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# The Executive Director As Keeper of the Past<sup>1</sup>

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*This paper outlines a rationale for the materials which ought to be preserved by executives of local agencies, identifies some of the legal issues involved in record keeping for historical issues and resources available at local and state levels and discusses access issues.*

Mary Richmond once wrote that “A profession which did not know its own history, which was indifferent to the memory of the men and women responsible for its making, would still be a shambling and formless thing.” (Richmond, 1930, 415) Fortunately, the publication of a number of general introductory historical surveys has made it quite possible for social work education to remedy such shambles and give form to history as an integral part of the overall social work education enterprise.

In part because the social workers of the early 20th century were aware of the historical importance of their efforts, a considerable record of achievement and accomplishment has been preserved for our use. Unfortunately, the same may not be as true of the present generation of social workers and the executives of social agencies where they practice. Preserving the record of social work accomplishment seems to have been a very low priority for too many local social agencies in recent years, and social welfare scholars have apparently done little to reverse this unfortunate development. After an extensive literature search, we have not been able to identify any literature in social work journals published during the past 30 years dealing directly with the issue of this paper. By contrast, business historians have recently been addressing several related issues. (Anderson, 1980; Bakken, 1973; Baughman, 1965; Bonfield, 1982; Cochran, 1979; Davenport, 1980; Davidson, 1969; Directory of Business Archives, 1980; Eullenberg, 1984; Lewis, 1981; Martin, 1981; Pollay, 1978; Riley, 1981; Schultz, 1981; Van Camp, 1982).

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## Responsibility for Historical Preservation

This paper examines the role of agency administrators, and particularly executive directors, in the maintenance and preservation of agency records which have outlived their contemporary usefulness and are thus primarily of historical interest. Like other forms of social work practice, contemporary social administration is highly present oriented, and largely disinterested in the remote past, and even in many cases, the near past. Thus, in general, attention to the need for preserving the record of local agency achievements has been largely neglected in altogether too many instances.

Evidences of this state of neglect are relatively easy to identify. Preservation of even the most basic information about local social services does not seem to be a high priority for anyone, including libraries, archives and other community information repositories in most American communities today. In many communities, for example, even such basic documents as program descriptions, agency budgets and annual reports are not collected by public libraries and are simply lost once their current utility is exhausted.

The fault in this case is not entirely, or even primarily, with the librarians. A recent survey of agency accountability practices in the United States and Korea, for example, found that the majority of administrators in both countries did not regularly send financial statements, annual reports or any related information to any library or archive. (Lohmann, Boo, Hahm and Kim, 1989) In fact, the principal destinations for such reports in both countries were various funding sources and the agencies own files. Under such circumstances, it is not out of the question to suggest that librarians and archivists as well as many other elements of the community, may simply be unaware of the existence of many contemporary social agencies.

It is our overall thesis that historical preservation of the record of social work accomplishment must, in the first instance be the responsibility of social agencies whose administrative records form the core of information which will be of greatest long-term historical interest. As a result, preservation of important documents should be part of an overall strategy of records management in the social agency. Executive directors, it is argued, have particular responsibility to be involved in developing and overseeing an active policy of records management and archiving in which historical preservation exists side-by-side with other information management strategies. Social work practitioners working in agencies must also assume some responsibility in this area. Finally, social work faculty should also assume responsibility for teaching students the importance of preserving the historical record of social work accomplishment, so that professional social workers, whether clinicians, consultants, supervisors or executives, recognize and assume the responsibility of historical preservation throughout their careers.

## Reasons for Executive Responsibility

One major set of reasons why executives should be actively involved in records

preservation involves basic self-interest: Such records are often quite useful for annual report information, anniversaries, public relations opportunities, and other similar management purposes. For example, recent efforts to celebrate the Golden Anniversary of a School of Social Work were, for a time, hampered by the fact that it could not be determined what exact year the original program of the school had been created. The original records had simply disappeared. They were only able to get close; the final date chosen was accurate only to  $\pm 1$  year.

An even stronger reason for preservation is the need to retain agency records which assist in explaining the development of the profession and various services with which it has been associated. It is quite conceivable, for example, that in many areas even vital local information on the development of the War on Poverty and other community social program efforts of the late 1960's and early 1970's has already been lost. A great many of the local programs and services of that period may just simply have vanished without a trace. Examples of this in the record of social work profession are numerous. Recently, one of us became aware, for example, that the majority of the records of the famous Pittsburgh survey were destroyed in an administrative transition at the Russell Sage Foundation in the late 1940's. Thus, even this well-known effort can no longer be fully studied or investigated.

Closely associated with this is the disturbing fact that failure to pay adequate attention to the historical record of social work has the unfortunate effect of contributing to and supporting lack of respect for social work in the present. It is almost as if the profession and the community join together in endorsing the alarming conclusion that the deeds of social work are not worth remembering!

