

PUBLIC ASSISTANCE

The income maintenance program with which we are most familiar is public assistance. Definitions of this are tricky and slip away as one explores other income maintenance possibilities; it is here defined operationally as the income maintenance program administered by welfare departments. At the moment the program rests universally on a means test, that is, an individual determination of needs and resources applicant by applicant. The means test has proved to be a degrading experience for many applicants. It has pitted workers against clients and is terribly wasteful both of money and professional time. The NASW Delegate Assembly acted in 1964 to oppose continued use of the means test.⁴ At the least, that implies a radical simplification of the administration of public assistance—a simple scale of family needs instead of budgeting, and affidavits instead of interviews and proofs.

Two other problems with respect to public assistance are the low levels at which assistance is paid and the fact that so many people are not helped. Virtually no recipient receives help at a level that avoids poverty; in general, AFDC children are treated with special penuriousness. Only about one poor person in four receives help at any given time. For these reasons, the profession has from time to time proposed a noncategorical program (or the addition of a miscellaneous category to the existing program, which would achieve the same result) and a mandatory federal standard of minimum payments. Such a program can be achieved only if the federal government is willing to operate public assistance programs—at least in some areas—for some states do not have the resources to contribute even a

small percentage of the cost and others would not be willing to do so. The issue of federal operation will not be considered here; instead the sort of program that would result from these three proposals will be pointed out.

There would be 30 million people or more receiving public assistance at levels not lower than the definition of the poverty line. Among these would be men and women who are or might be able to work; no investigations would be made of them, nor would they be asked why they are not working. The problem of incentive—about which we have been so troubled recently—would be compounded. No one who could work full time at the minimum wage or even a little more would gain much in income by leaving public assistance. Incentive scales can be devised that might cope with this problem, but they get caught between opposing pressures. Either the bottom of the scale pushes downward and many people receive inadequate income or it moves upward and people with comparatively decent incomes—\$5,000 or \$6,000 a year—receive assistance. Finally, the cost of the program is naturally quite large.

Because people who are now working would stop, the cost of the program would exceed the total poverty deficit in the United States—perhaps costing annually as much as \$20 billion.

Such a program would not be constructive for many of the people involved. It is not good for one to feel that no effort he makes can improve matters for himself. In any event, the nation would probably not tolerate such a program. If Congress gave it serious attention, conditions about employability and training would certainly be attached to it, and an investigative procedure would be added to assure that people were not simply malingering, that children were receiving proper care, and so on. We would shortly be back in the dismal business of the means test. Recipients would feel the keen edge of community dis-

⁴ See "Assembly Backs Minimum Income, Asks New Membership Proposals," and Wanda Collins, "The 1964 Delegate Assembly: A Delegate's First-hand Report," *NASW News*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (February 1965), pp. 1 and 14 respectively.