

MATERIAL AID SERVICE

- first report uncovers disturbing facts and attitudes

A review of the first six months operation of the Brotherhood's new Material Aid Services clearly shows that there are many people in the community who are unable to meet their own basic needs for material goods due to unreasonably low levels of income.

Between November 1972 and May 1973, 459 people made 1088 separate requests for clothing, food, furniture, accommodation, financial assistance or information. In almost every instance clothing and furniture requests were met.

LOW INCOMES

A closer analysis of these requests indicates that of 459 people requesting help, 322 were receiving a pension or benefit, 132 of these received an invalid pension while 109 were single parent families. It was particularly disturbing to find that 46 people had no income of any sort, and a further 42 people were awaiting benefits. Several reasons lay behind people's requests for assistance. In 225 cases it was due to consistently low incomes, while a further 106 were either sick or unemployed. Only a very small number sought help either because of alcoholism, release from prison or desertion. The majority of all consumers were in receipt of a pension or benefit although 49 were actively receiving wages.

There is a clear indication in these initial statistics that Commonwealth Pension and Benefit levels are far too low and do not meet the basic personal survival needs. The fact that 88 people had no income or were awaiting benefit payments also indicates that there are still some serious gaps in Australia's income security system at the present time.

The report argues that although there should be no need for material aid services of this kind today, it is unlikely that the material needs of very poor people will be met in any other way in the foreseeable future. It maintains that problems of this kind will continue on the same scale until Australia's wealth is more evenly distributed. If Australia is supposed to be 'the lucky country' it is clear that all these people are very much down on their luck. It is quite unfair for them to be personally blamed for

circumstances which are clearly outside of their control.

From the outset it was decided that the Material Aid Service should be reorganized on a new basis with a new philosophy of help. The general layout of the shop has sought to reflect this new approach. It is bright and attractive, looking like a normal shop. Though located next to Head Office in Brunswick Street it has its own separate entrance and people are



Children can help choose their own clothing at the Material Aid Service.

encouraged to come in and choose for themselves. There are also facilities for people to try on garments to make sure they fit properly.

HIDDEN COMMUNITY ATTITUDES

Yet it is precisely because the service has been made 'visible' and its quality upgraded that previously submerged community attitudes have come to the surface. There is a section at the end of the report which categorises the various attitudes which many people have expressed about the service and the people using it.

The first is that poor people should not be given good quality things —

"good things should be sold, not given away"

"Isn't that coat lovely, it's a pity to give it away"

The second is that poor people are not deserving —

"that old man smells of alcohol why doesn't he buy his own clothes"

"some of these people arrive in taxis or cars"

The third, is a paternalistic attitude which says that everyone should be required to make some token payment for what they receive —

"People who receive the service should at least pay a small amount because it helps them to preserve their self esteem and dignity"

Such a view may or may not be correct. Only the recipients themselves are in a position to say whether this is so or whether token payments are equally demeaning. The final choice should be left with them.

The report states that the prevalence of such attitudes indicates "The Brotherhood's failure to communicate the values and philosophy underlying its service. In fact they are the very attitudes about poor people which abound in

the community and on which the Brotherhood expends so much effort to change through Social Action."

POSITIVE EFFECTS

On a more positive note, Mrs Glen Alderson the Welfare Officer says that many people using the service have commented about the difference between the old and the new arrangements. They have said "it is not like charity at all" and they don't feel so embarrassed about making requests. This suggests that factors like the quality, choice and diversity of goods, when displayed in attractive surroundings does much to give people a feeling of dignity and increased self esteem.

It is also clear that the service is not being abused. Mrs Alderson comments that the "fair go" principle is very apparent amongst the consumers.

HOW THE SERVICE DEVELOPED

For many years the Brotherhood has offered material aid, in the form of clothing and

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affluent society is bound to mean partial and limited solutions simply because a whole range of new possibilities will have been ignored in the process.

The Enquiry should put the issues of social inequality to the Australian people so that they are helped to make a decision as to whether they believe existing inequalities are fair or not. The Enquiry would further the cause of the poor and the cause of social justice by helping to initiate such a discussion.

The real challenge for the Poverty Enquiry is not simply to improve the quality and delivery of welfare services but also to help the general public ask better questions about poverty and inequality.

RECYCLING PROVIDES REHABILITATION

Almost three years ago the Brotherhood started a project which has pioneered a new phase in sheltered workshops in Victoria.

The Newsprint Division provides work for patients in various stages of rehabilitation from several psychiatric hospitals in Melbourne. "I went to Perth and Adelaide to look at the work that had been done in this field," Manager Mr Hugh McNally.

