

Intake Practices in Local Public Assistance Agencies

MARGARET LEAHY *

THE PROCESS of taking applications for assistance for the needy aged, the needy blind, and dependent children and of determining eligibility today has a meaning quite different from that of 8 or 10 years ago. With the rapid expansion in these programs made possible by the Federal Social Security Act have come many changes in methods of administration. Broader and more flexible policies and procedures have been and are being developed for effective operation of the public assistance program.

The fact that in March 1941 there were more than twice as many persons receiving aid to the blind, three times as many families receiving aid to dependent children, and almost twenty times as many persons receiving old-age assistance as there were in March 1933 gives some idea of the impact of public assistance upon State and local welfare agencies. Even in States where there had been statutory provision for these types of assistance prior to the passage of the act, the early programs reached only a small portion of the persons for whom they were intended. Participation was not always mandatory; often the counties could choose not to provide assistance. With the added resources available to the States and local agencies, all political subdivisions in States with approved plans now participate in making provision for these types of assistance.

A significant factor affecting administration of public assistance since the passage of the Social Security Act has been the placing of responsibility for supervision of the public assistance programs upon a single State agency. In the earlier programs, State supervision existed in only a small number of States in which there was State financial participation. Formerly each local agency had its own policies and practices, and controls for seeing that those who applied for assistance received equitable consideration were either nonexistent or generally inadequate. Opportunities existed for

discrimination in the consideration of applications within the same State and even within the same county. Applicants denied assistance had no recourse.

The fact that a single State agency now administers or supervises the administration of public assistance within each State and that the agency must meet certain requirements in order to qualify under the provisions of the act is resulting in changing concepts of the program. In contrast to the old poor-law traditions, the concept of assistance as a right, available on fulfillment of certain conditions of eligibility, is developing. Policies and procedures designed to facilitate providing assistance to all eligible persons on an equitable basis are being promulgated by State and local agencies. The opportunity to apply for assistance is being made available to a larger group of persons, and there is a growing recognition of the value of uniformity in the procedures for taking applications with enough flexibility for consideration of individual circumstances. Formerly the final decision as to which persons in the community might receive assistance rested entirely with the local agencies. Now an applicant who is dissatisfied with the decision of the local agency may make a formal appeal to the State agency for a reconsideration of the decision. When the hearing is held, it is the State agency's decision that becomes binding upon the local agency.

The establishment in local communities of the principle of State supervision of local agencies and the right of individuals to a fair hearing is a slow and tedious process requiring continuous interpretation and leadership. Local autonomy has always been an important factor in a community's attitude toward the problems relating to the provision of financial assistance to groups receiving relief. The introduction of the rules and regulations of the State agencies into the local communities in such a way that they are understood and accepted has, therefore, involved constant work on the part of State and local public

*Bureau of Public Assistance, Field Division. Paper presented at the National Conference of Social Work, Atlantic City, June 4, 1941.

assistance workers and has met with varying success.

A marked development in the acceptance by local agencies of the leadership and supervision by the State agency is easily discernible. Even now, however, there are wide variations in practices in local agencies, often within the same State. These variations reflect the attitudes and pressures of the community and indicate that local agencies are coping with many problems in an attempt to give equitable treatment to applicants and recipients and to maintain satisfactory working relationships with other local groups and with the State agency.

Responsibility for developing and promulgating the policies and rules and regulations for taking applications and determining eligibility is now shared by the State agency and its local agencies. Making the opportunity to apply accessible to applicants and informing them of the conditions of eligibility are largely the responsibility of the local agencies.

To establish satisfactory procedures for receiving applicants, for answering inquiries, and for helping to prepare applications and to determine eligibility is challenging, particularly in a public agency which is constantly under the surveillance of the community. One of the most effective ways of informing the community about the program is by channeling information through the applicants and recipients themselves. Their first impressions of the agency, their understanding of its policies, and their reactions to the workers have, therefore, a direct bearing not only upon the future attitudes of the applicants but upon the community and its support of the agency.

