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Social Service Programs: Appraisal of State and Local Records

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Archivists have for many years expressed concern about appraising records that may be duplicated, in one form or another, at more than one level of government. To illustrate some of these problems and concerns, social service records were selected as the focus of this article, although the topic could just as easily have been labor records, highway records, or the records of any other function under the jurisdiction of more than one level of government. This analysis will answer two questions central to the appraisal of social service case files. First, is the information contained in case files statistically summarized elsewhere, either in state or local welfare department records? Second, if so, are there other valid reasons for preserving the case files?

The professional literature has little to offer the archivist facing the task of appraising social service records. Eight articles in the American Archivist published between 1960 and 1980 present only platitudes on the value of social service records, especially case files. Some of the articles suggest that, primarily because of confidentiality considerations, case files ought not to be preserved and provide sample retention periods. To the contrary, others assert, while confidentiality is indeed a problem, it can be overcome and, in and of itself, is not a reason to dispose of these historically valuable records. But none of these articles explains how to go about appraising the files, nor do they examine the relationship between the case files and related records created at the same or other levels of government.

Without guidance from the literature, archivists should begin by asking certain questions. First, should social service activities be documented? Given the extent
of social service programs in twentieth century society, no one would argue that preserving documentation of them is in any way inappropriate. If archivists agree that preserving records to allow for a full understanding of twentieth century society is an important goal, then we have no choice but to retain records of programs sanctioned by society, including those providing services to the needy. Were archivists to ignore these programs, they would be guilty of neglecting their professional responsibilities.

After dispensing with the question of whether or not to preserve, there is the more difficult question of specifically what to preserve. The best way to answer this is to analyze the available documentation, determine what information it contains, and establish relationships among the different records. In Ohio, where the welfare system is run directly by each of the eighty-eight counties under direction from and accountable to the state Department of Public Welfare, the scope of social service records is quite large. Based on inventories conducted between 1969 and 1977, there were in 1980 approximately fifty thousand cubic feet of case files. This figure does not include case files generated by county or state residential institutions or case files to be generated in the future.

These files document the bulk of the work of Ohio's social service agencies, and they provide a tremendous amount of information about the lives of the recipients of social services. Furthermore, there are not only case files to analyze, but the administrative record series created in the course of conducting the agencies' work as well. The scope of social service records is not only large, but diverse. The task of the archivist is to select from this mass of records those necessary to provide adequate documentation of the social service system and the people it serves. As with any complex task, this one is most readily approached by breaking it down into smaller tasks. The first step is ascertaining what information to preserve; the second is determining which records contain that information and how best to go about preserving them.

In approaching the issue of what to preserve, it is
useful to keep in mind T.R. Schellenberg's distinction between evidential and informational values of records. Documenting the functions and operations of the social service agencies is relatively simple and need not be dwelled on to any great extent here. Archivists should pay close attention to the tried and true rule of basic archival appraisal: identify those records that contain readily accessible information on the organization, functions, policies, procedures, decisions, and operations of the creating agency. Beyond this basic step, there is the endlessly debatable segment of the appraisal process--analysis of the informational values of records. Still keeping with Schellenberg's definition, archivists need to determine what information these records contain on persons, places, or subjects. Then, of course, the archivist will determine how important that information is and how much of it ought to be preserved.

One of the most useful methods of decision making is to pose a series of questions about the problem at hand and then use the answers as a guide to a solution. In this analysis of social service records in Ohio, four questions and their answers were instrumental in formulating an opinion on the value of case files. They are given here in the order in which they ought to be asked.

1. Is the information contained in case files useful for research? Yes, it is. This is probably the most uniform, comprehensive source of information available about a particular segment of our population.

2. How much of the available information is necessary to provide adequate documentation of the subject matter in question? A simple answer would be enough to provide a statistically accurate representation of the recipients of the services. There are many ways this can be done and many factors to take into account. First and foremost is that no case file duplicates another; each one is unique. This does not mean, however, that each file should be retained. It does mean that great care must be taken to assure that a comprehensive and representative sample is preserved. Is it necessary, for example, to retain some files from each of Ohio's
eighty-eight counties? If not, how many? And which ones? Differences between the coal counties of the southeast and the farm counties of the northwest are at least as significant as the differences between night and day, even though they do have certain similarities, such as total population and the sizes of their cities. The differences between metropolitan Franklin County and adjacent rural Pickaway County are equally as great as the differences between some counties separated by 150 or 200 miles. Statisticians, sociologists, demographers, and geographers would all have useful insights to offer in the decision of how many and which case files should be preserved. (This is an excellent example of an instance when archivists should cooperate with representatives of other disciplines to assure retention of appropriate records.)

3. How easily can the desired data be extracted from the records? This depends upon the nature of the documents themselves. The more consistent the forms used from place to place and from time to time, the easier it will be for the researcher to extract data from the documents. The greater the degree of central control over the welfare system in the state, the greater the degree of uniformity. If the distribution of social services is substantially under local control, the greater will be the degree of variation, and the greater the difficulty of conducting successful statewide studies.

In Ohio there is a substantial degree of uniformity. As early as the first years of the twentieth century, county home administrators were required to submit information about the daily movement of inmates to the Division of State Charities on forms prescribed by the division. This daily statistical record was a summation of information kept in the daily record of patients, which listed the names of persons admitted to and discharged from the county home each day. These forms were required to be kept and, hence, would be found in all eighty-eight county homes (except, of course, many have been lost or destroyed over the years). They would
also be found in state agency records, if they survived the test of time. This example leads us directly into the fourth and most important question.

