

WHAT HAVE SOCIAL WORKERS DONE?

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My topic, my question, my sermon text, is simply to ask ‘what have social workers done?’ – not to condemn, as in ‘what *have* social workers *done!!*’, – but rather describe and comment on the roles social workers have fulfilled in past times in South Australia – hopefully in a way that is both entertaining and instructive.

Broadly, I would suggest at least three roles for social workers in the provision of welfare services in S.A. since 1836:

- * as enunciators and enforcers of community values and standards
- * as entrepreneurs or facilitators, (often rationers) in the delivery of services
- * as advocates of the dependents/claimants.

To begin this survey of what social workers have done, here is part of the instructions issued by the Colonization Commissioners for South Australia on 15 February 1836.⁵¹ They were in effect describing the duties of the community's first social worker: I use the term functionally, not professionally:

On the arrival of the emigrants in the colony they will be received by an officer, who will supply their immediate wants, assist them in reaching the place of their destination, be ready to advise with them in case of difficulty, and at all times give them employment at reduced rates, on government works, if from any cause they should be unable to obtain it elsewhere.

Indeed, John Brown, the Emigration Agent, who got the job largely by persistence, and who was a failed London wine merchant and a noisy Dissenter – fine qualifications for a social worker – was told his duties were ‘exactly like those of an Overseer of the Poor in England’ – the controller, the entrepreneur, perhaps the advocate. An early newspaper emphasised the controlling role in the late 1830s:

We contend that it is the duty of the officers to see that the cottages erected by the Board for the purpose of providing shelter for the poor emigrant on his arrival in the colony, are appropriated to their proper purpose. Several of these cottages are tenanted by the lowest and most depraved characters; and more than one respectable and virtuous family has been compelled hastily to remove from such a neighbourhood.⁵²

In 1841 Governor Grey appointed a Board of Emigration to deal with the ‘evil of a pauper population’ in the midst of a depression. The Board were to render the condition of a ‘pauper’ ‘not one of suffering, but certainly not one of ease or enjoyment’.⁵³

A more realistic view of the social contract inherent in the provision of aid to socially dependent people was enunciated by the Colonial Secretary in advice to that Emigration Board in 1842:

In the ordinary case ... the labourer appears before them [the Board] stating that he has fallen into actual distress. The Board inquired into the statement, and it being found correct, recommends the labourer relief from the Public funds, but it is on the condition of his labour being made available for

public service. A sort of contract is thus entered into between the Government and the Labourer. The government feeling bound to support from want a Bright subject who is ready to fulfill the duties devolving upon him as a citizen.⁵⁴

When the office of Emigration Agent was re-established in 1848 (after its abolition as an economy measure for a few years), the advocate role was a little more apparent in this minute by the Governor:

The services of the Emigration Agent might be very beneficially employed in the charge of the destitute poor ... he might make diligent enquiry concerning those who seek for charitable relief, so as to prevent imposition ... he would be a guardian and friend.⁵⁵

But there was now to be a form upon which to petition for aid, requiring among other details, a declaration of destitution. It was a requirement which was still enforced until the early 1960s.

The identity of social workers, but not their roles, changed when in 1849, a Destitute Board was set up in lieu of the Emigration Agent alone. Now clergy were added to the officials – the better to be entrepreneurs, advocates perhaps, and obviously to interpret and enforce community values. There was the Anglican incumbent of Holy Trinity, James Farrell; the Catholic Vicar General, Michal Ryan; the Church of Scotland minister, Robert Haining; plus that well known Congregationalist William Giles, manager of the S.A. Company.

