

STRUCTURE AND CHANGE:

How a Social Service Agency Copes with Dramatic Swings in Client Numbers

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Refugee resettlement agencies have had to expand and contract in accordance with refugee arrivals. This constant shifting in staff and budget has profound implications for agency structure and staff morale. As the major resettlement organization of the Jewish community, NYANA has developed bureaucratic structures and technology to cope with the many swings in Jewish emigration. Communication techniques and rituals have overcome many symptoms of "survivor guilt" during necessary staff downsizings.

NYANA has served as the major resettlement organization of the American Jewish community since 1949. Though originally established as a temporary ad hoc response to the mass emigration of European Jews after World War II, the agency has remained in permanent operation as successive waves of refugees continued arriving in America from various parts of the globe. By 1998, NYANA had provided over 300,000 refugees with such concrete services as housing, financial support, language training, and employment, as well as with help for the psychological and social difficulties attendant upon the refugee experience. It has, in short, mirrored the world events of the last 50 years, to which it has repeatedly responded at a moment's notice.

Since refugee migrations arise in response to some form of persecution in the countries of origin, both the size and timing of new influxes are notoriously unpredictable. Sudden and unexpected events in faraway places leave no time for the kind of planning that would normally precede so massive an undertaking as the resettlement of thousands. Over the decades, therefore, NYANA's structure and processes have evolved under the principal influence of large and frequent fluctuations in its caseload.

THE "ACCORDION" AGENCY

Accurate data on the numbers of individuals actually resettled over the decades are

difficult to obtain. Numbers by country of origin were scarcely recorded in the 1950s, except for the period of the great Hungarian immigration. NYANA's archives do contain arrival numbers by country of origin for the 1960s, but it is not until 1988 when the agency computerized its records that entirely accurate data are to be found. Complicating the issue, the records of second-stage immigrants from Israel do not entirely reflect their original countries of origin. However, by studying the notes of different periods, the comments of staff, and what numbers were recorded, it is possible to put together a picture that captures most of the important migration periods.

In 1949, NYANA resettled over 22,000 refugees from displaced-persons camps in Europe. The next major surge came with the migration of Hungarians in 1956 to 1958, following the Hungarian revolution. Egyptian Jews came in the early 1960s and Rumanian Jews from 1961 through 1966. Cuba's revolution sent another surge of Jewish refugees to NYANA from 1961 to 1967, and Czechoslovakian Jews left their country in larger numbers in 1968 and 1969 after the brutal crushing of the "Prague Spring."

In 1972, NYANA dealt with non-Jewish refugees for the first time since World War II by assisting the U.S. government in the resettlement of Ugandan refugees. NYANA's board stated at that time, "NYANA should cooperate, not only because of their expert-

ness in the field and the humanitarian aspects, but because of the contribution the United States government has made to refugee programs benefitting Jewish refugees in Europe, in Israel, and in the United States" (NYANA, 1972).

Following this small program, in 1975 the U.S. government requested that the American Jewish community, through HIAS, assist in the nationwide resettlement of thousands of refugees from Vietnam and Cambodia. As a result, NYANA established a "Special Populations" Refugee Unit that resettled thousands of Southeast Asians between 1975 and 1997 (see the article in this issue by Bierman and Oltarsh).

In 1992, the emigration of Syria's Jews startled the American Jewish community. By the time the influx ended in 1994, over 3,700 Syrian Jews had been resettled successfully. NYANA saw several large waves of Soviet refugees between 1979–1980 and from 1989 through 1996, as the doors of the Soviet Union opened, closed, and opened again. This emigration continues today, albeit in smaller numbers.

The implications of massive swings in arrival numbers from several hundred to several thousand per month are many and varied. A quick look at NYANA's budget and personnel levels over a period of years demonstrates the problem.

Between 1952 and 1953 NYANA's budget was cut in half, from \$2,566,316 to \$1,236,945, and its staff decreased from 190 to 71. Two years later, the agency's budget had further shrunk to \$729,098 and its staff to 41. Relief expenses totaled \$665,142 in 1953; in 1955 they amounted to only \$311,775.

