September 1988

"Our Town": A Case Study of Ideology and the Private Social Welfare Sector

William M. Epstein

Recommended Citation

"Our Town": A Case Study of Ideology and the Private Social Welfare Sector

WILLIAM M. EPSTEIN

Management Consultant
Washington, D.C.

This case study explores the relationship between ideology and the performance of the voluntary social welfare sector in Western New York. Data were collected from the directors of 22 of the largest and most important voluntary social welfare agencies relating to their own social attitudes and those of their boards. The common expression of similar agency attitudes toward a variety of social policies were in narrow conformity with the conservative values of the current national administration. The common core of conservative values, suggesting that the agencies perform an ideological role within the community in addition to their service role, may explain much of their decision to ignore great and growing social needs. Yet most troubling for the possibility of liberal reform, the ideological commitments of the voluntary social welfare sector and the social preference voiced through its social service programs may be the widely-shared and regnant values of the contemporary United States.

Currently at issue in the debate over social welfare services, is the degree to which the United States shall satisfy the needs of lower socio-economic groups, in part through social work and its agencies. The past five national administrations, covering almost 17 years, have structured a social service system that does not seem to be responsive to growing social problems. If these emergent needs, as well as other longer standing deprivations, are going to be addressed, then the preferences that control national politics will also have to change. This change will probably come about, if at all, only through a competition in which organizations with stakes in the current distribution of goods and services give ground to organizations pursuing a different pattern of rewards. If lower socio-economic groups are to achieve greater welfare, then political organizations will have

to contend for their interests. This is axiomatic of social welfare politics: welfare gains in proportion to political success.

The ideological commitments and service roles of an important portion of social work's institutional base—the voluntary social service sector—influence the politics of social services. When voluntary social service agencies serve lower status clients, they champion both their clients' claims and the programs to serve them. When, to the contrary, the voluntary sector is animated by other interests, then its program justifications tend to weigh those heavier claims against the claims of lower status clients. In any event, private social service agencies take a variety of sophisticated steps to form public attitudes and opinions in support of their missions. These steps are political.

The ideological roles of private social service agencies in developing public opinion may be more frequent determinants of their own success than their apparent social service function. In spite of claims that current practice is scientific, few agencies and few social work services have ever credibly demonstrated cure, prevention or rehabilitation. Even the efficacy of casework's "nuclear" technique, psychotherapy, is still indeterminate, (Wootton 1959; Epstein 1984a; Epstein 1984; and Bergin, 1971). Nevertheless, voluntary social service agencies seem to be refunded, year after year, without scientifically defensible service histories.

This puzzle of agency continuity is solved when an agency's value lies more in its symbolic and ideological role than in its service function (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). In this event an agency's principal role is to form or to confirm political tastes through the voice that it addresses to the community in support of its selection of clients, services and organizational forms. In turn, its service designs tend to reflect the preferences of its auspices more than any objective standard of social need.

In a provocative case study written over twenty years ago, Cloward and Epstein implicated the professionalization of social work in the voluntary sector's disengagement from the poor. The authors described a private agency whose "structured incapacity" to serve lower socio-economic groups reflected a "strategy of help which (was) neither practicable nor congenial to" the needs of poor people (Cloward and Epstein, 1967); Sosin, 1985).[1]

Yet, notwithstanding their criticisms, they tacitly shared the be-
lief that institutional social work could still be bent toward more
client-oriented ends. The key to this reform lay in the political
malleability of agency auspices, that is, the degree to which
private boards could be reconstituted first to more closely rep-
resent client populations and then, to give voice to client
aspirations.

In support of these goals, a descendent literature created a
heroic practice role for the social worker and the private social
service agency. It cast the social worker and his agency in the
role of a catalyst, a "change inducing system", a provocateur to
develop a latent social constituency into a political tool for the
redirection of practice (Warren 1977; Henderson and Thomas,
1983; Piven and Cloward, 1971). The field's scholars began to
model this heroic process in terms of the stakes, the rewards,
the flashpoints and the structural weaknesses of contemporary
society. The summary assumptions were made, and may even
have been tested by the Great Society programs, that a social
will existed to serve the unserved and that social work and its
allies were capable of converting that will into the enforceable
claims of social policy. This reform literature evoked a nostalgic
myth—social work's Brandesian vision—that the poor, who stood
as proxy for all socially deprived groups, had been better served
by social work during prior periods.

In contrast to the reform tradition, another body of thought
has granted to social work far less freedom either to plan its
own destiny or to modify social policy. In particular, Leiby has
concluded that social work's historical role was performed nei-
ther in service to the poor nor as a champion of reform.
. . .'"Social welfare institutions and the profession of social work
did not grow into their present prominence because of their
theoretical elegance or practical success" (Leiby, 1978). Social
workers typically rendered personal care, screened clients for
welfare eligibility and most importantly, personified the virtues
of social conformity. Moreover, these roles were usually per-
formed on behalf of social elites, themselves customarily drawn
from among the wealthier commercial classes.

