

sion of the social service potential of public welfare, elimination of residence requirements, substantial revision of the present grant-in-aid formula, and strengthening of measures to support the capacity of clients to assert in practice the rights that are theirs in theory. Although none of these proposals is new, their combined appearance in an official government report offers the theoretical prospect for improvements in current programs long sought by NASW.

There is one important difference between the goal of the advisory council and current NASW policy. The report urges drastic improvements in public assistance in order that it may become the major governmental program for the replacement of income for those below the poverty line. NASW's policy statement regards improvements in public assistance as necessary interim measures during the evolution of other approaches to a national income floor, and as an ultimate guarantor against poverty for the minority who may still be unable to manage within the terms provided by expanded job opportunities, improved social insurance, and the negative tax or family allowance plans.

CONCLUSION

It is useful to suggest what the proposal for a guaranteed income will not accomplish in terms of national goals, as well as to summarize what may be expected of it.

1. It is not intended as a panacea. It does not suggest that a national income floor will cure all social ills. Many will remain. It will scarcely aid the poor to purchase better housing, when housing is in such short supply. It will not enable them to purchase significantly better medical care. It will not eliminate the necessity for the expansion of social services.

2. The guaranteed income does not demand the fulfillment of the

more dire predictions concerning replacement of manpower through automation before it can claim support. Poverty must be dealt with today, although it is well to keep in mind that drastic displacement of men by machines will intensify the demand for a national minimum.

3. The guaranteed income does not present a real threat to the current public welfare system. Rather, it presents it with its greatest opportunity for freeing social workers from unproductive work such as enforcing the means test and enabling them to fulfill their potential for becoming the major cadre for the development of state and locally inspired programs of social service for all who need them.

4. The guaranteed income would not bankrupt the nation. Even the more extreme estimates of cost are small when compared with a gross national product that will in the next decade approach the trillion dollar mark.

5. The national minimum would not obviate the need for working toward full employment for all employables and the development of creative new work opportunities for the majority of Americans, including many of those currently outside the labor market. Instead, it would complement such efforts.

What, then, can be expected of it? A major principle in an epidemiologic approach to disease is that utmost leverage in effecting control depends on locating a link in the chain of events leading to the disease that can be eliminated and that is sufficiently close to the disabling condition to have a significant effect on its incidence. In terms of setting goals for dealing with poverty, effective action does not require that causal mechanisms be understood and attacked in their entirety. Thus, poverty in a particular family may stem from a complex web of interacting

and interdependent variables, such as nonwhite color, slum residence, disability of the breadwinner, limited education, and large family size. The principle of parsimony suggests that the precise point at which to start is with the provision of jobs and money in amounts sufficient to support human life uniformly, adequately, and with dignity. If poverty is thought of in terms of its distribution and incidence throughout the population, such a course of action becomes absolutely necessary.

The history of social welfare legislation and its income maintenance phase in particular has been marked by gradual, step-by-step evolutionary rather than revolutionary increments toward the goal of the national minimum. The chances are good that it will continue to be so characterized. Ultimately, a triple-decker system of income transfers could evolve, aimed both at making up for income deficiencies among the poor and at providing protection against income interruption for the majority of Americans. Such a system could consist, for example, of (1) an income-conditioned social insurance contributory system for the majority subject to the predictable but incurable risks of income interruption through retirement, disability, or death of the breadwinner, (2) a plan based on the negative income tax or a partial or universal demogrant for those with insufficient income and limited attachment to the labor force, and (3) an improved means test program under public assistance for those who still remain below the floor provided by other programs. NASW's task is to move with vigor, supported by its base of knowledge and values, toward the best possible means, in the words of the late Charlotte Towle, "... to make real man's claim of right on society."¹⁷

¹⁷Charlotte Towle, *Common Human Needs* (rev. ed.; New York: National Association of Social Workers, 1965), p. 45.