

# Social engineers needed for reform

Research and development — the process that put microwave ovens into kitchens and man into space — holds equal promise for improving the welfare system and other human services.

According to Jack Rothman, University of Michigan professor of social work, the same techniques used for decades by science and industry can be successfully applied to problems in public assistance, child care, preventive health care and other social services.

He explains how in "Social R&D: Research and Development in the Human Services," just published by Prentice-Hall. The book, aimed both at researchers and educators on campus and professionals in the social service fields, presents systematic and encompassing guidelines for converting innovative ideas into effective programs.

"RESEARCH and development is the link between the knowledge producers and the ultimate consumers," Rothman explains.

In a company like General Electric, for example, it is the team of engineers who test new research findings relevant to the design of a new home appliance. At NASA (National Aeronautics and Space Administration), the same testing phase goes into the invention of space satellites.

But no such process has been evident in the social service fields, Rothman asserts.

"Hundreds of articles are published on group behavior and social services delivery — only to be read by other scholars. The scholars argue that practitioners should be more sophisticated in applying the results of current research."

"The practitioners complain that the research is garbled by technical jargon and is often irrelevant to the 'real world'."

"The result has been a giant communications gap between researchers, practitioners and policy makers," Rothman says. "What is needed is a kind of 'social engineer' who could convert scientific data into workable programs, analogous to the traditional engineer in science and industry."

ROTHMAN and his associates assumed that role themselves as they conducted the U-M's Community Intervention Project (CIP) under a grant from the National Institute of Mental Health.

For 10 years CIP collected research data, converted them to "action guidelines," made them operational in 22 lo-

cal human services agencies dealing in such areas as family counseling, juvenile detention, drug abuse and child mental health, and evaluated the results.

"The methodology works. In just nine months we recorded dozens of examples of successful interventions: task forces began working on problems related to education and unemployment; outreach services were provided to clients of neighborhood health clinic; a rotating library of toys, books and other equipment was established for 10 day care centers."

"Though we were not able to bring about the elimination of mental illness or poverty or the bursting forth of racial harmony, the number of tangible, goal-specific accomplishments was impressive," Rothman says. "R and D methods can aid the design of both large scale programs for a large client population and clinical techniques for the treatment of individuals."

Rothman's book is especially timely, notes Columbia University Professor Amitai Etzioni in his foreword, "as the country enters the third leg of the movement from Big Government to Anti-Government, to Effective and Responsive Government."

"THE LATE '60s and '70s have seemed characterized by a reaction against the excessive optimism invested in the 'Great Society' programs. But while most of the public were down on the government as it was, they had a long and impressive list of matters they wished the government to provide for, such as support for college students and National Health Insurance."

The next step, Etzioni says, is for less but more government; a smaller budget, fewer regulations, less paperwork — but more service delivery and more responsiveness to the people.

"Social R and D is the only way to find out — without massive waste, coercion and alienation — which programs work and work well," Etzioni concludes.

Rothman's comprehensive volume explains how to go about it, covering a basic introduction to research and development, steps in the R and D process, conclusions and case studies. "It is not the last word on the subject of social R and D," the U-M author notes. "It is among the first. Yet we believe it is a significant conceptual breakthrough for the application of social science knowledge in confronting the serious social and human problems that plague contemporary society."

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