PLANNING FOR NEIGHBORHOOD PROGRAMS

Introduction

A neighborhood program will ordinarily be one part of a larger city-wide community action program. Thus questions must be asked about the city at large and the whole community action planning, along with an inquiry into the neighborhood program itself.

Funds are likely to be limited so that in most cases a choice of some neighborhoods must be made, either to start the city's program or to be used as a "demonstration."

At the outset, reasons for preferring certain neighborhoods over others should be explored. In some cities past social disturbances or chronic trouble may dictate the choice of a neighborhood for concerted social effort. There is a caveat: A city may prefer to choose neighborhoods with problems that can be dealt with rather quickly because success will be more certain and visible. Unfavorable comparisons should not be made once programs are initiated between the more easily solved neighborhood problems and the knottier ones. The preference of one kind of neighborhood over another may result from wise and responsible political decision, but the basis for decisions should be understood both by the community and by the federal agencies.

In the attached outline we have asked a series of questions designed to offer some guides for those evaluating neighborhood programs. Because these programs are so frankly experimental, no such outline can provide more than a general approach. More reliable criteria will emerge from concrete experience with actual programs, their inevitable failures and successes.

A detailed knowledge of the city, the sponsors, and the over-all political context will be necessary for judgment in each case. Still, it may be a useful exercise to try to articulate in advance some of the factors that should enter into evaluation, even though judgments are likely to be intuitive.

The discussion that follows is divided into two parts: (1) criteria for defining the appropriate neighborhood; and (2) criteria for judging the substance of programs for a neighborhood.

It is not inappropriate to point out that some decisions to accept or reject a proposal for neighborhood programs must be made on a primarily political basis. The Federal program needs Congressional support and it needs the support of all the traditional agencies in the Executive branch with which it must cooperate. Further, the over-all political situation of any city is an essential ingredient in the success or failure of a community action program and of the neighborhood program which is its natural offspring. This point is probably understood, if not articulated, by applicants and evaluators alike.

The forms to be filled out for the Dept. of Housing & Urban Development may set up standards and expectations, but they are not like aptitude tests. A high score does not imply automatic admission to "school." As long as funds are insufficient to permit every sound program to be accepted, it should be understood that choices involve a variety of factors, not the least of which is political.

There is another risk. The existence of complicated forms, the promulgation of standards and the common knowledge that choices have to be

made, may lead cities to imitate slavishly the type of programs that have been accepted before. This could lead to rigidity -- a calcification which is the enemy of innovation and imaginative use of these special local characteristics of a city and neighborhood.

Neighborhood

The limited experience thus far with community action programs and the longer history of settlement houses have led those working with problems of organization to insist upon a small local area as the lowest common denominator for any new social programs. The word "neighborhood" is used to mean a relatively compact geographical area and also an area which has some sort of functional cohesiveness. Before the concept of neighborhood program becomes a cliche' easily glossed over, it may be important to ask some questions about what may or may not be defined as "neighborhood" and for what purposes.

Reaching out:

It is fairly well accepted now that any program of social action must be broken down into local units so that it can reach out to those people who are unwilling or unable to go very far for service, either because of fear, inexperience or lack of basic skills to make use of available services, on their own. Thus the very first criterion of any neighborhood program is that it be sufficiently local to achieve this end.

Elasticity:

The kind of services offered, and the characteristics of the people

served will affect the definition of "neighborhood." For example, a mother with a small child has a far greater physical-geographical limitation than does an adolescent who is used to wandering the city with a gang. Could you serve them both in a neighbor center? The unit for physical health care might be quite different from the unit for mental health care, in part because of the degree of education needed before the patient wants the services offered. A context of multiple services, or even services to a wide age range, indicates both elasticity of the concept of neighborhood and the arbitrariness of any definition. The very fact that one center may offer a multiplicity of services will also affect the delineation of "neighborhood." Even a single person may define his neighborhood very differently for different purposes -- church, school, or socializing, for example. The situation becomes infinitely more complicated when the "target population" encompasses many groups.

A neighborhood may exist because of preexisting services or grouping of services, for example, an effectively functioning settlement house with a long tradition, as in the North End, Boston, or a clinic. The Peckham Health Center in England created a very cohesive neighborhood for many purposes. A preexisting sense of community often grows up because of ethnic similarities or racial isolation.

The sense of community, however, may be a deceptive factor on which to rely. An effective preexisting service may provide a community on which broader services can be built and should be built. On the other hand, the invisible walls which create a ghetto like Harlem, create a "community," but one frayed with strife and hostility which may have to be broken down

into very small units to penetrate resistance that the larger community reinforces. In other words, a neighborhood has to be a manageable unit. If there had been trouble, hostility, delinquency or a high crime rate, the negative aspect of a community may argue for the arbitrary creation of very small neighborhood units for certain kinds of services, in order that the population can really be reached and involved.

