support.* Services recommended for highest level of support and eligibility for a special funding pool.

*Ongoing Support.* Services should be maintained with continued JFC support.

*Reduced Support.* Services recommended for reduced or lower level of JFC support.

*No Support.* Services recommended for no support are of lowest priority for JFC funding or not appropriate for such funding.

Rank scores ranged from 0 to 12, 12 being the highest rank. The highest rankings translated into Preferential Support, the lowest rankings into No Support, with the high-middle rankings falling into Ongoing Support, and the low-middle rankings falling into Reduced Support. A numeric ranking guide was designed and used by the Planning & Budgeting Department staff to convert individual raw rank scores into Recommended Ranking levels. A service category ranking form was designed which incorporated the list of criteria, their key words, the four assessment designations and numeric values, a ranking score box, and a section for written comments from ranking team members.

### Data Collection and Presentation

An informed priorities-setting process is predicated on the availability of a valid and current data base for use by the groups designated to produce the service rankings. A solid data base was important to assist rankers in judging the need and relative priority of social and communal services delivered by JFC and its network of agencies. The integration of the data base in the Community Priorities System enhanced the credibility and validity of the overall ranking process and bolstered the integrity of the service rankings themselves. A multidimensional data collection strategy was adopted. It incorporated needs assessment data, demographic profiles, and

relevant programmatic, fiscal and service delivery information about each of the twenty-eight services ranked.

Separate service information sheets were developed for each of the twenty-eight services ranked. This particular presentation format promoted speedy reference and easy comprehension of the data. The profiles highlighted the most pertinent findings from both the *JFC Regional Needs Survey Report* (Jewish Federation Council of Greater Los Angeles, 1983) and the 1979 *Los Angeles Jewish Population Study* in a concise and direct fashion. In addition, the service profiles contained other support information about the service category including user statistics, agency background materials, needs assessment and demographic data gleaned from other relevant research, and primary funding sources for the service area.

### Service Category Ranking Process

The Community Priorities Committee approved a two-stage approach to the implementation of the service rankings. First, it mandated the formation of separate ranking teams in the five JFC Regions. The nucleus of each ranking team was the regional Planning & Budgeting Committee, plus selected members from the regional boards and other regional committees. These ranking teams were selected by the regional lay and professional leadership. In each Region, ranking team members were instructed to rank the twenty-eight service categories according to their priority in their particular Region, based on the four assessment criteria.

The service category ranking process culminated with a full-day ranking session carried out by the JFC Central Ranking Team. This body was composed of the following groups: 1. JFC Planning & Budgeting Committee, 2. JFC Executive Committee, 3. Five JFC Agency Presidents.

This central body was instructed to rank the service categories according to their priority for the Greater Los Angeles Jewish Community based on the four criteria. As an important informational input a summary table of the recommended service rankings from the five regional ranking

teams was distributed to all central ranking team members.

The ranking process at the regional and central JFC ranking sessions followed the same format. The service categories were considered in a random fashion and ranked individually by ranking team members. Ranking team members reviewed appropriate support documents, including the appropriate service profile; ranked the service privately on the basis of the four criteria, thereby producing a rank score; provided a brief rationale statement, and submitted their completed ranking forms for tabulation by staff. A second round of ranking was conducted for those service categories where consensus on the priority ranking was not initially achieved. If, by the end of the ranking session, seven or more of the service categories fell in the Preferential Support level, an additional round of ranking of these services was conducted. This resulted in a numeric priority ordering of the services designated for preferential funding support.

#### SERVICE RANKING RESULTS

The service ranking sessions held by the five JFC regional ranking teams and the JFC central ranking team produced recommended priority ranking levels for the twenty-eight service categories. Services were assigned to one of four priority levels—Preferential Support, Ongoing Support, Reduced Support, No Support.

Six of the twenty-eight services were ranked by the JFC central ranking team for Preferential Support. These are: 1. Community Relations Services, 2. Educational Support Services, 3. Financial Aid to Jewish Education, 4. Housing Services, 5. Informal Jewish Education, 6. Volunteer Services. Twenty services were ranked for Ongoing Support, two services for Reduced Support. No service categories were ranked for No Support by the JFC central ranking team.

#### APPLICATION PLAN – IMPLEMENTING COMMUNITY PRIORITIES

The value of any priorities plan is measured by the degree of its direct impact on allocations decisions. The Com-

munity Priorities Committee devoted considerable attention to devising an explicit plan for the integration of the service rankings into the JFC allocations system. The plan ultimately approved instituted certain modifications in the format used by JFC and its agencies in preparing budgets and allocations requests as well as changes in the review process by the Planning & Budgeting Department.

The revised allocations system was designed to introduce the Preferential Support service rankings resulting from the priorities setting process in a direct fashion. For this purpose, a novel funding level was introduced into the allocations system—Tier III. Tier III was designated as the expansion level of funding. It was reserved exclusively to fund new and expansion program proposals falling under service categories ranked Preferential Support. These six priorities therefore served as screeners to determine eligibility for funding consideration from the Tier III funding pool. The amount reserved for this Tier III Priorities Development Fund was a function of the base budget call figure and the dollars made available as a result of this designation.

