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THE COORDINATING COUNCIL PLAN IN LOS ANGELES COUNTY

ERLE FISKE YOUNG¹

The lack of coordination in our efforts to deal with the problem of juvenile delinquency is notorious. A large number of public and private agencies have entered this field each with its own independent organization, policies, procedures and funds. Most of these agencies operate with little regard for what the other agencies may be doing. The picture is further complicated by the organization of some of these organizations on a nation-wide basis while others are state, county or municipal in scope. In addition to the agencies specifically organized to deal with juvenile delinquency, are the activities of a welter of service clubs, women's clubs, parent-teachers' associations and other lay groups with a more or less continuing interest in this field.

It is little wonder that conflicts of interests have developed, and that unhealthy competition between organizations is rife in the struggle for available funds, public attention, and exclusive responsibility for certain desirable classes of wards or special programs of action. Only too frequently in the resulting chaos the interests of the juvenile have been well-nigh lost sight of by the very agencies whose special guardians they were presumed to be. Incoordination of effort is not merely a matter of wastage of effort and funds but a certain proportion of juvenile disorganization can probably be directly charged to the resulting inefficiency of the institutions concerned. Many students now insist that one of the first necessary steps in social advance is the integration of the efforts of all responsible agencies.

It was in such a situation that the Los Angeles County Coordinating Council was organized. It is a voluntary organization including within its membership officials, professional child welfare workers and lay persons interested in juvenile behavior problems. The typical local council includes such persons as court officials, the probation officer, the school attendance officer, the police juvenile officer, representatives of service clubs, civic organizations, group workers and case workers from private social agencies, and lay persons.

The coordinating council plan is a local adaptation of the plan

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of the Berkeley Council organized some fifteen years ago under the leadership of Dr. Virgil Dickson and Chief August Vollmer. The first council in Los Angeles County was organized early in 1932. There are now fifty-two councils in as many high school districts, which correspond roughly to population concentrations, particularly those outside the metropolitan area. There is a central executive board with representatives from the local committees and from the various county and city departments and other special groups concerned with juvenile delinquency.

The movement is now spreading outside the county and is attracting considerable national attention. At the recent attorney-general's conference on crime held in Washington, D. C., a resolution was adopted recognizing the importance of the coordinating council and urging state and federal sponsorship of them. At the same time a national advisory group of fourteen was established including the chief of the Children's Bureau and the director of federal prisons.

The local coordinating councils are very simply organized. The actual work of each council is carried on by three committees: (1) The *adjustment committee* deals with all cases of individual children which are called to the attention of the council. It is composed of representatives of agencies actually handling children's cases. Its secretary, whenever possible, is a trained social case worker. Sufficient facts are presented in each case to enable the committee to make a referral to the proper agency for treatment. It does no case work itself. The intention is that, through the consideration of actual cases, the representatives of the local agencies will soon gain more familiarity with the programs, points of view and interrelationships of all the agencies of the community. Readjustments to meet needs, cooperative plans, assigned responsibility for every known problem child are thus made possible.

(2) The *character-building committee* includes representatives of the group-work agencies, such as schools, libraries, churches, settlements, Boy and Girl Scouts, Y. M. C. A. and Y. W. C. A. It deals with two major problems: (a) what to do for the vast majority of children who have no organized group connections and (b) what to do for the individual unadjusted child who needs to be incorporated into wholesome group activities as a measure of social therapy. The secretary preferably is a trained group worker.

(3) The *environment committee* is composed of representatives of those groups interested in the welfare of children from the point

of view of home and community environment, such as parent-teachers' associations, service clubs, women's clubs, churches, schools, and the like. It seeks to change demoralizing conditions, not by its own action but, as in the case of the adjustment committee, by ascertaining the facts and placing them in the hands of the organization best qualified to take action. Such widely varied matters as commercial recreation, protective legislation, parent education and questionable advertising come within its purview.

The following fundamental principles concerning coordinating councils grew out of the discussion at the San Diego meeting, 1934, of the California Conference of Social Work:

"a. The Council should provide a careful study of the various areas in the community in order to determine the problems and needs of the community in dealing with juvenile delinquency.

"b. The Council should coordinate into one plan the various services offered by all the social agencies in the area, to combat juvenile delinquency. This is the task of the Adjustment Committee of the Council.

