

Last Resorts: Where do the needy turn?

Discretion in public welfare—the leeway given to case-workers and local agencies to determine who gets what—has diminished in the United States, particularly since the 1960s. As welfare rolls grew it became increasingly difficult to treat each client on an individual basis and monitor the disbursal of funds adequately. States moved toward a flat grant—a form of payment that is, with the exception of work-related expenses, uniform for families of equal size and income. For some programs, such as Food Stamps, the flat grant was a federal requirement; for other programs, such as Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), it was adopted by states to reduce error in order to avoid federal sanctions. In any case it has been generally accepted as a way to hold down costs while controlling error and fraud.

The flat grant is also viewed as a means for providing equity among the needy. But the equity of a flat (or consolidated) grant is only a form of “rough justice”; families of the same size have widely differing needs. Illnesses, accidents, disasters are not distributed evenhandedly among the poor. When a family spends its entire income maintenance grant for living expenses (and most grants are minimal in their coverage), what is it to do if the house burns down, or one of the children develops diabetes and requires a special diet, or the welfare check is stolen? What’s to be done when a family runs out of food in the middle of the month, or is evicted?

To deal with these situations and others, the modern standardized programs have produced offshoots, tiny specialized programs to cover special needs and emergencies. AFDC-Emergency Assistance and AFDC-Special Needs have sprung up from AFDC. A special-needs adjunct is connected to Supplemental Security Income in some states. And an Expedited Food Stamp program has evolved from the Food Stamp program. Some specialized programs, such as local General Assistance, provide aid in a variety of emergency situations. And programs originally designed for other purposes—such as Title XX (a federal revenue-sharing program for social services)—are commandeered in some states to provide special services, such as laundry and chores. In fact all fifty states have at least one program to aid those in very straitened circumstances, who either need more than is provided by a standardized grant or who are not covered by a public program at all. The average number of such programs is four per state.

How the specialized programs work

How are these programs administered? What do they cover? What do they cost? Who receives benefits from them and who is excluded? What do they accomplish? And how do they fit in with the nationwide trend toward stan-

dardization? These questions and many more are raised and answered—some fully, some only in part—by Joel F. Handler and Michael Sosin in *Last Resorts: Emergency Assistance and Special Needs Programs in Public Welfare* (Academic Press, 1983). With data from questionnaires sent to welfare officials in the fifty states, and with material from case studies of states and counties, the authors have assembled a comprehensive picture of specialized programs (those that deal with emergencies and special needs) within the context of the American welfare system.

They found that in the welfare system as a whole, there is a strong desire to avoid discretion. Administrators at all levels confirmed that the income maintenance programs are standardized and that this system is preferred. Fear of error and fraud, of administrative cost, and of administrative complexity act as barriers to the provision of individualized grants. Discretion has become an unpopular administrative strategy for basic income maintenance programs.

Specialized programs are another story. Handler and Sosin found great variability in the provision of emergency assistance and special needs from state to state and from county to county within states. “Almost every state has something, but that is the only generalization that can be made.” Many programs that state officials call programs for emergencies or special needs are instead used to supplement basic income maintenance grants, which, with few exceptions, have not kept abreast of the cost of living. According to the authors:

Overall the many fragmentary provisions for emergency assistance and special needs give little aid to clients, leave large gaps in coverage, and possess great heterogeneity. . . . Further, in the melange of specialized programs, varying groups of clients and types of needs are covered in different jurisdictions. By contrast the consolidated grant in almost all of the states represents a conscious policy choice to move in the direction of uniformity. . . . While some items or types of clients are more commonly the focus of programs, we find no such policy with emergency assistance and special needs. No one program exists in even a majority of the states, and the states vary in terms of number of programs, and what they choose to label emergency assistance and special needs programs. In contrast to the consolidated grant, which was intentionally adopted, these programs seem either to have been left over from an earlier time or to have been enacted as a result of special pressures to meet special needs.

