

"Where there is no vision, the people perish."

—Old Testament: Proverbs xxix, 18

Nowhere to Turn

One measure of the alertness and worth of a community is the way it takes care of its young, its sick and its troubled members. By that standard, Long Island is deplorably below par. Last week NEWSDAY printed a five-part series by Reporter Pat Herman titled "Nowhere to Turn," the result of a month-long survey of 38 social agencies and dozens of Long Island hospitals and institutions. The overall conclusion: "Nassau, the fastest growing county in the country and her sister Suffolk, are as slowly paced as backwoods communities, in developing social services for their citizens."

Some Items:

- Nassau County, with a population of 1,087,000, spends only \$11 million a year on social welfare. Westchester County, with a little more than half the population, spends \$25 million.
- The new \$600,000 detention home for children in East Meadow has not a single psychiatrist, psychologist or social worker on its staff. Although its reception room is brightly decorated, the children themselves are herded into cell-like, locked cubicles with only a bed and wooden table.
- There is not a single county-wide non-sectarian family agency to give counseling on all Long Island. Westchester has three.
- The only low-cost psychiatric service for Nassau is Meadowbrook Hospital's 28-bed ward and adult out-patient clinic. It has a long waiting list. Suffolk has no facilities at all.
- Many public officials, like Children's Court Judge James N. Gehrig, are totally unqualified for their jobs. For example, George J. Kriss, director of the East Meadow Children's Shelter, says that "the children in here have a little bit of the devil in them (and) don't need psychiatric help."

Wayward Child

The list of abuses stretches on and on. As usual it is the middle-income group—the largest on the Island—that is hardest hit. Upper income earners can afford to buy medical services. Lower income groups get financial help from the county departments of welfare and health. But in the middle, social, medical and psychiatric help is almost impossible to find. "Nassau," says Reporter Herman, "the same county that boasts the lowest infant mortality rate in the country, offers virtually no help to the parent with a seriously disturbed child."

Who Is to Blame?

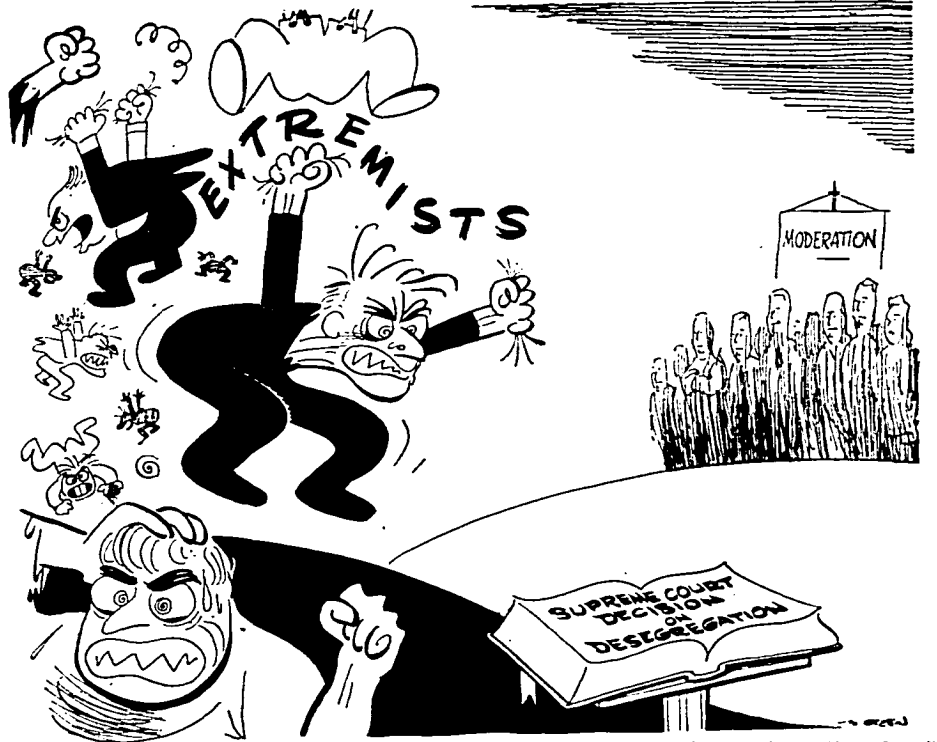
In part, the Nassau and Suffolk county governments must accept responsibility. In 1954, New York State passed the Community Mental Health Services Act, providing for an expansion of low-cost psychiatric aid. The state offered to match one-half of the funds put up by any community, to be supervised by a local mental health board. Nassau County Executive Holly Patterson dragged his feet for almost two years before appointing the board. (Westchester meanwhile put up \$600,000 and got \$300,000 from the state.)

