
REAGAN'S SOCIAL SERVICES BLOCK GRANT:
WHAT IT IS AND WHAT YOU CAN DO ABOUT IT

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	2
Block Grants: What Are They?.	2
Overview of Current Block Grant Budget Proposals	5
Title XX of the Social Security Act: An Example of a Block Grant.	9
Potential Impacts of the Social Services Block Grant.	13
Federal Level	14
State Level	16
Summary.	20
Guidelines for Action, What You Can Do	22
Bibliography	23

Abstract

This paper discusses the general nature of block grants, discusses social service experience with block grants via Title XX of the Social Security Act, and describes the current social services block grant proposal and its potential impact on the clients and organizations involved in the social services system. The paper has been prepared as a basis for action. The final page presents a series of questions that can be asked by concerned persons in analyzing and influencing the implementation of the social services block grant.

INTRODUCTION

The current budget proposals before Congress, authored and promulgated by the Reagan administration, will have profound impact upon the total social services system, including public and private agencies, their administrators and staff and the people they serve. This paper focuses on one part of these proposals, the Social Services Block Grant proposal,¹ and explores its possible consequences for the services system.²

Block grants are not new to the social services field. Indeed one of the five block grants passed prior to 1975 is in the social services area. Title XX of the Social Security Act, enacted in 1975, funds a variety of social service programs such as day care, foster care, adult services and services to juveniles. However, the distinctive feature of the 1981 proposals is the inclusion of an extremely broad variety of programs combined with a cutback in the total amount of funding for the included services.

BLOCK GRANTS; WHAT ARE THEY?

The purpose this initial section is to discuss the general nature of block grants as background for specific discussion. Historically, there have been three general ways in which federal monies have been funneled to the states: revenue sharing, block grants, and categorical grants. Each of these mechanisms emphasizes different federal objectives. From the state perspective, the least controlling is

¹Although this proposal is only one of the suggested block grants, its analysis is illustrative of the issues posed by the other block grant proposals and will aid in the understanding of any block grant program.

²Many thanks to Wendy Wintermute for comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

general revenue sharing; block grants are in the middle; and categorical grants the most restrictive.

Revenue sharing, known formally as the State and Local Fiscal Assistance Act of 1972, channels money to existing governmental units via a formula based primarily upon population and relative need. There are no restrictions upon the uses of the funds by state governments. However, there are broad restrictions upon the uses of the funds by local governments. The funds allocated to local governments may only be used for "ordinary and necessary capital expenditures" or for "ordinary and necessary maintenance and operating expenses" for eight broad priority areas.³ (Title I of the State and Local Fiscal Assistance Act of 1972 in Nathan, 1975: 374)

Block grants vary in restrictiveness. Each of the five block grant programs in existence is different and each has also changed over time. Title XX of the Social Security Act, the social services block grant, will be discussed in detail in the third section of this paper. However, in general, block grants have five basic characteristics.⁴

1. Federal aid is authorized for a wide range of activities within a broadly defined functional area.
2. Recipients have substantial discretion in identifying problems and designing programs and allocating resources to deal with them.

³The priority areas include public safety, environmental protection, public transportation, health, recreation, libraries, social services for the poor or aged, and financial administration.

⁴The Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations (ACIR) issued a report entitled Block Grants: A Comparative Analysis in October 1977. This thorough analysis provides a useful framework for understanding block grants.

3. Administrative, fiscal reporting, planning and other federally imposed requirements are kept to the minimum amount necessary to ensure that national goals are being accomplished.
4. Federal aid is distributed on the basis of a statutory formula, which results in narrowing federal administrators' discretion and providing a sense of fiscal certainty to recipients.
5. Eligibility provisions are statutorily specific and favor general purpose governmental units as recipients and elected officials and administrative generalists as decision makers. (ACIR, 1977: 6)

Categorical grants, on the other hand, are usually the result of legislation with specific goals and regulations as to how the money should be spent. Contrasting categorical grants with the five characteristics of block grants one finds that: 1. they are usually targeted for a specific purpose; 2. recipients have little discretion in defining the problems and designing the programs to meet them; 3. federal requirements restrict use of money in line with federal objectives; 4. aid is distributed based on compliance with federal regulation; and 5. usually money is given to state agencies and not to state or county governments.

For example, Martha Derthick in a study of the impact of federal aid to public assistance programs in Massachusetts (Derthick, 1970), finds that the following federal goals were the motivation behind the federal categorical grants for welfare programs: adequacy of assistance, equity of administration, efficiency of administration, the giving of services (versus only money grants) and the professionalization of personnel. These goals were then implemented with detailed regulations specifying how they were to be met and how monies were to be spent. The monies were (and still are) directed to the state welfare agency.

