MEMORANDUM

TO: Co-ordinators, Services

FROM: David Green

DATE: 27 October 1980

RE: Saying No - Some notes on the problems of working in last
        resort services

        Working within the context of the benevolent and charitable
tradition has not always been a problem for people in welfare services.
Historically, the degree of our knowledge and also our understanding
of the bases of deprivation, inequality and injustice has protected us
from many of the problems facing workers today. For now, injustice is
more stark and we are better equipped to know the effect of what we do,
and the unintended consequences. In addition, working in the context
of increasing abundance for some at the expense of others sharpens up
the ideological as well as the practical dilemmas of working in a
voluntary agency with limited resources and a benevolent tradition.
It is little wonder, therefore, that workers in the front line of
delivering welfare services experience even greater pressure and
stress in day to day encounters. The staff of the Brotherhood are no
exception in this regard. The following are some of the reasons why
staff in these positions are faced with the most taxing and distressing
problems.

1.   Obviously, it is the numbers of people who have apparently
        unsolvable problems which aggravates stress for staff. If
        only some of the users of your service are in difficulty, or
        grossly deprived, then it is not such a problem. If a
        constant stream of people in trouble pass by, then the impact
        becomes extremely wearing. Clearly, the Material Aid Service
        stands out in this regard because volume is so high and there
        is little chance to meet with the users of the service in any
        sense other than their highest need.

2.   The second major problem which follows from working in this
        way is that the worker becomes the focus of the pain and
        distress and frustration of the users of the service. So the
        users make the worker carry some of their anger and disillu-
        sionment just because workers are there and a handy target
        and an actual and real person saying no.

3.   Thirdly, many of the users of our services are very uncertain
        about using the services anyway and tend to take out their
        anger about charity on the worker. The injustice of their
        situations seem to be focussed in the charitable act which
        becomes symbolic of their own situation. In this way, the
        workers are fair game for pent-up anger, frustration, and
        also fair target for manipulation.

4.   The assistance that the Brotherhood can give becomes represent-
        ative of the meanness of society that picks out people as
        the have-nots and then grudgingly allows them to survive on
        meagre handouts. In this way, the Brotherhood and the workers
        become part of the depriving system.

Some of these problems cannot be solved because they represent the nature and structure of our society. However, there are things which can be done to make the worker's position less wearing. Some of these things are as follows:

1. The Brotherhood is a multi-faceted organisation and it runs a whole range of services. One of the reasons it does this and invests money in research and the development of policy is because it has rejected charitable solutions to structural problems. It sustains and maintains services like Material Aid, and subsidises Day Care and the Day Centre because such services are needed while there are inadequate social policies and programs to meet the needs of poor people. While the Brotherhood meets residual needs it attempts to change the circumstances which give rise to these residual needs. All workers in the Brotherhood are part of the agency's residual services as they are part of its policy development and social action. All services should give recognition to the diversity of activities of the Brotherhood and should, where appropriate, inform users of this diversity. Interestingly enough, not all parts of the agency may want to be identified with other parts. However, the identification exists and it is a very positive identification for those in services and those working in the most difficult of services. We should take more advantage of the benefits of working in a broadly based agency.

    Amongst the ways in which diversity of the agency could be better exploited is to improve direct communication between services and the research and policy areas. Graeme Brewer, when he returns, is going to develop a uniform data collection system for services to improve the overall collection of data and hopefully, improve the Brotherhood's ability to speak more precisely in terms of numbers, and objective facts. The agency has good idiosyncratic data and good case stories but does not make effective use of general statistical information derived from its own services.