Use of Personnel Affects Delineation of a Neighborhood

The availability and training of the personnel to staff a neighborhood program will affect the parameters of a neighborhood unit. More is meant here than the ratio of professionals to "client." It goes without saying that one doctor in a clinic will serve a far smaller population than ten. But personnel can be important in a qualitative sense, as well. The supporting worker can serve as connective tissue among professional services. This is the worker who knows the language of the neighborhood and who is able to direct the people in it to needed services, provide follow-up, and help the person coordinate the various services that may be assembled to meet his particular needs, whether welfare, medical, educational, or employment, or a combination of any or all of these, in any problem or crisis. Such personnel make up a psychological transportation and communication system. An example may make this more concrete: A store-front room may serve a block. In it may be neighborhood workers or urban agents who can take information from those on the block and steer them to adult education, employment training, work crews, mental health clinic, the hospital, a local lawyer, the housing authority, etc. All of these services need not be represented in the store-front room, but

they must be made accessible by effective workers who can communicate with the people the program is designed to serve. The urban agent becomes a pathfinder for the individual in need, to all the agencies and services required. Thus the concept of "neighborhood" is in part defined by the kind of staff available, because those who help people find their way through a labyrinth of services make the programs really accessible.

Actual transportation is of great importance, since the inability to find one's way is so characteristic of the poor. Their neighborhood, for many purposes, is walking radius. Here again workers can help make existing transportation usable and therby make far-flung programs accessible to a neighborhood.

We have stated earlier that one varient of the definition of neighborhood is the kind of service that is offered. We are assuming that one goal is comprehensiveness - the offering of a group of interrelated human services that will raise the aspirations and the opportunities of the people to be served. It is understood, then, that different services will serve different geographical areas. As pointed out, the lowest common denominator may have to be the workers who can link physically separated services.

But this is only one alternative. There are others. For example, the creation of a new institution designed to have such great impact that it defines the neighborhood. Consider the Community School as it exists in New Haven, Connecticut, and Flint, Michigan. They draw upon the neighborhood of the families whose children attend the school. In New Haven, Conte School is made as attractive with a center for senior citizens,

an auditorium, bocci courts, a park for young mothers, and so on - that a sense of community is created by the very fact of the institution. Other neighborhood services, legal, public health, welfare, etc., are then brought in to this "neighborhood." Other kinds of institutions may define the neighborhood by their creation. Probably this is what the multi-service center in Boston (Roxbury) is attempting to do. In such cases the neighborhood is geographically larger than that served by the block store-front with the "pathfinder" personnel. With a large center, staff may literally walk the streets to bring the people to the services concentrated in one building. There is no a priori reason to prefer one structure of a neighborhood program over the other.

So many neighborhoods are natural neighborhoods, defined by geography, tradition, or other boundaries that they can be seen quite readily. In the end, high deference should be given to the local definition of a neighborhood. However, the Office of Economic Opportunity can and should insist that the city consider the many variables, including history and tradition, which go into the delineation of a neighborhood unit. It should ask for careful consideration of demographic data, for detail about the ethnic background of the people in the neighborhood, the economic and educational level, employment opportunities, housing, recreation and social outlets. A well-thought out proposal is likely to be rich in this kind of detail.

THE PROGRAM

The substance of the program is no less important than the delination of the neighborhood, and must be adapted to this delineation.

The first overall requirement for any program is the involvement of the people to be served in the planning and then the operation of the programs designed to serve them.

It is not easy to involve the inarticulate poor, for whom organization is not a familiar phenomenon, but it is possible and it is essential. One clear goal must be to reduce dependency in all areas, not to increase it. This means that any "tender plant" of a neighborhood organization must be built upon -- any indigenous leadership that is at all constructive must be involved in the planning process.

A list of needs outlined in the program planning stage, health, education, jobs, etc. should indicate how these needs are felt by the population. It is difficult to establish criteria from Washington to assure this, but there must be some warning signal of local indifference to neighborhood participation in a program. Furthermore, it is so important that if there is any doubt, a field trip might be worthwhile. We can anticipate antipathy and resistance to the organization and voice of the poor. But these are risks that must be accepted as natural and inevitable and perhaps even welcomed as evidence of involvement.

Survey of Existing Services

A proposal should include a survey of existing social services and education, including, if possible, cost statistics and the ratio of professional and supportive personnel to the neighborhood population. It

would be useful to learn how accessible existing services are which reach the segments of the neighborhood population. Is the new plan going to build on preexisting services, and if not, why not" Often there are good reasons, but as often, a natural center for people, for example, a priest whose church has become a focus for informal social services, may be ignored and a new artificial center created.

Relations with Existing Agencies

In some cases there may be value in by-passing existing social service agencies. In other cases this may be politically unwise or unwise because of the strength of an agency. In the case of a strong well-supported agency, it is entirely possible that a neighborhood program should develop from one discipline or area of service. For example, if the Board of Education were strong and innovative, the idea of a community school might be the basis for the neighborhood program and education would then be the nucleus. If there were already a community mental health center with local support, mental health could be the nucleus of the community action program. Thus, in the Bronx, New York, a community action program is emerging from a mental health center out of the Albert Einstein Medical School (Dr. Harris Peck). In other cities, the Youth Employment, or Opportunity Center has already become a familiar and accepted part of neighborhood and so a comprehensive program emerges with the employment or job training at its core. The judgment probably should be made "on the ground."

