

THE "HARRIS AMENDMENT"

Public Law 90-248

90th Congress, H. R. 12080

January 2, 1968

Social Security Amendments of 1967

Section 210

[State plans must provide by July 1, 1969]

“for the training and effective use of paid subprofessional staff, with particular emphasis on the full-time or part-time employment of recipients and other persons of low income, as community service aides, in the administration of the plan and for the use of nonpaid or partially paid volunteers in a social service volunteer program in providing services to applicants and recipients and in assisting any advisory committees established by the State agency.”

INVOLVING ALL CITIZENS IN PUBLIC WELFARE*

by

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We meet here today as members of the American Public Welfare Association to consider involving all citizens in public welfare. I submit to you that the citizenry is already involved. There is evidence enough in the fact that public welfare is now a major campaign issue. The Wall Street Journal as well as the local press carry stories on public welfare's policies and programs. Big business and the industrialists discuss public welfare. Women's clubs, church groups, professional organizations and civic associations debate its lacks. Academia, suburbia, and the residents of slums propose alternatives. Requests for opportunity to serve as volunteers pour into our office. The citizenry is already concerned. It is a question of channeling and utilizing that concern.

Today, such is the turmoil of our nation, that when there is interest, there is criticism; when there is attention there are proposals for change. Change should be welcome. But when attacks are based on myths and misconceptions, on fallacies rather than facts, the changes proposed will be as irrelevant as the charges. Solutions lie in a new involvement of concerned citizens which will expose them to facts, permit them to understand cause and effect, and enable them to choose between alternatives on the basis of knowledge and understanding. It is our duty and our responsibility to provide the exposure, the framework, which will enable all sides to "see it like it is," and through dialogue, to resolve differences.

In a former era, New Deal debates led to constructive change, and to a structure that was relevant to the times. Today debates about the public welfare structure and about new Great Society programs take place amidst churning and rumblings which shake the very foundations not only of public welfare, but of all our

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institutions. The promised War on Poverty threatens to shrink to a skirmish while the predicted skirmish in a far-off continent escalates into a war that strains the nation, its resources and its patience. Indeed, the War on Poverty threatens to turn into a War about Poverty while its big guns often misfire and its little guns backfire.

But the sound of their explosions was loud enough to be heard in every city from coast to coast. The requirement for participation made silent citizens silent no more. Our clients organize and speak out in increasing numbers. They want a voice in determining policy. We should welcome this, but instead we are disturbed by the unfamiliar voices of those who have been silent so long. We fear the involvement of recipients on advisory boards. We are miserable in considering the implication of receiving advice from those who were expected to take it rather than to "dish it out."

If misery loves company, we can find comfort in the fact that demands for involvement grow louder outside every locked door and around every protective wall. The peaceful church is rocked. Priests are questioning and parishioners are protesting. The quiet colleges are rocked. Professors are challenging and students are demonstrating. Observing the demand of the little people for inclusion in the political convention, observing the demand for policy control over the local police we are forced to note that the demand for citizen participation extends from the political precinct to the police precinct.

The have-nots want in. The excluded want a voice. In public welfare, staff and recipient are joined by the middle-class and the industrial community, by youth and the pensioned, all wanting to participate in determining public welfare policy. Yesterday at this conference we heard both a newspaperman and a legislator tell us that they felt excluded, that they wanted to know us better but felt shut out. Citizens echo their complaints. We are aware that there is no unified opinion on the changes which should be made. Some want to expand our service—others to disband it. And it often seems that some want only to annoy or to destroy us. It sometimes seems that the Do It Your-Selfer suddenly decides to leave his lopsided bird house and marches straight for us hammer still in hand. But most, by far, who want to participate, want to modify and reshape because they want to help. They seek to alter a system which we, ourselves, were the first to say needed change.

