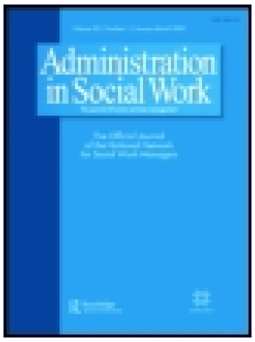

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MANAGEMENT NOTES

Developing a Public Information and Community Relations Strategy in a County Social Service Agency

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ABSTRACT. This case study documents the innovative efforts of a county social service agency in California to address its capacity to gather and disseminate information relevant to its mission and the needs of the community. Based on in-depth interviews and focus groups with representatives of model public information (PI) programs and local community-based organizations, senior county staff, and local opinion leaders, five key elements of an effective PI program were identified and include: (1) establishing a formal PI function, (2) strength-

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ening internal communication, (3) developing external communications infrastructure and strategy, (4) expanding community relationships, and (5) implementing multiple communication strategies.

KEYWORDS. Community relations, public social agency, communication

INTRODUCTION

When public social service agencies develop a public relations function to improve their communications and relationships with the community, they face several challenges. When dealing with the media, for instance, social service agencies encounter the following obstacles: (1) Fear of and reluctance to use the media (Brawley, 1995); (2) Concern about violating client confidentiality (Jones, 1991); (3) A lack of credibility as a result of the public's perception that social service workers do not know what they are doing (Brawley, 1995); and (4) Public antagonism toward the clients and the services of government-run social service agencies, including the journalists working for the various media (Brawley, 1995).

This is a case study of the efforts of a county social service agency in California to address these challenges by evaluating its capacity to disseminate and gather information relevant to its mission and the needs of the community. It describes the work of an external research group that investigated the need for a formal public information capacity to strengthen the agency's community relations. The goal of the investigation was to find a way to provide public education about the agency's programs and services as well as obtain public input regarding the department's various activities and objectives. In the next section, a brief review of the literature places this case study in a larger context.

BACKGROUND

The goal of public relations is to provide education and information to the public in order to promote positive awareness and reduce negative perceptions (Osborn & Hoffman, 1971). Effective communications to specific target groups or publics is based upon an evolving relationship between an institution and its publics (Bernays, 1986). As the role of public relations in social service agencies has increased in recent years, public information offices have been established to serve as a centralized contact point for two-way communications between an agency and its various audiences. The goal of such public information offices is to bring the agency to the attention of the public and to generate community understanding and support by: (1) supporting/advocating the development of programs to address the needs of special client populations, such as recruiting foster parents (Levy, 1956); (2) improving the image of the social service agencies and their clients by featuring successful programs and participants (Osborn & Hoffman, 1971); and/or (3) providing information to the public that will benefit the public, such as public service announcements, community service programming, local television, radio stations, or weekly newspaper columns (Brawley, 1995).

The challenge facing social service agencies is to foster and improve relationships with their different stakeholders, especially local taxpayers (Ayres, 1993). Stakeholders can be differentiated into the following categories: (1) the clients who want to know what services are available and how they might benefit from them (McIntyre et al., 1991); (2) interest and/or concern of the larger community who want to be assured that their taxes or philanthropic funds are being used wisely, along with cost-effective outcomes; (3) the detractors who are philosophically opposed to the notion of providing public services and often need to see how the cost-effective utilization of resources prevents fraud and abuse so that their lack of support might be reduced from active antagonism to at least passivity (Osborn & Hoffman, 1971); and (4) policy-makers and opinion-makers who require specific public relations strategies in order to educate and inform such bodies as City Councils, Boards of Supervisors, and state legislatures (Levy, 1956)

There may be different public relations goals for each of these target audiences and therefore messages need to be tailored to particular audiences (Brawley, 1995). Since good news does not generally leak out of the agency, systematic ways need to be established to ensure that stories about agency successes are routinely available to the media (Jones, 1991).