"From these investigations we were able to consider the relative merits of other sheltered workshop programmes," he said.

"And from then on it was just a matter of applying for a Commonwealth Subsidy.

"And from then on it was just a matter of wading through miles of red tape to apply for and receive various subsidies."

The Newsprint Division now operates from a factory building in West Heidelberg, and Bill Winford supervises the 25 men and women at the centre.

Paper of all types, mainly newsprint, is collected from homes in the metropolitan area.

Mr McNally makes contact with school and church groups to organise the collections. He has met with enthusiastic responses from school and church leaders.

The Rev. Peter Corney, a leading Anglican youth worker, has described the service as "the best thing that has been offered to youth groups for an opportunity for community service."

The collection groups first distribute leaflets explaining the project to as many as 500 homes in a specific area. The paper is then collected by a team from the group.

"One of the reasons the groups are enthused about the work is that it eliminates the need for storage. No more scout halls piled high with newspapers and cardboard," said Mr McNally.

The proceeds from the collections are taken straight to the factory in West Heidelberg to be sorted.

"We have great co-operation from householders. They are often very grateful to be able

to dispose of the paper that most households accumulate," he said.

The paper is sorted into various categories at the factory, baled and sold.

BILL WINFORD COMMENTS

"This type of work is a new concept in sheltered workshops. Most are unable to create such a normal atmosphere and there are few parallels with an outside work situation. The



Patients from surrounding hospitals baling newspapers in the Sheltered Workshop at West Heidelberg.

patients come from Bundoora, Larundel and Plenty Hospitals.

They may also be living in boarding houses before actually returning to their own homes. They work a slightly shorter day but apart from that the conditions are comparable with any factory.

Even the "power structure" if you like, is similar. If a man shows aptitude, he might be made a leading hand. He is then responsible for

a particular phase of the work, and acts as an advisor to his workmates.

So this system serves a number of purposes.

There are relationships to be sorted out with workmates, and the acceptance and delegation of authority. In this way both the individual and a doctor or social worker can gauge reasonably accurately his ability to resume his position in his home and work.

The men are paid for their work, depending on the state of the market for the paper.

The men are paid for their work at higher than average sheltered workshop rates.

According to Mr McNally, this also serves to add to the sense of involvement with the job.

Most of the men stay for a period of about three to four months or longer. They then may get jobs in other factories.

The factory has now been fitted with a hydraulic lifting system for the bales of paper. This greatly eases the need for the bales to be hauled manually, and will greatly increase the output of sorted paper.

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furniture, to poor people who have been able to establish their need for such goods. In the immediate past this service was offered through two different departments of the Brotherhood — to families and individuals through the Social Work Service and to old people through the Aged Welfare Service.

With the reorganization of these two departments and the development of the Family Centre, it was necessary for the Brotherhood to re-examine its responsibilities to the poorer members of the community. A small research study revealed that we were exercising two clear responsibilities which the new Family Centre could not meet. The first was information about community services and the second was material aid.

The Fitzroy Social Services Council and the Fitzroy Council have now taken up the task of developing a proper community based information service which is discussed elsewhere (See page 12). The matter of providing material aid was seen as a continuing Brotherhood responsibility. Ex-Senior Social Worker Joan Davey and staff saw an opportunity to develop an effective and separate material aid service which would be

much more widely available to those requiring assistance.

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

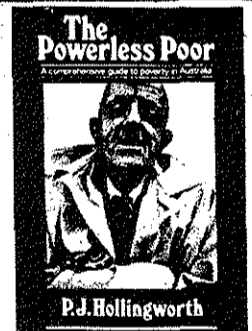
* Many people still do not have enough money for the bare necessities of life and at times some have no money at all.

* There is a critical need to continue the Material Aid Service until the Australian Government improves its income security arrangements possibly by providing some form of adequate Guaranteed Minimum Income.

* The service should be expanded to meet needs in areas beyond the inner suburbs which now appear to be fairly adequately met.

* Greater efforts must be made to overcome negative community attitudes towards poor people.

* There is an urgent need to develop a working auxiliary to improve both quantity and quality of supplies and to assist Mrs Alderson in the Centre. Even though a considerable amount of goods have been distributed in the past 12 months there is a serious shortage of some specific items. This, particularly applies to bed linen, blankets, and good quality children's clothing. The Brotherhood is most anxious to hear from anyone who is able to assist; here is a most useful avenue of service in an area of great need.



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