Although diversity is the rule for these programs, Handler and Sosin found that there were common elements in administration. Because states spend very little of their welfare budget on the specialized programs (Minnesota,

among the most generous, spends about 3 percent), because administrative simplicity is preferred, and because decisions of whether to provide or withhold aid are politically risky—the dire consequences of the refusal to assist the needy are as likely to receive media attention as are scandals related to fraud—state welfare administrators tend to delegate authority (and any ensuing blame) to the counties. State administrators keep specialized programs small by limiting the circumstances they can cover and by limiting total dollars that can be spent. Beyond this, they put very little effort into monitoring and controlling these programs. State regulations are either easy to sidestep or altogether lacking. The result is that communities have a great deal more autonomy in administering these specialized programs than in administering standardized grants. Therefore the specialized programs come to reflect the welfare cultures of the communities in which they operate: community demands, organizational goals, and the structure of the state income maintenance program all affect the number of programs offered and their size. Where the climate is liberal, local officials bend state rules to meet what they see to be legitimate requests. In other counties the system may be even more restrictive than the state requires. Some counties (and states) use specialized programs to supplement basic grants. Others use them in an effort to avoid giving out the more costly income maintenance grants. Most demonstrate a reluctance to meet certain needs, particularly those that overlap with what basic grants in theory cover.

Because these programs are so discretionary, they are “perfect vehicles for the expression of general attitudes and values related to welfare.” The programs are “old-style welfare,” in that clients have to request aid, there are no entitlements, decisions are discretionary, payments are small, and control over the client is maximized. The fact that payments are likely to take the form of vouchers, which the client can take to the store to purchase what he needs, or vendor payments, made directly to the person who furnishes goods to the client, is indicative of the moral context of these grants. The worker on the line makes a distinction between the deserving and the undeserving poor.

Suppose aid is refused. What happens to those who fall through the gaps in this stopgap system of specialized assistance? To answer this question, Handler and Sosin studied private charities. Here they found even more variability. The private charities are highly discretionary and may use that discretion to accomplish their own ends: reform and rehabilitation. Private agencies are under no obligation to provide procedural due process, to treat similarly situated clients equally, or even to refrain from imposing their notions of morality and right and wrong. “The crucial point is that not only do private charities exercise discretion along moralistic deserving-undeserving dimensions, but that this discretion is precisely what they are all about.” The amounts given, in addition to having strings attached to them, are small and variable.

The case for specialized programs

If the discretionary specialized programs are inadequate, inequitable, and variable, why have them at all? The usual answer has been that they are as unavoidable as the circumstances they cover: a necessary evil. But Handler and Sosin take a different stance:

Individualized treatment in public welfare is not a necessary evil, but a necessary good, and part of the evaluation of any public welfare system must depend upon its willingness and ability to meet those needs that cannot be covered by the standardized grant. In practice, a public welfare system must strike some sort of balance between the need to individualize and the need to standardize; the two countertrends occur simultaneously and must be examined together.

According to Handler and Sosin, standardization and individualization are always in flux. They document their argument with a description of the British system. In the thirty years since the British adopted a uniform national income maintenance system, that system has had to be overhauled twice to meet the pressures from claims for emergency assistance and special needs, and it now faces yet another crisis as the individualized programs grow to proportions that threaten to swamp the system. The lesson is that adjustments in the degree of individualization and discretion are periodically needed in any system.

Handler and Sosin conclude that much can be done to improve the American system of providing for the specialized needs of the poor. Their policy recommendations include expanding the programs to meet the broad range of needs that clients may experience. They also favor universal coverage. At present certain groups of people, such as migrants and transients, poor individuals who do not receive basic grants, General Assistance clients, and poor families with both parents present may be denied aid from almost every source. Handler and Sosin propose outreach efforts and argue for the need to continue the provision of emergency aid as long as the emergency exists. They feel that certain specialized programs should be mandatory in every state, though they recognize the need for discretion in their administration.

For all their criticisms, the authors see the American system as one that can work. “Separation of the standardized income maintenance grant from the nonstandardized specialized programs confines the problems of discretion to the small peripheral programs. This general trend in the United States makes sense.” They would like to see the emergency assistance and special needs programs serve in this country—as they now do in Britain—as barometers of the total system: When specialized grants get too high, it can be an indication that basic grants no longer cover basic needs. But owing to the paucity, variability, and uneven administration of specialized programs in the United States, they see this role as a long time coming. ■