In further support of this view of the profession's historical
orthodoxy, many modern social welfare historians seem to agree

first that cultural forces determine welfare practice to a far greater extent than social welfare practitioners and secondly, that the power of the charitable impulse to affect social policy—altrusim as a political force—has been negligible (Garrity, 1978; Mencher 1967; Lubove, 1965; Himmelfarb, 1984.)[2] In further support of the futility of heroic reform, an influential sociological tradition, exemplified by Nisbet (1969) and Lapiere (1954), defines social maintenance, not change, as the causal motive of society. Strongly held cultural attitudes inexorably perfuse social institutions. In this sense, social work as a cultural institution will inevitably reflect the dominant attitudes of society. Therefore any strategy of agency change that challenges dominant social attitudes and beliefs, will fail if it is contingent on social acceptance, expressed perhaps through charitable or public funding.

The reform tradition in social work, hard pressed to find a legacy of program success, does not seriously reject the controlling influence of social maintenance on agency behavior. Rather, it holds that the terms of accommodation can be negotiated through a constituency for client oriented reform. As a component of this negotiation, the reformers define institutional social work potentially if not historically, as an early mediator of social change and as an advocate for marginal groups. In contrast, social work may have a much more deferred role—one of only providing service and not contending for the conditions of its provision. The social worker may have a more passive professional function: to implement board preferences through agency policy.

The Study

Specific concern with the ideological and political behavior of voluntary agencies emerged out of a broader study of the feasibility of an alliance between the unions and the voluntary social service sector in Western New York. With an unemployment rate that reached over 15% in November of 1982, Western New York has been one of the hardest hit of the Northeast's rust-belt regions. Buffalo, a city of approximately 320,000, is the urban center of the two counties that comprise the SMSA of Western New York. Western New York's population, having declined more than 10% since the 1970 census, numbered just over one

million by 1980. All of the large agencies and most of the smaller agencies were located in Buffalo itself although almost all of them provided extensive services through out the metropolitan area.

Western New York has been losing population and jobs for the past two decades, suffering a decline of 49,500 jobs or 9.6% of its total employment between 1979 and 1983 alone. As a consequence of economic distress, social needs have increased. Yet the capacity of the people remaining in Western New York to meet those needs has declined.

Through a case study of one metropolitan area, this paper explores the general issue of the voluntary sector's role in mediating social needs.

Method

The contemporary roles of the larger and more dominant voluntary social welfare agencies in Western New York were studied through interviews with their executive directors. Information was collected from the agency directors through semistructured interviews, designed to last approximately 75 minutes. The respondents were encouraged to express themselves freely on a range of topics related to agency practice and structure, to their own social and political attitudes and to those of their boards (Table 1). Where appropriate, interviewers probed

Table 1

Information Gathered from the Directors

Respondent characteristics
Agency characteristics
Auspices characteristics
Respondent's report of his own political and social attitudes
Respondent's report of his board's social and political attitudes
Agency problems
Social problems generally
Agency plans
Perceived need for support
Experience and attitudes toward organized labor
Attitudes toward the future

the respndents in order to obtain coherent and complete statements.

Voluntary social service agencies were selected on the basis of their large human service budgets, their historical prominence and their centrality to social work practice. A core of traditional voluntary agencies was supplemented with a number of additional programs to better reflect the range of service roles fulfilled by voluntary agencies in the community. The sample, however, clearly overrepresented traditional, large agencies. Of 27 agencies initially selected for interviews, 22 (81%) were successfully completed.

The sample covers the private sector's presence in: counselling; residential and outpatient care for the deinstitutionalized mental health client and for people with developmental disabilities; traditional recreational and character building services; vocational rehabilitation; emergency shelters; and planning and funding.

In all but one instance, the respondent was the agency's chief administrative officer. The sample included: the local chapters of the American Red Cross, the United Way, Catholic Charities, Goodwill Industries, the Blind Association, Jewish Family Services, Child and Family Services, the Boys Clubs, the Lutheran Service Society, and the YMCA; three mental health programs for "deinstitutionalized" clients; a Meals-on-Wheels program; three programs for people with developmental and mental disabilities; a shelter for battered women; the local mental health association; two additional counselling programs; and a local shelter for homeless men.

