THE HUMAN SERVICES CLEARINGHOUSE: A TOOL FOR RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

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INTRODUCTION

The information explosion of the post–World War II era has received sparse attention by human services administration professionals. (1) This is somewhat ironic since most of us would agree that information can be considered a source of "power" and is undoubtedly a staple of "good" management. The implications of uncontrolled information flow, moreover, are as far-reaching (if not more so) to public administration practice as any other form of uncontrolled growth. Indeed, it is the authors' contention that information as a "resource" demands increased attention from the public administration community, particularly as it tries to deal with a myriad of social problems in the context of an admittedly shrinking resource base.

In the human services administration field, for example, a number of "trends" have been identified

which directly affect leadership and management in contemporary human services organizations. (Human Services Development Institute, 1979:Appendix C) Among the most relevant to this discussion are the following:

- Public demands for personnel and organizational accountability;
- Scarcer resources and the need to manage in a period of contraction rather than expansion;
- A call for more systematic evaluation of personnel and program performance;
- A push for increased educational and social service cooperation in order to utilize resources and delivery services more effectively;
- A more conflict-laden environment;
- Increased intergovernmental complexity; and
- Rationalistic expectations.

These trends clearly highlight the need for a <u>proactive</u> stance to social planning and administration and, consequently, to the need for a "solid," in terms of validity, reliability, comprehensiveness, and utility, information base which will enhance an otherwise constrained decision-making process. In this regard, it is important to note that the information needs of human services decision-makers will vary. Moreover, the capacities of these decision-makers to retrieve, assimilate, and utilize information are variable which, in turn, only compounds the problem of ineffective and inefficient information management.

Generally speaking, the approaches taken to resolve the information management dilemma have emerged from the scientific and technical community, culminating in such contemporary topics as "Information Science," "Management Information Systems," and "Technology Transfer." In fact, even a new journal, <u>Knowledge: Creation, Diffusion, Utilization</u>, has entered the scene, presumably testifying to the legitimacy of these emerging "disciplines."

One development, which is of particular importance to public administrators, has been the establishment of both generic and topical information clearinghouses. In light of the accelerating information phenomenon and its concomitant "overload" implications, the information clearinghouse has emerged as a tool for information management. In the human services field, for example, the clearinghouse concept has developed dramatically in recent years, with nearly every relevant federal agency operating at least one. Within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, at least eight subject-specific information clearinghouses can be identified, not to include Project SHARE, a national clearinghouse to improve the management of human services operated under contract by Aspen Systems Corporation. Aspen Systems Corporation also operates the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's HUD USER and the U.S. Department of Justice's National Criminal Justice Reference Service (NCJRS), two information clearinghouses of direct relevance to human services administration. Also at the federal level, of course, is the U.S. Department of Commerce's National Techincal Information Service (NTIS), which has been designated as the chief repository of non-classified, federally-sponsored research and publishes several bibliographic periodicals of interest to human services practitioners and researchers, most notably <u>Behavior and Society</u> and <u>Health Planning Abstracts.</u>

In addition to the federal efforts in this area, numerous information clearinghouse resources exist at other <u>public</u> sector levels as well as in the private and "third" sectors. For instance, various information clearinghouse services are now offered by national and subnational public interest groups, private, not-for-profit corporations, and universities. Many of these services are targeted at human services constituencies.

The purpose of this article is to examine this

information clearinghouse function in human services. In particular, the authors wish to develop the "information as resource" theme, including the need for information <u>management</u> capacity-building as a strategy for improving the management of human services.

INFORMATION AS A RESOURCE

According to a recent report by the U.S. General Accounting Office (1979:i), "Expenditures in the United States for producing, disseminating, and using scientific and technical information have increased more than 300 percent over the past two decades and will continue to rise." The same report noted that: (U.S. General Accounting Office, 1979:3)

> Although information as a component of the U.S. economy has grown rapidly, it is usually still treated as a free good, rather than an economic resource, by the Government. Federal departments and agencies have not given sufficient attention and direction to information activities management.

In a similar vein, Irwin Feller critiqued the <u>federal</u> investment in information in the following way: "User-orientation has become a buzzword in the rhetoric of intergovernmental science relationships. ... Increasingly, federal technology transfer and information dissemination programs have incorporated user-need components ... However, little is known about the effectiveness of these programs, in part because of the absence of systematic evaluation of the major programs along these lines and in part because of the recentness of many of these efforts." (Feller, 1979:1-6)

Feller also noted that the advent of new problems requiring new types of information for decision-making was not a recent phenomenon in the public sector. Rather, what did appear to be new according to Feller (1979:1-3), were concerns that the rate at which such new problems were arising has increased; that the consequences of "unsound" policies, including failure

to consider long-term or external impacts of policies, were greater; and that the gap between the information available and that which was required for sound policies has widened.