In addition to disseminating information about programs and services, social services agencies need to be able to monitor services and operations by gathering input from clients or from the community at-large (Thomas & Penchansky, 1984). Consumer surveys have become increasingly popular as tools to help agencies monitor the quality of care and service (James, 1994; Press, Ganey, & Malone, 1992; Inguanzo, 1992; Kritchevsky & Simmons, 1991; Berwick, 1989; Gold & Wooldridge, 1995). In addition, public forums, focus groups, suggestion boxes, comment cards, and selected interviews are other methods for gathering the opinions of clients and consumers.

METHODS

The case study utilizes qualitative methods including in-depth interviews and focus groups with four different populations: (1) public information officials located in different parts of the country, (2) senior staff in the social service agency, (3) representatives of local community-based organizations, and (4) local opinion leaders. A total of eight public information officials representing public, private, and non-profit organizations throughout the country were identified and interviewed based on their reputation for operating a model public relations program. The model public information programs included a diverse group of agencies. A health maintenance organization was selected because the health care and social services have recently received a great deal of public and political scrutiny in relationship to health care reform and welfare reform. A community foundation was selected because foundations work closely with the community and providers and often have a well-developed public relations capacity. In addition, state social service and human services departments were selected that resembled California's state supervised, county-administered programs. One state program was selected based on substantial national media attention to addressing welfare reform legislation and one California county department with a model public information program. The purpose of the interview questions to model programs participants were: (1) to define the public information office and its background and history; (2) to determine the organizational structure and context within which public education and public input is officiated; (3) to obtain a more detailed description of the office itself; and (4) to determine the organization's audiences and publics and to ascertain which methods of communication are used to target each audience.

Four county employees including senior managers were interviewed to assess how the agency and other county departments currently engage in disseminating public information and their vision for expanding its public information efforts. The purpose of the questions was: (1) to delineate background information concerning the division management and division objectives for public information; (2) to determine the structure and function of public information within the division and the agency; (3) to investigate communications that are internal and external to the division and to discuss how a proposed Office of Community Relations could facilitate communications for the agency; and (4) to describe the agency's audiences and key media relations functions and resources.

A focus group was conducted with representatives of eight community-based organizations which worked closely with the social service agency. The goal was to identify different ways that the agency could improve its ability to gather public input. The focus group included representatives from the following types of organizations: food banks, housing agencies, child abuse prevention agencies, advocacy organizations, counseling agencies, parent education services, senior services, and neighborhood community organizing. The purpose of the focus group was to obtain the following information: the public relations functions as practiced within the eight participating agencies; their perceptions of the strengths and areas for improvement of the social service agency's public information function; and perceptions of the merits of a proposed Office of Community Relations within the social services agency.

Finally, a select number of opinion leaders in the county were interviewed to gain their perceptions of the agency. These participants included representatives of the County Board of Supervisors, the Grand Jury, the Area Agency on Agency, and a staff person for the Department responsible for administrating two key advisory committees.

FINDINGS

The findings from interviews and focus groups reflect the perceptions of: (1) staff representatives of existing public information offices in a variety of organizations; (2) senior managers; (3) representatives of community-based organizations; and (4) selected opinion leaders.

The findings from the *representatives of public relations programs* in the public, non-profit, and private sectors provide an array of approaches to organizing public information offices (Figure 1). Media relations constitute the primary feature of all the public information programs surveyed, followed by developing/disseminating publications, coordinating a speaker's bureau, coordinating with legislative offices, conducting public education and charitable campaigns, and responding to public inquiries. The most frequently cited public information methods of model programs used in media relations are: (a) press releases, (b) editorial page, (c) newsletters, (d) media campaigns; (e) broadcast interviews, (f) feature newspaper articles, (g) public service announcements, (h) advertising campaigns, (i) distribution of publications, (j) special events, (k) presentations, (l) Internet and World Wide Web resources, and (m) legislative advocacy. Staff of public information offices often come to their positions with extensive media and communications training.

While few offices among those surveyed have a formal communications plan with evaluation procedures, all respondents identified their communication goals which included providing accurate information, promoting a positive view of the organization; and describing efforts to utilize funds effectively. These goals are frequently met by targeting specific messages to specific audiences.