The author and six graduate social work students interviewed the directors of the voluntary social welfare agencies during the Winter of 1985. The author also interviewed the graduate students in order to compare their attitudes with those of their interviewees. No consistent pattern of bias was apparent. Indeed the range of social attitudes and political preferences among the students was greater than the range among the agency directors. Liberal students recorded conservative opinions, and the few conservative students recorded liberal responses.

Yet by and large the students tended to be liberal. This may have been the directors' perception with the result that they may

have tended to liberalize their reported views or to suppress some contradictory conservative views of their boards. Indeed, the directors' response rate to the more sensitive questions probing their auspices' social and political views, were consistently lower than the response rates of labor leaders in describing their memberships. Yet the directors' low response rates to a number of items may also reflect the small degree of informal association between directors and their boards and the extent to which directors may have been guarded in making any critical appraisal of their employer. Therefore the final estimates of attitudes probably underreport conservative views.

Characteristics of the Sample

The combined unduplicated budgets of the 22 agencies total more than $60 million, of which more than half comes from public sources (Salamon and Abramson, 1982).[3] Six agencies draw more than 90% of their budgets from private sources. The agencies contained a mean number of 148 staff; six of the agencies contained more than 100 staff members, while only six had fewer than 50.

The directors had been in their positions for a mean of 9.3 years and earned a mean salary of $41,600. Nine had social work degrees. Eighteen of the 22 were male. While ten of the agencies had advisory boards, the administrative and legal responsibilities for all of them were vested in nonprofit boards of directors. In one case, the legal and administrative responsibilities were vested in separate bodies.

In a classic juxtaposition, wealthy high-status boards ran agencies for poor, low-status clients. Through intuitive classification, three (13.1%) of the 22 boards were characterized as predominantly upper class, 12 as predominantly upper middle, and only seven had middle-class or very mixed boards. Typically, board members were drawn from business and the professions.

Findings

Both the directors and their boards clearly perceived the depth of local social problems. Yet, they had not modified their agencies to address these problems. Apparently, the emergent

needs of the recently unemployed as well as many of the long-standing problems caused by chronic unemployment fall outside of the narrowly defined roles of the voluntary social welfare sector in Western New York. Agency plans to expand their roles when they did exist, were modest in scope, and usually prepared the agency to compete for a greater share of some fixed resource. Therefore one agency's plans to expand its service role entailed an attenuated role for some other, similar program.

In spite of the directors' near universal belief that their agencies deserved greater funding, they had not been moved by a live budget threat to take the first step and identify operational obstacles to additional resources. No respondent defined a new agency role to extend services to large pools of unmet needs. No agency defined a social advocacy role. No agency planned to organize a new constituency to secure additional resources for emerging needs. No agency planned to develop different auspices or to expand their current one. Instead, managerial energies and the policy priorities of the boards were focused inward to standardize services for an already demarcated client population.

The voluntary sectors' refusal to serve unmet community needs, its comfort with current agency functions, implemented the boards' conservative social and political perspectives and the directors' compliance with that mood in carrying through agency policies.

Social Problems

All but one of the agencies recognized that the failure of the local economy has produced poverty and unemployment. Table 2 suggests the directors' broad agreement on the prevalence of major social problems. Fully eighteen of 21 respondents felt that their boards would agree with their characterization of current social problems in Western New York. The remaining three respondents felt that their boards would "somewhat agree". No respondent felt that his board would disagree with his description of the nature of current social problems.

Agency Problems, Obstacles and Remedies

The directors' definitions of their own agencies' problems (Table 3) seemed to be only superficially related to their defini-

Table 2

General Social Problems. Number and Percent of Sample Reporting Each Social Problem

Social Problem	Number	Percent
Poverty and unemployment	21	95.5
Family (abuse, neglect, break-up, etc.)	6	27.3
Substance abuse	5	22.7
Health and mental health	2	9.1
Lack of education	2	9.1
Others	9	40.9

Table 3

Problems Faced by Agencies. Number and Percent of Sample Reporting Each Problem

Problem	Number		Percent	
Financial (total)	19		86.4	
Funding		17		77.3
Staff salaries		1		4.5
Local economy		3		13.6
Management (total)	6		27.3	
Director's time		1		4.5
Staff morale		1		4.5
Service design		5		22.7
Data		1		4.5
Other (total)	14		63.6	
Conflict with public agency		3		13.6
Control of agency		1		4.5
Competition with other agency		3		13.6
Unmet social needs		2		9.1
Insurance		1		4.5
Too much growth		1		4.5
Transportation		1		4.5
Negative public attitudes		2		9.1
Preaching		1		4.5
Stealing (of residents)		1		4.5

tion of the region's social service needs, especially those related to unemployment and poverty. Indeed, only two of the 22 respondents reported that "unmet social needs" came within the scope of their agency's current mission. Although 17 (77.3%) of 22 respondents stated that their agencies faced "funding" problems, these reports tended to be reflexive and superficial. Directors described few live funding threats resulting, for example, from the program cuts of the Reagan years. To the contrary, many of these agencies had actually prospered. They were neither dependent upon appropriations in the areas of the major social welfare declines (Food Stamps, CETA, and so forth), nor were they involved at a policy or political level in pressing for program restorations on behalf of affected clients. Some of the agencies even seemed to welcome those service cuts, especially where they diminished the direct service role of the public sector in deference to private contracts.