These enormous fluctuations over short time periods, dictated by declining arrivals (or as later seen, by expanding arrivals), occurred not only on an annual basis but even on a quarterly basis. In the first quarter of 1952, the agency's budget was \$808,420 compared to \$550,422 in the third quarter. The caseload for these periods had fallen from 1,588 to 862. In more recent times, NYANA has seen its arrivals in 1995 go from 1,127 in March to 834 in April, down to 630 in June,

and back to 1,978 in September. In 1996, monthly arrivals varied from 558 to 1,015 and in 1997 from 354 to 804.

How is an "accordion" agency such as this to structure itself for immediate and future needs while acting in a fiscally responsible manner? Pressed by the need to rapidly expand or shrink its entire operation, NYANA has, over the years, developed a structure able to accommodate gross fluctuations while maintaining a core service plan that meets the needs of its clients.

EXPANSION AND BUREAUCRACY

An agency in an expansion mode will sooner or later find it necessary to bureaucratize at least some of its operations. Work that was being done by one person will have to be delegated, necessitating the supervision of the delegated staff members. Multiply this scenario many times over, and the bureaucratic organization results: "Formal organizations cope with the difficult problems large-scale operations create by subdividing responsibilities in numerous ways and thereby facilitating the work of any operating employee, manager, and sub-unit in the organization" (Blau, 1972). Simple tasks are often separated from more complicated ones, allowing the organization to hire unskilled employees for the more routine duties, specialists for other tasks, and managers to decide issues, allocate resources, sort out disputes, and ensure the agency's smooth functioning.

Bureaucracy, especially to social service professionals, often conjures up images of red tape, rules by officials, manipulation, obstructionism, and threatening power. However, to the sociologist Max Weber, bureaucracy meant "a system of administration carried out on a continuous basis by trained professionals according to prescribed rules" (Beetham, 1987). Weber, the father of bureaucracy, defined four main features of bureaucracies:

1. Hierarchy—Each official has a clearly defined competence within a hierarchical

- division of labor and is answerable to a superior.
2. **Continuity**—The office constitutes a full-time salaried occupation with a career structure.
 3. **Impersonality**—The work is conducted according to prescribed rules, without arbitrariness or favoritism, and a written record is kept of each transaction.
 4. **Expertise**—Officials are selected according to merit, are trained for their function, and control access to the knowledge stored in their files (Beetham, 1987).

As NYANA enlarged, service tasks were necessarily subdivided to accommodate increasing arrivals and to allow professional staff to concentrate upon the counseling, referral, and case management functions that they were trained to perform. It was necessary to obtain financial support for clients and to refer them to the proper offices for food stamps and Social Security cards, but it was equally important for caseworkers to have the time to assess the client's adjustment and to provide counseling and support.

During periods of rapid expansion it was never possible to hire a sufficient number of professionally trained social workers to cover all services, and therefore special units of untrained "case aides" were created to handle the more routine aspects of cases—getting clients their first checks, copying necessary documents, filling out Medicaid applications, and the like. NYANA was able to quickly hire large numbers of bilingual case aides from the established community created by previous emigrations, thus ensuring that concrete services were in place and freeing up the more limited number of caseworkers for the vital functions of attending to clients' psychological well-being and overall case management. Similarly, vocationally trained case aides in NYANA's Employment Services Division were able to record vocational histories and provide job-readiness skills, whereas master's-level vocational staff counseled clients in the process of a job search.

The hierarchical structure that NYANA created enabled the agency to downsize quickly

by dismantling units and consolidating functions. Meanwhile, managerial lines were kept in place so that the organization could quickly gear up in case of increasing arrivals. This hierarchy provided direction and ensured coordination and accountability over numerous and extreme fluctuations in arrivals.