OVERVIEW OF CURRENT BLOCK GRANT BUDGET PROPOSALS

The social services block grant proposal must be placed in perspective as part of larger budgetary goals. As Alice Rivlin, director of the Congressional Budget Office, succinctly stated in testimony before the Senate Committee on the Budget, "In response to the poor performance of the economy, President Reagan proposed a dramatic shift in economic policies designed to reduce inflation, increase economic growth, and balance the budget by 1984." (Rivlin, 1981) The three words, "balance the budget," are code words which imply a wealth of other traditionally Republican goals such as decentralization and reducing the role of the federal government. Those primarily interested in the social services portion of the budget must keep these overall goals clearly in mind while analyzing the proposals which will affect social services.

Analysis of the current proposals is difficult because there is little information about their exact nature.⁵ The traditional sources within the executive and legislative branches as well as within special interest groups have been exploited for information about the current proposal. Even as of April 23 the details of the block grant proposals have not been revealed to Congress.

⁵This paper will not discuss the ways of influencing the political process of determining the nature of the block grant proposals. This is an extremely important component, but one which must be the topic of another paper or one which the reader must take up with his/her interest groups and political representatives. This paper is based on the premise that some type of social services block grant will be implemented.

TABLE 1

SERVICES TO BE INCLUDED IN THE SOCIAL SERVICES BLOCK GRANT

Title XX
 Foster Care
 Child Welfare
 Runaway Youth
 Community Services Administration
 Rehabilitation Services
 Developmental Disabilities
 Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment

Source: Office of Management and Budget, Draft of Proposed Legislation, March 8, 1981.

TABLE 2

HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES PROGRAMS (BLOCK GRANTS)

Program Cuts (Outlays) from the January Budget
 (In millions of dollars)

1981	0
1982	1,836
1983	3,129
1984	3,330
1985	3,316
1986	3,397

Source: Fiscal Year 1982 Budget Revisions, Appendix C. (U.S. Congress, CBO, 1981)

So we must proceed on the basis of the information that is available. The social services and community block grant proposal calls for approximately 40 diverse social service programs to be combined into 4 block grants: preventive health, health, social services, and the energy assistance and emergency social services block grants. Table 1 contains a list of the 8 programs to be consolidated into the social services block grant. The programs range from child welfare to vocational rehabilitation and cut across traditional social services boundaries.

The block grant proposals are also combined with a 25 percent budget cut. The cut will be based upon the expenditures in the current year (Fiscal Year 1981). Whatever amount is spent for all the combined programs this year will be cut by 25 percent. This then will be the amount contained in the block grant legislation for Fiscal Year 1982. Table 2 contains the overall budget cut for the 40 programs to be included in the four social services and community block grant proposals. Beginning with an approximately 2 billion dollar cut (based on the Carter budget) in 1982, this figure grows to almost 3.5 billion in 1986. These cuts are in addition to the decreased purchasing power caused by inflation.

In the section above, comparing revenue sharing, block grants and categorical grants, certain distinguishing characteristics of block grants proposals were presented. We can now analyze what is known about the current proposals vis-a-vis the five characteristics which were identified. The first criterion appears to be met, i.e., that a wide range of activities, within a broadly defined functional area, are being combined. However, the degree of discretion that will be

afforded to funding recipients, the nature of fiscal reporting, planning, and other federal requirements, and the formula by which funding will be distributed are currently unknown. Since the various programs are currently based upon different formulae, an analysis of the equity of the overall proposal is very difficult. Finally, it is not certain which governmental unit will be given the responsibility to administer the block grants. Informal sources imply that the recipient will be the state government, with primary responsibility being given to the governor.

As a summary, asserted positive and negative effects of the current proposals can be contrasted. When comparing the following lists of effects, one finds that proponents may forecast one effect and opponents, the opposite (and vice versa). This highlights the political nature of the proposals and the uncertainty which accompanies them.

The National Association of Social Workers (2-24-81), a group that opposes the block grant proposal, outlines the negative effects:

Congress will lose control over federal tax dollars.

Bureaucratic overhead will multiply.

National policy will be subverted.

Quality control mechanisms will be dismantled.

Dollars will not follow need.

Discrimination and uneven distribution of funding will increase.

Programs aimed at self-sufficiency will be diminished.

The following list of benefits is from a release prepared by the

Department of Health and Human Services (undated). (It is important to recall that the federal agencies are an extension of the executive branch and therefore, by definition, support the President's position.) According to DHHS, the block grant proposals will:

Eliminate the total lack of coherence in the federal effort which results in bureaucratic waste and inefficiency.