Not all social workers were officials: some were Methodists. In 1849 The Adelaide Benevolent & Strangers' Friends Society was established:

The friendly and purely charitable visitations of the select members will be seasoned with discretion and Christian humility, and as free as possible from any charge of denominational favoritism: so that the afflicted, and disconsolate strangers, and the widows and fatherless, may find a home amongst brethren, even in a country so far removed from the land of their birth.⁵⁶

Soon the controlling role came to the fore:

The [Destitute] Board feels the want of proper accommodation for the destitute where salutary rules might be enforced and where a due distinction could be drawn between deserving and undeserving characters – many cases of real distress have been but partially relieved owing to such want to accommodation.⁵⁷

Nor were the good times any easier:

The Board declines rendering aid to all families (except in cases of sickness) whose husbands are absent at the diggings. This resolution on the part of the Board will be stringently carried out, as there is abundant employment in this colony and parties ought to provide sufficiently for their families before leaving them.⁵⁸

Some clients found little comfort. One man called to the offices of the Destitute Board in 1859 and

Attacked me [the secretary] in a very rough and insulting manner, accusing me of withholding relief from a dying man, and a starving family; presented an insolent letter, which was returned.⁵⁹

So much for advocacy!

By the 1860s welfare support was being provided by the Destitute Board by local agents throughout the Colony. Some of these agents were clerks of District Councils, or local police. Sometimes they were representatives of respectability, such as Mrs. Hope of Wolta Wolta for Clare, or Miss Ellen Duffield of Para Para for Gawler Hills.

By the 1870s the Destitute Board as an active entrepreneur was publishing this advertisement:

The Destitute Board will receive applications, at the Adelaide Offices, from respectable married persons who are desirous of adopting a boy or girl, aged between four and ten.

Apply to T.S. Reed, Chairman⁶⁰

The role of social workers in child care was becoming increasingly complex, as this 1882 minute of the Destitute Board shows:

The Chairman was requested to communicate with the Commander [of the] Police in order that in the cases of neglected children, enquiries should be made as to the ability of parents to maintain and afterwards that our officer should be in attendance at Court when the case comes on.⁶¹

The community values of respectability and self-help which informed social workers a hundred years ago were reflected in this description of an applicant (has anything changed?):

This man and his wife spend all they can get in Beer. They quarrel and fight. The man can earn 4/- per day by chopping firewood, cleaning gardens etc. Wife gets 5/- per week for cleaning the Bar of the Criterion Hotel. Rent 4/- per week, but they have only paid 2/- for the 2 weeks they have been there – they have to leave. The landlady says she cannot put up with their dirty habits. Minchin has a son, who keeps racehorses at Golden Grove.⁶²

The tension between the entrepreneurial and advocacy roles was examined by the 1897 Parliamentary Select Committee on Old Age Pension, when it pressed the Chairman of the Destitute Board about undeserving cases:

Do you discriminate after you have found out?

Yes [he answered].

What is the result?

Relief for short periods under strict supervision. We do not refuse, the damage has been done.⁶³

Perhaps Western Australia's police as social workers were a little different. They reported in 1903 that one man whose family was in receipt of aid at Port Adelaide was:

a worthless good for nothing fellow, out of work, and not able to contribute anything towards the support of his family, who need not expect any aid from him even if he secures employment, which he appears not anxious for.⁶⁴

Sometimes the family of a client protested at the intervention of the social worker, as did one man in 1904 who was chairman of a suburban council. He objected to his

mother-in-law being granted aid:

in his opinion proper enquiry should have been made ... he considered he, and Mrs Hamilton's children, had been degraded by the issue of such relief, which in his opinion had been far too easily obtained, and trusted that any further application would be rescinded as he would see Mrs Hamilton was provided with all needful requirements in the future.⁶⁵

One wonders, too, what he said to his brothers-in-law!

The advocacy role, tinged with the best the community could offer in terms of values, was illustrated in 1905 by the report to the State Children's Council that

Miss Kate Cocks, an officer of the Department, had spent four evenings until 10 p.m, in the streets seeking young girls who might need advice and caution.⁶⁶

I count Catherine Helen Spence a social worker fulfilling those three roles. Here is the Destitute Board's minute at her death:

That the Board deeply deplore the death of Miss Spence, who has been a valued member of the Board for over 13 years, and desire to record their high appreciation of her noble work and self-sacrificing energies on behalf of the poor.