The purpose of the Tier III allocations level was to stimulate and support JFC and its agencies in launching new programs and expanding current programs deemed of highest priority by the JFC Community Priorities System. The Priorities Development Fund was designed to provide the initial funding stimulus for these high priority programs.

#### IMPLICATIONS FOR FEDERATION SYSTEM

CPS represents a major systems change for JFC and its process of distributing funds to its local beneficiary agencies. Any systems change of such major proportion cannot expect a totally problem-free implementation. It has taken a great deal of flexibility, patience and commitment among Federation and agency professionals and lay leadership alike to promote a relatively smooth transition to this new approach to allocations decision-making. Nevertheless, certain modifications were introduced in the second year of its application to overcome minor technical difficulties. The revised

allocations format has proved, however, to be relatively simple, easy to understand, non-mechanical and flexible. It has built upon the strengths of the most recent JFC allocations review processes, including the designation of an across-the-board budget call (Tier I), the presentation of JFC and agency budgetary information in program budgeting format, and the generation and distribution of a special circumstances fund based on explicit funding guidelines and evaluation criteria (Tier II). Building on these familiar and accepted foundations, the community priorities were introduced as a new and critical dimension through their Tier III application.

The concept of priorities funding has permeated the mindset of the allocations decision-making process, even under conditions of scarce allocable dollars. This is an important point. Even though the annual allocations base has shown only marginal growth over the past few years, the designation of funds exclusively for priority program development has served as a catalyst to beneficiary agencies to assess their current array of services and shift funding emphases. In some cases, it has stimulated agencies to launch new and creative program initiatives in accordance with the designated community priorities. These overall community priorities have begun to serve as a stimulus for internal agency program appraisal and program development. The pace of these developments has varied among the agencies. These trends are most pronounced in those cases where an agency's internal program priorities and the overall community priorities converged both in substance and timing to take advantage of the new priorities funding pool introduced in the allocations system.

After two years' experience, it is evident that JFC is firmly committed to a formal system of community priorities and their promotion through the annual allocations process. While the JFC priorities plan (and any other priorities plan, for that matter) has not totally resolved all conflicts and eliminated tensions arising from allocating inadequate funds, it has set in place a more orderly and planful approach for allocating resources under scarcity conditions. As such, CPS



represents a valuable systems management tool which has promoted a more creative and satisfying allocations decision-making experience for the lay allocating committees.

Further, CPS and the revised allocations system have solidified the program budgeting format adopted by the JFC system. Agency service offerings are organized and presented according to the broad categories included in the services classification system. Descriptions of specific programs, service statistics, program successes and problems are summarized for each service category. There is greater focus in committee deliberations upon substantive service delivery issues and trends in a single agency and across a network of agencies falling within a common field of service. The program budgeting format has promoted an educated lay leadership, an understanding and appreciation of agency services, and has helped pinpoint critical issues and dilemmas.

Knowledge about how federation dollars are distributed programmatically within the community and among its network of agencies has also increased. The merged programmatic and allocations information, along with the service priorities themselves, have been gradually introduced as a means to stimulate growth in the annual fundraising campaign. The strategic integration of the CPS into the annual fundraising drive requires attention to more fully actualize CPS' potential as a campaign catalyst.

It is important to emphasize that while CPS has introduced a new framework for allocations decision-making, the service priorities alone do not control, by any means, the entire funds distribution process. Only Tier III funding is determined by the service priorities in their role as eligibility screeners for funding consideration. In actuality, the allocations system during the most recent funding cycle was seriously handicapped due to the very limited amount of funds available for priorities development.

The Tier III level of funding has represented a very small proportion of the total funds distributed each year to agencies. It does represent, however, an important new vehicle

for agency growth and innovation, albeit not the exclusive vehicle.

The allocations data for the past two years also demonstrate sensitivity to ongoing agency program maintenance and administrative needs in other than priority areas, as well as new program initiatives and directions reflected in Tier III funding. This balanced approach recognizes the value of sustaining the current proven infrastructure of services to the extent possible as well as promoting new program development and growth in response to high community priorities, even given a limited allocations base. The community priorities and the revised allocations system have successfully institutionalized these dual concerns and allocations goals, thereby meeting the expectations set forth by the priorities planning endeavor. An orderly and creative framework for allocations decision-making has been established.

A priorities plan represents one technique for confronting allocation problems. Despite the similarities among many priorities plans, they are unique to each organization and its operating philosophy. The rationale, design features and implementation strategy for any priorities plan should reflect the needs and value orientations of the leadership commissioning the plan. The pros and cons of priorities planning should be carefully weighed in advance in the context of the specific problems facing the organization's allocations system. The funding pressures facing most voluntary funding organizations today are enduring and demand creative and bold responses. Given the right organizational circumstances, the potential benefits of introducing a well conceived priorities plan within the voluntary sector are enormous.

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