NATIONWIDE ORGANIZATION FOR SERVICE TO THE DISABLED

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Every year in the United States more than 200,000 persons suffering permanent physical disabilities are added to the army of the handicapped. Of these it is estimated that nearly 100,000 can be returned to economic independence if given adequate service in the way of vocational rehabilitation. While a program for this service has been undertaken by 36 states with federal leadership and financial assistance, there was no voluntary organization, national in scope, in this field until the National Committee for the Disabled was recently announced. This committee has as its purpose the development and direction of a national interest in the welfare of the disabled.

In the 1923 report of the Federal Board for Vocational Education there is drawn a comprehensive picture of the problem of the civilian disabled in the United States and of the remarkable achievements of the various state departments in the field of vocational rehabilitation.

The casual reader of that report who has not first hand knowledge of the situation might hastily assume that since official action is now underway there is less need for private agency activity in behalf of the handicapped; that all can sit back and watch the government work. A careful review of the facts disclosed, however, makes it apparent that by its very nature the problem demands for its solution more complete popular understanding and the wholehearted cooperation of voluntary agencies in all communities. As the report indicates, the 36 states cooperating with the federal government rehabilitated 4530 individuals suffering various handicaps, during the year ending

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June 30, 1923. On that date also there were 15,515 other disabled persons enrolled for rehabilitation service. Viewed in comparison with the number of individual cases served by some hospitals or other voluntary agencies these figures seem relatively small. Likewise, the total number of persons disabled each year requiring rehabilitation service, approximately 84,000, does not impress one as large.

As we analyze the steps which must be taken by the rehabilitation agencies, it becomes apparent that the amount of effort expended in dealing with these cases is tremendous. Unlike the hospital to which patients are referred for institutional treatment, the state rehabilitation agency is a field organization whose services must reach out into the smallest town and into the very homes of the handicapped. It serves persons who are disabled through industrial accidents, public accidents, permanently crippling disease or congenital conditions. Such persons may be found in practically every community. Some come to the attention of the rehabilitation agency soon after an accident. Others who have been disabled for years are reported as soon as they have completed grammar school education and become eligible for state assistance. Still others come from institutions or their homes where for lack of rehabilitation service they have been dependent upon their families or the public for support. Literally thousands of cases reported must be reviewed and intelligently studied as to eligibility and feasibility for vocational rehabilitation.

Intelligent decision in each case presupposes a survey covering the individual’s previous training, social and economic status, his aptitudes and desires, as well as his physical condition. In many cases before the program of the vocational rehabilitation worker may be undertaken, a disabled person must be referred to the proper authorities for further medical, surgical or therapeutic treatment. In numerous cases problems involving compensation must be adjusted and in some cases arrangements must be made for maintenance of the individual and even of his family during the period of training. Frequently a prosthetic appliance is required and in those states whose laws do
not permit the purchase of such appliances from state funds, arrangements must be made to secure financial assistance from relatives, friends or voluntary agencies. Once these steps have been taken and the way is clear for vocational rehabilitation, the decision must be made as to the type of service the individual requires.

It is frequently possible to effect rehabilitation through direct placement on a job. Many a disabled person has been placed back on the payroll by workers especially equipped to render this service—even after efforts through regular employment bureaus have failed and direct applications to employers have been turned down. The employment bureau for the normal is too apt to see the physical handicap instead of the man behind it. The employer usually needs to be shown by one who knows the requirements of particular jobs as well or better than himself. Once they are shown, however, employers come to recognize the economic soundness of hiring handicapped persons at the prevailing wage.

There are on the other hand a vast number of severely disabled persons who cannot be placed directly but must first be trained in a new line of work. Of the total rehabilitated by 36 states in the year ending June 30, 1923, 2843 were placed without training, 1290 after school training and 397 after training on the job (employment training).