Unfortunately, improving <u>access</u> to more and better information for decision-making constitutes an incomplete, sometimes even inappropriate, solution. In many respects, decision-makers often suffer from both too little and too much information. Feller (1979) concluded that the problem of user access to information is probably less significant than the question of assimilation, interpretation and utility. In this regard, the notion of "capacity-building" is significant. Feller (1979:10-11) states that in an intergovernmental context, capacity-building refers to those federal policies and programs which are intended to strengthen the capabilities of state and local governments in the range of activities---policy management, program management, resource management---which are required for improved public management.

The above "elements" of public management were initially articulated by Philip Burgess (1975) in a special issue of the <u>Public Administration Review</u>. According to Burgess' conceptual framework, the purpose of <u>resource management</u> was to develop and maintain a human, material, financial, and informational resource base that was maximally responsive to the demands of the policy and program components of the organization. Information management, then, is clearly a component of <u>resource</u> management. Moreover, it tends to be considered such whenever capacity-building strategies are being formulated.

INFORMATION CLEARINGHOUSES AND TECHNOLOGY TRANSFER

"Technology transfer" generally refers to disseminating information, matching technology with needs,

and creative adapting of items to new uses. (Hough, 1975:5) Therefore, it typically implies more than the mere dissemination of information. (Doctors, 1969:3)

Various taxonomies have been proposed of the mechanisms or approaches employed to promote the <u>transfer of technology</u> to state and local governments. In particular, Gordon (1977) identifies 11 such mechanisms in a recent review of federal technology transfer programs: (1) technology agents; (2) direct application assistance; (3) back-up sites; (4) networks; (5) exemplary projects; (6) demonstration projects; (7) experimental projects; (8) information clearinghouses; (9) seminars/training programs; (10) subsidies; and (11) task forces.

The fact that the information clearinghouse was identified as a mechanism for technology transfer should not come as a surprise, particularly when one considers the growing investment being made in information dissemination and management activities at the federal level. In fact, the proliferation of information clearinghouses on the national scene has actually prompted a "call for coordination." (U.S. General Accounting Office, 1979)

A role for information clearinghouses in technology transfer was also implied by Hough (1975), who developed an "informing model" of technology diffusion. According to Hough (1975:18), "Informing programs ...purvey technical information to potential users, either present or future. They encompass: (1) marketing; (2) information storage, retrieval, and analysis; (3) the technical press; (4) many types of technical training; (5) some professional and trade association activities; and (6) government-sponsored conferences, demonstrations, publications, and movements of knowledgeable people."

NATURE OF INFORMATION CLEARINGHOUSES

Whether the information clearinghouse is perceived

as a tool for technology transfer or resource management capacity-building, its relevance to improved public management should be underscored. Clearly, in an era of "cutback management" and resource scarcity, the desire to prevent <u>unnecessary</u> duplication of effort and/or "reinvention of the wheel" becomes a <u>sine qua non</u> of good management practice. The development of viable information "systems" is therefore more important today than ever before. The information clearinghouse should be seen as one component of any such system.

Information clearinghouses come in all shapes and sizes. In general, two categories of clearinghouses can be identified---bibliographic and numeric. Numeric clearinghouses contain facts and figures, while bibliographic clearinghouses contain citations to printed materials. (U.S. General Accounting Office, 1979)

An example of a bibliographic clearinghouse in human services, of course, is Project SHARE. According to its promotional brochure, Project SHARE "implements a key element of DHEW's capacity-building policy by providing state and local governments with information services to improve their capacity for planning, management and delivery of human services." One can easily infer the existence of an interface between capacity-building and technology transfer from the above statement. At the very least, an information clearinghouse, such as Project SHARE, can serve as a catalyst or stimulant to human services reform. More precisely, according to Tim Reed, Project Manager of Project SHARE: (Reed, 1980:5)

Information utilization can be considered a type of technology transfer while information dissemination cannot properly be viewed in this light. Clearinghouses then serve only imperfectly as tools for achieving technological innovation. Their most

significant contribution thus lies in their ability to stimulate awareness, albeit in a circular mode. That is, users of the clearinghouse should, through exposure to new materials, at the very least gain perspectives on the breadth and rate of innovation in particular subject areas. Similarly, as they strive to implement new technologies in their areas of concern, their queries should serve to alert clearinghouse sponsors and operators to the shortfalls in existing knowledge---in short the barriers to utilization. This then becomes the ultimate purpose of any clearinghouse function--- the establishment of an information loop with its user community.