Simplify and rationalize the current fragmented nature of the social services system so that clients will not face such a complex of fragmented services.

Enable states to plan and coordinate their own service programs.

Foster healthy competition among agencies providing services so that the most fit agencies will be funded.

Not decrease funding because increased efficiency will more than make up for budgetary reductions.

TITLE XX OF THE SOCIAL SECURITY ACT; AN EXAMPLE OF A BLOCK GRANT

There is no sure way of predicting what will happen as a result of the block grant proposal. However, we can look to experience with a current social services block grant, Title XX, to gain insight into some of the pitfalls and advantages of block grants.

Title XX, passed and implemented by states in 1975, authorizes a wide possible range of activities within a broadly defined functional area. The mechanism for accomplishing this is the use of five broad goals toward which all services must be directed.⁶ The states have

⁶1. Achieving or maintaining economic self-support to prevent, reduce or eliminate dependency. 2. Achieving or maintaining self-sufficiency, including reduction or prevention of dependency. 3. Preventing or remedying neglect, abuse or exploitation of children and adults unable to protect their own interest or preserving, rehabilitating, or reuniting families. 4. Preventing or reducing inappropriate institutional care by providing for community-based

almost total discretion in deciding which services to offer in the achievement of these five goals. There are a few requirements that relate to the types of services offered. For example, in order to ensure that services are targeted toward the poorer populations, it is required that 50 percent of the money be spent for services to families receiving Aid to Families with Dependent Children, Supplemental Security Income, or Medicaid. Also certain regulations encourage the provision of protective services, information and referral services, and family planning services.

Additionally, in the spirit of a block grant, the planning, reporting, and accountability requirements are minimal. Although they have been interpreted by some to be stringent, it is usually acknowledged that minimal conformity is sufficient. The formula for the distribution of Title XX funds is based upon population and is adjusted from year to year to reflect demographic changes. All Title XX funds are channeled through one state agency which is designated by the governor as having administrative responsibility.

With this basic knowledge of the Title XX program, it is possible to relate these characteristics to implementation. How has Title XX fared? Unfortunately, there have been no comprehensive studies of Title XX as there have been of the community development block grants or general revenue sharing. However, specific portions of the program have been analyzed (for example, the requirement for citizen participation was found to be relatively ineffective) and some general

care, home-based care, or other forms of less intensive care. 5. Securing referral or admission for institutional care when other forms of care are not appropriate, or providing services to individuals in institutions. (Copeland 1977)

conclusions can be made.

There are several levels at which the effect of Title XX can be evaluated: the recipients of service, the staff providing services, the organization responsible for implementing the program and the interorganizational network that comprises the social services system. During the first few years of Title XX, the recipients of service would not have been able to distinguish whether they were receiving services funded by Title XX or under the previous funding mechanism. The services themselves and eligibility for them did not change. What ultimately changed, that was most visible from the client's perspective, were the eligibility requirements and the providers of services. In general, since the ceiling on Title XX funds was not adjusted for inflation, the eligibility requirements became more restrictive. Therefore, a client who had been eligible for services one year may not have been eligible the next. Also, the provision within the Title XX legislation which allowed for the purchase of services from other private and public agencies allowed more of a variety of services, benefiting from the specialized expertise of the purchasing agencies and providing an alternative to receipt of the service directly from the state social services agency. However the bulk of monies continued to be spent for services traditionally provided by the public sector, e.g. day care, protective services, and services for families on welfare.

The staff had also to deal with the same complexities that faced the clients. (They had to learn and implement the new eligibility policies, for example.) In addition they were often faced with new forms necessitated by the new reporting requirements. However, the

composition of the staff generally did not undergo any changes other than the normal ones of staff turnover. Although some special training efforts may have been undertaken as a result of the passage of Title XX, by in large the normal course of development of training priorities was followed.

Minor organizational changes usually occurred at the state level within the division responsible for the implementation of Title XX. For example, an individual or group was given Title XX planning responsibility. At the local level there were no necessary administrative changes. The major impact on the expanded social services system was the provision for the purchase of services from other public and private agencies. This introduced the political element which will become so important in the analysis of the current Reagan proposals. Agencies began to vigorously compete for funds. Additionally the requirement for public input provided a structure within which the organized special interests could assert their influence in the funding process. Primarily this occurred around the purchase of service component. However, pressure was also exerted when policy changes were proposed that would have been detrimental to certain powerful groups, such as senior citizens. This competition for funds will be increased during the implementation of the Reagan block grant proposals.

