

OUTREACH

— strengthening families under stress

The Family Service Centre, a voluntary social work agency attached to the University of Western Australia first opened its doors to clients on the 16th May 1977.

The idea of establishing a broad-based family centre attached to the Social Work Department at U.W.A. was first mooted in 1974 in the Department's Triennium Submission for 1976-78 to the Australian Universities Commission and still remains a novelty in the Australian social work education scene. The sixth A.U.C. Report, in fact, expressed considerable interest in the idea by stating that "it might support a contribution to the academic staffing of such a development on the same basis as a University teaching hospital". Unfortunately, the lapse of this Report for political reasons, meant that this and other proposals contained in it were either shelved, lapsed or had to be reactivated within a different policy framework.

Convinced of the potential of such a Centre, the Head of the Social Work Department, Prof. D.L. Jayasuriya, initiated discussions with the then Minister for Community Welfare, the Hon. Mr. N. Baxter, and submitted a much more limited interim proposal to the University recommending that they establish the Centre as a general family welfare agency operated by the Departmental professional staff on a part-time basis and maintained out of funds from the Department's teaching budget. After much careful thought and discussion, the University accepted this proposal and released a house in Arras Street, Hollywood (about 1 km. from the main campus) as accommodation for the Centre. They also provided part-time secretarial services and made provision of an annual grant of \$1,000 to meet recurrent routine administrative expenses. An initiating

RAE LINDSAY

Rae Lindsay, B.A., M.Soc.Wk. (W.A.), Lecturer, Dept. of Social Work and Social Administration, University of Western Australia and Director of Family Service Centre. Rae Lindsay was appointed to this position in March 1979 and prior to this time worked as a Social Worker at the Child Guidance Clinic, Stubbs Terrace Hospital (psychiatric inpatient unit for children), Mildred Creek Autistic Centre and the Princess Margaret Hospital for Children.

grant of \$5,000 from the State Government Department for Community Welfare was used primarily for equipping the Agency and meeting other incidental establishment expenses.

The Founding Director of the Agency was Mr. Brian Cheers, Lecturer in the Department of Social Work. He functioned in this capacity until April 1979 when I joined the Department's staff and was appointed Director of the Centre. As Director of the Agency I have professional as well as administration responsibility for the running of the Centre and I am directly responsible to the Head of the Department. An Advisory Committee consisting of social welfare professionals and community representatives has also been established to assist the Director and the Staff of the Centre. This Advisory Committee meets regularly and considers, among other things, periodic Reports from the Director pertaining to the work of the Centre. The Centre also has a number of Honorary Consultants available to Staff; namely a Solicitor, a Medical Practitioner and a Clinical Psychologist.

AIMS & OBJECTIVES:

The Centre's objectives can be broadly stated as:

- a) to provide a skilled social work counselling service to families, couples and individuals in the community experiencing difficulties related to family functioning; and
- b) to provide a learning resource centre where Staff can maintain client contact and continue the development of professional skills; and students can experiment with innovative methods and techniques of practice under close supervision of academic teaching staff.

SERVICE DELIVERY:

Both in terms of its structure and interventive focus the Family Service Centre was seen as unique in the Western Australian Welfare Scene. Voluntary Welfare Agencies in Western Australia are few in number, mostly in the Perth metropolitan area, and those with a general focus on the family are Church sponsored. The potential clientele of these voluntary agencies is further defined by their heavy reliance on statutory funding which in many ways predetermines where, within the individual-family-environmental field, a particular agency's services ought to be directed.

The Family Service Centre aimed to fill an important gap in service provision by establishing a voluntary, secular, social welfare agency with a 'system focus'; thus breaking away from the stereotype of an identified 'problem' client. The view that the "problem" exists in the person-family-environment field, runs counter to the view which sees the person as being the problem. With the system concept, the client is almost inevitably seen as a responsible partner in service-delivery.

This article describes the origins, objectives and functioning of the Family Service Centre, a voluntary social work agency attached to the Department of Social Work and Social Administration at the University of Western Australia. The Centre has now been operating for 3½ years bringing specialized skills to families in the community and providing students with a unique placement experience. Its future is uncertain because funding for full-time staff has not become available.



Freedom from statutory regulations and 'tied' funding allowed us to practice the approach to social/psychological problems we had long taught in the academic part of our Course. Not surprisingly, it led to many of our clients being people who would never have approached the more traditional welfare agencies for fear of the stigma generally attached to social work clientele. No doubt the building in which the Centre is located — a University house — informal, homely and unobtrusive, has also made us seem more approachable to many potential clients.