Bureaucratic features, while enabling the organization to deal with a large number of cases in a uniform manner with administrative and organizational efficiency, may also have negative aspects. Adherence to rules can promote an indifference and insensitivity to individual cases, and hierarchy can discourage individual responsibility and initiative. When employees act in a ritualistic manner, the bureaucratic system becomes dysfunctional, denying the employee the ability to act creatively and productively. Alienation becomes a real possibility.

Any bureaucratic organization, but especially those engaged in human services, needs to be particularly vigilant in monitoring its bureaucracy for excessive division of labor, unnecessary hierarchy, and personal stress. Communication becomes a major issue and demands administrative attention. Because of its accordion nature, NYANA has paid particular heed to the need for effective communication and staff connectedness. The agency's staff development program and the design of its technology have served to mitigate some of the alienating effects of the division of labor.

All NYANA staff are connected by an E-mail system that allows for instant communication on client and agency matters and can also be used for personal messages. Although caseworkers often cannot arrange meetings with the multiple people providing services to their clients, they do have immediate access to information on these services via the computerized record-keeping system. All client service providers enter information immediately after service provision, providing an ongoing, up-to-date record of client services at the agency and a chronological record for reference. Although the caseworker is unable to be personally involved in every aspect of

service delivery, the technology at NYANA has enabled caseworkers to oversee, monitor, and feel involved in the process and in the end result.

A staff development program, which operates throughout the year, brings together staff from different disciplines and different hierarchical levels to listen to experts and discuss matters of common interest as varied as foot care, the immigration crisis, how to avoid burnout, and the implications of the Welfare Reform bill. Whereas the staff development program was originally envisioned purely as a learning mechanism for staff, without discarding this function it has also developed into an important way for staff to interrelate and for people from different hierarchical levels to meet.

Senior administrative staff are linked by Lotus Notes, an interactive groupware computer system that allows multiple users to work on joint projects simultaneously and communicate instantly. The use of this technology has greatly reduced the need for face-to-face meetings.

Something is invariably lost when the personal touch must be sacrificed to expansion. The experience of a client who works with one person throughout the resettlement period, from concrete tasks and psychological adjustment through job skills and vocational training to job placement, is totally different from the experience of the client who is sent from person A and department A to person B and department B and so on, even when there is active case monitoring. There are, however, some gains in the larger setting. The choices available to clients in large bureaucratic agencies cannot be replicated in smaller settings. In large agencies one finds the availability of dozens of training programs rather than just a few, as well as job specialists to work with clients in particular fields, special programs for older people, and bilingual mental health specialists, all of which are made possible by the large numbers of clients and accompanying funding.

The ability of the large agency to specialize enabled NYANA in 1989 to create an on-site mental health unit that has been a model

for bringing effective mental health services to the Soviet emigre population (see the article by Halberstadt in this issue). Clients arriving from the former Soviet Union were coming from a system where psychiatry was used as an instrument of the state to persecute those with whom it disagreed. They held a strong suspicion of psychiatrists, whereas psychologists and social workers were simply unfamiliar to them. Within NYANA and the community at large, it was recognized that attempts to refer arriving clients to community facilities for mental health services would undoubtedly not work.

In conjunction with the Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services (JBFCS), an on-site mental health unit was therefore established at NYANA and staffed by bilingual mental health specialists from JBFCS—psychologists, social workers, and psychiatrists. Mental health services were presented to clients as part of the resettlement package, and NYANA staff were able to make easy transitions to the on-site "specialists." JBFCS staff and NYANA caseworkers have worked hand-in-hand, and as a result clients have received crucial early interventions, which have prevented more serious mental health difficulties from occurring.

Clients, who arrived from the territories of the former Soviet Union, were accustomed to receiving information through the written word, which they trust more than verbal communications. After dealing with a government that consistently lied to the populace, Soviet clients preferred to have information in writing, in their own hands. NYANA was able to produce voluminous amounts of materials for its clients, covering some topics that would be discussed in face-to-face interviews and many others that could not be handled due to time constraints. Information was produced on every government program and agency that emigres would encounter, and health materials covered such topics as using medicines safely, nutrition, family planning, smoking, and breast cancer. Booklets explained American society—Thanksgiving, the banking system, and the difference between government and private institutions.