An applicant who finds the office easily accessible and who has an opportunity to tell his problems to a skilled interviewer in private and without undue delay, interruption, or confusion has a vastly different attitude from that of one who encounters a crowded office and must explain his problems in the presence of others. Local welfare offices are seldom located in modern buildings with sufficient space and equipment for suitable reception facilities and privacy of interview. Many offices are located in rooms which have poor ventilation and lighting and are served by antiquated elevators or reached by steep, dark stairways. Offices may be in courthouses, above garages, in basements, in buildings formerly used for warehouses or factories,

or in buildings formerly used as residences. Frequently waiting rooms are overcrowded, and reception facilities are inadequate.

Many agencies have recognized this problem and have attempted to obtain suitable quarters. Failing in this attempt, they have used makeshift devices in order to give a semblance of privacy to the applicant who requests assistance. Some agencies, to eliminate overcrowding in the waiting room, make more home visits than would ordinarily be required; some have found it necessary to make appointments for applicants to return for the intake interview; and, in some instances, the workers hold interviews in their automobiles in order to ensure some degree of privacy.

Decision as to the Type of Assistance

The applicant should be free to choose the type of assistance for which he wishes to make application. Ordinarily, of course, he will not wish to apply unless he believes his eligibility can be established; and, if the various services of the agency and the eligibility requirements are explained to him in the course of the intake interview, he obtains help in the selection of the program which will best meet his need.

Various factors have served at times to make it difficult for agencies to provide immediately the type of assistance best suited to the need of the applicant. Funds are often inadequate. Community attitudes may force rejection of the applications of persons who supposedly do not have proper moral character.

The growing tendency to integrate and coordinate all public welfare services at the local level has meant that many agencies now administer not only the three categorical programs but also general relief. Frequently the same agency makes certifications to the National Youth Administration, Civilian Conservation Corps, Work Projects Administration, and Farm Security Administration and may also be responsible for child welfare and other related services. In some of these agencies, persons who ask for one of the special types of assistance are required to make a general application for assistance on the theory that the agency will determine the type of assistance which best meets the need of the applicant. As a matter of fact, financial limitations and community pressures may be such that the primary concern of the

agency is necessarily the conservation of funds rather than the type of assistance most suitable for the applicant. Consideration is given first to aid under programs of the WPA or FSA, which involve little or no cost to the county. If the applicant does not meet the qualifications for these types of assistance, he may be permitted later to file application for old-age assistance, aid to dependent children, or aid to the blind.

In some counties applicants who may seek and be eligible for aid to dependent children first receive general assistance. After a period of observation in which the applicant has been proved technically eligible and has demonstrated his ability to handle or manage cash, is found to be unemployable, maintains a "suitable" home, is considered able to manage on aid to dependent children without supplementation, or will benefit from a long-time program, he is considered ready for aid to dependent children. In the meantime, if general assistance payments are lower than payments for aid to dependent children, the opportunity for continued maintenance of the child's home may be lost through inadequate general assistance payments. Moreover, if general assistance is provided in kind instead of in cash, the family does not have the opportunity for managing its affairs and for utilizing its resources in the way it considers best. Families receiving general assistance who are potentially eligible for aid to dependent children may be overlooked as a result of the pressure of work that often exists when there are large general assistance case loads.

When, on the other hand, the agency administers a number of programs of assistance, there are certain advantages to applicants. Those who are found ineligible for the type of assistance for which they make application may be considered and found eligible for another type of assistance without delay or inconvenience to them or to the agency. Moreover, when an applicant is eligible for more than one type of assistance and there is a long waiting list for the type of assistance that best suits his need, there may be vacancies in the quotas for other types of assistance. In such instances, assistance can be made readily available. Old-age assistance or aid to the blind is substituted wherever possible in some counties in which there are long waiting lists for aid to dependent children. As soon as the family is reached on the waiting list, aid to dependent children is provided.

In many instances general assistance is made available during the waiting period.

Taking the Application

The purpose of the written application is to have recorded evidence that an applicant has, on his own responsibility, made a formal request for assistance. If the intake interview proceeds skillfully to the point at which the applicant understands the requirements, and if no circumstance appears which definitely makes him ineligible for assistance, it should be possible to take the application for one of the special types of assistance at that time. Since a written application for assistance is a protection to the applicant who may wish to appeal in case action on his request is delayed, the sooner it is taken the greater his security in the consideration of his right to a fair hearing. Moreover, uniformity in recording an application makes for accuracy in the statistical count of applications. Uniformity also makes possible the comparison of time required for the agency's action on one application as compared with another. Moreover, interagency comparisons are more nearly valid.