4. Is the information unique, or can it be found in other, more accessible and more concise record series? For all practical purposes, the answer is yes. While it is true that there are many other sources of personal information about people, that information does not pertain directly to this particular group of people, that is, the recipients of social services. This analysis of social service records in the early and middle twentieth century indicates that case files are a unique record indeed worthy of preservation.

Records from the Franklin County Department of Public Welfare and the Ohio State Department of Public Welfare were analyzed for the years from 1910 to 1940 and from 1958 to 1970. Case files in both periods were remarkably similar. They include a variety of forms and correspondence. Applications for assistance—sometimes called face sheets or statements of fact—include, for both periods, a wealth of personal information: name, date and place of birth, citizenship, residence, length of residence at current address, residences of preceding years (usually for the most recent three years), marital status, living arrangements (whether living alone, with a relative, and the like), income (whether the applicant owned any real or personal property and its type and value), health, war service (if any), work history, and more. Significantly, the information on the applications changed little over a relatively long period of time.

In addition to the face sheet, case files include correspondence, medical reports (when applicable), and case workers' notes of interviews with clients. These latter items offer anecdotal information about the lives of recipients of social services that is not available in any other source. Following the analysis of the case files, other record series that might duplicate or summarize the information contained in the case files were analyzed. No such records were located.

Several record series from the Franklin County Home, a predecessor of the current welfare department,
were studied for the early years of the twentieth century. The most likely place to find good statistics on the local welfare program seemed to be within the records of the providing agency. For the period 1910-35, there were four record series which, judging from their titles, might have contained summaries of at least some of the information in the case files. The daily record between 1910 and 1927 included the names of patients admitted or discharged each day. Between 1930 and 1945, the daily record lists only the number of patients admitted or discharged each day. A similar record, Daily Movement of Inmates, covering the period 1910-35, also shows the number of inmates admitted or discharged each day and the total number of inmates in the home each day. It also includes monthly totals in each of these categories. A copy of this record was required to be submitted each month to the Division of State Charities. Neither of these records could conceivably substitute for the case files.

Containing much more information than either of the daily records is the admission record. This included essential personal information about each inmate: name, age, date of birth, case number, date admitted, condition upon admission, and date of discharge or death. While much more satisfactory a record than the other daily records, the admission record does not come close to the completeness of the case files.

Also containing more statistical information than the daily records is the county home annual report. The annual report for the Franklin County Home for 1912 includes the following patient information: total number in house at the close of the year; total admitted during the year; total discharged and died during the year; total number born in the home; and the number of inmates in each of four age groupings (less than 3 years old; 3-16 years; 16-60 years; and more than 60 years). Causes of pauperism were also noted, showing the total number of inmates in each category: idiotic, epileptic, and those disabled by disease, loss of limb, deformity, blindness, or deafness. Finally, the annual report tabulated the inmates by nativity, but in only three categories: Ohio, other states, and foreign countries.
Although this annual report does include a lot of useful data, so much information in the case files is excluded that it would be wrong not to retain at least a sample of the case files for research purposes.

The state Department of Public Welfare (DPW) was not created until 1921 and did not play a significant role as a regulatory or oversight agency until 1939, well after the New Deal began. Before that time, there is little statistical information at the state level that pertains to county welfare activities; hence, there is no duplication of information that should be taken into account during appraisal.

After 1939 and the DPW's assumption of ultimate responsibility for welfare programs in Ohio, one would expect to find substantial duplication of information. However, the annual reports of the DPW offer only the most sketchy statistics on county welfare activities. The 1950 annual report lists total expenditures for every assistance program in each county. There is no data whatsoever on the number or type of recipients. The 1969 annual report shows the total expenditure in each category of assistance and the average number of recipients per month in the entire state. There is no individual county data.

The DPW also issues an Annual Report of County Homes. These include more information than do the regular annual reports, but the information applies only to residents of the county homes—a very small portion of each county's welfare recipients. The data included is in extremely broad categories not suitable for refined statistical analysis. Only two age groups are listed (below age 65 and above age 65), and only 3 categories of nativity are listed (Ohio, other states, and foreign born). The Annual Report of County Homes for 1956 is not significantly different from the one for 1972.

The DPW's public assistance monthly statistics seemed a likely place to find the kind of information that might duplicate the case files. These records include a table for each of the assistance programs and list, for each county, the total number of cases, total number of persons, and the total dollar amount expended. Referring to Schellenberg once again, the statistical
summaries contain only evidential value and add nothing to an understanding of who is being served by the welfare system. The case files seem to be the only records with worthwhile informational value.

The most important point of this analysis is that no statistical record contains the range of qualitative information found in the case files. Although some of the information in the case files can be found, in summary form, in some of the statistical reports, it is quantitative in nature and, as such, does not illustrate the clientele of the welfare system. Given the limitations of the statistical reports, a small representative sample of case files should be retained to preserve the kind of qualitative information not reproduced in the statistical tables.

It is important to point out that this analysis is necessarily germane only to Ohio. It may apply in other states; if it does, it does so by accident, for each state is unique and operates its programs in its own fashion. In an age when people are demanding pat answers to difficult questions, this analysis can serve only as a formula for appraisal, not as a predetermined appraisal judgment. Archivists must analyze the records in question, compare them to the other available documentation, consult appropriate experts to answer technical questions--especially if sampling is involved--and make the most informed decision based on the best information available. This formula will in all likelihood lead to as many different appraisal judgments as there are archivists doing the appraising, but this is all to the good anyway. As Schellenberg noted over twenty-five years ago, "complete consistency in judging informational value is as undesirable as it is impossible of accomplishment."³

NOTES


Ibid., 149.

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