

SOME FACTORS IN STATE SUPERVISION FOR A PUBLIC-ASSISTANCE AGENCY

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FROM THE organization chart of a State welfare agency, with its boxes, its titles, and its duties, emerge the slender lines which connect the State agency with the local unit—the lines which make it possible to say in the words of the Social Security Act that the Federal Government is not only dealing with “a single State agency” but that, also, the program is “in effect in all political subdivisions of the State.” These lines, slender as they appear, symbolize one of the most important parts of the agency, for they represent the field supervisory staff, who bring to the local offices the program and policies of the State organization and who supervise the carrying out of that program. Wherever supervision is used effectively it appears as a method for stimulating the growth of workers so that they may be competent to take increasing responsibility for their own jobs. It is primarily a teaching-learning process. Therefore field supervision from the State office is carried on by a staff which has the necessary knowledge and the ability to use that knowledge skillfully, while, on the other hand, the district or local staff members to be supervised are people capable of growth.

Because there has been relatively limited experience in a program involving field supervision by State agencies, there has been correspondingly little consideration of its possible content and methods. Before the days of the Emergency Relief Administration, the relationship of the State to programs now embracing the assistance categories was almost entirely a financial one. If duplicate case records existed in a State office, they were checked for accuracy in situations involving legal establishment of eligibility. In most instances, however, financial supervision, through accounting procedures or by means of quarterly or annual reports, sufficed. During ERA days when orders changed rapidly, funds contracted or expanded overnight, and experiments, started with enthusiasm, were stopped to begin something else, field supervision from State to local offices was largely interpretation of administrative orders.

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Almost all that has been written concerning supervision in the public-welfare field relates to the process of case work. In the area which we are now considering, the work of the field supervisor embraces a much wider content and covers a greater extent of necessary knowledge; it calls for skills in method and relationship which are more far reaching than those implied in the restricted sphere of case worker and supervisor in an office.

Who, then, is the field supervisor, what does he need to know, and how is he to do his job effectively? To begin with, he is probably an individual who has come up from the visiting staff, where he showed outstanding ability; he has intellectual maturity and judgment and has probably also acquired a background of general and professional education superior in some respects to that of the local staffs. In addition, he is a person who can leave home ties, who can stand hard and constant travel, and who can work understandingly and effectively in local communities.

The second part of our question concerns what this field supervisor needs to know and the methods he is to use. First and above all, in order to carry out the program of the State agency, he should understand the purpose and goals of the organization which he represents and his own function in relation to that purpose. A social program and standards of assistance have been established by the State agency and must be maintained by the district offices, but standards do not mean uniformity. There is room for variety of expression according to the limits of interest, broad or narrow, of the community; there is room, too, for experimentation founded on sound practice, which ultimately is of benefit to the entire State. The field supervisor must realize his function as a stimulator of variety and of experimentation, but he must also test various programs and plans to be sure that they are advancing toward, rather than hindering, the agency's goals and purposes.

Next, the field supervisor should have basic knowledge of good administration against which he can evaluate the way that a particular office functions through its procedures and methods and

its personnel practices. This evaluation will be made with a thorough understanding of limitations which exist as to material equipment, staff, and funds, and with imagination to see what may best be developed within these limitations.

Other necessary knowledge concerns accurate and definite familiarity with the policies of the agency and the ability to interpret these flexibly, wherever that is legally possible. After policies and procedures have been carefully established and written into a State manual, numerous questions arise which require judgment in answering and for which the local office may not wish to take responsibility. In the discussion of these questions, the field supervisor needs to know not only the policy which applies to the particular situation but the principle upon which that policy is based; the discussion then becomes an instrument for developing sound social thinking in relation to the human personalities involved. Intangible affectional values that make a home "suitable" even when the mother's past history does not conform to the usual moral standard of the community; the amount of support which a working child is expected to give to his family and what exceptions may be made; the limit to which pressure may be brought upon "legally responsible" relatives, are instances of these border-line questions.

In the area of services to the client the field supervisor needs not only a body of case-work knowledge but also the ability to adapt that knowledge to new and changing situations, adapting methods but not altering basic principles. He must be able to use this practical understanding in discussing individual situations with the local supervisor, when frequently it may seem that little constructive work is being carried on. It is through the field supervisor that consultants on medical problems, family budgeting, or difficult case situations are brought into the district offices. He is, therefore, aware of the possibility and extent of such expert services when they are needed.

In regard to the community, the field supervisor must know agencies and organizations—Federal, State, and local—and their relation to and interest in public welfare as well as in individual need. If the public-welfare program is to be effective, the support of all possible local groups must be sustained; those having special interest in private institutions for children or old people may need

State interpretation of the need for their continuing and yet changing participation in new plans. Methods of stimulating interest in other groups will frequently also be a necessary part of his knowledge. And in addition, the field supervisor must have a background knowledge of the communities where he has a responsibility; their social and economic history and present situation; their traditions, their prejudices, and their prides.