Wayward Society

The Nassau County Medical Society bears even more of the responsibility. Under the guise of opposing "socialization of medicine," the society stubbornly resists all attempts to increase medical and psychiatric care for patients who cannot afford it themselves. Long Islanders themselves are also responsible. Few have known how bad the social welfare conditions are on the Island (see County Irritant) and as a result there has been little pressure to improve facilities.

There are some scattered signs that the situation is changing. Voluntary groups have begun to spring up to raise money for badly needed facilities in their own communities. But it is a small beginning. The people of Long Island must demand that their county government get to work on the problem immediately. They must also let their doctors, the County Medical Society and everyone else responsible, know that Long Island's social welfare facilities are a shame and a disgrace.

We are not caring for our troubled children. We are not ministering to our unfortunate sick. We are violating—on Long Island—every moral and even Biblical injunction by turning our backs on the helpless members of our own community.



County Irritant

The Shame of Long Island's Social Services

Freeport—Thank you for your series of articles "Nowhere to Turn." In the article in which you interviewed Judge James N. Gehrig, some of his answers to vital, pertinent questions were, in part: "... you can draw your own conclusions ...". "I refuse to comment" (twice). "You'll have to find out for yourself." "... what do you expect?"



Judge Gehrig

I, for one, expect straightforward answers from a man in so vital a position as Judge Gehrig's, a position in which he has to administer to children. One of these children might be expected to behave like this, but not the Judge. If this expresses his attitude, maybe he ought to step down and let a big ten-year-old take over.

—L. C. F.

Blasts Gehrig's Views

Hempstead—Congratulations on your "Nowhere to Turn" series. Among other things, I was shocked to read Judge Gehrig's answers to the questions put to him, particularly the one "Where in Nassau county, your honor, can a child go for psychiatric help if his parents cannot pay?" And his answer "That you'll have to find out for yourself." A man in public office such as Judge Gehrig should be dismissed for his refusal to help the public.

—A Mother

Dental Clinics Needed

Elmont—I would like to commend you on your articles "Nowhere to Turn," by Pat Herman. The facts presented are certainly a disgrace to Nassau and its special interest groups and Republican politicians who do nothing to help the lower-income families in their social welfare problems.

I would like to suggest another area that you might investigate, that of the practically non-existent dental clinics in Nassau. Dentistry is a very expensive item not covered by health insurance plans, and a great many children in our area have to forego necessary dental work because their families cannot afford private dentists.

—Mrs. H. C.

'Borderline' Children

Freeport—I read Pat Herman's articles, "Nowhere to Turn" with a great deal of interest, and I thought you would be interested in what the same concern as you obviously have had, did to me.

I was formerly a New York City teacher who

had taught classes for retarded children. When I moved out to the Island, I was interested in what my new community was doing in this area. Appalled by the paucity of facilities, I decided to start a one-room day school for retarded children. I purposely selected what we call "borderline children," children who were close to normal in ability but who had not achieved their potential because of improper handling.

During the four years I have received a number of children who should have but could not function in a normal classroom—children who were functioning as retarded but were emotionally disturbed and therefore needed extra help for their individual progress. I will not go into the ramifications, but we have received many letters attesting to our success—success that a properly trained person could help these disturbed and nearly normal children to achieve.

I thought you would be interested in knowing of one small program that has successfully met the challenge of what to do with the child who needs that little extra help not available through our public program.

—Gertrude K. Berman

A Case in Point

Hempstead—I am one of the many parents who is seeking help for an emotionally upset child. I have applied to a public assistance society for help for our child. Our application has been in for eight weeks without any response. This situation has gone on for about two years. We have sought help through our doctor and other channels but to no avail. The Nassau County Guidance Clinic would not accept an application from us because of the long waiting list for help. Our child is still in desperate need of help. Something must be done for us and for the many cases like ours.

Thank you Newsday, for bringing to the attention of the public the need for such help on Long Island.

—A Concerned Parent

Two Agencies

Levittown—Bravo for Pat Herman's excellent articles popularizing the need for social service facilities in Nassau. May I call your attention to two services of professional help not mentioned by you: The mid-Nassau Community Guidance Center in Hicksville, and the free Adult Education Consultation Center in Levittown, a rather unique and unpublicized service.

Thanks again for bringing to the attention of your readers such a vital community problem.

—Doris G. Gold

All letters must bear the writer's name and address. These will be withheld on request.—Editor.