The right to make written application should depend only upon the applicant's belief in his eligibility and not upon proof of eligibility typified by documentary evidence, establishment of need, or the performance of certain preliminary investigations. In some agencies, applicants may make written application when they first request assistance. In others, a written application is made and reported statistically by the agency at a later visit, usually by appointment, when a detailed intake interview is held. In some, an application is taken only when the applicant has proof of such eligibility requirements as age or residence. Although in many instances the applicants are able to obtain the required proof without serious difficulty, there are some who, through a lack of knowledge or because of fear, may not take the steps necessary to obtain evidence of their eligibility. Thus, even though they have requested assistance, if the applicants do not return to the agency and the agency does not seek them out (as they frequently do not), the applications become in actuality rejections.

In still other agencies, the burden of responsibility for establishing the eligibility of applicants

is assumed by the agency, but the request is not considered and reported as an application for assistance until all necessary proofs of eligibility have been obtained. In some places where the State agency makes the final decision regarding eligibility, the request for assistance is considered as an application only when the record is sent to the State office for approval of a payment.

It is common practice to reject persons at intake without taking a written application if they seem obviously ineligible for old-age assistance, aid to dependent children, or aid to the blind. This practice is undoubtedly sound, provided rejections are made by persons qualified to make the decision and are based on clear-cut evidence of inability to meet technical requirements, such as age or residence, and provided the reason for the rejection is clearly interpreted to and understood by the applicant. If, however, the applicant is dissatisfied with the decision, he should have opportunity to file a formal application and to obtain the same consideration of his request as is given other applicants.

Unfortunately, the records of rejections at intake are often so meager that it is impossible to determine by review whether the applicant has had full opportunity to apply and equitable consideration of his request. In many instances in which the reason for rejection is recorded, the agency's basis for deciding that the application should not be taken is not substantiated by information in the case record. While the recorded reasons for such rejections usually relate to technical eligibility requirements, some are based on a worker's decision that need does not exist, either because of the applicant's statement of his income or the presumed ability of relatives to furnish support.

For various reasons it is desirable to keep a complete record of the interview and of the decision reached jointly by the receptionist or intake interviewer and the applicant. Such a record safeguards the interests of the applicant and the agency and is useful to the agency if the applicant reapplies. It is available when questions arise as to the consideration given to the applicant when he made his request for assistance, and it affords the necessary material for a review of his opportunity to apply. This opportunity is the first and perhaps the most important step in the application process.

The Application Form

The application is essentially a petition for a benefit to which the applicant believes he is eligible, and the application blank is the form on which the petition is presented. The form is developed primarily for the use of the applicant, and for this reason it is important that the content be limited to the data that are germane to the filing of a written application and that the items be simple to avoid confusion and error in preparation.

The application blanks now in use vary in content and form. Separate forms are generally used by local agencies for each of the special programs. Some are simple and limited as to content; others are needlessly elaborate and include too much of what should be a part of the investigation of eligibility.

An application form could include only a request for assistance, data identifying the applicant, and the signature of the applicant. Agencies have found, however, that it is usually advisable to make the application blank for categorical programs somewhat more inclusive. It seems especially desirable to be certain that the applicant is aware of the eligibility requirements of the program under which he is applying for assistance and that he is aware of his right to a fair hearing. One method used is to include this information in the application blank or on a supplementary form, where it is stated in simple terms which any ordinarily intelligent applicant can understand.

No doubt the contents of some application blanks look as formidable to the applicants as insurance policies and income-tax blanks look to some of us. Therefore, if the applicant is to understand the requirements of eligibility and to comprehend his responsibilities in fulfilling the conditions of eligibility, the application blank should be so simple that many applicants could, if they wished, make out their own blanks. In addition, it is desirable that the agencies give information, advice, and aid in filling out these blanks. An especially skilled staff of workers is being provided by some agencies to carry on the intake interview with each applicant. At this time, the eligibility requirements are more carefully interpreted and explained than is feasible on an application blank. Ordinarily the applicant himself should fill out the blank. If he is unable

to do so or desires help, the worker may assist him. When help is given, it is essential that the applicant have a complete understanding of the information on the form before he signs it.