They also desire to record their sincere appreciation of her wide sympathies in many directions over such a lengthened period, and feel her unselfish activities have in various ways been for the betterment of the community, and merit the highest admiration.⁶⁷

Officialdom wasn't always unimaginative. In 1911 the Destitute Board sought and gained power to grant financial aid at its discretion in specific cases, especially to women. It sought a new visiting officer who would 'act with as little publicity as possible', who would be a 'sensible, kindly, sympathetic female officer with a good general knowledge of the proper rearing of a family'.

The mothers will be encouraged and helped in every reasonable way and will feel that there is someone in close and sympathetic touch with her and that her burden is being shared and lessened.⁶⁸

But the enforcing function remained. One woman residing at Rosewater was reported in 1914 as disposing of rations for drink and otherwise misconducting herself. The Visiting Officer investigated, and got the local policeman to keep an eye on her.⁶⁹

Control and advocacy sometimes failed. In 1918 a girl at Naracoorte in the control of the State Children's Council wished to marry her cousin.

The Board sent an investigator and sought to have the girl removed from the district. When she utterly refused, they discharged her from their care.⁷⁰

Advocacy could become one-eyed. In the death agonies of the Moonta Mine in 1921 the local Enquiry Officer of the Destitute Board was reported to be 'too inclined to believe the statements of applicants for relief without verification.' He resigned, and the Premier was informed.⁷¹

Advocacy and entrepreneurial effort took many forms. The State Children's Council resisted a request for the transmission of information in paternity cases in 1925 in these

terms:

To be forced to supply information to the police etc. would destroy this relationship and threaten the best interests of the child.⁷²

Other agents of the state became involved too. In 1938 a schoolteacher explained through the Council's inspector:

the parents of the other children are up in arms not so much because of the low mentality of these state children but because of their filthy habits, filthy clothing and filthy heads. The children at the school will not play with them unless the teacher is in the yard playing with them or watching them.⁷³

In some cases social workers had to use imagination to make the punishment fit the crime. Consider the case of the bullets and the ducks reported by a State Children's Council Officer in 1941:

About one month ago, boy came home with rifle, told F.M. a boy had found it in the scrub and had given it to him. As the vital part of the rifle was missing and after a very close examination by [the foster father] the boys were given permission to have it to play with. A few days later, a friend was calling at the home, and the boys took 100 bullets from this friend's car, found the missing part of the rifle (which *they* had hidden) and let off all the bullets. Needless to say the rifle has since been destroyed by [the foster father] ... [the foster mother] thought the best way to punish them was to give them something to do they disliked very much. They have to pluck one duck for each bullet they stole, so they are not going to forget the rifle episode. I also had a good talk with both of the boys and told them that unless they could be trusted they would have to come to the Inst. and learn discipline.⁷⁴

Social workers have to develop empathy with their clients. One wrote of a client in 1953, after a divorce and the transfer of most of her children to state control:

I have never seen Mrs. — so elated, she was bubbling over in so called happiness, said she had a god job with Housing Trust cleaning homes as they were completed ... [Her son] had ridden his first winner and his name was to be in [the] paper. She had gone in for a raffle in [his] name and won a giant size sailor ... Really she was a different woman since her children have been placed in orphs and she has plenty of money to spend on herself.⁷⁵

As Elaine Martin has shown, professionally trained social workers began to be active in the 1950s in a range of new non-government agencies of welfare – for example the Crippled Childrens Association and Red Cross. It would appear that especially those with the new professional training available from the Social Science Department at the University of Adelaide, were more creative in their entrepreneurial role, more imaginative about the services they might deliver, more sensitive and liberal about the values and standards of the community they might reflect in their dealings with welfare clients.

They plainly contributed much to a re-evaluation of standards and practices in social welfare.

So in 1958 the Children's Welfare and Public Relief Board decided to switch from ration coupons to cash; to cease pursuing family members for maintenance payment after six years; and in 1961 successfully pressed for the application not of absolute standards of destitution, but for reasonably acceptable community standards as

the bench mark. Clearly changing values were at last being reflected by social workers.

