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Community Social Services for Children

Social services for children may be described as services, based on careful study of the child and his needs and family situation, that may assist in overcoming conditions that prevent his normal and happy development.

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Community Social Services for Children

EVERY community, large or small, in the city or in the country, has children who need some kind of special care. Children whose families cannot provide for them properly without financial aid. Children whose homes have been broken by death, sickness, or other circumstances. Children who are physically or mentally handicapped. Children who are neglected or mistreated. Children who are delinquent or in danger of becoming delinquent. Children whose home life is harmful to their development because their needs and behavior are not understood.

If such children are to overcome their handicaps and learn how to meet life in a way that is satisfactory to themselves, their families, and the community, they must have special help. Every child needs something different from any other child. Studying each child and his needs, and then providing the services essential to meet these needs, is the best way to insure the child's normal, happy growth. Effective social services for children can be given only by persons who, through special study and experience, have gained an understanding of child behavior, family relationships, and methods of dealing with difficult social situations. Such persons may be called social workers, case workers, or child-welfare workers.

The social services provided for a child should be based on sound knowledge of his personality and behavior problems, his physical condition, and his mental and physical handicaps. In all the larger urban areas it is possible to obtain this knowledge through child-guidance clinics, child-health clinics, or individual physicians or specialists. Such resources are increasingly being made available to children living in remote communities through the assistance of State agencies. Resources follow the recognition of the need for such special services.

After study of the child and his family it may be found necessary to provide financial aid or other help for the family, special services for the child in his own home, or suitable care elsewhere for the child who cannot receive such care in his own home.

Care of Dependent Children

Keeping children in their own homes.

Because family life is the foundation of our society and because every child is entitled to the love and security of a home among his own people, the first effort in the care of dependent children should be to preserve the child's own home. No child should be removed from his home because of poverty alone.

Both public and private agencies are helping to make it possible for children to remain in their own homes. If the family income is inadequate, funds may be provided to supplement it. If the mother is away from the home, ill, or for some other reason unable to care for the children, a housekeeper may be placed in the home to care for them or to help the mother. One of the means used to keep in their own homes children deprived of parental support because of the death, continued absence from the home, or physical or mental incapacity of a parent is called public aid to dependent children. Under the laws that provide such aid a parent or a near relative may receive a small monthly allowance for each child, the allowance coming from public funds.

Study by a qualified social agency of the family situation and of the child's special needs should show whether the child can be provided for in his own home. When children cannot be provided for in their own homes, they may become dependent on relatives or on the community.

Caring for children away from their own homes.

If the community assumes responsibility for a child, it should see that he receives the care best suited to his needs. When it seems to the child's best interests to be cared for away from his

own home, he may be placed with relatives, if this is desirable, or in a foster home, or in an institution. Whatever plan is selected the aim should be to give the child the care, training, and affection he would get in normal family life.

Foster-home care is considered the desirable form of care for many dependent children. Such care may be given in free homes, boarding homes, or adoptive homes. The foster parents should be persons of good character and understanding kindness who know how to deal wisely with children. The foster home should meet the standards of a normal family home; it should be well equipped and in a good neighborhood, accessible to school and other community activities. The foster family should be selected with the needs of the individual child in mind and should receive continuing service by the child-placing agency to insure the child's happiness and his physical, mental, and spiritual welfare.

Institutional care may be more desirable than foster-home care for children who need the regular routine and the group life which the institution offers and for children who require short-time care only or those who may not be able to make a satisfactory adjustment in a foster home. Institutions in which children live in cottages small enough to give a homelike atmosphere provide an environment as nearly normal as is possible for boys and girls needing institutional care. In the best institutions the physical well-being, recreation, education, behavior, and spiritual training of each child are guided carefully, and participation in community activities is encouraged. The length of a child's stay should be regulated by his individual needs. Arrangements should be made for the child's return to his own family or for his transfer to a foster home when institutional care is no longer necessary, as long periods of institutional life may make difficult a satisfactory adjustment to normal family life in the community.

Protection of Neglected Children

Children suffering from home conditions that endanger their welfare should have the protective services of a social agency. Such agencies can help parents to understand the child's needs and to overcome undesirable conditions. Often the home situation can be so changed that the child may safely remain in his own home, and every effort should be made to enlist the cooperation of the family to accomplish such a change. When this is not possible it may be necessary to call upon the protection of the law to remove a child from his home. Such children may be placed in suitable foster homes or in institutions until home conditions can be improved, but some neglected children need long-time care away from their own homes.

Services for Physically Handicapped Children

Adequate provision for the care, treatment, and education of children who have defective sight or hearing, or who are crippled or otherwise physically handicapped should be available to every community. Social services for these children have as their purpose to discover physically handicapped children and to arrange for care and treatment as early as possible so as to help each child to a life as nearly normal as his condition permits. Social agencies may be of real service to the physically handicapped by helping them to recognize the nature and extent of their disabilities, to understand the ways in which they can be useful, and thus to make a satisfactory adjustment to community life.

Surgical and medical care and treatment are essential to remedying many physical defects and to rehabilitating children who otherwise might remain helpless all their lives. Early discovery of physical disabilities or conditions which may lead to them is an important factor in a program for the physically handicapped.

A community should provide not only proper medical care and social services but also opportunity for education. Special resources should be provided which will make possible the education of every child regardless of the character of his physical disability. Special classes, school curricula and equipment adapted to individual requirements, home teachers, and special transportation facilities may be necessary to enable these children to have an education which will make it possible for them to join with other children in activities of various kinds.