The second way in which the Title XX example can be of use in the current analysis is in imagining what the effect of combining it with the other twelve social services will be. This leaves more open to speculation. It is unlikely that the provisions of the new block grant proposal, when they are released, would be more restrictive than

the current Title XX guidelines. Therefore, changes in the current pattern of funding and administration would not be mandatory. It would however, allow an opportunity for the administering agency to make changes which were prevented under Title XX. It is possible that states would alter the public input opportunities or the targeting of the services to the poor. These changes would have adverse impact on truly needy groups currently receiving services. Great changes would also be expected if the administering agency were changed.

POTENTIAL IMPACTS OF THE SOCIAL SERVICES BLOCK GRANT

The consequences of the social services block grant are, in part, determined by the use of the block grant mechanism itself, in lieu of general revenue sharing or categorical grants. As the Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations (ACIR) points out, there are seven "compatible and conflicting objectives" of block grants: economy and efficiency, program enlargement, decentralization, coordination, targeting, innovation, and generalist control.⁷ (ACIR, 1977: 8-11) The emphases in the current proposals, which are also combined with a proposed 25 percent budget cut,⁸ are economy and efficiency, decentralization and generalist control. Decentralization and generalist control will be assured by the nature of the block grant proposal itself. For example, if federal rules and regulations governing the programs to be included in the block grants are largely

⁷Generalists are defined as elected officials and administrative generalists, such as city managers. They can be contrasted to specialists or professionals trained in the social services.

⁸The actual decrease in funding will be 32 percent after taking inflation into account. (Congressional Budget Office March 1981)

curtailed and the state is given primary responsibility for program implementation, the control of the programs will have been decentralized from the federal government to the state. Likewise, if the governor and the state legislature are given general oversight responsibility then generalists will be in control. However, generalist control will not be as great as in revenue sharing where local governments receive funds directly. Generalist control will also be lessened if the state agencies currently administering programs are given responsibility for the block grant. Then the professionals (public administrators, social workers) will have substantial input into the formation of the program.

Economy and efficiency are debatable consequences of block grants. Although proponents cite the administrative savings resultant from block grants, the two groups who have conducted the most intensive analyses of the current block grant proposals (ACIR, 1977; Nathan, 1977) find that administrative complexity and cost may increase. This possibility is also suggested in the analysis of the Reagan budget conducted by the Congressional Budget Office (March 1981). Whether administrative savings will occur or not remains to be seen. However, it is certain that the administrative costs will be shifted from the federal to the state and local levels, who have been undergoing their own fiscal crises.

Federal Level

The changes at the federal level will be complex and dependent upon the nature of the final laws that are passed.' However, the

'A good description of the consequences of the passage of the

role of the federal agencies will certainly be reduced. It is possible that workload may increase during the phase-in period, but this should be short-lived. With this reduction in agency responsibility, there will be a corresponding reduction in the number of staff employed at the federal level to manage the block grant programs. If Title XX of the Social Security Act is to be a guide, very little federal technical assistance will be provided to states.

The role of national level interest groups will also change. First the absolute amount of effort will decrease. There is at least one very important reason for this: many of the interest groups themselves are beneficiaries of federal funding. They will also be, and have already been, affected by funding decreases. (Remember, the block grant proposals are combined with a budget cut.)

Second, based on the revenue sharing experience, there will be a change in activities of national interest groups. In the short-run, they will attempt to influence the nature of the laws that implement the block grant proposals. Areas on which they are likely to focus are the formula for the distribution of funds to states, civil rights protections, programs and priority areas to be specified in the block grant, and provisions protecting their special concerns. Remember that the reason that the block grant mechanism, rather than general revenue sharing, has been selected is so that some federal control can be retained. Therefore, each group will retain hope that their interests may be preserved in the law and the rules and regulations

community development block grants can be found in the Nathan (1977) publication called Block Grants for Community Development. However, the community development block grants are quite different from the proposed block grants, if the advance information is to be believed. Therefore, this analysis can only be used as a general guide.

that follow. In the long run, as was the case with revenue sharing, national level groups will turn their attention to the local and state levels which will have responsibility for the expenditure of funds. (Nathan, 1975)

State Level

The current plan is for the block grant monies to be administered by the states.

Therefore, this is where the action is going to be. The guidelines for analysis and action at the conclusion of this paper help one understand the state structure and determine where to intervene. Most states are already discussing how to deal with the passage of the block grants. Therefore, it is important to become involved now and to continue to be involved during initial stages of implementation and during periodic reevaluations of the allocation of funds that will occur in the future.

