

SOCIAL-SERVICE ACTIVITIES OF THE DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

A Social Service Bureau was established by the Department of Health in January of 1924. Being a new departure, various difficulties arose in its organization because many believed it was primarily for the dispensing of charity while others believed that the social workers had supernatural ability to remedy all the evils that surround those masses of the less fortunate which are to be found in every country.

The first three months were spent in establishing direct relations between government institutions and private agencies, in the preparation of a general directory of the associations and agencies dedicated to social and civic activities, and in the organization of the dispensary work.

The staff of this bureau is composed of eight persons; the director, the superintendent, a secretary, one special worker and four social workers who are assigned to field service. A complete record system was immediately adopted and by this means it has been possible to have an exact understanding of each case, as to antecedents, heredity, family history, previous residence and conditions, social status, past and present, and the actual economic situation.

The Bureau has been very active in its endeavor to bring about better social relationships and ideas of responsibility, as the number of unmarried and separated couples as well as the number of unmarried mothers is high among the poorer classes. So, many marriages have been effected through the influence of the social-welfare agents over the families with which they come in contact, and much stress has been brought to bear also upon the parents as to school attendance. In cases where clothing and shoes are needed the social-welfare agents have secured the coöperation of the "Ropero de Niños" (Childrens Wardrobe Society) and the "Zapato Escolar" (School Shoe Society) or of private persons in providing necessary garments for children of the most deserving and needy families.

People registered in the clinics have been taught to attend regularly each week and many who did not realize the importance of

this regular attendance were convinced as to the necessity of a better mutual coöperation. Splendid service has been rendered by this Bureau in coöperation with the Public Health Nursing Service in the care of tuberculosis cases confined to their beds. The nurses giving careful attention to the patients' physical needs and the social-welfare agents securing proper nourishment from various sources and at the same time instituting a follow-up system of supervision.

Soon after the Bureau was organized a brief course on Social Work was given at the Masonic Home to a group of University students with a daily average attendance of sixty students. Later a two-weeks course planned especially for the preparation of social-welfare agents was given at the Atheneum.

The Department of Health of Porto Rico was convinced of the great need of this Social Welfare Service as an intermediary agency between the patient lacking in means and the public and private agencies of the Island and there is no doubt that it has improved the moral atmosphere of the community, the social status of the family, and the permanent well-being of the individual. Extracts taken from last annual report speak more eloquently than anything else that might be said on the matter.

The case of a man and a woman who were being treated at the Social Hygiene Clinic was referred to the social-welfare worker who found that they had never been legally married. After talking with them frequently as to the advisability of establishing legitimate relationships, this couple went to the office one afternoon and invited the social-welfare workers to their wedding. Later this same couple was visited and they were found to be very happy and doing well.

The case of three children was referred from the Baby Clinic of San Juan. They were being cared for by their grandmother who was very poor and was to be put out of the place where she was living because she could not pay her rent. The parents of these children were both dead and the nearest relative was a brother in New York who was located through the Charity Organization Society of Brooklyn and was requested to help support the children. He began by sending a small amount each week which helped to clothe them, and in the meantime other relatives were discovered. An aunt offered her home to the oldest boy, the second child's god-mother took her and the smallest boy went to live with his godfather.

The grandmother, who is already aged, was given a home in the Asylum for the Aged.

In some instances this Bureau extends its activities to cases outside of San Juan and its suburbs. So in the case of a young man the son of a former school inspector whose family had all died, except one brother, of tuberculosis and was found lying in a filthy stable with no bedding and only having the meagre food that his unfortunate brother could bring him from his small and uncertain earnings, the social worker started a heroic effort at eight o'clock one morning to get this victim of the White Plague out of the squalid place where he was facing death so as to place him where he would spend his last days in a wholesome atmosphere. The little town of Carolina had no facilities for the hospitalization of a chronic case of this kind and so the social worker decided to put up a small shack for him. Funds were collected from the merchants of the town amounting to \$35 and these were spent in the purchase of lumber for the construction of a small cottage well ventilated and with the necessary sanitary commodities. Volunteers were obtained who immediately proceeded to the construction of the cottage while the social worker obtained donations of a bed, quilt, blankets, necessary cooking utensils and everything essential to the future comfort of the patient. By six o'clock in the afternoon the young man was taken out of the stable and carried to the clean, cool little cottage prepared for him by the strenuous efforts of the social-welfare worker. Four quarts of milk a day had also been provided by two generous milkmen of the town and for several months he lived where the sunshine could cheer his heart and the zephyr breezes of Porto Rico's unparalleled climate could cool his feverish brow.

This Bureau also stands ready to render its services in emergency cases. During the fire which destroyed one of the prosperous mountain towns of Porto Rico almost entirely, the social-welfare workers together with the Commissioner of Health of Porto Rico and his staff went immediately to the scene of disaster and carried out a vigorous relief campaign in which shelter and clothing were secured for those whose homes had been destroyed, the National Guard providing temporary shelter and the Red Cross sending food and clothing. Through the combined efforts of the social-welfare workers and the Public Health Nursing Service those persons who were found suffering from contagious diseases were immediately

isolated and all those who had suffered physical injury as a result of the fire, were ordered to report at the dispensary of the Department of Health where, in coöperation with the Red Cross, four hundred victims were given both medical and material assistance.

What has already been accomplished by this Bureau since its organization shows clearly that it is an essential factor of the big welfare program of the Department of Health and it is believed that by joining public-health activities and social and philanthropic causes into one strong fraternity the moral, physical and economic conditions of Porto Rico will be greatly improved.

