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JEWISH INSTITUTIONS: THREATENED?

Government funding for private welfare agencies in California is increasing three times faster than private gifts to those agencies. Jewish agencies are not exempt from that tendency. Indeed, the Council of Jewish Welfare Funds and Federations has set up a special office in Washington to try to accelerate that tendency.

It is perhaps inevitable for Jewish agencies to become more dependent on government funds. It has become expected that welfare needs of the citizenry will be guaranteed by government. Jewish citizens should be just as eligible for that government aid as everyone else. And there is the matter of health and welfare costs, skyrocketing along with everything else. Insofar as private giving cannot keep up with that inflationary factor, the government has to step in.

There is, however, the old saw that "he who pays the piper calls the tune." With government funds come government regulations, and they have created some problems for the nature and continuity of Jewish institutions. Examples:

. A Jewish Community Center camp is part of a general program of the U.S. Department of Agriculture in which certain foods are provided at minimal cost. The Department of Agriculture asks the camp to sign a declaration that their facilities are open to everyone regardless of race, color or national origin.

. A Jewish Home for the Aged is asked to make a similar declaration by a government agency, because of the medicare payments to its residents.

. An inquiry is made as to whether a Jewish family agency and a non-sectarian family agency in the same area might merge, since they performed "the same function." A Canadian Jewish agency was in fact put out of business as a Jewish agency, for that kind of reason.

First, there is the concept that government funds should not be granted to any institution whose clientele, staff and governing board do not fairly reflect the racial and ethnic population mix. But metropolitan Catholic and Protestant agencies naturally have very mixed racial and ethnic constituencies. Jewish agencies do not. Government bureaucrats often just see the overwhelmingly caucasian character of Jewish agencies. Jewish communities have to insist that, for their agencies, racial and ethnic discrimination be measured against the racial and ethnic mix in the *Jewish* population, rather than in the *general* population.

So far, the Jewish agencies with a clear religious mission have won those battles, but not without a continuing struggle. Those agencies whose "religious" missions are not so clear have had a more difficult struggle. The religious/ethnic nature of the Jews and their institutions, the peoplehood of the Jews, is not easily understood and often seems secular in Christian terms.

Even more important is the tendency to see welfare institutions as primarily serving the needs of "deprived minorities," and the prevailing resistance to seeing the Jews as either deprived or a minority. More people are questioning the legitimacy of middle class welfare institutions; and that is related to their difficulty in perceiving the ethnic/religious nature of the Jewish community.

In brief, the vaunted "ethnic revolution" in America may be illusory. The context may be political and economic, not ethnic. (Even the "bilingual" push may be mainly related to political and economic power than to ethnicity *per se*). The fundamental dynamic of America may still be a *homogenizing* one. Therefore, the thrust of government-funded programs will be homogenizing, and threatening to those Jewish agencies which are dependent on government funds.

What Needs to Be Done?

On the one hand, the Jewish community must insist on the Jewish nature of its institutions -- while striving to make sure that Jewish citizens are not therefore deprived of basic welfare benefits to which all citizens are entitled. On the other hand, Jewish institutions must make sure that they have enough private support from the Jewish community that they do not become critically dependent on government funds.