There are other reasons as well to take preserving the social work record seriously. In some instances, for example, historical information may have a number of contemporary administrative uses. For example, information validating a long record of service to a community may be used to justify new or additional funding. Study of historical records of fund raising activity may uncover donors and supporters from long ago who have been neglected by the agency more recently, or whose heirs and descendents would not have emerged independently as potential supporters.

Similar strategies might be used in some instances to identify and recruit potential new board and committee members. Sought after board members might be more inclined to respond favorably, for example, when they are informed of the highly-respected pillars of the community who used to be board members of the agency.

The marketing and public relations value of particular types of historical materials, for example, photographs has seldom been fully exploited by social agencies. At annual meetings, in brochures and pamphlets, in shopping mall public service displays and a wealth of other situations, old photographs as well as other materials like hand written letters from well-known people, raffle tickets,

buttons and ribbons and other paraphernalia can be real crowd pleasers.

Historical information is also important because of the strong tendency for incremental decision making evident in most settings. Decisions are seldom made in a contemporary vacuum, and therefore, information about the circumstances of prior decisions, precedents which may have already been set, and other similar historical information is often highly relevant to contemporary decisions.

It is especially likely to be the case also that executives and other decision-makers will often employ a kind of oral historical approach to fact-finding in their attempts to become familiar with an agency and its current context. In this case, tape recordings and transcripts of

## What Records To Keep?

Possibly the most important question is what records should be retained. While there is no easy general answer to that question, a variety of tentative suggestions can be made. Those types of records which are likely to be most useful for future research are identified and categorized by their probable future value: Case records, financial records, minutes of boards and policy committees, basic legal documents, various types of correspondence and other forms of records are identified and discussed as most fundamental for historical research purposes. Selected other types of documents, such as appointment calendars and drafts of proposals may also be important sources of historical information.

## Agency Survey

To get some idea of current practices with respect to historical preservation of social work records, a two-page questionnaire with ten open-ended items, was sent to the chief executive officers of twenty-five national nonprofit social welfare agencies. Responses were sought on several specific questions regarding the use of record preservation manuals, assignment of record preservation responsibilities; transfer of records to archives; and their impressions of implications for their local member agencies.

Fifteen agencies responded with information about their policies and practices on retention and preservation of records. Responses were received from the Accrediting Council for Services for People with Developmental Disabilities, American Red Cross, American Jewish Family and Children Agencies, Big Brothers/Big Sisters, Boys Clubs of America, Boy Scouts of America, Council of Jewish Federations, Family Service of America, Girls' Clubs of America, Girl Scouts of the USA, Planned Parenthood Federation of America, Salvation Army Archives and Research Center, United Way of America, National Urban League, National YMCA and National YWCA.

On the strength of this rather limited sampling, it would appear that the majority of national social agencies have no formal policy for preservation of their records and do nothing to encourage preservation among their local affiliates. Only three of the

fifteen national agency boards of directors have mandated policies and procedures for retention of inactive client records, for example. Almost alone in this regard, the Salvation Army Archives and Research Center distributes a 23 page records manual to all local entities.

Lack of formal archival policies and practices, however, should not automatically be equated with record disposal. Seven national agencies surveyed had established policies and procedures for retention of their own inactive records. However, only three of the seven had any type of operational manual spelling out suggested procedures in detail. The absence of formal policies and procedures did not prevent some national agencies from assigning staff or volunteers to administer a retention of records program: Ten of the 15 agencies utilized paid staff or volunteers for such purposes.

Two of the fifteen national agencies directly administer archives centers for retention of their own records, but neither retains inactive records of local affiliates. One agency utilized volunteers for more than 40 hours a week, while another agency utilized three professional archivists and four full-time support staff for its national archives center.

Eight other national agencies donate their national records to an outside archives center or library; the Social Welfare History Archives of the University of Minnesota; (three agencies) Fordham University Library, National Jewish Archives in Boston, Sophia Smith Collection of Smith College, Library of Congress and the National Archives were all mentioned.

Interestingly, these national agencies also apparently generate few mandates for archival activity on the part of local affiliates. Only two agencies reported accreditation or certification requirements for local affiliates stipulating retention of inactive records.

The national respondents believed that their local entities had given management of inactive records low priority and that the management problems and issues the local level were similar to those at the national level. One chief executive (and professional social worker) noted: "Local affiliates have not indicated a serious concern about the retention of records for historical or research purposes. This may in itself be a problem because many local affiliate chief executive officers can benefit from a firm grasp of their affiliate's history. Knowledge of the past is often an ignored program development and strategy formulation tool. Affiliates may retain inactive records, but these records are not typically perceived as helpful to current affairs."

## Issues

In general, there is very little legal guidance or precedent to assist the executive director in preserving agency records. All federal and state governments, for example, have laws specifying documents to be kept and identifying depositories. In general, however, nonprofit agencies are treated as purely private endeavors, with no legal restrictions on preservation of records beyond the ordinary

three to seven year limits on various types of tax and financial information.