Although agencies do not always require the signature of applicants on applications for general assistance, it is customary in nearly all agencies to have the application for old-age assistance, aid to dependent children, or aid to the blind formalized by the applicant's signature. In some instances the signature must be witnessed or notarized. Twenty of 51 jurisdictions administering old-age assistance, 13 of 43 jurisdictions administering aid to the blind, and 10 of 44 jurisdictions administering aid to dependent children under State plans approved by the Social Security Board require applicants for these types of assistance to make their applications under oath.

If the application blank is used merely to identify the applicant, to set forth the eligibility requirements, and to record his request for assistance and his belief that he is eligible, there seems to be little reason for concern over the question whether or not the document is legally binding. Investigation of eligibility is a social study and cannot be a mere check on the veracity of statements made by the applicant or by other informants. Assurance of an applicant's veracity is usually much less important, in fact, than assurance that he has fully understood the eligibility requirements and that in making his statements he has understood and taken into consideration all the facts that have a bearing on eligibility. The applicant's feelings are also important, since they inevitably influence the selection of facts to be included in his statements and likewise his method of presenting them. In other words, the facts back of the applicant's statements and his purpose in making them are as significant as the statement itself.

The Investigation or Social Study

The basis for determining the eligibility of individual applicants for old-age assistance, aid to dependent children, or aid to the blind is the investigation or social study that is carried out by the local unit. The investigation begins at the first request for assistance and extends through the decision to grant or withhold assistance. It consists of a careful inquiry into the applicant's

circumstances as they relate to the conditions of eligibility established by the State agency, the accumulation of the best information available to substantiate his claims, the weighing and evaluation of this information as a reasonable basis for determination of eligibility, and the decision to grant or withhold assistance. It involves the collection and evaluation of information from a wide variety of sources and requires the constant application of the essential skills of social case work and the use of tact and discrimination that can be assured only under effective supervision.

The investigation brings into focus the policies of the State and local agencies, and in the final analysis the decision reflects the attitude of the worker and of the community toward individual applicants and toward the program. A clear definition of terms and a thoughtful formulation of policy by the State agency will establish basic methods of work, leaving to the judgment of the individual worker those matters in which discretion and flexibility can assure more sympathetic treatment and better service to the applicant. Basic also is the need for the worker to know the policies and procedures so that she can interpret them to the applicant. Her ability to apply the eligibility requirements to the applicant and to his particular situation determines whether the applicant leaves with a feeling that application is a mechanical process or a process in which there is recognition of his own particular problems.

To assist and direct the worker in this important task, agencies are recognizing the need of providing trained and experienced case-work supervisors in the local agency to interpret the rules and regulations of the State and local agency; to direct the worker to appropriate sources of information during the investigation; to assist in evaluating evidence obtained; and to share in the decision as to what service is to be provided.

The division of responsibility among the various agency workers for establishing eligibility is important only as it relates to proper consideration of the application and to the promptness with which the applicant's needs are considered. The division of responsibility between the receptionists and the intake interviewers or between the intake interviewers and the home visitors is not always clear-cut. In some agencies, clerks act as receptionists and are responsible for most of the inter-

viewing at intake; in others, their services are limited to routine activities, such as recording identifying information and clearing the request with the master index and the social service exchange. In some agencies, the intake interviewer is a professional person whose responsibilities for a particular application end when the intake interview is dictated. In some, the intake interviewer also makes telephone calls and prepares letters for verification of such eligibility factors as may be obtained without home or collateral visits. In others, the worker who conducts the intake interview carries complete responsibility for establishment of eligibility and may or may not have continuing responsibility for service to the recipient.

Most agencies consider the establishment of eligibility a joint responsibility: the applicant supplies information about his economic and social status and obtains documentary proofs of eligibility when they are readily available, and the agency assumes responsibility for supplementing this information through correspondence, contacts with other social agencies, and search of public records. Such a plan tends to preserve in the individual the impulse toward self-help and independence and helps him to understand the agency's resources and its policies and procedures.