Services for Mentally Handicapped Children

The child with limited intelligence suffers from many handicaps. If the activities which he undertakes are not suited to his abilities, he does not have the satisfaction of real achievement, he may be led into wrongdoing easily, and, if he lacks wise guidance, he may never build up habits of action which are essential in community living. Every opportunity should be given these children to lead useful and happy lives.

Sound community planning would provide for every retarded child a careful study of his mental abilities and educational opportunities adapted to his requirements within the public-school system. It would provide also a program of social services to help parents to understand their children's limitations and capacities and to plan for and guide the mentally handicapped children remaining in their own homes or returned to their homes after a period of training in an institution.

The care of mentally defective children who cannot be cared for in their own homes is a problem in most States because of limited institutional facilities. Every community should feel responsible for providing social services and some form of foster care that will assist these handicapped children to become useful citizens in their own community or that will assure their welfare until permanent care can be given in State or local public-welfare institutions.

Services for Children Born Out of Wedlock

Children born out of wedlock are in particular need of services that will safeguard their immediate and future welfare. The unmarried mother meets social pressures and disapproval and needs help. It is important that social service be available to her as soon as she knows of her situation to assist her in planning for herself and to prevent hasty and ill-advised arrangements for the child's care that she may later regret and that may result in hardship for the child.

Many unmarried mothers retain responsibility for their children; for others this seems impossible and assistance is needed in providing care for the child. For some of these children adoption by persons other than relatives is desirable; in such cases the plan for placement should be made through a qualified child-placing agency. All such adoptions should be safeguarded by a thorough study of what the home can offer in satisfactory home life and thorough understanding of the social, mental, and physical background of the child.

Prevention and Treatment of Juvenile Delinquency

A well-rounded preventive program includes consideration of all conditions affecting the family and child life. Community interest should be awakened to the importance of relieving overcrowding and other bad housing conditions, of doing away with undesirable neighborhood conditions, and of strengthening the work of agencies and groups concerned with the welfare of children.

Every community should see that its children have adequate play space and wholesome recreation opportunities. The spirit of adventure, when undirected, may lead children astray. Companionship with other children in interesting activities that give an outlet for this spirit is an important factor in preventing delinquency.

Valuable aid in preventing delinquent behavior is given by social agencies working to prevent dependency and neglect and to make the homes satisfactory places for rearing children; by agencies and child-guidance clinics assisting parents in understanding and dealing with personality and behavior problems of children; by schools providing visiting teachers to aid parents and teachers in dealing with various problems of social maladjustment among school children; by vocational-guidance programs; and by special classes for retarded children. Child-study and parent-study groups also contribute toward preventing delinquency.

When court action is necessary.

Highly skilled services should be available for the child whose delinquencies are serious enough to require court action. Thorough study must be made of the causes which lead to delinquent behavior and of the influence of the family situation, neighborhood conditions, and the child's own physical, mental, and emotional needs.

Wise guidance and sympathetic encouragement and assistance given by local public social workers or probation officers assisting the court enable many children to make satisfactory adjustment without being removed from their homes. If delinquent tendencies cannot be overcome without changing the child's environment, care in a specially selected foster home under supervision of a social-service agency or in a special training school, to assist him in overcoming his undesirable habits or social attitudes may be necessary. When the child returns to his own home, social services should be continued until a satisfactory adjustment to home and community life has been made. The community has a special responsibility for providing the essential social services and for adopting an attitude of sympathetic encouragement instead of censure during the child's difficult transition period.

Public Responsibility for the Well-Being of Children

The provision of social services for dependent, neglected, and handicapped children and children in danger of becoming delinquent is a public responsibility. The community should see that public funds are available to provide social workers in the county or city welfare department and in other public agencies to give the necessary social service to children.

In many communities private agencies have assumed responsibility for the care of considerable numbers of children, thus making a valuable contribution toward assuring care for these children. Public services for children should be coordinated with and supplement the child-care services of private agencies so that social services will be available to every child in need of care.

One of the important responsibilities of State welfare departments is to establish, extend, and strengthen local public services for children, especially in rural areas.

Under the Social Security Act, Federal funds are given to the State welfare agencies to be used in the development of local child-welfare services. These funds are used in selected rural areas to employ one or more child-welfare workers in the county welfare department to study the situation of children for whom special services are needed, to arrange for the care required, and to give information to the leaders in the community on what is needed to provide more adequate protective services for children. Such service is available in some urban areas also, and is needed in all areas, urban and rural.

Inquiry as to how to proceed in obtaining help for an individual child should be made to a private child-welfare agency in the community or to the county or city welfare department.

Does Your City or County Have—

Adequate public assistance so that dependent children can remain in their own homes when this is possible?

An agency providing housekeeper or homemaker service to care for children in their own homes when mothers are away from home, ill, or for some other reason unable to care for them?

One or more child-welfare workers in the welfare department working through the schools and other community agencies to provide social services for children?

Resources for the care of children in foster homes when for any reason care cannot be given in their own homes?

Child-guidance service available in local clinics or from a State agency to assist parents and social agencies to understand the needs, personality problems, and conduct difficulties of children?

Cooperation between the schools and health and social agencies in serving children having special problems?

An organization or agency interested in improving housing conditions?

Adequate facilities for constructive and interesting leisure-time activities?



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