"c. The Council should provide all the agencies in its area with the facts by which they can evaluate their program and by which they can be directed in their efforts and plans for expansion."²

The widest possible latitude has been given each local council. The simplicity of the council organization has made possible whatever activity special conditions and local interests have suggested. Certain problems, for example, the sale of liquor to minors, are county-wide, if not state-wide. A plan has therefore developed to devote at least a portion of the work of all councils to these wider interests, following a schedule of topics agreed upon at a meeting of officers of all councils. Topics listed for discussion in the immediate future include such matters as social legislation, liquor and youth, the summer camp program, church and youth, and home life of modern youth.

Annual conferences give further opportunity for securing united effort and developing a common point of view. By these means the weaker councils, which have had difficulty in developing concrete activities, are provided with a minimum program and are stimulated to action.

The activities of the central committee have led to a number of city-wide and county-wide projects. The State Employment Relief Administration has provided a high-grade personnel including many unemployed professionals. A group of such persons was or-

²*The Conference Bulletin*, XVIII (November, 1934), p. 12.

ganized and assigned to the playgrounds to supplement the work of the professional personnel. Some were assigned to help the individual councils and the probation department. Various survey projects were set on foot. A careful survey of delinquency by elementary school districts has provided for the first time usable local statistical pictures of the delinquency situation in the city. A directory of all recreational and character-building facilities was also prepared.

The leadership of the movement in Los Angeles County is in the juvenile probation department and the juvenile court. However probation officers do not act as officers in the local councils. A high degree of local autonomy and local control is thus assured while at the same time providing the necessary intimate contact of the local community with the juvenile court; this easy access to the court frequently results at first in "dumping" the local difficult children on the court. Through the adjustment committee this tendency is soon sharply counteracted and local community resources are called into play. The net result has been a sharp reduction in the number of cases referred by many communities to the court. Certain councils have undertaken to clean up "sore spots" in the community. A few illustrations of local council activity will show the variety of activities in which they engage:

The Downtown Council has practically put a stop to the raiding of the public wholesale market place by juveniles. The cooperation of police, merchants and parents was secured. Individual programs were planned for more than 250 boys with the result that few have repeated the offense.

A small desert community has developed a varied community recreation program which attracts not only the youth of the immediate locality but those from a wide hinterland. There have been no juvenile court cases in that community in three years.

An old vacant church in a deteriorated district was rehabilitated by a group of sponsoring organizations and devoted to juvenile activities. The reduction in gang activities in that area is noteworthy.

In short, no formal standardized program is provided by the council. On the basis of a study of local conditions some immediately practical scheme is evolved and carried out. The emphasis in each instance is organization of local effort to deal with local problems. The theory is that in general a sufficient number of agencies already exists in the local community and by simply coordinating their activity in some specific plan of action the local situation can be brought under control.

This, in brief, is the plan of the coordinating council. In a few communities it is well under way and concrete achievement can be credited to it; in other communities the councils are little more than a year old as yet and there has been little opportunity for their efforts to have effect. In fact, the leaders of the movement declare that only a long-time effort will bring results on any scale. They "do not expect the full effect of the councils to be felt for another generation."³ We must therefore view the coordinating council as a structure just now coming into being rather than as a full-blown institution.

It is too early to make a satisfactory evaluation of the council plan. That can be done only after the institution has developed further and has been tried under more varying conditions. That it has been successful in certain communities and in dealing with certain problems is a well established fact. Whether these successes can be repeated in other communities and with other types of problems remains to be seen. Some insight into this problem may perhaps be secured by considering certain of the immediate problems which have appeared in the councils' brief history and by a consideration of the fundamental character of some of the problems with which it is called upon to deal. Excerpts from interviews with council officers and leaders will illustrate these problems:

"It is very true that to a large degree the social and civic workers have learned to get along better together and to discuss their problems with each other, but each then goes back to his own organization and continues his work in his accustomed routine way. As yet, no real reorganization of any agency has been effected. That is a very difficult matter. . . .

"One of the greatest difficulties has been that, from the point of view of the local agency, the program has been developed and sponsored outside of the community and independently of the agencies concerned. It is, in fact, a child of the probation department, turned over to us for foster care. We have had very little to do with the planning and those who have imagination and organizational ability have had little chance to make original contributions, while those who are unimaginative and lack organizational ability consider it an abstraction, or as something of a routine procedure which they work out faithfully but frequently ineffectually. Though there is considerable leeway in the local councils, after all the general plan was imposed from above and from outside and creative possibilities have been limited. . . .

"Another serious difficulty of a similar nature is the relation of the agencies to delinquent children. In some communities the children are now being over-opportuned to join organizations and participate in activities. Many things are offered them. They are invited to pageants, programs, picnics, and so on in large numbers where everything is arranged for them.