The directors reported a range of managerial activities characteristic of organizations that are in the process of routinizing a well defined role rather than in the process of modifying their agency mission to address new problems. Only three of 22 agencies felt that the effects of the local economy or the politicalization of unmet social needs might imperil their budgets and thus create pressures for new goals and roles (Table 4).

In spite of the directors' near unanimity in placing poverty and unemployment at the root of most other social problems, no

Table 4

The Principal Obstacles to the Success of Current Agency Plans. Number and Percent of Sample Reporting Each Obstacle.

Obstacle	Number	Percent
General or local economy	8	36.4
Public agency intransigence	5	22.7
Internal agency resistance	3	13.6
Bad public image	2	9.1
Worn-out physical plant	1	4.5
Other obstacles	5	N/A
No obstacle reported	2	9.1

agency planned any major expansion of its current mission either
to address the needs that were emerging from these problems
or to call more public attention to them. Nevertheless many
agencies steadfastly maintained the priority of their current
counselling programs. Meanwhile no agency claimed, even im-
plicitly, that the scope of its current role was sufficient for local
social needs, including those that fell within the boundaries of
its current service function.

While the directors acknowledged the desirability of ex-
panded agency roles to handle unmet social needs, no agency
had taken serious steps to realize those hopes. Typically, plans
to increase an agency's role entailed a minor renovation, the
addition of a staff person, a small amount of research, regulatory
relief from a public agency, entry into a new but limited service
for existing clients, or an internal reorganization of staff or
services.

Reports of more assertive agency plans—"political action,"
"social action," or "advocacy"—referred in practice to more par-
ochial tactics: follow-up to a referral agency and agency advocacy
in the sense of kindred organizations coming together to seek
relief from the reporting burdens and heavy handedness of their
supporting public agencies. Only four of the 22 respondents
planned political action and this usually meant petitioning a
state legislator to pump a public agency for greater moneys. No
agency planned any standard community outreach event to pub-
licize emerging needs. Not surprisingly then, 18 (90%) of 20
respondents felt that much of "the needed political and social
influence required to realize their goals had already been
achieved."

The two most frequently reported remedies (Table 5)—man-
agement consultation and private fund raising, each mentioned
by eight (36.4%) of 22 respondents—are both narrow in scope
and consistent with inward-looking managerial attention to the
efficacy of agency operations. In these cases, the directors faced
staff problems, or they had the ear of a local philanthropist or
they hoped to increase their appropriations from the local United
Way.

Agency ambitions were so modest, especially in the face of
emergent social needs, and their planned remedies were so tame

Table 5

Steps Currently in Place to Remedy the Problems Faced by Agencies.
Number and Percent of Sample Reporting Each remedy

Remedy	Number	Percent
Management consultation	8	36.4
Private fundraising	8	36.4
More services and other administrative changes	5	22.7
Political action	4	18.1
New staffing	3	13.6
Board training	2	9.1
Staff training	1	4.5
Restructure the board	1	4.5
Legal redress	1	4.5
No remedy	1	4.5

that only four of 22 respondents felt pessimistic ("little" or "no" chance of success) about "the steps that (their) agency had taken to remedy the problems that it faced." Moreover only 6 (27.3%) of 22 respondents predicted an ominous future in which economic failures, political insensitivities, or social preferences for continuing in a conservative policy direction jeopardized the continuity of their agencies. Fully 18 (85.9%) of 21 respondents, secure in the prestige of their boards and the apparent worthiness of their clients' claims on service, were "very confident" of the success of their low risk-low reward agency strategies.

Social and Political Attitudes

Agency complacency reflected the conservative social views of their boards and the agency directors' easy acceptance of the limits on agency operations that those values implied. Thirteen (72.2%) of eighteen respondents guessed that a majority of their board members had voted for President Reagan in the 1984 elections. Thirteen (61.9%) of the 21 respondents characterized the general political orientation of their boards as either "conservative" or "moderately" conservative, while only 3 (14.3%) of the 21 respondents characterized their boards as "liberal" or "moderately" liberal.[4]

The basic conservative political orientation of the boards was consistent with their specific policy views toward taxes, the role of government, organized labor, welfare and abortion. The directors characterized ten (50%) of their boards as having decidedly negative feelings toward taxes, accepting the trade-off (or double benefit, perhaps, in their eyes) between lower taxes and lower services. Only six boards (30%), tending to control the smaller agencies, were willing to sustain higher taxes in order to pay for more services.