Very few of the respondents from public information offices have public input responsibilities but provide staff at the program level with assistance in designing consumer satisfaction surveys, conducting focus groups, and working with advisory boards (Figure 2). In response to questions about the future role of public information offices, these respondents identified the increased need for the publication of fact sheets, the development of issue-specific public information campaigns, increased communication and collaboration among social service agencies, and the importance of developing and maintaining strong communication links to professional groups and providers.

Senior county staff emphasized the need to improve the quantity and quality of information currently shared with community-based organizations and other county departments. Some of their concerns identified included communicating changes to programs and policies, providing referral information about shared clients, and increasing the

FIGURE 1. Description of Public Information Dissemination Utilized by Model Programs

Media Relations	• This is often the primary function of the public information offices. • Protocol for media calls is referral to the public information officer in order to: (a) ensure that calls are promptly returned, (b) safeguard client confidentiality issues, (c) guarantee that a consistent message is communicated, (d) ensure that media response reflects an agency-wide perspective and an understanding of policy nuances, and (e) monitor all media inquiries and contacts. • Methods for contacting the media include the issuing of press releases, holding press conferences and producing and distributing public service announcements. • A proactive stance toward the media involves building good rapport and relationships with reports and helps ensure consistent and balanced media coverage.
Internal and External Publications	• Widely circulated internal publications are often in the form of newsletters. • External publications include brochures, pamphlets, flyers, posters and billboards. • All publications reflecting agency-wide issues are usually approved by the public information office. • Most frequent publications often relate to specific public educational campaign.
Speaker's Bureau Coordinated by Public Information Office	• Coordinate speaking engagements sponsored by a variety of community groups. • Maintain a list of speakers, usually consisting of employees who have technical expertise in specific program areas. • Designate spokespersons for each division who are prepared to provide information with minimum briefing. • Foster successful public speaking events which address topical issues and open up a dialogue with the audience (e.g., responses to crisis situations or impact of new federal or state legislation).
Public Inquiry	• Public information offices will respond to calls from the public on a variety of programmatic and policy issues. • A separate office usually handles the bulk of these calls, since many calls often require referral to program staff.
Public Education	• Educate the organization's clientele and various publics through the media, special events and other free information. • Education campaigns are developed in conjunction with specific divisions but strategy and coordination is provided by the public information office. • Messages are focused on public education–particularly messages aimed at prevention or notification about changes in programs and policies. • Within larger organizations, education is a function of a separate education office.

FIGURE 1 (continued)

Legislative Briefing	• This function serves to increase awareness of legislation among management and staff and assists the organization in working toward desired policy changes. • Legislative advocacy is usually a function of the management team or a separate legislative office; however, communication legislative information to the public and within the organization is the responsibility of the public information office. • Legislative tracking and lobbying is usually handled by other offices in collaboration with the public information office when it comes to issuing press releases, drafting and distributing reports, or conducting briefings.

FIGURE 2. Description of Public Input Methods Utilized by Model Programs

Questionnaires	• While surveys and questionnaires are often used, rarely is the public information office responsible for administering them. • Program managers are usually responsible for the content of questionnaires and if there is a research or quality control department, this is the location for instrument design and administration. • Some survey items are identified by scanning the media and by listening to advisory group members, staff, and clients.
Focus Groups	• Viewed as a non-traditional and helpful approach to getting input. • Sometimes focus group training and coordination are provided by the public information office. • Some programs utilize focus groups only when organizational programmatic changes are being considered, often as an option to a survey. • Alternatives to focus groups are public meetings with the program's advisory and policy committees.
Advisory Groups	• Advisory groups are often viewed as part of a public input structure (e.g., priority setting for funding decisions and/or giving advice). • Sometimes advisory groups are used to help manage negative media attention by using an advocacy database with the names and telephone numbers of program supporters.
Toll Free Numbers	• Sometimes 800 numbers are used for particular programs; however they are not always a useful approach to obtaining public input.
Office Tours	• Office tours for public officials and other citizen groups can be an excellent way of providing information for generating feedback.

department's visibility at community events. Senior staff noted that messages about programs and services need to be conveyed in a coordinated, strategic manner which build upon current practices and expand medial relations strategies.