Client Profile

An Annual Report giving details of the Centre's operations is presented to the Advisory Board each year and later submitted to the Senate of the University. For the purposes of this article I will draw on statistics given in the 1979 Report.

Records show that 228 persons contacted the Centre during 1979, one hundred of whom later became clients. Decisions at the time of initial contact are shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1
Decision at the Time of Initial Contact

	%
Clients referred for assessment interview	43
Clients referred to a more appropriate agency	7
Clients referred on — no room on caseloads	18
Clients withdrew request for assistance	3
Clients situation dealt with via telephone call	5
Clients uncertain — matter left open to re-contact	13
Other	11

Due to a policy decision not to keep a Waiting List, and the very limited staff resources available, a large number of clients have to be referred on to other (sometimes less appropriate) agencies. As the Centre becomes more widely known, and appears in an ever-increasing number of resource indexes, the number of telephone calls requesting resource information increases.

The range of problems initially presented to the Centre is shown in Table 2.

TABLE 2.
Problems Initially Presented %

Marriage/De Facto (incl. Sexual)	28
Family Relationships	23
Adult Emotional/Social/Practical	22
Child's Emotional/Behavioural	16
Separation Problems	6
Legal Problems — re separation	1
Pre-Marriage	1
Retirement Planning	1
Other	2

Recently there appears to have been an increase in requests for 'preventive' help, persons anticipating second marriages coming and asking for help with communication and problem-solving skills so they will not make the same mistakes in their second marriage.

It is interesting to note the wide variety of agencies using the Centre. Table 3 shows the source of all referrals received. The small number of clients referred by each agency would suggest that social workers referring clients to the Centre see the agency as providing specialized skills and methods of intervention. Whilst Family Therapy is by no means the only type of intervention employed by our staff, our agency would be one of the few agencies in Perth providing this kind of counselling. We are also one of the few agencies who are prepared to see clients outside normal office hours.

TABLE 3. Source of Referrals.

	No.
Self Referrals	41
Public Hospitals	16
School Guidance	10
Family Court Counselling Service	9
General Practitioners	9
Community Welfare	8
Alcohol and Drug Authority	5
Family Planning Association	5
Legal Aid	4
Public Health	3
Department for Social Security	3
Rehabilitation Workshops	3
Citizens Advice Bureau	2
Marriage Guidance	2
Aboriginal Legal Service	1
Hyperactive Help	1
Probation & Parole	1
Psychiatric Clinic	1
Silver Chain Nursing	1
Local Government Welfare Officer	1
Telateen	1
Don't know	13

Over time the Centre has obviously become more widely known and the number of self referrals has grown. By far the greatest number of self referring clients are friends of ex-clients, but there are also a significant number who are introduced to the Family Service Centre by personal friends employed in the Welfare/Health field.

As would be expected, most of the clients contacting the Centre are in the 20 — 50 year age range (i.e. the age when most people are coping with child-rearing) and the majority of these have children in the 5-11 year age group.

Clients are drawn from a very wide geographical area, representing 69 different suburbs and 5 country towns. The majority of clients are seen weekly at the Centre over a period of 8 or less weeks and those coming from the country are usually seen frequently over a weekend or a few days.

Financial Counselling Service

In September 1979 the Staff of the Social Work Department, together with the University Department of Accounting & Finance established a pilot project in Financial Counselling at the Family Service Centre. The project arose from concern expressed in both the Henderson & Galbally reports that financial difficulties, especially in the fields of credit and debt, can place great strain on the family and often contribute materially to family and personal breakdown. In his report on poverty prepared for the Commonwealth Government Prof. Henderson suggested that credit counselling and advice on budgeting, insurance, mortgages and hire purchase might help to reduce the number of tragedies caused by 'an impossible load of debt'.

The aim then, was to assess the extent of the need and the nature of the problem and to this end, Mr. Ian Scarman, Senior Lecturer in the Department of Accounting & Finance, offered his services as an Honorary Consultant to the Family Service Centre. The new service was advertised widely in the Welfare field in early September. The initial response was quite slow, but following publicity in the "West Australian" and Mr. Scarman's involvement in a popular talk-back radio programme the Centre was overwhelmed by:



LEFT: Student & supervisor experimenting with video equipment.

ABOVE LEFT: Student supervision.

ABOVE: A student manning the phone at the centre.

ABOVE RIGHT: The Director explaining unemployment benefits to a young couple.

RIGHT: Student supervisors at a training session at F.S.C.