Although comprehensiveness of services may be the goal, it is entirely possible that as a beginning strategy for political, financial, or even

social reasons, a simpler or even segmentalized program should be created. In other words, a city might want to start with health and education only, and slowly add employment and perhaps much later deal with teenage recreation. Or, there may be an assault on the problem of teenage delinquency which required an across-the-board approach directed to that age group only, leaving families and senior citizens for later. It is possible to choose to work only with the families of very young children or those children themselves, on the theory that the very young are the most salvageable part of the population.

The reasons behind any of these or other choices may have validity, in terms of short and medium range strategy, but they must not become the excuse for abandoning the objective of a comprehensive program.

The planned use of staff, including provision for training should be examined carefully. To what extent does a neighborhood program plan to search out indigenous workers, to what extent rely on outsiders? How have connecting links to outside services been planned? Are they sufficient to make all of the services truly accessible to the population of the neighborhood?

Some provision should be made for working out a relationship of cooperation and connection among the traditional agencies and institutions which will either work with, control in part, or impede a neighborhood program. Friction may be inevitable, but its destructive aspect should be minimized at the planning stage. A very current example of this is the creation of neighborhood legal services in New Haven and in Washington, D.C. In New Haven, at present, there is serious opposition from the

organized bar which has slowed down the program seriously. In Washington, the Bar Association and Legal Aid were involved at each step of planning and have thus far given strong support. Including the traditional service agencies in the planning process as much as possible and drawing upon their skill and experience may substitute cooperation for friction.

The interrelationship of citywide or even state agencies is a question more directly related to the evaluation of an entire community action program then for judging the specifics of the neighborhood proposal.

Also a larger matter is the area of the whole question of information gathering and disseminating devices, communication, data and collection, both formal and informal. There are more ways of assuring effective communication than can be listed here. Citywide newspaper coverage, radio, TV, are the ones first considered. The functional illiteracy of many of the people who most need to be reached means that person-to-person communication, and contact through the places most frequented, whether bar or church, is the basis for an effective communications network that ought to be in every neighborhood picture.

After a Program has been Accepted

The style of initiation of a program is something that should be regarded with great interest. In some situations a quiet launching might be preferable to one with fanfare. Crisis exploitation, crisis creation, and timing must all be considered.

We would want to know early what obstacles are anticipated and which obstacles are in fact faced. Illiteracy, lack of social cohesiveness, and apathy may be prevalent almost every place that a program is contemplated.

What are the plans to deal with them? How are some of these obstacles considered in the attempt to involve the neighborhood in planning its own program?

It is hard to anticipate whether a program will become rigid or calcified. We have already indicated the possibility that application forms, or rumors of hard choices among cities, may cause a proposing community to take a "safe route." If it is made clear from the outset that all of these programs are frankly experimental and that innovation is desired and that constant feedback and evaluation, as well as program initiative at lower levels, are desirable, rigidity may be avoided in many places.

There should be mechanisms for anticipating crisis or resistance that may come from the mobilization of a neighborhood. Program effectiveness often means the assertion or creation of a political force which will be fought. There are ways to lay the ground for significant changes, although resistance or even outcry may be inevitable. The situation of the rent strikes in Mobilization for Youth and the political repercussions, raise the question of what kind of preparation might be most effective.

Evaluation

Plans for evaluating a neighborhood proposal must be built into the proposal from the beginning. This is a subject for another document. The whole area of community action is too new for us to be aware in advance of the many causes of lags in progress or even failure. Feedback must be rapid and constant.

We would want to know who is evaluating the neighborhood program and against what criteria. Is it part of a larger evaluation scheme of a

citywide community action program? Are there any plans to test theories and conclusions against other neighborhood programs in the same and other cities?

Long-range goals should be broken down into sequential steps. Each must have a planning period beyond the first allocation of funds. But detailed plans should be worked out at shorter intervals than overall plans and broken down in such a way that parts of a program can be looked at separately from other parts of the overall structure. We would want to know how often, what kind, and to whom reports are made; how much personal contact is there by the evaluators; how are they treated at program headquarters, - ignored, exploited or self-supported? Are periodic reviews carried out?

Are the goals sufficiently formulated in the beginning so that we could ask later on whether the plans were fulfilled? Whether they were amended? How recent and how severe and how frequent were the amendments? We would want to know whether the evaluation is set up in such a way that side effects could be anticipated or observed, if they occurred.

We would be loath to set up any machanical criteria for judging the effectiveness of a comprehensive neighborhood program. There are some, of course, each with some limited value. For example, the concept of increasing life-long earning power, or, a reduction in unemployment, the increase of staying power (retention) of young people in high school dropouts, in illegitimate births, lowering crime rate, family break-up, hospital admission, and so on. Probably all of these statistical measures must be enployed, but each should be looked at quantitatively to see

whether, in fact, it tests the social condition we think it does. For example, an increase in employment is a good thing, but if the Negroes continue to hold only menial, lower paid jobs, the employment program is no success.

If our goal is the fullest development of the resources and capacities of each human being, then we will not be satisfied with any simple statistical measures. These will be only our mechanical starting points. The aspirations of any neighborhood program should escalate with success.