In addition to external communications, senior staff called for increased internal communications. Current gaps exist in communication between bureaus and among line staff and managers. While this need is considered important, there is also resistance among employees to having their workload increased by requirements to attend more meetings or read more announcements/mailings. Therefore, a public information office should have responsibility for coordinating internal communications, including establishing a Speaker's Bureau and administering an ombudsperson program. Staff will need to be educated about the role and function of a proposed public information office by utilizing training resources at county and state levels as well as the opportunity for service staff to educate the public information staff about the agency's various programs.

Community-based organizations focused their attention on the process of obtaining public input. Several respondents noted the difficulty of involving the community in decision-making when there is a bias against being associated with the county social services agency. Suggestions for fostering community participation included annual or bi-annual community needs assessments, service evaluation surveys, and input from advisory groups.

The major concerns of the five *opinion leaders* were the need to address the negative public perceptions of the social services through effective media relations. They noted that the public needs to see "success stories" about consumers, profiles of individuals and organizations serving the community, the impact of state and federal legislation on the community, information about client demographics and service outcomes, and descriptions of current social service programs. The opinion leaders shared a perception that a public information office should: (a) serve as a centralized media contact (distributing flyers, television news, feature stories, etc.); (b) coordinate internal and external communications; (c) track legislation; (d) serve as the primary office responsible for community relations (conduct needs assessments and utilize input from advisory boards); (e) reflect a capacity to communicate with non-English speaking and ethnic communities; and (f) participate on the department-wide decision-making team.

The following themes emerged from the interviews and focus group data representing all who participated in the feasibility study:

- Public relations are of great value to the agency and community.
- The way to increase public awareness of social services agencies is through the provision of clear, consistent information about the

agency, its programs, services, and clientele as a way to clarify the role of social services within the larger community.

- Public relations needs to include community relations and outreach functions, especially collaboration between public and private agencies in order to involve a cross section of the community and ensure the availability of services to those most in need.
- A critical function of public information offices is to centralize media relations and foster strong relationships with reporters through a proactive approach to the media.
- Effective external communications are based on effective internal communications and when they are not connected, they both suffer.
- There is value in the participation of the public information officer in formulating agency policy and making decisions. Also, the public information officer needs to be seen as an implementor of policy and a communicator of decisions.
- Formal evaluation of the effectiveness of public information is needed on an on-going basis.
- The methods used by public information offices ought to include: (a) determining and evaluating the agency's audiences (e.g., the general public and the internal audiences; (b) helping to shape relevant messages to communicate (e.g., welfare reform, human interest stories); (c) use of multiple methods to communicate these messages (e.g., publications, presentations, etc.); (d) use of multiple media relations tools (e.g., public service announcements, press releases); and (e) ongoing use of public input methods (e.g., surveys and focus groups).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based upon these major themes, the following steps were identified to develop an effective public information program: (1) establish a formal public information function, (2) strengthen internal communication, (3) develop external communications infrastructure and strategy, (4) expand community relationships, and (5) implement communication strategies. The five broad steps include ten specific recommendations as noted in Figure 3.

The recommendations build upon a number of internal and external

FIGURE 3. Recommended Steps for Establishing a Public Information Program in a County Social Service Agency

Step 1: Establish a Formal Public Information Function Within the Social Service Agency.

The development of a centralized, coordinated public information function within a new Office of Community Relations (OCR) will require trained personnel to ensure that the agency's public information goals are met and the development of a community-oriented advisory group to advise and monitor the work of the Office of Community Relations.

- Recommendation 1: Assemble a multidisciplinary advisory committee to advise the OCR on its purposes, plans, and activities.
- Recommendation 2: Establish the Office of Community Relations with Public Information Manager, Publications Specialist, and Community Relations Officer.

Step 2: Strengthen Internal Communications Infrastructure and Understanding of Public Information Function.

Staff understanding and awareness of the activities of other programs within the Department will contribute to cooperative working alliances between divisions and strengthen the common sense of mission among staff.