Fourteen (66.7%) of 21 respondents reported that their boards were decidedly negative toward the current role of government, characterizing it as intrusive, impersonal, too large, inflexible, inept, inefficient, and ineffective. While they acknowledged some role for government in funding services, they felt that the private sector, through boards such as theirs, had the principal responsibility to administer the funds. Yet all but one of the agencies accepted public moneys and all of them fulfilled traditional welfare functions. Nevertheless, 11 (55%) of the 20 respondents felt that their boards had antagonistic or mixed attitudes toward the provision of public welfare itself (in addition to the perceived inefficiency of the welfare system).

Twelve (54.5%) of 22 directors were willing to estimate their boards' view toward abortion and free choice. Yet only six (50%) of those 12 respondents reported views that either endorsed free choice or the Cuomo position (against abortion personally but for its legal availability).

In contrast to their boards' attitudes, the directors described themselves as somewhat more liberal with slightly more expansive views toward taxation and the provision of welfare, and much more positive pro-choice views toward abortion. Moreover, far fewer directors characterized their own general political orientation as "conservative" or "moderately conservative." Yet 10 (45%) of the 22 responding directors stated that they had voted for President Reagan in 1985.

In one other important regard the directors and their boards were in substantial agreement: both groups had similarly hostile views toward organized labor. Even though 11 of 20 respondents felt that organized labor should be represented on their boards, this marginal inclusion was made only in reluctant deference to

the potential of the unions to secure agency goals. Still 12 (57%) of the 21 respondents reported no current "relationship (formal, social, political or other) with any union or union leader."

Fourteen (66.7%) of the directors felt that the unions were not currently a progressive social force (seven "maybe," none said "yes"). Citing their earlier legislative successes at securing minimum wages, child labor laws, and so forth, many directors felt that there was not a strong current need for labor unions. Moreover they felt that many unions had been acting irresponsibly, especially in terms of unreasonable wage demands. No director characterized the unions as an important working class institution to be courted for their social meaning. Only two of the 21 responding directors felt that the future success of their agencies might be dependent in any large way on the support of organized labor. Fifteen (71.4%) of 21 respondents predicted gloomy futures for organized labor.

Only one (5.6%) of 18 respondents felt that his own board would hold more positive attitudes toward organized labor (and this respondent's views toward the unions was among the most antagonistic), while half (9) felt that their boards would respond in "virtually the same manner." In short, the boards and the directors evaluated the unions as an unimportant and sometimes hostile constituency for their agencies.

Their common hostility toward organized labor suggests that voluntary social welfare agencies were very unlikely to seek support for unmet social needs in Western New York—assuming for a moment that they would want to—through an alliance with the unions. It appeared that such an alliance would be premature, and surprisingly, not for the reluctance of local labor leaders to pursue allies in the social welfare community. Rather, the voluntary social welfare sector itself—its boards and its directors—presented the principal barrier to the development of a common front with labor in support of expanded social services (Epstein, unpublished).

All in all, the directors report that they are substantially in agreement with the social views of their boards, especially as they affect the policies of the agencies. In no instance was the difference between the views of a director and his board characterized as "very great." Rather, nine directors report "no dif-

ference" or "little difference" with the views of their boards. Only one director saw his differences with his board as "great" and eleven directors perceived "some difference" with their boards.

Still ten directors felt that their boards' social views should change to be more in line with their own (and these were views with direct impact on the role of the agency). However only three of these directors had any formal mechanism in place, and only one director was attempting informally, to achieve this change. These tactics usually involved only the passive intro-duction of information. While 14 of 22 respondents perceived a need to change the composition of the board, not one of these 14 argued that the change would be needed to better represent unmet populations of need. Usually the board changes were motivated by more mundane managerial concerns: needed tech-nical skills (an accountant, a lawyer) or the functioning of elderly board members. In short only 4 (19%) of 21 respondents were in any way contesting their boards' conservatism.

The directors' relations with their boards seemed to be nar-rowly circumscribed by agency operation. Few directors either interacted socially with their boards or thought that informal interactions were desireable. In spite of their more "liberal" and avowedly humanistic commitment to broader welfare entitle-ments and services, the directors passively fulfilled a narrow managerial function, implementing their boards' restrictive so-cial views through agency operations.