From the 1960s I have no more case files. I observe, with the help of my colleague Rod Oxenberry, that social workers experienced important outside challenges in the fulfilment of their roles. Without those challenges many, whether in government or non-government agencies, might well have failed to perceive the shifts going on around them. Certainly the leadership of the Children's Welfare and Public Relief Board had ossified by the mid 1960s. Don Dunstan intervened from the outside in 1965, Ian Cox and Len King continued the transformation in 1972. In a like way even SACOSS experienced a major revision and expansion of its tasks, with a distinct shift from a limited entrepreneurial role to a major advocacy role, with the appointment of Ian Yates as its executive officer in the early 1970s.

In the field of child care, it does appear to me that social workers, both within DCW and the non-government agencies, were the advocates of a new and better approach, over against the guardians of long established institutions (Magill, the Orphan Home, Glandore, Vaughan House etc.).

But I still want to issue the challenge, to observe the obsession with systems maintenance among most social workers:

Is it true that creative action in many fields had of recent days come not from social workers, however defined, but from clients and consumers, especially among many groups of women?

Are social workers, especially (but not solely) in DCW, being trapped into being cautious purveyors of limited resources amidst overwhelming demands?

Cannot social workers, then, review and revise their roles:

- * as enunciators and enforcers of social values and standards;
- * as entrepreneurs in the delivery of services;
- * as advocates for client/ consumers?

Might they be able to review what social workers have done in the past in order to reconsider what social workers in the future, can do?

⁵¹ Colonization Commissioners for South Australia, General Information ... 15 Feb 1836; Appendix 4 to first report of the Colonization Commissioners for South Australia, *British Parliamentary Papers* [BPP] 1836, vol. 36, no. 491

⁵² *South Australian*, 23 Jun 1838

⁵³ Enclosure to Gov. Grey to Secretary of State, 7 Jan 1842; 'Papers Relative to South Australia', *BBP* 1843, vol. 32, no. 505

⁵⁴ Col. Sec. to Emigration Board, 22 Jan 1842, GRG 24/ 83/no. 22, State Records SA (for all manuscripts cited).

⁵⁵ Executive Council of SA, Minutes, 5 Sep 1848, GRG 40/1/1/230

⁵⁶ *Register*, 28 Feb 1849

⁵⁷ Destitute Board, Minutes, 7 Jan 1850. GRG 28/1/1

⁵⁸ The same, 6 Sep 1852

⁵⁹ Secretary, Destitute Board to Chief Secretary, 8 Jul 1859, GRG 28/30

⁶⁰ *S.A. Govt. Gazette*, 7 Oct 1872

⁶¹ Destitute Board, Minutes, 24 Aug 1882, GRG 28/1/6

⁶² Visiting Officer's Report, 26 Jul 1883, GRG 28/16/1

⁶³ Select Committee, 19 Oct 1897, Aged Poor Royal Commission, evidence qq. 166-176, *SAPP* 1898, II, No. 21

⁶⁴ Destitute Board, Minutes, 29 Oct 1903, GRG 28/1/16

⁶⁵ Ibid., 20 Oct 1904

⁶⁶ State Children's Council [SCC], Minutes, 11 Dec 1905, GRG 29/124/3/79

⁶⁷ Destitute Board, Minutes, 7 Apr 1910, GRG 28/1/19

⁶⁸ Destitute Board to Chief Secretary, 21 Sep 1911, GRG 28/31/10, folios 16-20

⁶⁹ Destitute Board, Minutes, 12 Feb 1914, GRG 28/1/21 101

⁷⁰ SCC, Minutes, 8 Aug 1918, GRG 29/124/4/282

⁷¹ Destitute Board, Minutes, 16 Sep 1921, GRG 28/1/26/ 58

⁷² SCC, Minutes, 22 Jun 1925, GRG 29/124/5/407

⁷³ Children's Welfare & Public Relief Dept files, GRG 29/123

⁷⁴ The same

⁷⁵ CWPRD files, GRG 29/6/96/1948