When the requirements are thoroughly understood, applicants are usually better able to furnish the detailed data needed to establish eligibility. The applicant himself is the primary source of information and therefore should know his full rights and responsibilities under the State plan, including his right to a fair hearing. Some local agencies have found it helpful to supplement an oral explanation to the applicant by a booklet giving full and clear explanation of the provisions of the plan as they relate to individual applicants, of facilities available for service to him, and of his obligations. In some agencies, this information is given by the receptionists, and in other instances by the intake interviewers. Some agencies depend entirely upon oral explanation by the workers of the opportunity for a fair hearing and of the eligibility requirements. Others make no special provision for assuring that applicants fully understand eligibility requirements, their responsibilities in establishing eligibility, or their right to appeal from the decision of the local agency.

Determination of eligibility is not a task that can be reduced to a few simple routine steps or

carried out by any one formalized method. Some of the factors of eligibility, such as age and residence, are objective and relatively easy to establish. Some factors, such as income or resources, although they may seem simple, objective, and absolute, really are far from being so. Income, for instance, is often variable and uncertain; and, since future rather than past need must be considered, there must be an estimate of expected income and need, which requires discriminating judgment as well as technical skill. The evaluation of resources may involve estimates of value and availability which also require judgment and discrimination.

Some agencies send out questionnaires, sometimes requiring notarization, or form letters to relatives as a means of obtaining data on their ability to support the applicant. Such a questionnaire usually fails to enlist the interest of the relative in making a financial contribution or in giving service to the applicant that might be obtained through personal contact. Moreover, the use of a questionnaire or a form letter does not generally ensure an accurate and intelligent reply, because the relative usually does not have a sufficient understanding of the objectives of the program to comprehend the significance of the questions asked. Understanding, interest, and cooperation are important, and personal contact is much more fruitful of results.

Satisfactory help from relatives rests on the recognition and acceptance of responsibility as a part of normal and wholesome family relationships. It is therefore desirable that the agency explain the law regarding responsibility of relatives and permit the applicant to make his own arrangements with his relatives. When a satisfactory arrangement cannot be reached on this basis, the worker may interview the relative, explaining to him the scope and objectives of the program and his responsibility under the State law. When distance makes it impossible to interview the relatives personally, an interview by a cooperating agency may be arranged or the worker may write directly to the relative, explaining in detail the situation. In the selection of relatives to be approached, the applicant can participate by indicating which relatives may be able and willing to help him.

It is customary in some agencies to obtain signed statements from friends of applicants con-

cerning the applicant's resources. Aside from the effect of such a practice on the relationship of the applicant with the agency and with his friends, undue responsibility is placed upon the friend, who ordinarily does not know what resources may be available. He is then obliged to refuse information or to give information that may later prove false. Moreover, this requirement gives the veto power to private persons in a matter that requires expert opinion based on preliminary findings of fact and also tends to routinize the investigation process.

If the relationship between the worker and the applicant is skillfully developed, an applicant will usually accept his responsibility for presenting a full and accurate account of his economic resources and the evidence of his ownership of property. He is less likely to do so, however, if agency policies are, or seem to him, unfair and oppressive. The number of persons who conceal resources can be reduced by assurance of fair dealing, and, conversely, the number can be and is increased when agencies attempt to substitute for equitable treatment and individual interpretation mechanical methods of check-up backed by threats, pressure, and actual prosecution of those who are found to have misrepresented their circumstances. Agencies that put their emphasis on establishment of

sound investigatory methods resulting in equitable treatment usually win the confidence and cooperation of applicants.

No attempt has been made in this paper to indicate all the problems in connection with the taking of and action on applications for old-age assistance, aid to dependent children, and aid to the blind. An attempt has been made to emphasize a few selected problems common to all agencies and to show the various ways in which local agencies are dealing with them.

The most vital point in the functioning of a public assistance agency is its method of accepting and acting on applications. The treatment and consideration given the applicant and his participation in the application process are likely to determine the relationship that will exist between the individual and the agency as long as he receives assistance. Public opinion is directly influenced by the applicant who, as a member of the community, expresses his reactions to the services of the agency. Recognizing the far-reaching results of equitable treatment of applicants in the consideration of their applications, local agencies are continually evaluating their procedures in the light of their experience and are attempting to keep attuned to progress in the development of public welfare administration.