

Development of a Black Voluntary Social Agency In a Black Community

In New York City—as in many other cities—the problem of extending sufficient social services to unwed black mothers has been largely unsolved. This is a report on steps leading to the establishment of a new social agency in Harlem, operated by blacks, and designed to meet community needs.

JOSEPH H. SMITH

In New York City in 1962, 85 percent of the black unwed mothers were not being reached for social services. They were not accepted by voluntary agencies that could not plan adoption for their children, and that would not offer foster care. Healthy black infants were left in large numbers in hospitals, waiting for homes or shelters. A leader in the black

Joseph H. Smith, M.S.W., is Director, Harlem-Dowling Children's Service, New York. This paper was presented at the CWLA Eastern Regional Conference at New York, 1970.

community at that time asked if the Spence-Chapin Adoption Service, though primarily an adoption agency, would rescue these children from maternal deprivation.

The former executive director, the late Miss Helen B. Montgomery, seized the opportunity to serve these children. With the encouragement and help of the Board of Directors, a 5-year demonstration project in foster care was established. For the agency, this meant a new building and a tripling of professional and clerical staff.

The director also sought and gained board approval for a new program in differential use of casework staff that enabled it to expand the services to the neediest natural parents and children. The agency hired students with B.A. degrees and outstanding scholastic backgrounds who attended a school of social work on a work-study basis and under close supervision. They were utilized to the full extent of their knowledge, experience, and capacity.

Children were removed as quickly as possible from hospitals and shelters, and thereafter the agency was able to work

with mothers early in placement. Working closely with the natural parents enabled many children to be returned home after a brief stay in foster care. Other children were surrendered and many were placed in adoption. From August 1962 to March 1970, Spence-Chapin accepted 1877 black children. Of these, 483 went home to their parents, 306 were placed in adoption and 1088 remained in care, with many of their foster parents in the process of adopting them.

Although the foster care project was highly successful in terms of the increased number of black unwed mothers and children reached, the families reunited, and the permanent homes found for many of the children, the project did not encourage other agencies to expand their programs to this extent.

Facilities Outgrown

In 1968, after 6 years of expansion, the Spence-Chapin Adoption Service began slowing the acceptance of unwed mothers whose children would go into foster care because the agency was outgrowing its facilities. It was necessary to consider expanding physical facilities again or think of another way to serve this clientele.

Illegitimacy rates in deprived areas were skyrocketing, with the highest percentage in central Harlem. During the first 10 months of 1968, there were 1400 more out-of-wedlock births than during the same 1967 period. Black unwed mothers living in deprived areas do not have the same options available to them as are available to white unwed mothers in other areas, deprived or not. What happens to these mothers?

In November 1968, Mrs. Jane D. Edwards, who became executive director of Spence-Chapin after Miss Mont-

gomery's death, proposed the creation of a black child welfare agency in the central Harlem community to join other social agencies in this community and work with the overall child welfare system in the entire city. In this way, Spence-Chapin could continue to expand to meet the needs of minority people from this and other areas in the city. The new agency would have community acceptance, support, and control, with initial financial help from Spence-Chapin, along with foundation aid. Spence-Chapin's plan was to help the agency eventually to become independent. The board president, Mrs. Alice Hall Dowling, accepted the idea as the best way to meet the needs of children of minority background. She pointed out that this was in keeping with Spence-Chapin's aim to serve children, as well as to exercise leadership in the development of services. In December 1968 the board approved the establishment of this agency.

The primary purpose of the new agency is to help natural parents to provide good homes for their children if possible, and, if not, to place children in adoption. Should neither plan prove feasible, children will be placed in early infancy into long-term foster homes, preferably homes with potential to develop into permanent homes.

In April 1969 I took over the duties of director of what was to be the new agency. My first responsibility was to canvass the Harlem community for prospective board members representing different community occupations and a variety of socioeconomic and age levels. The board, although under auspices of Spence-Chapin during the first stage of the agency, was set up to be an Advisory Council helping to shape the program. Council members were to establish liaison with the people in the community, refer

staff and clients to the agency, and assist in fund-raising projects.

Forty-five letters were sent out to Harlem residents, describing the plan for the new agency. Thirty-five responses were received, 28 in the affirmative. The group held its first meeting at Spence-Chapin in May 1969, with 20 persons attending. Dr. Walter Donald Kring, a Spence-Chapin board member, outlined the background for formation of the new agency in Harlem. He described the development of Spence-Chapin's long-term foster care program, inaugurated in 1962 to find homes for healthy black children who were confined to hospital wards because they had no homes. It was pointed out that large numbers of children were still admitted daily to hospital wards and that the programs of existing child care agencies were still unable to cope with this problem.

Dr. Kring, stating that Spence-Chapin's board and staff felt that people want to solve their own problems, introduced the idea of Spence-Chapin's underwriting a satellite agency that could develop a program similar to Spence-Chapin's long-term foster care program, but one that would be the community's own.