Illustrations of the numeric information clearinghouse are perhaps more common than its bibliographic counterpart, particularly at lower levels of aggregation, i. e., substate, local jurisdictions. This is so for several reasons. First, the "data holdings" of this type of information clearinghouse are typically localized, comprising needs assessment, social profile, and services inventory data which are most relevant to social planning activities at the local, community level. The economies of scale, which are usually important factors in the planning and establishment of bibliographic clearinghouses, do not exist (at least not to the same degree) for this type of information service. In fact, the case is often just the opposite, wherein a more "grass roots" clearinghouse may prove to be more effective from a user point of view. Second, the nature of the data, by definition, requires a closer linkage with the user community, particularly in terms of the provision of technical assistance, in order to understand the clearinghouse's output. In other words: (Benson, 1980:3)

> Information clearinghouses which focus on the written word have different requirements from those that focus on computerized data. The latter must be more sensitive to the problems of users in understanding the output of the data clearinghouse.

As indicated earlier, the organizational sponsor and structure of information clearinghouses vary widely in practice. In fact, one of the most perplexing questions facing information service designers and providers is: At what level(s) of organization are information clearinghouses most effective and efficient? Because of the inherent difficulties in establishing objective evaluation criteria in order to assess the presumed contributions of information clearinghouses, the answer to this question typically hinges on speculation rather than quantitative measures of effectiveness. On the other hand, even subjective assessments can be useful, particularly when trying to identify the various <u>economies</u> of scale associated with different organizational arrangements. For instance, the unit costs involved in establishing a bibliographic human services clearinghouse at the local level would be extremely high and in some cases even prohibitive. At the same time, the benefits to be accrued from such an effort would probably be minimal, if at all. By shifting the responsibility for this information service to a "higher" level (<u>i. e.</u>, state or federal), however, the probability of losing touch with the "user community" may be increased as a consequence.

The "costs" involved are not limited to monetary concerns. Indeed, of prime importance to the design and implementation of information clearinghouses are the associated <u>management</u> costs. A case in point is the Resource Clearinghouse "network" of the Employment and Training Administration (ETA), U.S. Department of Labor. In a recent ETA Task Force "briefing paper," the management issues which hindered the operational efficiency and effectiveness of ETA's <u>regional</u> information clearinghouses were identified and examined in detail. Among the Task Force's final recommendations was a proposal to centralize rather than continue to regionalize ETA's information clearinghouse operations. While the

abolishment of <u>regional</u> information services may not be an entirely appropriate response to the management frustrations experienced by ETA, this recommendation is still instructive---management costs must be incorporated in any cost-benefit ratios when evaluating information clearinghouse proposals.

CLEARINGHOUSES AND CITY OFFICIALS

In an effort to learn more about the role(s) of information clearinghouses in human services, the U.S. Conference of Mayors (USCM) conducted a brief telephone survey of 21 USCM-member cities which had an identifiable human services office prior to the National A.S.P.A. Conference. Although this sample of cities is by no means statistically representative, the results of the survey do provide some "food for thought." Efforts were made to sample a variety of cities according to size, geographic location, and sophistication in human services management, i. e., whether the city engaged in comprehensive human services planning, loosely defined.

Survey Results

All of the city officials contacted knew of at least one information clearinghouse; most could list a number of them. On three specific human services information clearinghouses that the authors asked about, the following results were elicited: 62 percent of the respondents (13) had heard of Project SHARE; 33 percent (7) had heard of HUD USER; and 67 percent (14) had heard of the National Criminal Justice Reference Service. When asked to identify other information clearinghouses of relevance to human services, the city officials named thirty-eight national, state, and local clearinghouses. (2)

Eighty-one percent (N=17) of the city officials contacted had <u>used</u> an information clearinghouse. In the space of a year, thirty-five percent indicated that

they had used them one to five times; thirty-five percent had used them six to nineteen times; and thirty percent had used them at least twenty times. Regarding the degree of __responsiveness__ of the information clearinghouses used by these city officials, fifty-eight percent thought the clearinghouses used were responsive; thirty percent thought they were varied in responsiveness; and one thought they were not responsive to user needs.

