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The Neighborhood Law Office Plan

Raynor M. Gardiner

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The Neighborhood Law Office Plan

BY RAYNOR M. GARDINER*

The Neighborhood Law Office plan has had a great deal of publicity during the last few years. As far as I know, Philadelphia is the only place where the low cost or neighborhood plan has been tried. The experiment is still continuing and it is too soon to tell just how it will come out.

The idea of a chain of offices on the outskirts of a city, giving advice at a low fixed fee, sounds attractive. I am cynical enough to

*General Counsel of the Boston Legal Aid Society in the BAR BULLETIN of the Bar Association of the City of Boston.

assume that the purpose of these offices is primarily to get clients—that the clients will also be benefited is purely incidental.

The experiment in Philadelphia shows that these offices can apparently be made self-sustaining. In the long run, however, they must show a fair profit or they will eventually fold up.

The potential clients of a neighborhood office range all the way from those who are just above Legal Aid or social service level to the moderately well-to-do business and professional man. The proprietors of the local laundry, garage or store are not apt to consult the neighborhood law office. They will be much more inclined to patronize an in-town law firm. Other competitors of the neighborhood office are the lawyers who have long been established in most suburban districts of every large city and, while few of them have a large practice, its amount, in the aggregate, is considerable.

It is true that a large percentage of the clients who go to a neighborhood law office have never consulted a lawyer before. They, therefore, represent an untapped field, but the fact that they have never had occasion to see a lawyer indicates that they rarely need one. If this is true, it would take many hundreds of these people to build up any sort of a decent practice.

I believe that the chances of a neighborhood law office's making a real success are not good. People instinctively have a rather low opinion of all doctors, dentists and lawyers who work at cut-rate prices. They may know that a particular doctor at a clinic is a good man, they may be aware that the attorneys of the Legal Aid Society are very experienced in certain fields of law, but they would much prefer to consult a doctor or lawyer of their own choosing.

A client recently summed it all up to me as follows: "I would not come to you if I could possibly afford to go to a good lawyer." That, it seems to me, is the catch in the Neighborhood Law Office idea and that is the principal reason it will not succeed.