

CAPE WESTERN REGION

1989 ADVICE OFFICE REPORT

1. INTRODUCTION
2. GENERAL CASE WORK
3. STATE PENSIONS AND GRANTS
4. TRAINING
5. KHAYELTISHA ADVICE OFFICE
6. SQUATTER ISSUES
7. CONCLUSION
8. STATISTICS OF CASES SEEN
9. ANNEXURES

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INTRODUCTION

We can look upon 1989 as a year of progress in the Mowbray Advice Office. We have undertaken a new direction for ourselves in seeking to work closely with other organizations and communities, in recognising our short comings and the need to re-equip ourselves for the challenges ahead.

We have a volunteer 'work force' which is much the same as last year and the staff compliment remains the same. We have embarked on the process of setting up job descriptions and conditions of employment agreements for staff; of instituting training programmes and advice workers meetings for volunteers; and developing internal structures to meet the changing needs. We are conscious of our lack of knowlegde about labour issues for example and this needs to be addressed in training workshops for staff and volunteers.

The process is never easy. Some who are familiar and comfortable with the old ways, have difficulty in adapting to the new, and some that look forward to the new are impatient for reform.

The advice office committee held a brainstorming meeting in May to address some of these issues. There was a general recognition that we all need to communicate better with one another. Methods of improving the way we work were looked at and some solutions were suggested. The advice office is now closed on Friday mornings between 9 and 11 am for staff meetings, and this time is used to share information and discuss problems that have arisen during the week. It is also a time used for staff training workshops where the need arises. Advice office volunteers meet bi-monthly to share common problems and keep abreast of current trends. The monthly advice office committee meetings continue as in the past and an administration committee has been formed which meets when necessary and deals with with financial and staff matters.

This report deals with the areas of our work that highlight some of the new trends.

women should get together to look at ways of changing it and develop ways to fight for a better system.

2. SYMPTOMS OF MENTAL ILLNESS:

There seems to be an increase in the numbers of people coming to seek advice who also manifest symptoms of mental illness. We approached the Organization of Appropriate Social Services in South Africa (an organization of volunteers, mainly professional psychologist and social workers) in this regard and have decided with their guidance to try and identify some of the contributing factors. We held a brainstorm session with one of OASSA's members to identify the most common problems seen in the advice office (described as presenting problems) and also some of the common symptoms of distress that are manifested. This list will be used by their volunteer workers to go through our cases and identify trends. There are two purposes for this from our point of view:

1. to assist our case workers to identify these sorts of problems more easily, and perhaps in the future to learn more about how to counsel people with such problems;
2. and to help case workers to direct people to appropriate places.

Although we have started on this joint project, it will be a long term project which we will be working on together for many months.

3. HOUSING PROBLEMS:

We receive relatively few queries about housing according to our records but most are associated with buying a house, a new and complex experience for most who seek our advice.

Common problems are those where people buy a house, agreeing to pay a monthly bond repayment based on the joint income of husband and wife. One of the income earners then loses his or her job and the repayments become impossible. The bond payments stop and the bond holder re-possesses the house.

It would seem that there should be a massive education problem on the processes and pitfalls of entering into a purchase agreement on a house. Maybe this is a task to be taken forward for next year - YOU AND BUYING YOUR OWN HOUSE?

OTHER PROBLEMS:

LABOUR ISSUES:

Although problems relating to workers and labour issues account for a substantial number of cases on record in the advice office, it is an area of work that we need to gain more expertise. Many of the cases involve unfair dismissal and exploitation of one kind or another. We handle such cases as we are able and refer people to union advice offices where this is possible. Many cases are also the result of misunderstandings between employer and employee and are resolved when this is cleared up. Workers in the office have attended workshops on labour law over the years but we need to equip volunteers with more information and training in this area.

The area where we have developed most skills is in dealing with STATE PENSION problems.