The survey results revealed that city officials were clearly more interested in programmatic and funding information (bibliographic) than in statistical data (numeric). Thirteen of the officials expressed a desire for information on how other cities were doing certain things, __i. e.__, what the current state-of-the-art was. Seven respondents wanted timely information on available funding for human services. Only four of the twenty-one respondents desired statistical information.

In terms of an expressed __need__ for information clearinghouses in human services, ninety-one percent of the city human services officials surveyed saw a definite need for such clearinghouse services. As to who should be __responsible__ for the information clearinghouse functions, twelve city officials felt that information management services was a federal government responsibility; nine saw them as the responsibility of state government; and, interestingly, fifteen respondents saw them as the responsibility of private organizations such as public interest groups. Several of those city officials surveyed were concerned about excessive bureaucracy in the administration of clearinghouses by governments and therefore wanted to keep them outside of government.

As another way to estimate "need" for information clearinghouses, the surveyed city human services officials were asked if their cities would be willing to

pay for clearinghouse services. As one would expect, all responses to this question were coached in terms of the tight budget that most cities face. Thirty-eight percent felt that their cities would be willing to pay for such services; thirty-three percent said "maybe"; twenty-four percent responded negatively; and five percent were uncertain.

Finally the officials were asked to describe the elements of an <u>ideal</u> information clearinghouse system. Although there were many varied responses, the main directions called for were:

- a computerized, centralized, national system with broad dissemination of current information on a regular basis, responsiveness to individual needs, timely retrieval, and provision of information in a simple and concise form;
- state, regional or local systems with information applicable to regional areas; and
- more participation by practitioners in identification and development of issues to be studied and in the perspective from which they are studied.

In summary, the city human services officials sampled used clearinghouses and are generally satisfied with them; but they want more and better services. If funds are available and the services are good, they are willing to pay for them. The information they want is on programs, on the state-of-the-art of human services management and delivery, on innovative techniques, and on available funding. They are less interested in statistical information. The city human services officials surveyed wanted a system that provides lots of information, on a timely basis, regularly, and, at the same time, is responsive to individual needs. Finally, they want opportunities to have input into how the system is operated.

CONCLUSION

It would be presumptuous to expect that information

clearinghouses could provide answers to everybody's questions. Indeed, the nature of public management precludes definitive, universal solutions to most issues of concern. In many respects, the adage, "It all depends," is a basic tenet of public administration. On the other hand, the fact that rationality is admittedly "bounded" (Simon, 1957) and, consequently decision-makers will never have the luxury of complete information upon which to base their decisions does not imply that they can (or should) abdicate their public service responsibilities. On the contrary, decision-makers at all levels need to strive constantly for no less than a "satisficing" position---balancing informed reason with the value preferences of themselves and their constituencies. Clearly, this is no easy task. Yet can we expect any less from a responsive and accountable public service?

The role of the information clearinghouse in such a turbulent environment is crucial. Information, as the authors have already noted, is at a premium under conditions of resource scarcity. Moreover, information as a resource itself, warrants close scrutiny and careful management. The clearinghouse function has surfaced as a resource management tool in contemporary public administration. In all likelihood, it is here to stay to quote Reed (1980:6):

> In sum, although completely convincing models of clearinghouse evaluations have yet to be built, it would seem safe to assume that clearinghouse efforts will carry forward into the next century. The aspects of automation which are almost daily revolutionizing the information industry seem best suited to clearinghouse environments.

To be sure, the information clearinghouse function also will continue to establish its niche in human services administration. Human services warriors will increasingly need and seek its services if, as this survey data seem to imply, certain key conditions are met. Those human services policy-makers who strive for more informed policy decisions, those program

managers who seek new management approaches and techniques, as well as those service providers who attempt to integrate new service approaches and technologies, will undoubtedly find the information clearinghouse to be an important resource tool.

NOTES

1. The ideas and comments presented herein were initially developed for presentation at the panel, "Role of the Information Clearinghouse in Human Services Decision-Making," held at the 1980 National Conference of the American Society for Public Administration. Besides the authors, the other panelists were: Dennis K. Benson, President, Appropriate Solutions, Inc., Columbus, Ohio and Timothy Reed, Project Manager, Project SHARE.
2. It should be noted that city officials defined clearinghouse broadly from Project SHARE to the FEDERAL REGISTER, legislative services, and public interest groups.

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