

dichotomy between community services for "community children" and substitute care and welfare services for the "special others".

Over the past half-century we have increasingly acknowledged that families need outside supports to raise children. We sometimes forget that infant welfare services, schools, child endowment, school medical programs, inoculation campaigns, etc., come into this category. It is generally accepted that the needs are intensifying as social change proceeds — families become more vulnerable.

If we accept the premise that most families today need community supports of some sort to raise their children, it becomes a question of variations in the intensity, quantity and kind. It also then becomes possible to draw a continuum between the "normal" family and the client family of welfare services. In Victorian administrative terms this certainly means a needed continuum between the family welfare responsibilities of the Social Welfare Department and the early childhood service responsibilities currently assumed by the Health Department.

The main lesson of the past few years for someone able to observe the burgeoning of the children's services field, is the potential for localized, friendly, non-stigmatized, non-"welfare" services to offer an alternative to welfare services for many families whose very fragility is a comment on the absence of community support.

Moreover, these services for "normal" children not only have potential as services but they have political clout. They have a popular mandate which might submerge temporarily as funding is jeopardized but which is unlikely to lie down and disappear. It seems essential to develop the capacity to see the interconnections and to link the political power of this mandate, this concern for "our children", to the welfare field where we talk in a lonely fashion about other people's children. It might incidentally be an important development in our search for more relevant, coherent family welfare policies. Maybe then a \$75 million budget might have a different impact.

REPORT ON AN ALTERNATIVE TO WARDSHIP PROJECT —

Towards the end of 1973 a small committee was convened under the sponsorship of the Children's Welfare Association in the Barwon Region to study alternatives to the existing Wardship provisions within this State.

The committee based its research on the findings of Dr Patricia Leaper's report, "Children in Need of Care and Protection", which was the outcome of a study of children brought before the Victorian Children's Court in 1972.

An examination of the existing Wardship provisions within the framework of Victorian legislation resulted in the conclusion that they contained numerous disadvantages, such as:-

- (1) The effects of separation on children.
- (2) High monetary cost.
- (3) High incidence of delinquency resulting from Wardship.
- (4) The stigma attached to Wardship.
- (5) The demoralizing effect of the court action and police intervention on the parents.
- (6) The open ended nature of Wardship.

It also concluded that far too many children were made Wards, not because of the advantages attached to this process, but because of the lack of suitable alternatives available to the courts.

Some children are being made Wards not because they need protection from their parents, but rather because some parents have difficulties with their parental role. Wardship then is likely to be coun-

ter-productive as the whole court procedure could make the parents feel even more inadequate.

A submission was made to the Australian Government through the A.A.P. by the Children's Welfare Association (Barwon Region) for funds to carry out a small pilot project in the Geelong district to be conducted in conjunction with the Geelong Courts and the Barwon Regional Department of Social Welfare.

Because of the reasons outlined above, the aims of the project were to find an alternative to Wardship which could result in residential placement for children brought before the Children's Court as being in need of care and protection, with two specific aims:-

- (1) To enable the parents to meet their responsibilities to their children by strengthening and supporting the family unit, so that it could function effectively.
- (2) To provide a suitable alternative within a family environment for the child when the family unit is unable to be maintained.

Although the project was focused on Geelong, it was felt that its results could have far wider significance as it seemed a viable model that could be developed in other regions.

The disadvantages of Wardship, as have already been outlined, indicate an urgent need for some preventive action to be taken at the time a family is brought to the notice of the court by police intervention or even before it reaches court.

As an alternative to Wardship, parents have often been advised by the police to place their children voluntarily. This is not seen as a satisfactory alternative, because a voluntary placement has many of the disadvantages of Wardship such as:-

- (1) The effects of separation from the parents.
- (2) The high monetary cost of residential care.

and furthermore, parents are more likely to take a complacent view of the situation having placed their children, and take no further steps to provide a home for them as they see them being safely cared for. It then becomes a more open-ended placement than Wardship.

With these factors in view, the committee placed emphasis on the following objectives:-

- (1) Keeping children within their families.
- (2) Helping these families to function effectively as a viable unit.

With the co-operation of the Women Police and the Senior Magistrate of the Geelong Courts a service was provided to those families whose children were about to be charged before the Children's Court as being in need of care and protection.

Referral was made to the caseworker by the Women Police, so that an alternative plan could be prepared for presentation to the Magistrate in the court. Where there was insufficient time a request for

an adjournment was made.

With information available to her the caseworker was able to select those cases which were considered appropriate and recommend for Wardship where co-operation of the parents could not be achieved.

Once the worker undertook the case, she used all the resources available in the community to the best advantage to help this family function more effectively. This may call for:-

- (1) Immediate financial aid and other material help.
- (2) Emergency accommodation.
- (3) Counselling.
- (4) Employment.
- (5) Home making services.

The essence of the whole exercise was time, which meant immediate action on the part of the case worker and concerted effort over a period of three months.

Through the good offices of the Social Welfare Department, Mrs. Jaggs, in her official capacity as research officer in the Department, helped to interpret the findings of

the case worker in her efforts,-

- (1) To identify the family problem and
- (2) To isolate the cases that had not responded to the services offered.

The original plan was a research programme designed to be carried out over a period of two years, but it was decided that before any suitable alternatives could be proposed, a minor research project should be undertaken in which a few cases could be worked through in a short space of time using all the resources available within the community.

A period of three months was allowed, April to July 1975, but it is hoped that with the information now available this project may be extended and developed to cover Children's Courts in areas that would cover inner and outer suburbs in the metropolitan area and a number of country districts so that a larger sample could be produced to test the effectiveness of this scheme.

Sister M. Agatha

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