STATE PENSIONS

Pensions problems have taken up the bulk of the advice office volunteers time in 1989. Clearly one of the most obvious problems experienced by old age pensioners and disability grant recipients is the inefficient and obstructive beaurocracy.

A good example of this was in November when we made the first of our many daily calls to the Parow office of the CPA who handle queries and were informed that the query could not be dealt with after 10 in the morning. The head office closed queries at that time because they had so many queries they did not have time to work on the computer terminals if they continued to recieve calls after 10! We wrote a letter to the senior offical with whom we deal and have never received a reply. Some two weeks later on November 22nd when we phoned BEFORE 10 am we were told no queries would be dealt with until after 3 December. We were asked to phone back after that date as there had been some 50 queries the day before and they were receiving more all the time and so could not promise to reply to all of them on the 4th. The reason given for this delay was that the computer in Pretoria is linked to the one in Cape Town, the people in Pretoria were moving office and so the computer would be off line for that 10 day period.

It was at this time that a young woman came in with a disability grant problem. Her grant had simply stopped. It had been sucessfully transferred from Grahamston to Cape Town in 1987, she had reapplied in 1988 as she was expected to do and then the grant inexplicably stopped. The delay in the computer linkage meant that she would not have her query seen to until after Christmas and it was doubtful whether she would receive her payments again until February or later.

The feelings of one case workers are expressed in a letter she wrote of her experiences in trying to resolve a case. (See Annexure 5)

In April we were invited to attend a meeting called by the new Regional Representative of CPA, Community Services, responsible for pensions which we did. We were informed at this meeting that pensions would be paid out on a monthly basis from May onwards. Despite our initial anxiety about confusion that could arise, the word seemed to spread quite quickly and people learned of this development rather more easily that we anticipated. The purpose of this meeting was also to introduce us, (service and welfare organizations) to the sub-regional office staff, and to explain their function. This office now deals with all queries. To this end the meeting was successful and we have been treated politely and courteously throughout the year. (This was not always the case before.) We asked at this meeting whether provision had been made to engage additional staff at payout points as this was a traditional point of delay. We were assured that additional clerks had been employed and they were being trained, amongst other things in dealing sympathetically with the public.

However, later in the year we heard through the grape vine that the office in Observatory that was dealing with all queries as well as **applications** for pensions was closing. Applications would now be dealt with at the payout points. We received no prior warning of this and many people were confused and spent their money travelling to the Observatory offices to be

told they must go back to the closest township office to their home to apply. The situation at present is as follows; applications and payouts happen at the same point in the townships. This would seem to be an improvement as previously all application were received and processed through the Observatory office necessitating travelling expense and waiting in long queues.

Payouts occur on a specific day during the month and this date is detailed in a schedule that is easily available. If a pensioner misses the payout date, there is a alternative date which also appears on the schedule. Pensioners are paid out on a voucher system, and here lies the cause of many problems:

In May a man receiving a disability grant came to us for help saying he had not received his money this month and that he was told it was because of a computer error. On enquiring we found out that some 1,200 pensioners were in the same position. We were told that the computer in Pretoria had refused to eject the correct vouchers and that people would get their money in eight days time. The vouchers had to come from Pretoria: (this after much was made of the fact that pensions would be handled by the Provincial community service authorities in each area!) He returned on the allotted day to collect his grant and only received half the expected amount. He came back to us again and we telephoned again and were told that this only affected about 100 people. They got the rest of their money the following week.

I think it is important not to loose sight of the fact that while this person suffered as a result of TWO delays in one month in his grant, the cost to him also involved two trips to our offices as was not able to sort out the problem himself.

At the beginning of 1989 many of the frequent callers at our office were those Old Age Pensioners whose pensions had been delayed for up to two years. We had received no satisfaciton with the authorities on this depite numerous assurances and so we called a press conference. (See annexure 2)

Since that date, all of the people with whom we were dealing have received what is due to them. In some cases legal procedures had been intiatiated by the Legal Resources Centre, but the pensioners were paid out before the case came to court.