    Brotherhood literature, posters, and leaflets should be more readily available in the services themselves and for service users. It is important that users recognise that the BSL is attempting to change general social conditions and matters of injustice, even if this activity has no immediate impact on their own circumstances. It is equally important for staff working in services to be able to see that part of the service they provide is directed towards changing social policies. Again, this may do nothing to alleviate the problems of lack of food, or a cold house, or no house, but all these situations are part of the context the Brotherhood at least attempts to address. Users of services who are satisfied or dissatisfied with the Brotherhood's actions should be informed of their rights and of their overall 'political' position. Even if there is very little time, some users are able to act on advice and information regarding next steps or appropriate courses of action for them to take. Of course, for some, it is impossible to relate to these issues and destructive for the Brotherhood to encourage any broader activity or response on behalf of the user. The point is that the opportunity should be there for users of services to take some action on their own behalf if they choose to do so.

The point is that workers in the BSL are not working in a narrow and
isolated context - the Brotherhood is attempting to meet social needs
in a wide variety of ways. There should be some support in this fact
for service providers as there should be some reassurance for research
staff that their organisation is not removed from the real world.
If either of these two parties are not benefitting then there is
something wrong with the way the BSL is working internally.

2. The second major strategy that staff could develop in order to look
after themselves is to be able to identify the kinds of hooks that
service users throw out and the kinds of hooks that systems throw
out to people who work face-to-face in difficult services. The
first problem is being able to identify who or what is responsible
for the users problem and the failure of the service to solve that
problem and then being able to identify that both to the worker
themselves and, if necessary, to the client. Sometimes the worker
is responsible, sometimes the actual service, sometimes the BSL,
but very often it is the social and economic order which is causal
to the client's problem. Often this kind of statement is trite
because no-one wants to lash out at an amorphous system or an
intangible political order or even a massive department. If the
worker is the only tangible person saying no, the worker is likely
to get the blame. At very least, however, the worker should know
how much responsibility they have and not take on responsibility
which is not theirs.

At the same time, workers should be able to clearly distinguish
between their agency's responsibility and that of the social system
within which they operate. In the same way as workers become landed
with responsibilities that are not theirs, so do agencies, while at
the same time agency structure and systems which aggravate problems
are not recognised and these problems are attributed to broader
systems. Knowing who is responsible for what is an important way
that people working in direct service can look after themselves and
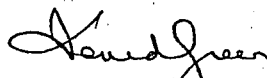in so doing look after their clients more adequately.

3. All workers need good support from their management and hopefully,
a trusting relationship with colleagues and friends. The Brotherhood
has traditionally given its staff a lot of independence and responsi-
bility in many ways but that is not always helpful for staff who may
need more in terms of direction, support and advice. If our present
management systems are not working and if staff do not feel supported
in the problems of saying no and other matters, then these issues
should be spelt out, particularly by the Co-ordinators who have the
responsibility, not only to immediate management, but also to support
their staff to the Associate Director and the Executive. Hopefully,
the determination of the Executive Committee to review priorities
of work and give greater attention to management questions may lead
to greater support for staff.

4. There are approaches to practice and rules of practice which can
support staff who are in the position of having to say no. The key
factor in this approach to practice is honesty, being able to say
exactly what the situation is and why it is rather than having to
fudge an answer. Hopefully, the administration of the Chaplain's

Fund, for example, can be clarified so that those who are involved in using the fund can be more direct and clear about its availability. In addition, we should be moving towards clearer statements about our services, particularly Material Aid, Family Day Care, the Day Centre, etc. in the form of brochures, so that people can know what they can expect to get and what is not available. This kind of statement and the possible use of posters and other forms of communication support honest and clear practice. They also reduce the burden on the individual worker to have to explain why things are not available or why fees are required as if that person was making them up or was responsible for the rules.

Honest practice is also supported by the better availability of agency information as mentioned above. Many people are better able to make a decision about their situation if they have more information available to them.

Summary

These suggestions do not make problems go away and they do not alter the material situation of people to whom we have to say no. However, they do serve to clarify reality, put problems in context and give people better information about their economic and political situation. However, staff who are clear, confident, as well as compassionate, are going to be more effective in their jobs. These problems should be reviewed at our regular monthly meetings so that we can continue to provide the kind of framework which will facilitate not only better services, but also a better basis of practice for staff who have to say no.

David Green