conformity with the State plan and with the requirements of the Federal act. Since hearings concern themselves predominantly with "critical cases"—that is, cases which the drafters of policy did not intend to exclude, yet which are not expressly covered by stated policies—hearing decisions offer particularly significant clues to the manner in which State policies and procedures operate.

The very facts that hearings are or are not held, that claimants do or do not know about their right to a hearing, and that hearings when requested are made readily available or are as far as possible prevented, give a key to the agency's attitude toward the rights of individuals under its programs. An agency's ready acceptance of requests for hearings on a policy, rather than on a questioned decision made under this policy, constitutes acceptance of the right of claimants to participate in developing policies that vitally affect their rights and their welfare. Likewise, the follow-up action taken after a hearing indicates whether the agency puts hearings to effective use by eliminating the weaknesses in policy and procedure that the hearing process has disclosed. The agency may effect the necessary change either by direct action through policy revision or, when necessary, by submitting bills to the State legislature that would broaden or liberalize the program's legal base.

Beyond their significance for policy development, hearing decisions have a cumulative effect. While the individual hearing demonstrates the effect of a specific policy in a specific situation, an accumulation of hearings on related issues conveys a three-dimensional view. They give depth and focus to the picture by showing what a certain policy will do in relation to a cross section of a whole case load, or in relation to a whole set of similarly constituted case situations.

Though an individual hearing decision may appear equitable and fair, the perspective gained from a large number of related decisions may highlight deficiencies not visible in the individual instance, and the decision reached in the single instance may suddenly appear superficial and not directed at the core of the problem.

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