FUNERAL EXPENSES:

This is a area of much confusion. Many people believe that this grant is designed to COVER the funeral expenses when a pensioner dies. This is not so. The only money due to the next of kin of a deceased pensioner is that money which he or she was still owed at the time of his or her death. The confusion lies largely in the fact that the next of kin are expected to produce evidence in the form of receipts from funeral expenses that they are in fact the legitimate next-of-kin. People therefore believe that they will receive full compensation for the funeral which often amounts to thousands of rand.

CAMPAIGN ON PENSIONS:

During the course of the year, we have accumulated and summarised a list of all the old age pension cases that have been dealt with through our office in the past year. This work has been done largely by the advice office volunteers for which we are most grateful.

We hope to present this information at a press conference called in the first few months of 1990 as a co-ordinated Black Sash campaign around the problems with state grants to illustrate the seriousness of the problem and seek to find ways of improving the system.

TRAINING

Training has been an important development factor our work this year. We were approached by a local advice office and a local youth organization for training. The Peoples Advice Office of Guguletu asked for training in advice office skills. We felt it would be useful to establish a 'training group' to work with their committee, to identify their advice office needs and the context in which they work. We arranged to meet with them on this basis but regrettably nothing came of the initiative.

The secretaries group of CAYCO (Cape Youth Congress) approached us for training in secretarial skills. We suggested the same approach and worked very well with them in developing workshops together. We ran two such workshops attended by between 10 and 15 secretaries from CAYCO branches around Cape Town. The subjects of the workshops were **minute taking** and **report writing**, both workshops we had presented in previous training courses. We have been asked to present a course in typing for this group and this is planned for 1990.

Although this may seem not to be the traditional area of advice office work, the question of organization building and skills development is, as will be seen in the rural training section, central to the operating of advice offices. Some of the young people attending the training sessions mentioned above have become involved in the Khayelitsha Advice Office as well as the Peoples Advice Office in Guguletu.

However, much of our time in training has been spent in developing programmes for rural advice services. This has been an enriching and thought provoking exercise and the area in which I believe we have made much progress.

RURAL TRAINING PROGRAMME

The steering committee of the Rural Advice Workers Training Programme continued to meet this year having learned a number of lessons from our two previous courses:

- * We learned from the 1987 training course that to concentrate on evaluating only the negative aspects of the course is misleading. It showed us that we tended to ignore the **correct** descisions made in '87 in making descisions about the following year. We failed to re-inforce the positive and tried only to correct the negative.
- * We learned from the 1988 course that preparation work and follow up work are as important as course content;

BUT most imporantly, we learned that an advice offices cannot survive without stong and consistent support from the local community and ongoing development, assessment and evaluation. (This applies as much to the training programme committee as to the advice offices themslves!)

The committee met in January and began by reviewing the background of the training programme.

The programme was developed in response to a perceived need for training for advice office workers in rural communities. It was launched in 1987

with a three week course and followed the next year with a four week course. The committee looked at the areas in which clear assessment was needed in planning the future direction of the work. The following general comments summed up the feelings of the committee:

1. Places where accountability structures are in place worked better because otherwise the advice office becomes isolated from the community it serves;
2. Advice office committees often consist of people with little formal education who are not conversant with how to run an advice office. The advice office worker therefore runs the office and all the finances etc. There is therefore no accountability and mistrust develops. In this way the advice office can become a destructive force in the community. Conversely, where accountability structures are in place, the advice office can be useful in the community.
3. In addition to this, there is often a lack of liason with community organizations and consequently few people come to the advice office.
4. Often, there is an expectation of the advice office that cannot be met, and faith in the advice office is lost because the advice office worker is unable to solve the problem.
5. Initiatives in some areas to develop **regional structures** are useful in order to continue on-going training and in creating and building accountability structures.
6. A big problem is seen in the direct link with funders. It was again stressed that where organizational structures exist, advice offices were seen as a good initiative.

