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MEMORANDUM

TO: Joyce Ware, Regional Office, CORE Date: January 11, 1965

FROM: Stanley Sterling, Social Workers for Civil Rights Action

RE: Social Workers in Their Professional Roles

This memorandum briefly summarizes the activity of our organization, Social Workers for Civil Rights Action, with special reference to the activities of "social workers in their professional roles".

BACKGROUND

During the Summer of 1964, moved by events in Mississippi and New York City, some social workers came together to raise funds for volunteers in Mississippi and circulate petitions for civil rights. Interest was solidified when three civil rights workers were murdered, and Social Workers for Civil Rights Action was created. At a rally in the Community Church on October 22, 1964, attended by 650 social workers, a three-point program was adopted:

1) To establish the Michael Schwerner Memorial Fund to continue to provide social work services on behalf of civil rights in the South,

2) To organize and develop opportunities for social workers to volunteer professional services to established civil rights organizations, and

3) To participate as citizens in community civil rights activities.

PROGRAM

To implement opportunities for social workers to volunteer professional services to civil rights organizations, contact was made with CORE and a basis for organizing social work tasks was devised. At the center of the program is the belief that chapters would improve their "staying power" by shifting some of their attention from broad city-wide policy issues to more direct work on neighborhood problems as they are experienced daily by residents. Further, a chapter's interest in broadening the base of participation of neighborhood residents requires its concentration on problems as the residents experience them.

Thus, the central foci of work would be:

1) Offer concrete help on day-to-day problems of neighborhood residents (Department of Welfare, housing, narcotics, medical care, education, etc.)

2) Development of groups of neighborhood residents having the same problems, to work toward group solutions where possible.

3) Development of a systematic approach toward influencing institutional service patterns in the ghetto communities.

4) Increase indigenous leadership potential of chapter members.

In developing a working relationship between a chapter and our group, two major conditions should be built in:

1) Tasks assigned to the social workers should be specified as precisely as possible, and

2) Time limits should be established around all assignments.

Thus, the chapter leadership could be assured that the social workers are not redefining the chapter's function and goals, and that the social work group's life in the chapter office is based on the chapter's periodic decision to extend it. We believe that this understanding can help both the chapters and the social workers develop and maintain a relationship in which neither group feels imposed upon.

The general types of social work activity anticipated at this time might look like the following:

1) Social Service Desk:

A scheduled availability of a "Social Service Desk" in each chapter office, to which residents could be directed for help with any problem.

This work will generally emphasize a service negotiation function wherein the worker will represent the resident as "a social worker from CORE". It is anticipated that problems of bureaucratic inequity and red-tape will be most prominent. Short-term counselling, referral and referral follow-up is expected to be other forms of work required.

2) Group Meetings:

Meetings will be organized on a scheduled basis around specific types of problems. For example, a meeting about the welfare "system", focused on mutual education and problem identification could be held at regular intervals, with neighborhood residents being encouraged to attend for both learning and direct help.

These activities might form the base of the over-all social service program in a chapter. Other activities might include helping groups of residents having a similar problem with a community institution (welfare centers, clinic, etc.) to work on finding group solutions to problems that appear to be less amenable to individual solutions.

In addition, an on-going system of recording will be devised that could help to locate clusters of similar neighborhood problems around which groups may be organized. This can also form the basis for collecting data on a city-wide basis regarding problems common to many neighborhoods, reflecting a need for action at a higher level of policy formulation.

Specific tasks that a social worker might find himself engaged in are:

1) Interviewing: helping a resident carve a workable problem out of the large mass of problems that brought him into the chapter office.

2) Short-term counselling: for those problems needing no more than two or three interview sessions.

3) Referral: to agencies in the community appropriate to deal with the problem brought in by the resident.

4) Follow-up of referral: to check that the service for which a resident was referred was obtained. In general, this aspect of our work will be emphasized with a view toward building the chapter as a meaningful source of accountability for the availability and quality of services offered by neighborhood institutions.

5) Recording: simple, a log-style recording of who came for what service, what was done about it, and what was the outcome will be required in order to coordinate the work and to develop services. These recording devices will need to await development and refinement by each group of social workers in their respective chapters.

Group Work: with small groups of people having a similar problem.

6) Training indigenous workers: training residents and chapter members to help individuals and groups around problems not requiring a high order of professional skill.

7) Developing manuals: helping chapter workers develop information manuals regarding housing, welfare, medical and educational services.

Although we are hopeful that this work by social workers can enhance the efforts of CORE chapters toward the aims of the civil rights movement, we are fully aware and concerned about the barriers to be overcome before these benefits can be realized. Coordinating the work of a group of volunteers in a chapter office; communications between workers in the same chapter; the necessity of one case being handled by more workers, etc., will require planning and innovation of the highest order. However, task is worthy, the motivation is high, and the skills necessary for the task are available. We now need only begin.

Stanley J. Sterling

SJS/cf