Much recent attention to this issue has been devoted by the historical research community following the Salinger ruling (Garrow, 1990), which in effect grants the “authors” of a broad range of private documents, presumably including memoranda and letters and internal reports by nonprofit officials, virtually complete control over the publication and use of those documents under copyright statutes.

The respondents from the survey reported above also identified several significant problems and issues in the management of inactive records for historical and research purposes. One of the most significant problems was the variable confidentiality of records--which can vary all the way from immediately public to long-term confidential. In the case of social agencies, there are several types of confidential records that may be related to whether or not the parties are still living: grievances by a staff member or client; memos relating to legal issues; salary questions and documents that negatively characterize or even slander someone’s character.

Other issues identified include availability of records to different units of the organization (such as public relations or institutional advancement); adequate space for reviewing, organizing and storing records; costs of adequate staffing of archives (for processing, maintaining, indexing, inventorying, filing, etc.); costs of equipment, physical security and protection from fire, air, water, heat and insects; policies regulating access to records by outside researchers; over-zealous space savers; difficulty in mobilizing the interest of local entities in retention of records; and preserving and storing records in different media. Along this line, there are also the special problems of nonprint media such as photographs, costumes and furniture.

Perhaps the key issues of historical preservation for social agencies involve busy administrators finding the time and making the effort. In at least some cases, simple disposal of records will turn out to be the alternative chosen by many administrators just because it appears to be the simplest and least costly, or because other viable options are not evident. One of the major challenges for historically minded social work educators, in fact, would appear to be overcoming or counteracting these tendencies.

Another major issue for agencies is deciding what to keep. The social welfare history community could be of great assistance in this regard. In particular, a committee might be formed to establish voluntary guidelines or suggestions for records management procedures and practices for nonpublic social service agencies. As a first step in that direction, we offer the listing of potentially valuable documents in Appendix 1.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

It will not do in this case for those of us in the academic community interested in the history of social welfare to let ourselves off the hook by simply foisting responsibility off onto others. The main point of this paper is that the primary responsibility for the preservation of the documentary record of contemporary social welfare history rests with the agency executives who control those records. There are also, however, several major roles for social work scholars and educators in this:

First, stress upon the importance of historical preservation of the social work records should be part of the education of the social welfare administrators of the future. At the very least, the importance of historical preservation should be stressed in dealing with information processing and records management generally.

Secondly, those of us interested in this subject need to recognize that we constitute a potential constituency or interest group with the potential to influence not only executive directors of agencies, but also to stimulate interest in the preservation of social agency records by various local and regional archival centers. Archives in New York, Chicago, Cleveland and a few other cities have taken exemplary leads in this, but archives in relatively few other cities have followed their lead to date.

Finally, there may be a specific role for the Council and the Social Welfare History Group in the creation and dissemination of voluntary guidelines, standards and other materials on the subject of records management and preservation. One possibility is suggested by the creation of a special committee by the Social Welfare History Group to pursue this matter at its 1990 meeting.

The social work profession must not be allowed to become indifferent to its own history, and primary responsibility for avoiding this collective loss of memory rests with those who control the historical record of the field.

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## Appendix A

### Archival List of Core Agency Documents

Accreditation reports and responses  
Annual Meeting paraphernalia (invitations, program sheets, reports distributed)  
Annual Reports on any theme (such as client statistics, staff training, program evaluation, staff or board committee reports, etc.)  
Articles of Incorporation  
Audit reports (financial or management)  
Authorized annual budget  
Awards and recognition letters and photos  
Benefit reports  
Biographical information, including photos of Board members, executive staff  
Building maintenance reports and assessments  
By-laws with all amendments  
Certificate of Incorporation  
Charter  
Client case records  
Constitution, with amendments  
Consultant reports  
Contracts and grants from government agencies, foundations, et. al.  
Deeds of trust  
Documents relating to initiations, mergers, or terminations of programs  
Employee handbooks  
Expenditure reports  
Fee schedules  
Financial reports, including cash receipts, disbursements journals, vouchers, general and subsidiary ledgers, individual earnings records and financial plans.  
Grievance reports  
Insurance policies  
Inventories of property and equipment  
IRS letters re: tax exempt status and inquiries  
Leases of property or equipment  
Legal correspondence related to legal issues, opinions, subpoenas, hearings,  
Letter of Agreement  
Licenses and certificates  
Meeting Minutes of all board and committee meetings

Minutes of executive staff and major staff committees  
News releases, interviews and press clippings  
Newsletters  
Organization Charts  
Personnel manuals  
Photos of facilities, meetings and special events  
Policy oriented correspondence (Executive, President, board members  
and committee chairs)  
Property Appraisals  
Publications by agency staff or board members or others related to  
agency  
Reports presented to the board  
Reports to state or local regulatory bodies  
Revenue reports  
Salary schedules  
Tax returns (IRS-990, state returns, etc.)  
Trust Documents  
Union contracts