

NOTES ON NELLIE'S AND ALTERNATIVE SERVICES

I'm writing this paper at this point out of desperation for my sanity - to make some sense out of the incredible frustrations i've feeling working at Nellie's and to offer some suggestions as to how we can most directly improve our working situation in a **SIGNIFICANT** way. And since improving our working situation inevitably comes down to obtaining more money, the question is how we can organize (frustrated and exhausted as we all are) to get that money. But first, back to my frustrations and the source thereof.

Nellie's was initially set up as emergency housing for women with no money in emergency situations and who would therefore be otherwise on the street. Bandid or not, this was a very real need and one which is not being met in most other areas. At Nellie's, as with the women's movement generally, we tried to provide the needed services for women ourselves rather than demanding them from the government. What this inevitably meant though, was taking on a huge amount of work for shit wages (and in many other women's services it was for no money at all) in the name of the cause, in order to get those services set up which the government wasn't ready to do itself.

Setting up the hostel as an "alternative" service and obtaining funding for it was a victory for us in that we were able to have a service established which the government wasn't about to do itself and at the same time, get jobs from the government with little supervision. This meant that the staff could run the hostel collectively, without a boss. But we, the staff, were forced to pay the price for it.

The money we won from welfare was on a per diem basis, which means a productivity deal = the more work we do (the more people we service), the more money they'll give us. And in any case, the funding allotted necessitated understaffing & shit wages.

Running on a minimal budget reinforces the concept of us being an alternative, that we must be providing a service quite different or even opposed to the regular government services. The staff is to work out of dedication, for love not money. (Sounds suspiciously like what they say about housework!) Dedication becomes a blackmail to be used against us, just as it is a discipline on women and social service workers in general. Presumably it is because it's our nature as women or in the case of an "alternative" service, because we are "liberated" women that we can AFFORD to do such demanding work for the sake of others. This means, in effect, that whatever freedom we have gained in not centering our lives around men, we end up making up for by undertaking the large time commitment & responsibility that this job entails. And what "liberation" we had won becomes quickly short-circuited.

In the meantime, the state is getting a bargain: more labour for less money. The state is able to use the impetus of women's struggle for its own interests (to fill in the gaps in social services & try to appease us women for awhile) and on its own terms (with a minimal amount of money). The state wants us to resocialize people, to have them become more functional in this society. This means that they should be out working if at all physically possible (and we know what kind of jobs the women at Nellie's get) or they should be quietly stuck away while they collect their government cheques & receive the social treatment that lets them know that they are considered to be parasites. The

service that Nellie's provides meets an immediate need, but we don't want to extend state control nor have to pay the price of providing a social bandaid out of our low wages and physical & mental exhaustion.

The extent to which the hostel has been a bargain of a social service serving the interests of the state is the extent to which we've lacked the money & power to be anything else. As women, we've been used to getting low wages or no money at all, making it all the more difficult for us to struggle for higher wages. We also need more funding in order to improve our working situation, that is, to reduce our workload & hours. Not coincidentally, lack of money is also the fundamental problem of the women who use Nellie's - not lack of feminist inspiration! We have nothing other than referrals (especially to welfare) & free room & board for a few days to offer women in the way of helping them to deal with their immediate material situation. As the staff refer women to other agencies, we facilitate the clientèle flow between social agencies. There's NO ROOM for us to be a counter-service. The cycle of dependance that we, as a feminist staff, are to help the residents break out of is obviously more than a head space. You need money to be independant. While Nellie's theoretically provides emergency housing for women in crisis, what becomes clear from working there is that their whole lives are crises. And not only theirs - Canada's highest rate of suicide is amongst social service workers! Hm-mm-m. If the residents had enough money of their own, would there even be a need for crisis centres like Nellie's?

Vicki says that we have been naive in pressuring the board since they have no power. The staff pressuring though, has happened in recognition that WE haven't had the power - either to decide on the size

of the budget (government approved) or how it is to be distributed (board approved). When the board's power is not defined, it makes it difficult for us as workers to act as workers. In any case, the board members are more powerful as individuals than we are &, as non-staff, they inevitably have a different relationship to the hostel. They cannot share the same frustrations: it is not their livelihood nor where they work their guts out. The power they have as individuals could be used to make a scandal out of our working conditions if they did feel the same frustrations.

In the process of pressuring the board though, we as staff have been able to build our power. For the first time, it has been clearly articulated to all staff and board members that all hostel policies are the staff's jurisdiction & that the staff have control over who enters & remains on the board. Although it involves more unwaged work for us (meetings outside of our regular work hours, etc.) to keep up with the board's functioning, it means that the board is now accountable to us. In fact, we're now in the situation where WE are being asked to define the board's responsibilities & powers.

As much as we need to & will continue to confront the board on issues i think that it's important to see how they function basically as mediator between us and the state (ie the government, charitable organizations, churches & wherever else we can get money from). Just as the board will never have the power to determine the amount of funding we receive, we have to look beyond Nellie's in order to get that money we want. And in order to have the strength to win it, we need to connect up with women outside of Nellie's. i see the struggle against doing service work out dedication & for low wages as basically a women's struggle & of particular

relevance to "alternative" services, since we've been given the largest dose of dedication to work by. Anything we can do to further this struggle, even on the level of breaking through the blackmail to publicize our discontent, can be of use to women in similar situations, not to mention ourselves. Here i'm thinking in terms of something that could be written for TOW or elsewhere.

I'm also proposing that for starts, we call an informal meeting reasonably soon of women we know in other "alternative" services who would be interested in discussing our work situations. Ann Cox has talked about setting up a meeting of feminist women in "straight" social services to talk about their frustrations with their jobs. As "alternative" social service workers who sre supposed to be the furthest away from that traditional role, i think that we would have alot to say about the role and working conditions of social service workers.

If it is not too late, we could as well call a meeting of the toronto hostels to see, if on the basis of a critique of how the government uses alternative services, we could take a united position for a significantly larger per diem rate.

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