³Kenyon, J. Scudder and Kenneth S. Beam, *Who is Delinquent?* p 51

Children and parents are impressed by such affairs and come to the conclusion that it is not necessary to earn the privilege of belonging to clubs or to earn the pleasures provided them. This is a violation of the principles of sound group work; we are thus pauperizing them, as it were, in a spiritual way by giving them opportunities which they do not want and do not understand. It seems sometimes almost as if we were bribing them to participate. . . .

"At present these communities are frequently over-run with schools, playgrounds, character-building agencies and community affairs. A very unhealthy competition has developed between social agencies for the available juvenile clientele. That seems paradoxical in view of the large number of unchurched and unorganized boys and girls, but it is the actual situation in some communities. . . .

"We social workers are a very busy people at our own tasks. An additional committee to attend is a real burden for most of us. Even the probation officer is overworked and may view attendance at council and committee meetings as just another chore. . . .

"Most of us have had little experience at organization work and little ability for it while most of the work of the council calls for just that. . . .

"We have few of the leading people on our councils. We do have the responsible social workers but they cannot accomplish the tasks they have set for themselves without the active help of the real leaders in the community. Hence we have failed to clear the neighborhoods of disorganizing forces, low grade movies, dance halls, saloons, and the like. We are so powerless that we cannot even induce the County Board of Supervisors to light some of the playgrounds at night where it is most needed. . . .

"It is true that we social workers, through council activities, have come to know our problems better, to work together more harmoniously and have drawn into our groups many lay persons but our difficulty is that as yet no real technique for adjusting juvenile problems is known. All the good-will in the world and all possible cooperation will not remedy many situations. We simply do not know what to do or how to do it. Conferences, committee meetings, paper plans are no solution for those situations. Much further research is needed. The worst of it is that the council raised false hopes in many social workers as well as lay people which are later dashed to pieces against the hard realities of social conditions.' . . .

"We are quite innocent of any formulated social philosophy. Since organization is itself presumed to be a good thing we have apparently assumed that this is what is needed in this case. There is good reason to think so, of course, but we do not have any carefully formulated point of view such as the juvenile court movement had. That makes us almost wholly empirical in our approach but gives us a very confused picture of what it is all about." . . .

Some of the present shortcomings of the Council will, no doubt, be remedied by a process of natural growth. Already a shifting

of emphasis in organization, functioning and point of view is correcting some of the difficulties noted by these interviewers. Further decentralization is under way and local councils are assuming more responsibility for the program. More significant is the tendency to deal with the whole problem of child welfare and not merely with juvenile delinquency, hence to work with normal children and do preventive work. A wider basis of support is being gained, more democratic participation in planning provided for, sounder policies of group work developed and organizational ability within the ranks is given freer play. Such changes lie within the range of adjustments which the council itself can achieve. Other difficulties are more deeplying and may require other approaches for their solution, if they be solvable at all.

It will be noted that the relationship of the members of the local coordinating council to the local community varies between two extremes; (1) in some communities the local agencies are indigenous in the sense that they represent the local interests, sentiments and attitudes. The council members in such a community are agents of the immediate community, sensitive to its public opinion and responsive to local wishes. Such communities benefit greatly by the integration and coordination of their organizational activities through the council. At the other extreme (2) are those communities in which the social workers and public officials are the emissaries of agencies foreign to the community and hence do not reflect its interests, sentiments and opinion. Sound principles of community organization require that the local leadership and native institutions be developed and utilized. This parallels the principle in family case work that the family should be organized as far as possible to meet and deal with its problems and not be "pauperized" by too freely extended "services" of the professional worker. Such a policy, however, is foreign to the thinking of a considerable number of social workers when dealing with culturally backward communities and divergent groups. Moreover social work as yet lacks an effective technique for social control through the use of the institutions and leaders native to such groups and communities. It is conceivable therefore that the better organization of the invading social agencies might accelerate the conflict with the indigenous institutions and thereby increase communal disorganization.⁴

⁴For a detailed discussion of this phenomenon in an area of Los Angeles noted for its high juvenile delinquency rates see Pauline V. Young, *Pilgrims of Russian Town*, particularly pp. 122-59 and 184-238.

[Note: For further details of organization and methods see Martin H. Neumeyer, "The Los Angeles County Plan of Coordinating Councils," *Sociology and Social Research*, XIX (May-June, 1935), pp. 460-71.]