- a) the number of people requesting counselling;
- b) the expressions of support which came from a great variety of organizations — e.g. Westrail, Australia Post, Credit Unions, Paraquad, Building Societies, Alcohol & Drug Units, the Department for Community Welfare and the Citizens Advice Bureau; and
- c) the interest shown by both professional social workers and volunteers in a proposed workshop on financial counselling to be held in early 1980.

The financial counselling service was established as a referral consultant service and as such, takes responsibility only for the financial aspects of a client's problems. The client continues to receive help with other problems from the referring agency. In the 1979 Annual Report Mr. Scarman noted that:

"There seems to have been a high rate of *initial* success in resolving crisis situations. Only one of the persons counselled to date has failed to follow advice — all others have been able to resolve their

immediate problem. There is no guarantee, of course, that these problems will not recur for some people, particularly those at the bottom of the income scale."

By the end of 1979 Mr. Scarman had seen 28 clients in all, 13 of whom were self-referred and the next largest number (7), being referred by hospital social workers. Like the general Family Service Centre clientele, they came from all over the metropolitan area. Fourteen clients were married and seven were separated, divorced or widowed. Fourteen clients were in steady employment, seven were on Social Security benefits and the employment status of the remaining seven is unknown.

A weekend Financial Counselling Workshop was arranged by the Centre on 12th and 13th April 1980. Numbers for the workshop were limited to 40, participants coming from both the Welfare field and the Financial sector, mainly the Credit Unions. Applicants numbered over 70.

Mr. Brian Walker, Supervisor, Budget Advice Service, Department



for Community Welfare, South Australia, served as Consultant and Resource Person and course content included financial, legal and welfare knowledge necessary for financial counselling. Attention was also given to counselling skills. Participants were enthusiastic about the workshop and requested both continuing group contact and further education. Due to very limited staff resources the Family Service Centre was unable to meet these requests but both the Department for Community Welfare and the Citizens Advice Bureau have shown interest in providing further information and training in financial counselling and the Family Service Centre has offered to act as Consultants to these bodies.

Mr. Scarman has continued seeing referred clients by appointment during 1980 and intends to write up the project when he returns from Study Leave in early 1981. A manual on financial counselling for use by people working in this area is to be jointly produced by Mr. Walker and Mr. Scarman.

THE CENTRE AS A TEACHING RESOURCE:

As noted earlier in this article, one of the primary aims of the Centre was to provide an opportunity for professionally trained academic staff to continue their clinical practice; and for students to have access to a non-statutory, system-focussed family agency where they could practice innovative methods and techniques learned in their Course.

Since its inception 30 students have completed placements at the Family Service Centre, for periods ranging from 10 — 20 weeks. As well as students from the Social Work Course at U.W.A. students have come from the Social Work Course at the Western Australian Institute of Technology and from the Master of Clinical Psychology Course at U.W.A. Student learning is a high priority at the Centre and students receive intensive supervision using both audio and visual tapes and working with their supervisor in co-therapy situations. Reports from students on placement at the Centre have been highly favourable.

The Centre has also provided a venue for small group teaching, family therapy workshops and student supervision workshops. The Centre has recently been discussing with several community self-help groups the possibility of students being involved in running groups for them at the Centre.

The enthusiasm and dedication of the Staff has been exceptional. Despite the fact that their work at the Centre is imposed over and above a full teaching load and has therefore necessitated them spending much of their own time (usually evenings) working at the Centre, they have continued to support the concept, giving willingly of their time and energy. I believe this is because they find continuing practice gives added meaning and life to their teaching and because they have found the opportunity to work alongside their students in the field both refreshing and challenging. As members of a social work agency, staff have also benefitted from both information and association with Welfare staff usually denied to the academic.

THE FUTURE:

But what of the future? The Centre has established beyond any doubt its value and utility as a general Family Welfare agency providing a community service hitherto unavailable in the Perth metropolitan area. Furthermore, its operation has been vindicated by the extent to which it has been used as a referral agency by key statutory social welfare agencies. As a learning resource centre it has more than justified its existence and the Centre is now widely accepted in the Australian social work education scene as an innovative departure in programmes of field education in social work training.

In these days of disillusionment with 'Ivory Tower' institutions the Centre has served as a bridge between the University and the general community, bringing specialist skills (both counselling and financial) out of 'the confines of the cloisters' to a Centre where they are readily available to the general public. However, without additional funding and the establishment of the Centre on a more formal basis with a nucleus of full-time staff and a permanent administrative structure, this pioneering innovative venture may have to be terminated. ■