At times the large agency's need for expediency can mesh quite nicely with the preferences of its clientele.

DOWNSIZING AND STAFF MORALE

The numerical shifts in emigre arrivals have meant that NYANA has had to downsize dramatically numerous times over the years. In fact, refugee arrivals often dictated several downsizings within the space of a single year. The loss of colleagues and of established relationships can have a devastating effect upon staff morale, particularly when retrenchments are large. Surviving subordinates can be expected to experience a wide variety of emotional reactions: anxiety, anger, guilt, envy, relief, and denial (Brockner et al., 1990). So prevalent are these emotions that a label has been attached to them by social scientists who study such patterns—"lay-off survivor sickness" is a generic term describing a set of attitudes, feelings, and perceptions that occur in employees who remain in organizations after downsizing (Kets de Vries, 1997). The survivors' prior identification with the laid-off workers is an important variable in their reactions. Survivors who worked closely with the laid-off staff members and who socialized with them are more likely to feel personally affected. Survivors may react to the feelings engendered by the lay-offs by distancing themselves from the organization, which leads to dysfunctional work behaviors and attitudes, such as reduced work performance, low agency commitment, increased absenteeism, and resistance to change. Although downsizing may be unavoidable, some key factors have emerged in mitigating some of the more negative reactions that may affect staff performance.

Justice issues seem to be salient for survivors. Staff question whether the lay-offs were legitimate, if those laid-off were informed in a fair way, and if seniority and procedure rules (including fair compensation) were utilized (Brockner et al., 1987). The extent to which the environment is seen as causal is, in addition, an important factor. NYANA, as a unionized agency, has followed contractual

guidelines throughout numerous downsizings. The agency has also attempted to keep the union and the entire staff apprised of arrival numbers, future implications, and, when possible, predictions of future arrivals. The refugee staff at NYANA has always been aware of the relationship between arrival numbers and staff size and has therefore understood the necessity for periodic downsizing.

Research has shown that subordinates are personally more accepting of their managers' decisions to the extent that managers offer clear explanations for the reasons underlining them (Brockner et al., 1990). Lack of realistic information is apt to cause greater damage through rumor and speculation, and NYANA has therefore paid particular attention to effective communication before downsizing. Managers have been prepared by clear, honest, and timely briefings, guidelines have been followed, ample notice has been given to affected staff, and transition services have been arranged. Communication is probably the key ingredient in a downsizing process that seeks to avoid organizational paralysis, particularly when the downsizing may be repeated: "Survivors' negative reactions when management accounts are unclear are higher when the perceived likelihood of lay-offs in the future is relatively high" (Brockner et al., 1990).

The repetitive nature of NYANA's downsizing can lead to "change fatigue" syndrome with serious consequences for an agency that must be up and running on a moment's notice. Managers have therefore been vigilant in noticing signs of depression in staff whom they address directly; in these ongoing confrontations, it is found that staff adjustments and transitions do occur.

Rituals become an additional way of alleviating depression. The goodbye party for a departing staff member has become an important event allowing for staff expression; discussions are held in small unit groups throughout the agency preparatory to a downsizing, and new staff who are hired are informed on the "accordion" nature of the agency. Hiring decisions, although always

important, are crucial in a context where flexibility and adaptability become significant attributes in applicants.

SUMMARY

The United States has seen enormous swings in refugee arrivals, dictated by unfolding world events. As the major resettlement agency for the Jewish community, NYANA has had to adjust to major fluctuations in numbers, which has had important implications for its structure and service delivery. As an accordion agency, NYANA has seen periods of enormous expansion, with development of a bureaucratic structure and sophisticated technology. Specialization has led to the development of important client services. Periods of downsizing, with their negative effects on staff morale, have led to a high value placed upon staff flexibility and adaptability.

Extreme fluctuations in client arrivals, over which NYANA has no control, have caused the agency to develop coping mecha-

nisms that have increased client opportunities and choices and have brought the agency to the point where it can shoulder new challenges.

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