

The Problem of the Feeble-Minded. **LIBRARY**

The problem of feeble-mindedness is a serious one in the work of our Department, since probably we are handling more feeble-minded families than any other social agency in this country, having 14,500 families under care at the present time. As Supervisor of Family Relief I find that, invariably, cases brought to me by workers in consultation, where they have worked for a long time with no results and are thoroughly discouraged, there is very often a diagnosis of feeble-mindedness, or evidence that would indicate that members of the family are subnormal mentally.

Large numbers of such cases in a case load make supervision difficult. Many of the families that have drifted to our Department have been under the care of various private agencies for a long time, and when they have felt that further intensive case work was not advisable, the case has been closed and referred to our Department. This is, of course, a perfectly legitimate procedure, but it does create a serious problem for the Department, with 14,500 families under care and about 90 workers in the field, some of whom have had no training for social work. You can readily see that the task is too great for them to deal with successfully.

The workers often do not recognize feeble-mindedness so that only the obvious cases are diagnosed and planned for accordingly. Often a supervisor finds that they are trying to accomplish results which are impossible to attain with the type of family concerned. The worker does not know that she has to be satisfied with an adjustment on a lower level in working with this less hopeful group. She, therefore, feels frustrated and discouraged.

These families often demand attention so that the worker is compelled to devote a great deal of her time to them because they are unable, so many of them, to plan for themselves. One of our chief problems is to help our workers recognize mental defectiveness and refer such cases to the proper agencies so that plans can be made for them.

One of the difficulties with the great mass of our families is the question of management of income. We cannot expect a subnormal mother to live on a minimum budget which would tax the ability of a person of superior intelligence. Many of the families that our workers refer to the nutrition workers of the V. N. Staff are those in which there are serious social problems largely due to feeble-mindedness. The worker, in her efforts to get help from some source on these problems, refers the family to another agency. Often the woman has not the intelligence to grasp the nutritionist's teachings, and the latter feels that she cannot expend further time and energy on the family.

It is impossible for a worker in our Department, doing relief work with the large case load which has been as high as 500 families per worker, to accomplish much in the way of treatment of feeble-mindedness. Our greatest concern is to build up adequate standards of relief and see that our families are assisted quickly, intelligently and adequately. However, we are trying to develop in the workers an awareness of other social problems and an effort is made to refer such problems to the proper agencies where they can receive intensive treatment.

In many of our families where feeble-mindedness is a factor, the children present serious behavior problems. The parents have often little or no control over them and they get into all kinds of difficulties. There has been an alarming number recently of seventeen and eighteen-year old couples who have applied for relief shortly after their marriage, where the marriage was a forced one. We had such a case recently where the parents of the boy and girl had both turned them out of the home. The first interview was taken on the front steps. When the young groom was asked why he had married when he had no job or prospects of work, he replied "Well, I had faith in Roosevelt." Such immature young folks are becoming parents with no idea of what parenthood or home-making entails.

We are trying, wherever possible, to refer such couples to family agencies for intensive case work care. These are the types of families who, if taken on to relief and treated in a mass fashion, will be on relief probably for a long time and will become our chronic cases a few years hence.

The adolescent children in all of these homes create a serious problem, especially at this time when they cannot get work and it is almost impossible for the social worker to secure employment for them. The boys quite often drift away from the home and become hitchhikers, roaming the country at large and becoming a problem to every large community. The fathers of these families become discouraged because they cannot get work and are apt to stop trying for anything better and to be satisfied simply with a work relief job. We are trying to stimulate all such men to desire a normal job and bringing to them as often as we can the opportunities for employment. Regular periodic registration at the employment bureau is required. We hope, in this way, that some of the group at least will be able to secure employment and be taken off the relief list.

It was quite encouraging to me to see the amount of interest that our staff at Central office took in the report brought back from the last meeting of this group by the worker from our District who attended the meeting. We had a most interesting discussion of the problems of feeble-mindedness and we hope in the near future to study the problems more carefully so that we will be able to work more intelligently with other agencies dealing with this particular group.

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