Agency Objectives

In general terms of the plan, the new agency is to work with natural parents, children, foster parents, and adoptive couples in the Harlem community, including a geographic area stretching from 96th Street to 159th Street, river to river, but services are to be extended, if feasible, to any client outside this area in need of help, regardless of ethnic background. The group expressed interest in development of the agency and willingness to serve on the Advisory Council. They formed the nucleus of the council.

I reported that a lease had been signed for 2400 square feet of floor space in a centrally located office building, and that it was necessary for the council to agree on an architect and an appropriate decor. The council concurred, with the understanding that black merchants in the community would be utilized whenever feasible.

Four black architects were suggested by council members. A local firm consisting of two young architects, graduates of Harvard, accepted the job. The architects also became members of the Advisory Council. (We later learned that one of the architects had adopted a child from Spence-Chapin 3 years before.) The architects supervised the construction work and collaborated with the decorating committee of the Advisory Council, and with a local firm that supplied carpeting and drapes.

The Advisory Council met in June 1969 to select a name for the agency and to set up bylaws. The council wished a name indicating the area of the agency's operation, and also honoring Mrs. Dowling, Spence-Chapin president. Mrs. Dowling had long been active in the child welfare field and had been a moving force behind the formation of the new agency.* The name "Harlem-Dowling Children's Service" was agreed upon. The council adopted bylaws, reviewed construction progress, and elected a nominating committee to submit a slate of officers. In the interim between the June meeting and the fall opening, each Advisory Council member undertook to spread information about the agency, on their jobs, in the community, and among friends.

* Mrs. Alice Dowling died February 2, 1970.

Press Conference Held

Mrs. Edwards and I sought out and were approached by militant, conservative, and moderate groups in the community and explained the program. Each group wanted assurance of eventual, if not early, independence of the agency from Spence-Chapin. Then they approved the proposal and made suggestions on how to reach more people in the community.

Several qualified professional and clerical persons in the community applied for jobs in the agency, and were hired. We moved into quarters at 2090 Seventh Avenue October 6, 1969, offering services to natural parents, foster care, and adoption.

A press conference was held November 17, 1969, with representatives of the New York Times, New York Post, Look Magazine, WLIB, WCBS, WQXR, and WPIX. WLIB publicized our opening for several days. Within an hour after the initial broadcast, we began receiving calls from job applicants and foster care and adoptive parent applicants.

Even before the press conference, referrals on natural mothers were received from the Maternal and Infant Care Program, which is located in our building; from Harlem Hospital, and from a prenatal shelter care home. The community response has continued to be most encouraging. There have been referrals from local hospitals, and several neighborhood community groups, as well as local residents.

The agency has been written up in several issues of *Muhammad Speaks*. Several foster care and adoptive parent applicants called as a result of this. Two Black Panther members asked if we would serve unwed mothers of their group requesting placement, and were advised that the service is for parents and children in need, regardless of the parents'

political or social beliefs.

The present staff consists of 15 full-time and two part-time persons; three supervisors, four work-study students attending Fordham School of Social Service, three fieldwork placement students from Columbia University School of Social Work, two Fordham field placement students, three secretarial employees, a part-time pediatrician, and a registered nurse. M.S.W.s are being interviewed for two casework positions.

Continuous recruitment is going on through current foster parents, adoptive applicants, and attendance at community churches, social, and professional meetings.

The Advisory Council is working toward the agency's eventually becoming autonomous. This will come about when there are approximately 75 foster homes and 260 children in care. Currently the agency has placed six children in adoption and admitted 69 children to foster care and 35 foster homes have been licensed. The agency has served more than 100 natural parents, including 15 fathers.

The council has set up public relations, benefit, and case policy committees.

Aspects of Program

We believe this agency will be successful because:

- (1) It gets directly to the core of the problem: the need to develop permanent homes for black children.
- (2) It is located in the Harlem community and is accessible to it.
- (3) It reaches out to serve natural parents and children within the community.
- (4) Being a voluntary organization, it is not burdened by negative community attitudes toward "welfare" or the political bureaucracy.
- (5) Spence-Chapin assists and guides,

but the agency will eventually be completely autonomous. At no time will Spence-Chapin impose its will upon the management of the new agency. We believe that black leaders should shape their own destiny.

(6) The agency has enlisted the guidance, help, and support of the black community in getting started. The director and many members of the staff are Harlem residents, concerned individually and collectively about the community. They have more knowledge and identification, reducing the communication gap. (Living in the community is not enough of itself to insure success. One must have a strong conviction about the services given and a personal pride in the community, as well as common cultural interest. This discourages exploitation of the people in this community by so-called "downtown" folk.)

(7) Paraprofessionals and workers in training perform liaison work with the community and integrate their efforts with those of the trained social workers on staff. This dual approach is designed to break down the barriers of suspicion and fear that frequently hamper professionals in their dealings with residents of deprived areas. It also trains people to work in other agencies within this community or to become workers in similar areas.

(8) It gives the community a stake in the child welfare system. Further, it encourages self-help and stimulates development of leadership, race pride, strength, and self-respect. The pride the residents already have in knowing of the existence of the agency in Central Harlem has been evidenced in many letters and telephone calls.

This new agency should not be regarded as an experiment; the need for it has long been felt in Harlem. ♦