

Future work of the Social Service Bureau

By MISS JANET PATERSON, Senior Social Worker

At the end of last year, a discussion took place about the future work at the Bureau. It was a time for "stocktaking" for several reasons. Firstly, our social work staff had been reduced during the year and this had naturally meant a cutting down of our services. We had been forced to decide priorities and the work of five people had been limited to manageable proportions for two. Secondly, we had prospects of new staff for the coming year and wanted to know how we should use them in re-developing the bureau. The third reason was an influence from outside, namely the tendencies of other agencies to declare their policies and to concentrate on achieving good standards by specialising. This meant that more than ever we needed to know where we were going.

SIGNIFICANCE

The significance of our decisions is not in their radical nature, because they are not radical, but in the fact that they came from conscious deliberation. We believe that our function is to continue working with low income families and to develop ways and means of increasing our co-operation with the clergy.

Most people, who are familiar with the Brotherhood, have known that the work was with people with low incomes whether they were pensioners or small wage earners. However, what few people may realise is that the Brotherhood is one of a very very few organisations employing trained social workers to do this.

SOCIAL WORKERS

It follows that as well as working with individual families, we must consider the needs of those families on a larger scale. In the past we have been outspoken on subjects like the low rate of Unemployment Benefit and our outspokenness has produced results for people who were not able to speak for themselves. There are many more matters deserving this attention and we intend to produce material gathered from our daily practice that will warrant attention. For instance, at this time with the beginning of the school year, we are concerned about the cost of education and in particular the strains imposed on a family who are trying to keep "a not too bright" teenager at school.

We are inclined to think of our education system as a free one but any basic wage earner with a number of children could tell about the hidden and not so hidden charges which worry him.

Amongst our low income families, there will be many whom we have called multi-problem families because they seemed to

have recurrent troubles with lots of things at once. It has even been suggested that the term derived from the social worker's own inability to know where to start! Many people will remember that the Brotherhood pioneered work with this group with the Family Service Project in Camp Pell in 1955. Here for the first time the service was adjusted to the needs of the people as a recognition that one of the major characteristics of a multi-problem family was its inability to use ordinary health and welfare services. When an intensive social work programme began to show results in terms of better household standards, improved rent payments and greater family stability, the Housing Commission offered financial support, the staff was increased and the project attracted a great deal of professional interest.

The next stage of the Family Service Project was at East Preston. Progress was slower, new problems were encountered and resistant ones became more resistant. By the end of 1959, it was felt that in this form and with the same group of families, the project was becoming supportive rather than dynamic and most of the families, if not on their feet, had grown sufficiently to seek this support when necessary from ordinary agency services. And so the project closed in June, 1960. It is true that many families felt abandoned, no matter how hard we tried to prepare them for the end of our visits and reassured them that we still cared and would be glad to see them at Brunswick Street. Furthermore we disappointed our professional colleagues by not producing a report on these five years of work and our silence was interpreted as a sense of failure.

We do not believe the project was a failure. Untold numbers of methods and ideas arising from it have been incorporated into our daily routine as a matter of course. Ultimately a report will be produced so that the lessons we learned can be made available to the many who followed the project with interest and who have waited so long for our evaluation.

The work we are now planning will probably be with a selected number of families who fit certain criteria which were derived from the project. A principle one is likely to be "contact with the social service bureau over a period of five years or more but never really known" (or helped). We will examine our attitudes and their attitudes; we will look at the nature of their problems and the relevance to them of the help we offer; and will try to do this in such a way that records can be easily compared. The aim will be increased understanding and more effective service.

Our interest in improving co-operation

with the clergy has grown naturally since the appointment of our chaplain. With his help, links have been established on an individual basis with parish clergy when we have needed their help for a client in the district. We feel we have much to offer each other and should be working more closely together if only to reduce the wastage of welfare effort. We need the help of the parish organisations and we believe that the local clergyman could use our help and specialised training when he encounters personal problems that are beyond the scope of pastoral counselling.

PERSONAL PROBLEMS

Last year in June, we wrote to many clergymen explaining our staff position and regretting our inability to accept all the work they might want us to do. It is now possible to write again retracting this letter and inviting referrals. There are various ways in which we can make the link between the clergy and the social workers of the Brotherhood a real thing. One way is to invite the clergyman concerned to a case conference when a family he has known is being discussed. This gives him a chance to see how we think and work and the face to face contact has endless advantages over telephone conversations. On the other hand we are interested to understand the complications and difficulties of his work in the parish and in particular the sense of anxiety and frustration that is inevitable when a hungry, homeless family comes to him at night long after our offices are closed.

This outline of plans for 1965 has concentrated on two main emphases and has not described the general nature of family case work. Traditionally social workers have found this hard to do but perhaps the key to the whole thing is in the phrase that "instead of helping people, we try to help them to help themselves." Financial relief, clothing, assistance with accommodation and holidays are all provided against the fundamental belief that it is the person who matters and it is his ability and will to change that we are really working on.

BUREAU'S 1964 STATISTICS

NUMBERS

Total number of families seen	653
New	273
Previously known	380
Home visits	484
Office interviews	2,084
Other visits on behalf of clients	153
Amount of aid	£4,785
	(record figure)

MAIN AREAS FROM WHICH FAMILIES CAME

(registered at first visit in the year)

Fitzroy	128
Preston, Reservoir	62
South of Yarra within 4 miles of G.P.O.	41
Carlton	41
South of Yarra over 4 miles from G.P.O.	41
Collingwood, Abbotsford	33