

NOTES ON THE ESTABLISHMENT OF ADVICE CENTRES.

There are two basic kinds of advice centres.

- 1. Legal Clinics. These are advice centres where legal advice is given to people on a variety of problems. A legal clinic operates under the supervision of qualified lawyers although not all the workers need to be lawyers. No advice centre can be described as a legal clinic or legal advice office unless properly qualified lawyers are in charge.

A legal clinic is expensive to operate because of the need to pay proper lawyers to work in it.

- 2. Advice Centres. Advice centres which have no lawyers in charge and are run by people who are not lawyers are called by many different names, e.g., advice office, advice bureau, industrial aid centre, complaints centre, citizens advice bureau etc.,

There are many different kinds of advice centres in South Africa now. Some are run by Churches, some by the Black Sash, some by the Trade Unions, some by independent committees. They are all very different from one another.

In this paper we are only considering those advice centres where all help and advice is given free of charge. There are various "helping hand" societies which demand that people pay to join before they can be helped. Very many of these societies are not honest. They charge people monthly fees and then do not give the help required when there is a problem. People should think very carefully before paying money to an organisation which promises to give help with problems. Many people have lost a lot of money by paying for nothing.

IT IS AGAINST THE LAW FOR ANY PERSON WHO IS NOT A LAWYER TO CHARGE MONEY FOR GIVING ADVICE ABOUT A BLACK PERSON'S PASS OR PASS PROBLEMS.

EVERYTHING in this paper refers only to centres where all advice is given free.

Most of the Church and Black Sash advice offices are run in the same kind of way. The Black Sash and the S.A. Council of Churches believe that there is a very important difference between a legal clinic and an advice office.

When a person goes to a lawyer for help with a problem he expects the lawyer to solve the problem for him. It is like going to a doctor. You go to a doctor when you are sick because you don't know how to cure yourself. You expect the doctor to tell you what you must do and what medicine you must take and then you do what you are told and you expect to get better. The doctor has cured you and you have done nothing except to obey his instructions.

It is the same thing when you go to a lawyer. You go because you have a problem which you don't know how to solve. The lawyer listens to your problem and then he decides if you have a good case. He tells you what to do and he does most of the work for you. If you win your case you say thank you to the lawyer because he has won the case for you.

All of us need help and advice from doctors and lawyers sometimes because we all sometimes have big problems which a person without medical or legal training cannot solve. In the same way doctors and lawyers might need an accountant or a bricklayer or a plumber to help them with money problems or building a wall or mending the drains because they are not trained to do these things.

Complicated problems often need/

Complicated problems often need specialist help but the Black Sash and S.A.C.C. believes that everybody wherever they live, whether in South Africa or in another country, has many problems every day which they can solve for themselves if they have information and knowledge about what causes the problem, what the law says about the problem and what is the correct way to set about solving it.

Everywhere in the world, people have problems about housing, pensions, unemployment, wrongful dismissal, overtime pay, retrenchment, notice pay, hire purchase, etc., Here in South Africa black people also have problems because of the pass laws, the citizenship laws, the homelands, removals etc., and because they do not have a vote. In South Africa black people are always being ordered to do things by officials and very often the order is wrongly made and the official is telling a person to do something which is not what the law says he must do. In South Africa people have got used to doing what they are told because they do not have information about what the law says.

We believe that people can often solve their own problems if they are given the information about what the law says and how the structures of administration work. We also believe that if a person learns how to solve a problem and manages his own case once, and succeeds, he will become a more independent person and next time he has a problem he will manage it himself.

Even if a problem cannot be resolved in the way a person wants because of the oppressive laws in South Africa he can still learn that he always has a choice. He can learn that he is not the only person affected by a bad law and he can learn that by working with other people with the same problem he might help to change the way things are done.

The trade unions and civic associations are a good example of this. People join together to take action on common problems and often succeed in having the cause of the problem removed.

For these reasons we believe that an advice office is a teaching place. It does not help people if you do everything for them because that increases their dependancy. They go on thinking about themselves as being persons who can do nothing for themselves. They go on thinking that they must always go on doing exactly what they are told to do. Next time they have a problem they have to find someone to help them to solve it.

An advice office should be a place where people learn about what the cause of their problem is, what the law says about it, what they can do about it and how to begin. The advice office workers are there to teach them and to support them as they struggle to win their case.