Agency Missions

In line with their conservative boards and their passiveness, no respondent defined the mission of his agency or the per-spective of his board within the structure of a modern welfare state: a core of social services broadly provided on the basis of right. Moreover, there was no reference, in justifying their agency's missions, to the egalitarian tenet of a welfare state that public solutions were proper for shared risks. To the contrary and reminiscent of the characteristic theme in American welfare legislation that public provision is only temporary, the voluntary sector held a strong belief in the "exceptional" nature of all pub-licly underwritten social services.

Board members were reportedly motivated to serve: by a desire to be associated with helping programs; by the sense that participation on voluntary boards was a devout charitable obligation of their social position; by their strong sense of voluntarism and localism; by a belief in their skill to monitor and to manage social services; and, by their orientation to the ethos of the business community. The toughening experience of competitive private enterprise seemed to justify their deaconship of social services and their position on the boards.

Although 12 (55%) of the 22 agencies (and usually those with the largest budgets) received more than 50% of their funding from public sources, the boards still identified their agencies strongly with sectarian purposes, temporary service roles, and the personal altruistic impulse. Agencies took up posts on the shores of social need to manage a reduced public commitment with a receding tide of popularity for social services and to act as a flood wall against a rising popular appetite for greater public service (and taxes). The agencies defined themselves as cherished private organizations: they expressed little commitment, at any time, to the institutionalized public sector in the provision of social services.

Table 6 approximates the distribution of agencies and budgets by their service missions. Although an agency's entire budget is assigned to the single category that best describes its mission, in practice most agency budgets cross into more than one area. So, for example, much of the budgets of the "counselling" agencies are actually expended on "surrogate care," especially for foster children. Notwithstanding this failure to disaggregate budgets, the mission priorities of the voluntary sector are quite clear, and would probably have been even more apparent if detailed budget allocations had been possible. "Manifest impairments" and the programs of the social service infrastructures nearly excluded concern with the more "social" needs. Indeed, it is apparent that the direct needs that arise out of economic and social failures were not considered at all by the voluntary sector until they may have produced manifest behavioral disabilities or a life-threatening condition in which an individual cannot care for himself any longer.

Taken together, the agencies had narrowly refined their prin-

Table 6

Type of Agency Mission by Number and Percent Distribution of Agencies and by Dollar Amount (in millions) and Percent Distribution of 1984 Budget Totals.

Mission	Agencies		Budgets	
	N	%	N	%
Direct Service				
—Mental and Physical				
Community mental health and				
outpatient psychiatric	5	22.7	9.05	11.6
Physical and vocational				
rehabilitation	4	18.2	13.95	17.0
Extremely mixed	1	4.5	19.60	24.2
Total	10	45.4	42.80	52.8
—Infrastructure: recreational,				
informational, athletic and				
cultural	3	13.6	14.50	17.7
Total	3	13.6	14.50	17.7
—"Social" needs				
Surrogate care	3	13.6	1.67	2.0
Counselling	3	13.6	8.30	10.1
Total	6	27.2	9.27	12.1
—Other	1	4.5	.06	*
Total Direct Service	20	90.7	67.33	82.6
Funding, Planning and Advocacy				
—Funding	1	4.5	14.00	17.1
—Advocacy	1	4.5	.32	*
Total Funding, Planning				
and Advocacy	2	9.0	14.32	17.1
Total All Missions	22	99.7[a]	81.85	99.7[a]

*=less than 1.0%
[a]=total may not reach 100% due to rounding

cipal mission priorities: first, to justify and to manage intensive direct services for a relatively small number of very impaired clients (the physically or psychiatrically debilitated, or both); secondly, to provide thinly staffed recreational, informational and cultural programs for a large portion of the community. In the first instance, the emotional and self-validating claims of impairments resulting from mental retardation, schizophrenia, cerebral palsy, polio, birth defects and so forth were seen as sufficient to secure public and private resources. In the second instance, the apparent desireability of at least a modicum of a largely self-supervised (by users) municipal social service infrastructure was sufficient to justify recreational, informational and cultural agencies. The legitimacy of these residual service roles have historically been acknowledged outside of work-related marketplace considerations.

The third and smallest mission priority was to provide service for "social" clients. Their debility was not manifestly physical or psychiatric yet they required frank financial support or the relatively intensive attentions of expensive personnel (as for example, the "child and family service" outpatient client who pays for counselling on a sliding fee scale) to resolve an emotional or behavioral disorder. These services were justified along criteria of cost efficiency. That is, timely services for "social" clients might prevent more expensive physical and psychiatric care and might possibly allow "social" clients to partake of far less expensive infrastructure services. Yet few counselling services were funded, and these were customarily for the surrogate care of "social" clients who passed an implicit work test. In this regard, abused, abandoned and neglected children and battered wives, accounted for much of the "social" expenditures in the voluntary sector. Almost all of the foster care services were publicly underwritten.