The supervisory visit is most successful when it is planned for a stated period and regular intervals. While short frequent visits may at times be advantageous and necessary, usually longer visits at less frequent intervals are more satisfactory, not only because of economy in time in travel, but mainly because of the cumulative effect of a series of conferences.

The field visit involves preparation by both the field supervisor and the office visited. It may be that there are new policies or procedures to be introduced and discussed; complaints received at the State office may indicate that policies already established are not understood or are not being adhered to. It will be possible to discuss situations observed at the time of the previous visit, or the results of an analysis of statistics or finance which bear upon the operation of the office. Whatever the matter for discussion, the field supervisor's visit must have a definite purpose.

Preparation is also made by the director or supervisor in the local office. With the knowledge that the field supervisor is coming at a regular time, questions which demand State interpretation and which can wait for the visit are noted and scheduled. A staff meeting may be planned, or a special community committee meeting, where the knowledge gained or given by the State representative will prove of value. There will often be an opportunity also for the field supervisor to meet with the official board, if one exists.

While the field supervisor's successes depend on the breadth of knowledge that he has acquired, they depend still more largely on his skills in human relationship and his understanding of the way people learn to work together and are able to use what each has to give. He may go to an office where there is no recognition that the help he has to offer is needed, to another where it is not wanted, or to another where there may be too much dependence. In all these situations some way must be found to promote freedom of

understanding if the field supervisor is to use successfully his teaching and leadership function.

The attitude that the field supervisor brings to the visit is basic to this freedom. Though he comes in as a professional person with a broader point of view, he must at the same time show such a discerning interest in the local experience, such an appreciation of successes as well as failures, that he is accepted not as someone in authority who has come to praise or blame but as one who shares in the circumstances which exist and who must of necessity understand if he is to help. His questions, comments, or criticisms will then be seen as resulting from this interest. Many authorities on personnel practice¹ in fields other than public welfare have emphasized the need for these qualities, among them Jessamine Fenner² whose four points for successful personnel work are all applicable here:

1. A belief in people as individuals.
2. Patience and sympathy with the shortcomings of human nature.
3. A conviction that scrupulously fair, honest, and direct dealing with individuals is the one method which will best serve them.
4. An open mind and an unemotional approach to the individual problem.

In the field supervisor's visits to each of the districts, counties, or localities for which he is responsible, he sees his work in relation to the individual supervisors and executives and their need for knowledge and skill in carrying on a more effective program. He goes to these as a leader, an interpreter, and a teacher, to stimulate their interest in improving methods, increasing efficiency, and carrying on their day-by-day job in a way which will be most helpful to the organization, the clients, and the community which they serve. All the skills needed in the case-work process are needed here, for more help cannot be given than the worker is prepared to take. Each has his own point from which to develop competence and his own particular background which may limit or spur his progress. The field supervisor accepts these people as they are; though he has the authority implied in the supervisory relation-

ship to the extent that standards must be developed and maintained, that authority rests on the continual and careful evaluation of attempts to meet the standards. In developing a relationship with the district offices, the field supervisor's effectiveness will be judged by the quality of leadership which he exerts in these visits and the ability which he shows in relating the questions discussed to broad general principles as well as to the particular local situation.

During his visit the field supervisor will discuss the use which is being made of staff meetings and conferences and whether they are being held regularly or only when an emergency arises. In this discussion the value of staff participation, staff study of a special project, and a stimulation of interest in professional reading may be suggested. Discussion of the use of individual conferences between worker and supervisor in the local office will serve to emphasize their value in providing an opportunity for helping the worker to develop increasing ability to make his own decisions rather than their use as a continued check of the worker's mistakes or omissions. In discussing particular staff difficulties, also, the field supervisor will feel his responsibility for relating individual performance to the effectiveness of the agency, for keeping the discussion on an objective basis, and for helping the local supervisor to take responsibility for meeting the personnel problems which belong to him. In all the topics discussed there will be considered use of encouragement, of constructive criticism, approval, and stimulation to further responsibility.

At the conclusion of the visit there may be a general summing up of the decisions arrived at through conferences and discussions, to make certain that there has been mutual and definite understanding as well as some plan for the future—something new to be attempted or some change accomplished before the next field visit. This summary, incorporated in his own notes, becomes part of the field supervisor's working knowledge of the district and the basis for his field reports to the State office. Through his work a two-way plan has been established, and the slender lines on the chart lead back again from the local office as the field supervisor brings to the State his knowledge of local conditions and problems as a basis for increasingly improved program planning.

¹ See particularly Tead, Ordway, *Human Nature and Management*, 1933, ch. 13; also Niles, H. E. and M. C., *The Office Supervisor*, 1935, pp. 120-121.

² Fenner, Jessamine C., *Personnel Manual: The Personnel Function in Nontechnical Language*, rev. ed., 1938.