- Recommendation 3: Educate staff at all levels regarding the necessity for and benefits of a structured public information function.
- Recommendation 4: Improve the internal communications structure both horizontally and vertically.
- Recommendation 5: Work toward developing a sense of employee pride and commitment to the Department.

Step 3: Develop External Communications Infrastructure and Strategy.

Research and planning will be needed to produce and ensure the consistent transmission of written, electronic, and oral communications as well as ensure that the communication vehicles match the needs of target audiences.

- Recommendation 6: Research and develop public input structures.
- Recommendation 7: Research and develop public education structures.
- Recommendation 8: Develop key messages and ensure their consistency via a coordinated information dissemination strategy.

Step 4: Expand Relationships in the Community.

There is a need to intensify communications efforts within the community, especially with community-based organizations, in order to promote opportunities for networking and two-way communications.

- Recommendation 9: Create strong relationships with community-based organizations, private funding sources, local policy makers and elected officials, the media, and the public at-large.

Step 5: Implement Communications Strategies.

Successful implementation depends on a coordinated, targeted strategy to achieve multiple objectives with an economy of effort.

- Recommendation 10: Utilize a variety of public information methods, including accessing media outlets, sponsoring of public events, attendance at community events, hosting forums and town hall meetings, producing publications, and airing CCTV programming, and maintaining a comprehensive Internet web-site.

communication activities already in place. Internally, there is strong management support for the development of an Office of Community Relations (OCR) as reflected in the earmarking of funds and resources for a communications program. Based on these recommendations, a staff person with considerable marketing and media expertise, as well as ties to the political and social service communities has been hired. Externally, there are currently in place numerous supports including access to a legislative liaison, strong local media outlets, and partnerships with community-based organizations to foster public education.

In expanding its communications and community relations efforts, the department also faces a number of internal and external challenges. Internally, the lack of a formal communications function has resulted in fragmented efforts which are not necessarily focused around the central mission of the organization. There is a lack of consensus among mid-level managers in terns of the need for a formal communications program. There is also concern that such a function may increase the "turf wars" which have increased due to recent funding cutbacks and restructuring efforts. Among employees, there is some anxiety that the proposed OCR will, at worst, identify additional eligible individuals who cannot be served due to lack of resources and, at best, only serve to increase the workloads of current staff.

External challenges to an expansion of communications and community relations are present on both national and local levels, especially the erosion of public trust in government institutions and the public's negative perception of social service programs. The current uneven coordination with other government agencies and community-based organizations provides another challenge to fostering structured communications. Exacerbating these external challenges are the demographics of the county, with its multiple languages, diverse ethnic perspectives, and geographic areas marking disparate preferences and points of view.

While not all of these challenges can be addressed via effective communications and community relations efforts, the absence of a strong, purposeful communications program is likely to prevent the agency from achieving its stated goals and objectives. The recommendations reflect the primary objectives that need to be accomplished in order for the agency to remain a strong and viable force in the community by targeting messages and receiving input from different audiences (Figure 4).

NEXT STEPS

The feasibility study recommendations were adopted immediately as part of a work plan to establish a new Office of Public Information. No sooner was the ink dry on the report than an experienced professional from the field of advertising was hired full-time and soon thereafter an administrative assistant was hired. Reporting to the agency director, the new Public Information Officer (PIO) engaged in the start-up phase which included reviewing all existing agency publications and establishing standardized formats related to logo, color, photography, paper quality, clarity of messages, and typeface. The PIO collaborated with staff on several advertising campaigns related to the need for temporary beds for abused/neglected infants and the need for more child care providers. Building on prior relationships, the PIO also engaged in extensive outreach to the media by pitching story ideas about agency services (e.g., adoptions) and policy changes (e.g., welfare reform). Given the strong anti-press perceptions among staff due to a history of being misquoted, considerable effort was devoted to preparing/training staff to deal more effectively with the media. One of the goals was to raise the status of reporters in the eyes of staff and this required extensive listening and educating. As a result, new forms were developed for receiving and routing calls from the press along with follow-up evaluation forms. With the new system in place, an average of three news articles and publications are released each month.