The South African Council of Churches has a programme to help people to learn about setting up an advice office. This programme falls under the Home and Family Life division. The director is Mrs. Bernadette Mosala. The field worker is Sheena Duncan who also works with the Black Sash. If you want to start an advice office please write to Sheena Duncan at Khotso House, 42 De Villiers Street, Johannesburg. 2001

Here are some suggestions how you can begin :-

1. The first thing you need is some kind of organisation or committee.

It is not a good idea for a person to try to begin an advice office alone. A person needs a support group of some kind. Many Churches are now getting involved in this work. Sometimes it is just one parish that decides to have an advice centre. Sometimes several Churches decide to work together to have an advice centre. Sometimes a trade union decides to have an advice centre or complaints office.

Sometimes a civic association will do it.

If you think an advice office /

If you think an advice office is needed in your area the first thing to do is to find other people who are interested in the same thing and to get together to plan how it would be best to start in the place where you live.

2. The second thing is work out how you are going to raise the money.

An advice centre does not need to cost much. Many advice offices do not pay workers at all. All the work is done by voluntary workers ; that is, workers who give their time as a service and are paid nothing at all for what they do. If you feel you must have a paid worker then you will need to decide how much the worker is to be paid and how you are going to find the money.

REMEMBER The Fund Raising Act makes it an offence to take any money from members of the public or funding agencies unless the organisation is registered as a Fund Raising Organisation. The Churches are exempt from this and this is one of the reasons why it is best to find out from your local Churches or your Regional Council of Churches if they are prepared to establish an advice centre. They are able to apply for money from funding agencies without any trouble.

In some Church offices there is one paid worker who is responsible for running the office but who gets help from other people working as volunteers.

You cannot raise money by charging people who come for advice because :

- (a) People who need help are often poor and cannot pay at all.
- (b) If you charge a fee you cannot give any advice at all about passes and pass law problems. To do so is to break the law.

3. The third thing is to decide where your office is going to be.

An advice centre needs to be in a place which is easy for people to come to. Churches are often the best place because sometimes a Church is willing to have an advice centre in their hall or in a spare office and they will not charge any rent. If you cannot find a Church in a good position you might have to find an office somewhere but then you will have to pay rent and that means you will have to include an amount for rent in your budget and you will have to find a way of raising the money to pay the rent.

4. The fourth thing is to decide when your office will be open.

This will depend on whether you are going to have a paid worker or not. If you are going to be relying only on voluntary helpers then you will probably find it easier if the office is open in the evenings and on Saturdays when people who work in paid jobs during the day can offer to help outside office hours. If there is a paid worker then the office hours can be decided as is most useful to those in need. Some offices are open Mondays to Fridays in the mornings only. Some are open only three days a week e.g., Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays.

Whatever you decide the important thing is that the office must be open at all the times when you say it is open.

If you say it is open on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays it must always be open on those days.

These offices will only work if people can trust you.

If they are to trust you, you must always be there when you say you will be there.

5. The fifth thing is the most important. Who is going to work in your office?

It is most important to choose advice office workers carefully.

It is not necessary that they be highly educated. They must be able to read and write well, but they do not need to have matric.

An advice office worker needs to be warm and friendly and someone who understands that people have problems which cause them much worry and that even if they are illiterate, they can be very wise and well able to act for themselves once they have information. An advice office worker should never be bossy. She or he must not be the kind of person who orders people to do things.

6. The sixth thing is office furniture.

An advice office does not have to have telephones or typewriters, or expensive furniture. If you are going to teach people how to manage their own problems you need to use the tools they have available. There is no law which says letters or affidavits have to be typewritten. You will need pens and paper and carbon paper because a copy of everything written must always be kept.

You need a carbon book to write down details of cases and you need some file covers so that people's cases with all the documents can be kept safely. You need chairs or benches for people to sit on and a table or desk and a filing cabinet or drawer or cupboards which can be locked.

7. Advertising. The best way to make a new advice office known is through Churches trade unions, civic associations and local newspapers. It is usually slow at the beginning because people are suspicious but after you have managed to help some people and they learn they can trust you, they will tell their neighbours. If you do a good job you will soon have dozens of people coming for help every day.

8. Training. Learning how to run an advice office can be arranged free of charge. If you need training in this please write to Sheena Duncan, Khotso House, 42 De Villiers Street, Johannesburg 2001. The training programme will be arranged to suit you according to where you are and the major problems in your area. Regular information is sent out to all advice centres, as the law changes and new developments take place. This service is also free.

C O N C L U S I O N .



Running an advice office is very responsible work. It is important that people are given accurate information.

It is important that advice office workers care about people and want to help them.

It is something that can only be started with careful thought and proper planning in advance.

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