Even while watching their numbers grow, the Western New York voluntary social service sector was in the process of deepening the distinction between the physically and mentally impaired and the socially deprived by concentrating its service eforts on the obviously worthy impaired client. In effect, by refusing to address the current conditions of Western New York's "stern necessity," the agencies—even those serving "social

clients"—tacitly complied with the continuing erosion of serv-
ices to unemployed and marginal working class groups.

A common theme was being championed by the voluntary
agency boards. The national economic emergency (the recession
and the need to reindustrialize) together with a growing national
deficit justified the superordinate claims of both impaired clients
and the community's infrastructure over subordinate claims
growing out of unemployment and poverty. The voluntary sec-
tor's near total refusal to give voice or otherwise attempt to le-
gitimize the claims on resources of the physically unimpaired
but still needy client constituted agency policy consistent with
their own conservative mindset.

Conclusions

The voluntary social welfare sector in Western New York
may not be hospitable to a representative range of social atti-
tudes. The high prevalence of similarly expressed agency atti-
tudes constitutes a social perspective that is characteristic of the
voluntary agencies. Voting patterns, the social and political views
of the boards and their attitudes toward both the government's
role and the missions of their agencies are generally in line
with the conservative philosophy of the present national
administration.

Their preferences for a small service agenda, a small tax bur-
den and the avoidance of redistributional impulses are given
more specific expression through agency policies: their choice
of private control over public auspices; rejection of a civil service
or unionized work force in favor of a much less institutionalized
and lower-paid, nonprofessional staff; preference for a volun-
teer-rich staff mix; narrow eligibility for services as opposd to
broader entitlements; temporary, task specific services instead
of a more permanent and general commitment to social welfare;
and a residual agency role relative to social need rather than a
proactive approach to the seemingly permanent imperfections
of the social and economic system.

The harmony between the social views of their boards and
agency policy suggests that in addition to the provision of serv-
ices, voluntary welfare agencies also fulfill a strongly ideological
role. This ideological role is performed in a narrow context when

an agency justifies its program choices in terms of cost efficiency.

The ideological role is also performed more broadly when an agency interprets to its community, the value of program outcomes in terms of social conditions and social responsibilities. Therefore in fulfilling the broad obligations of its ideological role, an agency evaluates, at least for itself, the social distances among groups and thereby contributes toward a political decision either to change or to maintain those distances. In another sense, this judgment constitutes a brief for the fairness of current economic conditions and thus speaks to the issue of whether policy should pursue benefits for some groups at the expense of others.

While its direct service function is an obvious element in an agency's mission, its greater importance is expressed through the voice that it directs toward the community in order to justify its choice of services, of clients and of organizational patterns. This voice is controlled by its board of directors. Historically, the boards of directors have frequently articulated the values of dominant commercial community elites.

The pervasive "isomorphism" with conservative values among voluntary social service agencies in Western New York explains much of their decision to maintain a passive and narrow service role in a community with great and growing social needs. The voluntary sector has clearly chosen not to champion the claims of unserved groups. In conformity with this preference, agency directors are screened far more closely for their compliance with board preferences than for their prior training or experience.[5] Therefore the quality of a director's managerial skills may miss the ideological boat; agency success will be determined less by the ability to choose rationally among program alternatives than by the ability to proselytize board values.

In effect then, social service agencies in the private sector are powerful voices of political education that reinforce a selected and usually conservative range of social values. The selection of an agency's board of directors may have a more trenchant meaning in determining social welfare outcomes than the actual operations of the agency itself.

The obvious conclusion of this analysis is that agency ideology must first change if voluntary social service agencies are

to better serve large pools of unmet needs. This may imply too, that the composition of voluntary sector boards must change to better represent those unmet needs. Yet in order for agencies to change their service missions, the claims of the unserved must first be legitimized politically and socially. This process of legitimization becomes an implicit institutional responsibility, if social work is going to align itself with the needs of lower class clients. In this case, its intellectual outlets, most notably, the schools of social work, must take prominent roles in ennobling service to the needy. Yet social work may currently be moving in precisely the opposite direction.

Academic social work's narrow attention to an indeterminate psychotherapeutic practice and to an improbable scientific model of research may have begun to crowd out the service needs of lower income groups. Together with the current professional expansion into employee assistance programs and private practice, the field is moving quickly toward a market based ideology that deflects social policy away from the structural issues of class to the issues of personal adjustment.

