

# Dealing with bureaucracies

## Families help their members cope

This is the eighth in a series of 15 articles exploring "American Families in Transition." In this article, sociologist Marvin B. Sussman discusses how families can cope, individually and collectively, with modern bureaucracies.

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By Marvin B. Sussman, special writer.

Despite dire warnings from some quarters that the family is in trouble, the family as a form of human organization survives.

It not only survives but does well by its members. It cares for its own and provides its young with skills and values they need to function in the world, to form relationships, and to deal with society and its organizations.

To provide for its members — both young and old — in today's society, the family must obtain goods and services from other institutions like schools, corporations, government agencies, hospitals.

It must deal with bureaucracies that control the resources needed by family members to survive and thrive.

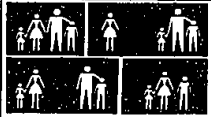
But families have neither relinquished all their major roles to bureaucracies, as some critics have argued, nor are they helpless — as individual units or in organized groups — in dealing with large bureaucratic organizations.

**FAMILIES TODAY**, as in yesterday, are the primary care system for their members, from the newborn to the elderly. Although organizations and institutions provide specialized services such as health care, relatively few persons grow up or live out their lives in institutions.

Even among those over the age of 65, only about 5 percent are in long-term care facilities such as nursing homes or homes for the aged.

This is striking evidence that families are the best suited structures to provide growing human beings the nur-

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Families in Transition

ture, love, emotional support, caring, solidarity and instruction required for survival and for a reasonably satisfying life.

Inevitably in our complex society, a large part of the institution, adding complexity to the rules, and disrupting orderly functioning of the organization. When company officials order a manager to move to another part of the country, they assume that the manager will see that his or her family moves. The family's reaction has not traditionally been the company's concern.

On their surface bureaucracies are impersonal and rational. They are governed by rules, and are thus presumably fair and immune to personal influence. They are, ideally, systems designed to permit easy social exchange among strangers in a world that is too large and complex for exchange to be governed solely by kinship, friendship, and other informal, personal relationships.

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LOOKING AT the individual as a member of a family complicates the work of the institution, adding complexity to the rules, and disrupting orderly functioning of the organization. When company officials order a manager to move to another part of the country, they assume that the manager will see that his or her family moves. The family's reaction has not traditionally been the company's concern.

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TO NEGOTIATE bureaucratic institutions to get what their members need (and have a right to), families learn to use informal and personal resources for leverage on the institution. Every formal bureaucratic institution has informal ties to the community through the kinship and friendship circles of the people who staff the organization.

For example, a mother who wishes to see that her child gets fair treatment at school may visit the child's teacher, volunteer for field-trips or tutoring, or work with the parent-teacher organization. These gestures are not intended to bring undue influence, but they insure that the child will be visible to the teacher, a person rather than an anonymous face in a classroom group.

The point is that the family uses the people within the bureaucracy to get what it needs for its members to live good lives. And it teaches its young how to go about using such personal resources to grease the machinery in what can otherwise be the frustrating, rule-bound obstacles of bureaucratic encounters.

Let's look at a hypothetical case: a 16-year-old young man — call him Jack — tries to get a job and is told that he needs a driver's license and a Social Security card. He goes to the Social Security office, fills out forms, and waits what seems a very long time. Finally he is told that he needs a birth certificate to get his card and number.

By this time business hours are end-

ing and Jack goes home. He tells his mother about his frustrations. He doesn't know where to get either his birth certificate or a driver's license.

But his mother's cousin has a friend in the city clerk's office who can give him the information and direction he needs. She phones the cousin who tells Jack to come to her office the next day and she will introduce him to her friend.

**THIS CASE** — not at all untypical — demonstrates how families can use the informal system to get things done. Not only will Jack be able to get what he needs, but he will be learning important lessons about society and bureaucracy.

He will learn that when he is frustrated in dealings with formal organizations, he may be able to work that system through "connections." There is nothing objectionable or demeaning in such action, since the bureaucracy wants to serve its clientele but is often unable to do so efficiently because of regulations and because of unenthusiastic workers.

Some families have greater skill and resources in using this informal system of connections than others. The well-educated and wealthy are more likely to know people in power positions, and they know how to enter and make themselves visible in bureaucratic systems. When their children need jobs, these families know where to send them.

Sometimes families band together with other families to get something done. Their objective is to exert pressure on bureaucracies by forming organizations with programs designed to obtain sympathetic public support and credibility, and with implied threats to replace elected officials if they do not heed the messages for action from these organizations.

**TWO SUCH** organizations are MADD, the acronym for Mothers Against Drunk Drivers, and SLAM, which stands for Concerned Citizens for Stronger Legislation Against Child Molesters.

MADD originated with a number of families in which a member had died from an accident involving a drunk driver. Many other families soon joined its ranks. Working through local chapters, they have been conducting mass media campaigns aimed at educating the public and using the voting franchise to bring about stricter laws against drunk drivers and more severe



penalties by judges ruling in such cases.

SLAM had its origins in California when Patti Lindebaugh's granddaughter was kidnapped, raped, tortured and strangled before her third birthday. Within two years the organization has attracted more than 30,000 members nationwide.

In California the group was successful in changing the law so that molesters receive mandatory prison sentences. In the past, the majority of child molesters were never jailed. In 1980, for example, it is reported that only 15 percent went to jail, 25 percent were sent to a state hospital, and 60 percent were placed on probation.

This group, with its political, educational, and proposed legislative programs, is beginning to have a real impact.

**THERE ARE** SLAM organizations in Nebraska, New York, Colorado, Washington, and Illinois, and elsewhere its activities are receiving national attention. In Florida a scoutmaster who pleaded guilty to molesting some of his charges was sentenced to 60 years in prison, with all but 15 years suspended and the rest on probation, despite a re-

quest for leniency by the mother of two of the boys.

It is obvious that the functionaries of bureaucracies, the courts, police, legislatures, human services agencies, are responding to these family coalitions. This illustrates the point that a collective of families organized around a specific and meaningful objective can have influence and power, and that bureaucracies can be changed.

Families and bureaucracies need one another. They have different functions to perform but they must tolerate and complement each other. Families have developed techniques and skills to handle the demands of bureaucracies. When internal resources are not sufficient to do this, families will increasingly band together and engage in collective action.

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