The feasibility study was also used extensively in in-service training to educate staff on the role and importance of a public information office. With the support of staff liaisons to the public information office involved with staff training on public presentation skills, a Speaker's Bureau was launched and expanded to include representatives in 15 local Chambers of Commerce. This "Chamber Corp" includes a group of specially-trained staff who are members of local chapters of the Chamber of Commerce and make presentations on new developments related to welfare reform and other program changes. At the same time, an internal monthly staff newsletter, called FYI, was developed to increase the flow of information about changes in agency services and organizational processes. Increased attention was given to staff recognition by developing and presenting a new Director's Award for developing innovative practices. Like the feasibility study,

FIGURE 4. Summary of an Audience Grid

AUDIENCE	GOAL	SAMPLE MESSAGE	POSSIBLE VEHICLE
The Media	Expand positive coverage.	"We've got good stories."	Monthly communications via media newsletter and/or pitch letters.
Program Managers	Support managers in their job functions.	"We are here to make your job easier; we won't increase your workload with more paper."	Training in the following areas: media and public speaking, employee education, etc.
Line Staff	Demonstrate how employees are valued.	"You are valued because . . . ."	Employee recognition ceremonies.
Community-Based Organizations	Clarify roles of the agency vis-a-vis community-based organizations.	"Here's what we can (and can't) do for you."	Regular meetings with community-based organizations for networking, brain-storming and sharing.
Professional Community	Increase visibility of the agency and awareness of its services.	"This is who we are and what we do."	Informational letter publicizing the activities and services of the agency.
Advisory Groups	Improve the information-sharing process.	"We want your ideas to make things better."	Regularly scheduled advisory group meetings.
Clients	Help clients become self-sufficient	"We provide only temporary assistance."	Special events featuring successful clients (e.g., graduation ceremonies)
Advocacy Groups	Minimize attacks on the agency.	"Here are all the things that we are doing . . . "	Meetings and community forums focused on policy and service delivery issues.
Taxpayers and General Public	Counter negative public image of social services.	"Family supports are an essential element of a just society."	Media coverage profiling successful programs and their contribution to the community.
Government Representatives and Policy Makers	Enact supportive legislation.	"We are using funds responsibly and have the facts and figures to show for it."	Testifying at hearings (especially involving successful clients).
Grant Makers, Funders, Donors, Foundations	Increase funding.	"We are developing innovative programs that are sustainable."	Meetings with program officers with materials which profile successful programs.
Business, Private Industry Councils	Develop partnerships.	"You are investing in your community by hiring graduates from our programs."	Fact sheets listing demographics and outcome statistics.

new publications are also used as part of staff training, especially with regard to orienting new employees.

The start-up activities were launched with the full support of the agency director who displayed a strong commitment to disseminating high quality and readable information, internally and externally, even if it cost more money than had been expended in the past. The director was also interested in experimenting with new and innovative approaches. He consistently recognized the extra staff effort to launch and utilize a new public information system. With the same concern for high quality communications among staff and with the community, the director acknowledged the importance of improving the work environment by authorizing the hanging of pictures of people reflecting the Department's mission on office walls, hallways, and conference room walls as well as installing more welcoming furniture and carpeting. These indirect forms of communication were seen as equal in importance to direct written communications. Staff support was also communicated from the Director's Office with the launching of a new OZ Fund whereby middle and senior managers have access to $25,000 to address immediate staff or organizational needs. The array of fundable projects includes funds for new equipment, redecorated office space, employee recognition, and/or staff retreats.

All these examples of start-up took place during the first two years of operating a public information office. The next phase of activity includes efforts to develop and disseminate a new client newsletter, called Opportunity Knocking. Similarly, there will be further expansion of agency booths at community festivals, expanded use of a new video on client rights and responsibilities, and expanded participation in "transportation kiosks" located at public facilities and shopping centers.

The success and impact of activities to date can be measured in the following ways:

- Internally, there is increased staff awareness of the public information function as evidenced by increased involvement in the monthly newsletter, in the Speaker's Bureau, and in appreciation for the multiple approaches to staff recognition.
- Externally, there is positive feedback from the elected officials and business community about the way that the agency is assertively telling its story in the community, the receipt of state and

national awards for several different public education campaigns, the increased staff use of the PIO for developing brochures and related publications, and the increased interest by other county departments in securing the expertise of the PIO.