The committee reached several conclusions as a result of this review and assessment, summarised as follows:

- * There is an important role for fieldwork in rural communities to encourage the development of community structures;
- * follow-up and follow through work is very important;
- * there is a need for skills in administration
- * we should be developing ourselves better as resource people;
- * there is a need to help groups to understand the function of an advice office and what it means;
- * future courses should be developed and run in the rural areas themselves;
- * more training is necessary for **existing** advice offices in rural communities;
- * we should expand our committee membership to include representatives of funding organizations;

With these basic goals in mind, the steering committee began the work of developing ourselves as resource people and devising appropriate workshops on - **The role of the advice office in the community, accountability and committee structures** as well as - **Basic Bookkeeping.**

CHANGES IN THE COMMITTEE

The committee orginally comprised the following organizations: Black Sash, Advice Office Forum, LEAP, OASSA, LRC, and T & G Workers Union Aid Service. We held a workshop at the beginning of June to which we invited all the organizations who presented workshops at the previous training courses.

This list included organizations who had given inputs on funding and fundraising, political organizations, unions, etc etc. The purpose of the workshop was to consult with these other organizations on the revised direction of the programme and to seek wider representation on the committee. We also sought to make clear the fact that our group was NOT a co-ordinating structure for organising in the rural areas but rather one to offer training to communities trying to start advice offices. (This point was taken up and we were informed by the UDF's interim committee that they planned to institute a 'rural portfolio' at their AGM to elect a new executive committee in early December. The main purpose of this portfolio would be to look at the needs of rural communities in terms of organizational work and develop a co-ordinating structure to address some of the problems encountered in this area and raised by the training programme committee.)

The workshop in June was a limited success. Some of those we sought to consult did not attend, but the steering committee gained a few new members. We did succeed in interesting two funding organizations, SCAT (Social Change Assistance Trust) and Kagiso Trust both became members of the steering committee (Kagiso as a 'floating' member*). SCAT, which funds many Cape advice offices has employed two fieldworkers to visit the projects they fund and assess community and advice office needs. Both these fieldworkers have been regular attenders at training programme meetings and their input and perspective has been most useful.

OASSA, a member of the original committee, launched a joint rural project with DTT (Detainees Treatment Team) and employed a fieldworker to do this work. She became a member of our steering committee.

The Black Sash Southern Cape fieldworker joined the committee.

Representatives from CACE (Centre for Adult and Continuing Education at UWC), SPP (Surplus Peoples Project) and SACHED became 'floating' members of the committee.

(A member organisation of the original committee, Advice Office Forum, dropped off the committee because of internal staff problems, but have rejoined the committee with effect from January 1990.)

Committee meetings took a new form. Previously we met weekly for a hour long meeting which was very task oriented and focussed on planning the next stage of the training course. The new committee met once a month for four hours. Meetings were divided into two; half the time being devoted to developing ourselves as resource people or planning workshops, and the other half spent on sharing information about the communities in which different committee members were working. This proved enormously valuable on both counts.

* 'Floating Members' attend when they are able or when there is to be discussion on a particular point of interest to that member. They also receive the minutes of all meetings.

We held two workshops as part of our self development section; one on BOOKKEEPING (run by Annemarie Hendrikz) and another on ADVANCED FACILITATORS SKILLS (run by Angela Schaffer of CACE). Both were designed to equip us better to run workshops ourselves, and were extremely successful.

TRAINING WORKSHOPS:

Having decided to consolidate our past work and offer training to communities where advice offices already existed, we planned our first training workshop in the SOUTHERN CAPE region for mid October. Nine Communities from the Southern Cape were represented and a total of 40 people attended. We designed the weekend workshop around the following criteria:

- the workshop to be run in the Southern Cape region
- both advice office committee members and workers would be expected to participate
- there would be at least one facilitator per every five or six people attending
- we would invite people from communities where fieldworkers in our group were already working.