And if the public now condemns public welfare, we can, with justification, quote the betrayed and abandoned woman, who turned to her accuser, and in turn observed, "You made me what I am today. I hope you're satisfied." For our program is a public program, based on legislation which reflects the will of the people. Our program was fathered by the people, but for years it was the public welfare professionals, who were the only persons in all of society who had to nurture the child who was neglected and all but abandoned by the parent society. Long before the birth of the Office of Economic Opportunity, our infant sibling, we were the only advocates of the poor. Poverty had no popularity. Now, in many geographic areas, the legal profession defends and embraces our clients, and wins new rights for them, and as it does, it points an accusing finger at us, charging that we have denied these rights. How quickly and conveniently they forget that it was this same legal profession which only recently argued that welfare was a privilege and that clients had no rights. They forget that courts upheld their own arguments that recipients were non-persons before the bar. Shall we tell them they made us what we are today? Shall we tell them that they should have brought suits for moral and financial non-support against a neglecting society? Psychiatrists and psychiatrically oriented agencies point the same accusing finger at us, decrying our current failure to provide essential casework services. But these same agencies forget so soon that as a matter of policy it was they who restricted their intake to persons who did not have to cope with financial lacks, that they boasted, took pride, and derived prestige from the fees they charged. Did they, too, help to make us what we are today?

And do we, too, forget too soon? How long did we moan that the affluent did not want to know or see or hear about the poor, but preferred to abrogate all responsibility to the professional while they built their lopsided birdhouses, and antiqued scratched tables? Well, now they care. And we, who have cared so long, now should mark the avenues, clear the paths and open wide the doors, welcome their interest and their participation so that all the citizens may join in our struggle for meeting needs wherever we find them, for meeting financial, psychological, and rehabilitation needs. For make no mistake, once among us, regardless of the forces which motivate them, regardless of the attitudes they bring, the people, by working with us and our clients, will stay to loosen the fetters which tied our hands. They will remain to become the advocates of our clients. The volunteers will join

hands with us, for, like us, they come to public welfare neither to punish nor to demean, but to help, to serve. And like us, they too will search for better methods, and for enabling legislation.

I shall be the last to argue that in an era of demonstrations and devisiveness, the initial stages of citizen involvement will be either an easy or a relaxing experience. I shall be the last to argue that a volunteer program will mean that fewer staff will be needed, for I know it will mean the addition of staff. I shall be the last to argue that advisory committees will not be time-consuming, for I know they will require the personal attention of no less than the director, who already has more than he can do, and they will require other staff services, from staff who are already overburdened.

But I will argue long and loud that volunteers will prove to an alienated clientele that the community cares, that volunteers can bring the security, the self-respect and the emotional support which are necessary preludes to the independence and self-realization of our clients.

And I know, as those of you who have already tried the program know, that legislators, community leaders, and opinion makers who have been exposed to our clients through the so-called home visitation programs, the "go-see tours," will stop shaking the finger at us, for it is their erroneous beliefs instead that will be shaken.

And I will argue that right and justice compel us not only to permit, but to encourage and assure, that the persons who must live by and with welfare policy have the opportunity to participate in making that policy, in determining their destinies, in shaping the rules which will govern them.

And we, we whose purpose and aim has been to develop the potential of our clients, to create policies which are relevant and effective, will have help in achieving these ends, if we will but provide for dialogue with the poor, and if we listen and we seek the advice of advisory committees.

I am not here to tell you that you must institute these programs because the Harris Amendments, the new law, requires States to institute volunteer programs and to involve recipients on advisory committees. I am here because I believe that democracy requires an informed and an involved citizenry, because I believe that the poor and the affluent have been separated too long, that recipients and top administration have been sepa-

rated too long and that separation creates deviousness. I believe that only personal, intimate, continuing contact and dialogue can erase the distrust and the disunity which has made recipients regard us as misers, and has made the affluent look upon us as spendthrifts. Let us bring them together and permit each to judge for himself. Let us be thankful that the citizenry is at long last concerned with the future development of its child, public welfare.