In planning for a course of training and deciding how the training should be provided, the worker must take into account the age and other individual characteristics of the trainee. If the training is to be provided in a trade or commercial school, care must be exercised in the selection of the school as well as the course, and a definite training program, individual in character, must be arranged. If the training is to be provided on the job, an employer in the right industry and of the type who will give necessary supervision and instruction must be sought out. Not infrequently, the type of training and the type of job selected must depend not only upon the individual's permanent physical handicap but likewise upon complicating physical weaknesses which make favorable working conditions necessary.
Industries throughout the territory must be carefully surveyed with the handicapped person in mind. It is readily seen therefore that the problem involves intensive case work on behalf of individuals scattered over an extensive area. Every case may entail contact with the man’s family, his friends, physician, hospital, previous employer, prospective employers, social service agencies, training schools, civic bodies and various state departments. It is likewise of the greatest importance that the program of rehabilitation be viewed as a continuous process from the time of disablement to replacement in suitable employment. Thus the closest possible cooperation between physicians, surgeons, nurses, occupational therapists, medical social workers, educators, welfare agencies and placement workers is essential. Objectives must be determined upon and all steps in the rehabilitation process designed to realize those objectives.

When the problem is reviewed in this way and it is noted that the service staffs of the 36 states cooperating with the Federal Board do not exceed a total of 150 persons, it is obvious that the burden of responsibility for rehabilitation service must rest upon social service agencies, medical agencies, civic bodies and employers with the state rehabilitation agency as a coordinating force. This was early recognized by the Ohio state department which developed a plan providing supplementary service in all counties of the state. An analysis of the distribution of the cases served during 1923 disclosed that they were widely distributed and were found in practically every county of the state. The Ohio plan calls for the establishment in each community of a clearing agency, representative of the various groups concerned, with an advisory committee including in its membership leading educators, a physician, a nurse, a home visitor and employment managers thoroughly acquainted with local industrial conditions and employment possibilities. The state of Ohio is among the leaders in the development of rehabilitation service. It is important to note that Mr. M. B. Perrin, supervisor of civilian rehabilitation service for the state of Ohio believes that their progress is almost wholly due to the splendid relations which have existed between the state officials and the local people.
In other states and especially in some of the larger cities cooperative relations have been developed to greater or less degree. The situation would seem to call for a definite plan in all states. It should be a matter of deep concern to leaders in social service and medical social work to see that relations of this sort are developed between the state rehabilitation service and the local people in all states.

As stated previously in this article, it is the purpose of the National Committee for the Disabled to develop a nationwide interest in the welfare of the disabled and direct this interest into channels of effort which experience indicates most likely to succeed. The National Committee is an outgrowth of the Institute for Crippled and Disabled Men which has been conducting research work and pioneering in this field during the past six years. The National Committee membership is to be representative of the entire country. Its program includes the promotion of widespread understanding of the problem of the disabled and possibilities of rehabilitation. It aims to serve as a clearing house for information on this subject, and to assist in making the rehabilitation service of the federal government and the states more effective through the development of a deeper interest in the problem on the part of the general public, as well as employers and agencies whose general service, whether social or medical, brings them in contact with the physically disabled. It proposes to assist in the study of local situations, and recommend plans for adequate programs under local auspices.

Thorough study will be made of legislation now operative and steps taken looking to the enactment of such further legislation as from time to time may prove desirable.

It should be noted at this time that most of the states now organized to render service to the disabled civilian are using funds allotted to them by the federal government, as well as state appropriations. The act providing this federal aid authorized appropriations only until June 30, 1924. Federal aid to the states beyond that date must depend upon further congressional action. Bills authorizing appropriations for another four years
were introduced in both houses during the session recently closed. These bills passed both houses after an amendment reducing the period to three years. However, the appropriations authorized by this legislation were provided for in the second deficiency appropriation which failed to pass before adjournment. It is confidently expected that Congress will not fail at its next session to take the action necessary to continue and extend the service in which such a noteworthy beginning has been made.

The budget for the first two years of work of the National Committee is assured through the generous support of the Commonwealth Fund, the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial and the Trustees of the Institute for Crippled and Disabled Men. Headquarters for the Committee have been established at 245 East 23rd Street, New York City. Inquiries concerning the plans of the Committee and the service it is in a position to render, should be addressed to the Executive Secretary and will be given careful consideration.