

MAKING PUBLIC WELFARE POLICY

A SUMMARY OF OPINIONS FROM SEVEN GRASS ROOTS MEETINGS ON PUBLIC WELFARE PROBLEMS

Scores of suggestions for improving the public welfare system were made at seven regional conferences sponsored by the New York State Board of Social Welfare throughout New York State during February and March.

The conferences, held as part of the Board's 100th Anniversary, were follow-ups to the Arden House Conference at which representatives of industry, labor, philanthropy and mass media discussed possible new approaches to the welfare problem. Two hundred thirty-nine persons appeared at the meetings, which were held in Long Island, New York City, Albany, Binghamton, Syracuse, Buffalo and Rochester.

Speakers included public officials, attorneys, physicians, representatives of religious, civic, health and welfare organizations, chambers of commerce, taxpayers associations, farm bureaus, business and labor, and welfare recipients.

Almost without exception, all speakers criticized various portions of the present welfare program, but with the exception of three speakers from one rural upstate community, no speaker advocated regressive or punitive measures. All urged various reforms to liberalize the system, make it less demeaning and more effective and constructive. In virtually every community, there was sharp agreement on the following:

(1) A vast expansion of day care facilities for preschool-age children to enable mothers now receiving public assistance to return to work.

A survey of welfare mothers in New York City, which revealed that 70 percent wanted to work, was borne out by testimony throughout the State.

(2) Deplorable housing was cited in every community as a pressing problem. In New York City alone, it was disclosed, the public welfare department pays almost \$200 million annually in rents for generally sub-standard housing. Experimentation with welfare department-sponsored housing was urged in some communities.

(3) Lack of transportation in many parts of the State makes it difficult for welfare recipients to obtain work. Testimony showed that jobs are available, but there is almost no transportation to help a slum resident get to the job.

Lack of transportation also made it difficult for welfare recipients to shop at supermarkets and to get adequate medical care in many instances.

(4) Abolition of the system of mandatory verification and substitution of an affidavit to determine welfare availability were recommended in every region.

Not only would these measures save money, but they would enable scarce staff to spend its time helping people get off the welfare rolls instead of making certain they stay on, testimony disclosed.

In New York City, where an affidavit system has been used for two pilot areas, preliminary results show the system works as effectively as the mandatory investigation.

(5) Better job training and employment programs geared to existing jobs were cited as high priorities.

(6) More effective and intensive family planning information was widely recommended. One novel suggestion was that married women of child-bearing age whose incomes are below the poverty level receive \$500 bonuses for each year they do not have a child. Such payment, the speaker said, would cost less than the cost of having a child on public welfare.

(7) Some critics of the system said the public assistance program had "too little cash and too much control." A caseworker told the Board that "the traditional, accepted way for a widow with children to rehabilitate herself is to remarry, but if she has a man over for dinner, she risks both social and legal embarrassment under the current welfare system."

One proposal was that in the event a welfare recipient with children remarries, her new husband not be required to provide funds for the care of children by a previous marriage. It was testified that this would help restore a large measure of stability to many fatherless homes.

(8) Abolition of the present welfare system and substitution of an income maintenance program was recommended by many speakers. Some favor a form of universal children's allowance; others a negative income tax; some said either would be preferable to the current program.