Yet the most provocative challenge of this case study to the egalitarian welfare expectations of social work, its reformist ideology, may also be the most obvious one. The ideological commitments of the voluntary social welfare sector and the social preferences voiced through its social service programs are the widely shared, popular and regnant values of the contemporary United States. In spite of the recent neoconservative political victories that infused new vitality into the voluntary social welfare sector, current social welfare policy expresses widely shared preferences for voluntary and minimalist responses to social distress. The national mood seems to reject a more "universal" welfare state.

Even while accepting the notion that the Reagan Administration's success at social welfare budget-cutting is "less than meets the eye," this nation may have reached a watershed of agreement on the social service conditions of its welfare state at levels far lower than the egalitarian reformers have urged during the past few decades (Glazer, 1984). The privitistic, market-oriented social values of the current conservative administration have deeply perfused social institutions, social work among them.

References

Bergin, A. (1971). The evaluation of therapeutic outcomes." In A. Bergin and
    S. Garfield (Eds.), *Handbook of psychotherapy and behavior change* (pp. 107–
    192). N.Y.: John Wiley and Sons.
Cunningham, J. and Kotler, M. (1983). *Building neighborhood organizations.*
    Notre Dame, Ind.: Notre Dame Press.
Cloward, R. and Epstein, I. (1967). Private social welfare's disengagement
    from the poor. In G. Brager and E. Purcell (Eds.), *Community action against
    poverty* (pp. 40–64). New Haven, CN.: College and University Press.
Epstein, W. (1984). Technology and social work 1: The effectiveness of psy-
    chotherapy. *The Journal of Applied Social Science, 8*(2), 155–73.
———— 1984. Technology and social work 2: Psychotherapy, family therapy
    and implications for practice. *The Journal of Applied Social Science, 8*(2),
    1974–86.
———— 1986. Science and social work. *The Social Service Review, 60*(1), 145–
    60.
———— Unpublished. "Social Work's Alliance with Organized Labor."
Garrity, J. (1978). *Unemployment in history.* N.Y.: Harper and Row.
Glazer, N. (1984). The social policy of the Reagan administration. In D. Bawden
    (Ed.), *The social contract revisited* (pp. 221–240). Washington, D.C.: The
    Urban Institute Press.
Henderson, P. and Thomas, D. (1980). *Skills in neighborhood work.* London:
    George Allen and Unwin.
Himmelfarb, G. (1984). *The idea of poverty.* N.Y.: Alfred E. Knopf.
Lapiere, R. (1954). *A theory of social control.* N.Y.: McGraw Hill.
Leiby, J. (1978). *History of social welfare and social work in the United States.*
    N.Y.: Columbia University Press.
Lubove, R. (1965). *The professional altruist.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard Uni-
    versity Press.
Mencher, S. (1967). *From poor law to poverty program.* Pittsburgh, PA.: Uni-
    versity of Pittsburgh Press.
Meyer, J. and Rowan, B. (1977). Institutionalized organizations: Formal
    structure as myth and ceremony. *The American Journal of Sociology, 83*(2),
    340–63.
Nisbet, R. (1969). *Social change and history.* N.Y.: Oxford University Press.
Piven, F. and Cloward, R. (1971). *Regulating the poor.* N.Y.: Pantheon Books.
Salamon, L. and Abramson, A. (1982). *The federal budget and the nonprofit
    sector.* Washington, D.C. Urban Institute Press.
Sosin, M. (1985). Social problems and private agencies. *The Social Service
    Reivew, 59*(1), 75–94.
Warren, R. (1977). *Social change and human purpose.* Chicago: Rand McNally.
Wootton, B. (1959). *Social science and social pathology.* London: George Allen
    and Unwin.

Footnotes

1. Sosin maintains that the discussion of the relationship between agency auspices and agency function is "at a preliminary, speculative stage" (76). Indeed, the literature has not unravelled the causal conditions of agency outcome: whether ideology causes function or the reverse and the ways in which both might be related to other factors. It is clear however that little systematic attention has been given to any of the organizational characteristics that may be associated with the performance of private social welfare agencies.
2. This is a tiny selection from a vast literature that searches for the determinants of social policy among the broad social, economic and environmental conditions of society and not in the individual acts of will that constitute the premises of heroic deeds.
3. This compares closely with the 58% of private social service agency budgets that are reported by Salamon and Abramson to come from Federal programs.
4. The respondents were asked to score political views along a five point scale: 1-liberal; 2-moderately liberal; 3-moderate; 4-moderately conservative; 5-conservative. The means were: Directors = 3.0; Boards = 3.8; Labor leaders = 2.3; and Union members = 3.1.
5. During the few months that elapsed between the data collection and this write-up the directors of two of the most important agencies, each an MSW social worker, were replaced by nonsocial workers. (One retired and the other changed jobs. Neither were forced out.) The replacements are in greater conformity with the entrepreneurial individualism of the local Chamber of Commerce.