Great emphasis was placed on skillful facilitating and a comprehensive set of notes was drawn up by the committee to ensure that the maximum benefit was obtained from the small group work. All communities were divided into committee member groups and worker groups for the first day's work. On the second day committee members and workers came together and worked on a 6 month plan for their own advice office.

SEE NOTES: Training Workshop Agenda and Facilitators Notes: Annexure 3

A second, similar workshop was run in the Boland during the first week-end in December. Five communities were represented with 20 people attending.

The steering committee was asked to run this same workshop in the Karoo town of Carnavon. The local community initiated the programme and members of our committee participated as facilitators. The situation there was slightly different as none of the fieldworkers on our committee work in that area. Our decision to concentrate our efforts in areas where we have fieldworker contact was reinforced by this experience while it was felt necessary to encourage such an initiative to the extent of our ability.

The committee is very pleased with the results of these workshops so far but much depends on the subsequent fieldworker reports on developments in the communities they service. These reports will be delivered at the rural training committee meetings as part of the information sharing time.

In 1990, we plan to continue with the same workshop format used this year and have been asked by advice offices in the West Coast Region to run similar workshops. We also look forward to working with Eastern Cape organizations in helping them to establish their own 'training network', in the hope that our experiences in the past two years can contribute to such a development.

KHAYELITSHA ADVICE OFFICE

There have been many developments during the course of the year in the Khayelitsha Advice Office. At the beginning of 1988 when the office was opened, a steering committee met monthly to deal with the business of the office. It became clear in the first quarter of 1989 that a monthly meeting is not enough to a) conduct the business of the advice office (reports, finances, actions etc),

b) plan and hold community meetings to encourage participation of community based organizations,

c) and generally give direction and thought to the fulfilment of the aims and objectives.

So two sub-committees were formed, one a staff committee and the other a planning committee. The staff committee's function was to facilitate communication between the workers who each worked on different days during the week and to discuss daily advice office matters and write a joint monthly report. The planning committee's task was to plan meetings and arrange community interactions to facilitate community organizations involvement in the advice office. Several community meetings were arranged and interest began to develop in the advice office.

In April a temporary worker was employed to work one day a week in the office. He brought enthusiasm and energy to the advice office and his temporary status was extended for some months. Largely due to his input, an interest in the office developed amongst members of various community organizations and 'new' people (Khayelitsha residents) became part of the planning group.

On the 6th September, the day of the Tricameral General Election, Khayelitsha was the scene of terrible conflict. Scores of people were killed and many others injured in incidents of fighting. There were rumours of provocation by one group of the other and allegations against many of the Town Councillors of Lingelthu West (Khayelitsha' Local Authority). The Khayelitsha Advice office became a crisis centre where people came to give statements and were referred to doctors and lawyers. The office opened for 5 days a week during this time and volunteers were drawn in from the newly established 'Crisis Committee' and other organizations. It became necessary to employ a full time person on a temporary basis to handle the additional work load. The Black Sash volunteers and workers continued to play their part on a weekly basis and the office became very busy and has continued to operate on a daily basis since that time.

As a result of this activity, renewed interest has been shown by community organizations in the advice office. During this year a Khayelitsha branch of UWCO (United Womens Congress) was launched and they send representatives to advice office meetings. Also, the youth organization in Khayelitsha has shown much interest and send representatives to meetings as well as provide volunteers to work in the office when necessary. There have been some misunderstanding between the steering committee of the advice office and the Khayelitsha Zone Civic Association which were discussed at a meeting between the two groups during December. The meeting was positive and we hope Civic representatives will join the committee in the new year.

For Black Sash members involved in the Khayletisha advice office these developments have been exciting and positive. Plans have been made to start the new year with a workshop for the steering committee members to review the aims and objectives. These were written as a guide for the project. It has become necessary to consider writing a constitution which will be a priority for the first quarter of 1990.

CASE WORK: The case work in the office, aside from crisis time, continues to reflect the poverty experienced by so many Khayelitsha residents. Old Age Pension queries, unemployment and suffering from illness are regular visitors to the office. Queries about housing are numerous. Official statistics indicating overcrowding are staggering (SEE ANNEXURE 4) I do not include figures of cases seen here as it is not a Black Sash advice office.