Other successes can be seen in the active participation of the public information officer in weekly senior staff meetings which involve agency policy making, planning, and operational decision-making. Irrespective of the issue on the table, the PIO continuously reminds and alerts senior staff to public education component of any decision. For example recent shortages in child welfare personnel led to a more complete discussion of how to educate the community about this phenomenon. Similarly, an internal fraud crisis led to contingency planning in anticipation of questions from the media, how such questions could be used to educate the community, and how to prepare for such events in the future with a set of responses to general background questions.

From the agency director's perspective, the introduction of the PIO has directly improved relations with the media whereby the agency is seen as more open, credible, responsible, collaborative, and less of an isolated government bureaucracy. The increased public understanding is reflected in the improved image of the agency and appreciation for disseminating new materials that describe the agency's programs. There is also great staff appreciation of media relations as demonstrated by program managers who frequently call upon the PIO for advice, assistance in dealing with the media, and greater staff sensitivity to their own responsibility for media relations within their job descriptions.

Two major areas of unfinished business are on the agenda for future action. First, a system needs to be developed to monitor and evaluate the impact of the public information office internally and externally. Collecting and analyzing staff and community feedback will require the investment in evaluation research capacity either inside or outside the agency. Planning and implementing this component of public information processing will most likely require substantial staff creativity and effort.

A second area of unfinished business relates to some recommendations emerging from the feasibility study, namely the capacity to regularly collect and analyze feedback and input from the community. The study highlighted such mechanisms as surveys, focus groups, hotlines, and advisory groups. Keeping tabs on the pulse of the community involves considerable community organizing and evaluating skills. For example, simply analyzing the input from existing agency advisory groups, charged by the agency to provide advice and feedback, requires significant staff effort. Similarly, dealing with some of the negative community perceptions of the publications produced by the public information office ("why are they spending money on fancy annual reports and brochures that should go to poor people?") will require skillful public relations in its own right.

Clearly the costs associated with the work of a public information office will need to be evaluated in terms of benefits/outcomes/impact as well as explained to those with the questions about the allocation of scarce resources.

CONCLUSION

This case description of a feasibility study and its early implementation covers a four year period, from the time the agency director requested the study based on the support of several senior managers to the completion of the first two years of operating a new public information office. From the perspective of agency management, this case study of innovative practice provides several important lessons for current and future administrators:

1. Whether or not the agency is a public or private non-profit community agency providing social services, a public information function is an important element in the process of communicating how tax dollars or philanthropic dollars are being spent as well as a focal point for collecting information relevant to service delivery.
2. Planning for the introduction of a new organizational function like public information benefits greatly from the use of a feasibility study which documents best practices, internal and external local perceptions of need, and reflects the continuous monitoring and guidance of senior management.
3. When there is limited in-house expertise, it is important to search outside for talent with the capacity to understand and appreciate the work of the agency. Such experience and expertise is needed

to help the agency tell its story while at the same time "turning up the volume on the voices from the community" so that feedback and input can be understood and addressed.

4. The guiding vision of an agency director regarding the centrality of effective internal and external communications is critical in order to overcome obstacles to the implementation and funding of a successful public information office.
5. In most social service agencies, considerable effort is needed to educate and assist staff in gaining an understanding and appreciation of the importance of BOTH delivering high quality services AND regularly sharing with the community information about what is working and what is not working and WHY.

These are some of the lessons which can be gleaned from this case study. Given the different experiences of the reader, it is assumed that many other lessons can be derived from this example of innovative management practice in a public social service agency. It is increasingly clear that public relations will have an expanded role within the changing organizational structure of social service agencies. The rationale for this projection is based on some of the following realities: (a) a political climate that is unsympathetic to large-scale social service programs; (b) an enhanced need for accountability in the administration and allocation of public funds; (c) the need for quick access to accurate and up-to-date information; (d) an increasingly competitive environment for public funds, and (e) a growing emphasis on collaboration between public agencies and community-based organizations.

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