

The most difficult cost question deals with the propriety and efficiency of utilizing federal funds in the community action-community organization aspect of neighborhood programs. The propriety of federally-supported community action is a philosophical issue integral to an evaluation of the entire CAP effort. The information in this report may be of value in deciding this issue but the focus of this report is really on a subsidiary issue; that is, are the neighborhood centers an effective and efficient organizational arrangement to achieve the goal of community action. In answering this second question it is to be remembered that the centers studied in this project devote a comparatively small part of their resources to community action but have instead concentrated on the outreach and service aspects.

Community action is carried on quite differently in the various centers throughout the country. It is quite clear that few people agree on what is meant by this phrase or how it is to be accomplished. Further, there are few counterparts in other programs that can be compared with community action. In view of these factors, any determination of the reasonableness of the costs involved would be extremely nebulous.

Evaluation

It is believed that the outreach and service functions of the center are being handled at a reasonable cost. However, the internal disorganization and lack of adequately trained staff at most centers leaves some room for cost savings. It is not anticipated that centers ever will or ever should operate as efficiently as traditional agencies for the centers are training grounds for poor people without experience in similar jobs.

No method exists to determine whether the community action aspect is reasonable in cost and this remains a moot point.

SUMMARY

The neighborhood center is an effective organizational device for reaching out to the poor, for engaging the participation of other neighborhood groups and local residents, and for changing existing institutions. For the most part these functions are being achieved at reasonable cost.

There is little evidence that centers are acting in an integrative capacity and it appears that this role is incompatible with their other functions. Some centers concentrate on developing an informal atmosphere that is inviting to the poor people of the neighborhood. These centers are less concerned with service integration or refinements. Other centers encourage attitudes and organizational arrangements associated with aggressive community action and these appear antithetical to close collaboration with traditional agencies. Thus, unless the center views its role solely as a service agency, and this is rare, service integration cannot be expected to take place in the centers.

The lack of emphasis on training local residents for the staff and board positions they occupy jeopardizes the extent to which any center programs may be carried forward successfully. This problem is pervasive and crucial.

On balance, it is concluded that the neighborhood center is a worthwhile institution to achieve most of the purposes for which it is designed. The trend of development of centers is encouraging and more effectiveness can be anticipated if they are not expected to accomplish incompatible service and community action functions. With comparatively minor modifications of emphasis and structure, centers can be even more valuable features of the Community Action Program.

VIII. RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations to follow deal with ways to make neighborhood centers more effective. This, therefore, implies the first and most fundamental recommendation which is that centers should continue to be important features of the anti-poverty program. Subsequent recommendations are, of course, contingent upon implementation of the first.

THE ROLE OF THE CENTER

The evidence obtained in this project indicates that there is considerable confusion at all levels of the community action program as to the proper role of neighborhood centers. This confusion is reflected in organizational and operating difficulties.