

Twenty Years of Providing Human Services

How can a private organization generate public services? What can happen when the churches in a community join together to deal with local human service needs? Judging from the work of the InterFaith Council of Chapel Hill and Carrboro, the possibilities are endless.

This year the InterFaith Council (IFC) celebrated its twentieth birthday. In those twenty years this group has helped plan and initiate several local service organizations, including the Council on Aging, Health Consumer Organization, Alcohol Recovery Inc., Friends of Nursing Home Patients, Meals on Wheels, and Vial of Life, to name only a few. The agency got its start when a group of women from several local churches joined together to help meet the needs of poverty stricken people in the community. Along with serving these individual needs, the women also organized a Committee on Community Needs as a continuing activity. Today, thirty community religious institutions and congregations support the IFC by donating the many hours and dollars needed to run the agency.

The IFC directs its energies into three divisions: individual services, community services, and general services. In response to individual needs, trained volunteers see clients daily. In 1981 the agency saw 700 clients, held 1,000 interviews, and gave emergency financial assistance for food, housing, heat, utilities, transportation, medicine, and child care. The IFC staff also works closely with public agencies through referrals and by sharing information. In addition, the IFC is responsible for the annual detailed listing of community resources for social services printed in the local telephone directory.

Often individual problems point to a pattern of needs which apply to large groups of people, and therefore require further action by IFC. By lobbying for new legislation and demanding more effective delivery of human services by official agencies, volunteers in the community service division have improved the public sector's ability to meet citizens' needs. IFC has initiated a Welfare Rights Union, lobbied against the state food tax, and is currently trying to establish a uniform county housing code. Recently IFC secured HUD fund authorization to build twenty-four units of low-cost housing for the elderly and handicapped, which will be the second housing program that the IFC has initiated. In response to the new state law that requires children under the age of two to be put in car seats when riding in an auto,

the IFC is starting a program to rent car seats to low income families. Other services initiated this fall include a neighborhood "soup kitchen" and a personal budget counseling service.

The general services division is responsible for the administration of the agency, and for offering administrative and planning assistance to other programs which are just getting off the ground. IFC offers telephone services, office and mailing supplies, seed money, and community support by sanctioning the new program. As the project grows the IFC helps the new program seek public or alternative funds so that it can operate independently. A few of the programs started in this way include Head Start, the YMCA integrated day camp, the PTA Thrift Shop, the Council on Aging, and Alcohol Recovery Inc., a nonmedical detoxification center.

The local United Fund contributes one-third of IFC's financial resources, with the balance being equally divided between individual contributions and the churches. The total annual budget is about \$100,000 and there are two and one half paid staff positions. The core group of volunteers usually numbers about 100. Throughout its lifetime, IFC has used over 4,000 different volunteers whose "free" time has not only saved the community millions of dollars, but has also given citizens a chance to help others.

The IFC is an example of how a private organization can use comprehensive social planning to discover and then fill the gaps in public services. Organizing through area churches is an effective way to evoke a tremendous amount of citizen participation and gives an organization strong community influence without political affiliation. Public services come and go at the decree of two to four year office holders, while the IFC has grown steadily over twenty years. This steady growth shows that there is a need for the services that the IFC offers. Other communities in North Carolina have come to the IFC requesting advice on beginning similar programs. Council members are very willing to help other communities and encourage any interested persons or groups to contact them at any time.

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