SQUATTER ISSUES

The advice office has received many requests for help from squatter communities over the years. Groups from Port Nolloth, Koekenaap, (in Namaqualand) Uitkyk, (a farm in Kraaifontein) and Noordhoek in the Southern Peninsula have sought assistance from the advice office during this year. It has been important that we keep in touch with developments in other squatter communities throughout the Region.

Black Sash representatives have for number of years been part of the Ad Hoc Squatter Support Group which is a grouping consisting of service and welfare organizations concerned with supporting squatter communities in their struggles and especially during times of crisis.

One of the main functions of this body has been as an information gathering network. It also plans and executes collective actions on squatter issues such as holding public meetings, press campaigns and other attempts to mobilise public support and interest. Attempts were made this year to formalise this structure into a co-ordinating structure for squatter support including service and community organizations. Also a number of squatter support groups have arisen in 1988 and 1989 such as the Port Nolloth support group and Kraaifontein support Group (in support of the Uitkyk and Bloekombos squatters). The idea of the formation of the co-ordinating structure was well received by these groups. A meeting was held to which all the groups that had played a role in squatter struggles were invited. An interim committee was formed and the regular meetings continue. The functions of the group were identified as:

- * regular sharing of information on squatter struggles in the region;
- * establishing a system for sharing and obtaining necessary resources to assist these struggles;
- * identifying education needs for organisations participating in the structure;
- * collective campaigns, public meetings etc.

One of the most important aspects of this initiative is that squatter groups have been able to meet and share problems. The squatter groups are strengthened by this solidarity and it enables some degree of clarity to emerge on developments throughout the region.

The advice office has been peripherally involved in many of these squatter struggles through direct contact with groups and through our involvement on the ad hoc squatter support group. We have been able to provide resources and support in a number of cases. One area where notable gains have been made is in the Noordhoek community where Sash members living in the vicinity have been actively involved.

The Noordhoek squatters, whose shacks were demolished in December 1987 and forced to move to Khayelitsha, won their court case contesting the legality of the demolition and were permitted to move back to Noordhoek some four months later. Since that date they have been harrassed in a number of ways by the authorities. They are constantly told to leave, trespass charges have been brought against individuals, a gate leading to the piece of land on which they live (owned by the RSC) has been locked, access to water has been denied etc.

In November this year the squatters were promised a permanent piece of land on which to live by Mr Koos Theron, Cape MEC. All trespass charges against individuals in the group have been dropped, and temporary water and toilet facilities have been promised on their existing site. Many of these concessions are the result of years of pressure from concerned organizations in particular the Surplus Peoples Project. Black Sash members in the area also have played a key support role.

These concessions will undoubtedly set an interesting precedent for other squatter communities. However, there are a number of questions relating to the promised land that are still to be resolved. There is still debate around the limiting of numbers of people living there and therefore the their essential right to live there.

CENTRE FOR DEVELOPMENT STUDIES

In addition to the grassroots struggles of squatter communities, we have been involved in the fomration of the CDS (Centre for Development Studies) **LAND and LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND PLANNING SECTORS**. This research body has been formed to do research work on alternative policy in these and other fields. In the Cape Western Region, these two issues have been combined and Black Sash representatives form part of this committee. This is a relatively new committee and two Sash representatives will be mandated when the 1990 Regional Council is elected.

CONCLUSION

Much of the work done in 1988 has been developed in 1989. The rural training programme changed its focus and good progress is being made. Plans to make the Khayeltisha Advice Office a community based office are beginning to take shape. The squatter support group that we have been part of for many years is developing into a more formalised structure; and the internal advice office structure is developing in keeping with our change of focus. The whole country seems to be suffering from a 'change of pace' syndrome. We look forward to the 1990's and all the changes to come with enthusiasm in the hope that a new society will emerge.

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