A useful way of thinking of the impact is to consider the interorganizational nature of the social services system, keeping an historical perspective. The first step is to identify the actors and components of the system:

Public/Private Social Service Agencies

Interest Groups

Professional Associations

Client Groups

Organizations Representing Groups of Agencies

Private Industry (Business and Labor)

Political Entities

State Legislatures

City and County Governments
Political Parties¹⁰

Second, it is important to consider how resources flow within the system. The use of the term resource here is a very broad one. Resources include money, clients, power, information, staff, and potentially many other goods. For example, agencies currently receiving funding will be in the best competitive position to receive continued funding. It is necessary to identify what programs the block grant inherited as a first step in determining how monies are likely to be allocated in the future. There is a series of other factors, discussed in the following paragraphs, that must also be considered in determining how money, and other resources, will be allocated.

There are different theories as to how monies are allocated. For example, some believe that more money goes to geographic areas with greater need. This idea has been tested in a number of social science studies (e.g., Pfeffer and Leong, 1977). For various reasons, need has generally been found to be negatively related to the amount of funding that an area receives. In other words, the greater the need, the less the funding. This may be due to the lesser capability of poorer areas to produce grant proposals and to complete many of the requirements for funding. Therefore, the language in the block grant legislation, and the consideration that is given the needs of poorer areas during implementation, will determine whether this will be the

¹⁰This list is not intended to be inclusive and will vary from location to location.

case with social services block grant monies.

Another theory is that monies will go to those agencies with the most valuable resources. (Jacobs, 1974) For example, one would predict that an agency with high quality staff and good programs (having valuable resources) will receive more funding than a poorer quality agency, all other things being equal. Or agencies who have effective client outreach services will gain priority in funding due to their access to the raw materials of so many social services, i.e., people in need of service. There is some research support for this theory; however, many times it is hard to determine which resources are the most valuable. Even if consensus is reached on quality, other factors may determine allocation of funds. This will be especially true in the face of decreased funding for social services.

Finally, some say that the money goes to those with the power. (Wamsley and Zald, 1973) An example of this would be agencies who have strong political or financial figures on their boards of directors. Another example is an agency who must license providers, e.g., nursing home licensing boards. As is pointed out below the agency that administers the block grant will have great power in determining how monies are allocated.

Regardless of which theory, if any, is ultimately correct, it is important for the interested person to be aware that a variety of factors influence the final allocation of monies. The push and pull of these forces will determine policies such as who is eligible for services, the types of services that can be provided, or what type of staff to hire. The political nature of interorganizational relations becomes very important. Those engaged in the process must be aware of

this if their actions are to be effective.

It is also at the interorganizational level that many of the benefits of the block grant mechanism are to appear. This is where duplication is to be lessened and coordination to be facilitated. This creates opportunities and problems. For example, the block grant mechanism may force agencies and programs to develop improved linkages and coordinated delivery systems. This could be positive. However, pressure to reduce administrative costs may be so great as to have negative consequences. Cheap services may be preferred over good quality services. Also employees in funded agencies may become so overworked that service quality declines and negative effects such as burnout, become more frequent.

Finally, we approach the responses that will occur within the provider organizations themselves. The agency that will be most immediately affected will be the agency (or agencies) that is (are) responsible for the implementation of the law. This agency will take on the role formerly held by the federal level and its power will increase greatly. This is likely to give its own programs an edge in funding. Therefore, it is important to identify the agency in control and to be aware of its vested interests. Aside from funding, its role in the development of implementing policies will be crucial. The process by which new policies are implemented will also be an issue. If approached too quickly, this can create chaos and demoralize the staff who must deliver service on a day to day basis in the face of transition.

Ultimately all agencies who receive funds from block grant programs will be affected. Again the pace and nature of the changes

are difficult to discern. However, it is fairly certain that the level of services will be reduced. Private agencies who have purchase of service contracts under Title XX and other programs may be unfunded. The state agencies will need the majority of the reduced funding to maintaining their basic services, many of which are mandated by state law. On the other hand, programs may be sustained by improving efficiency and supplementing federal monies by state, local, or private funds.

What, then, will be the consequence of the block grant proposal on the current recipients of services? Perhaps the most certain statement that can be made is that services will be reduced: eligibility requirements will be tightened and the number and variety of services will be decreased. This is almost an inevitable result of a budget decrease combined with an increase in state administrative costs. The more powerful parties described above, e.g. generalist officials, public and private agencies, and interest groups will determine what types of policies will ultimately be implemented. Many recipients are powerless and may find themselves in worsened economic and social condition as a result of these new policies.

SUMMARY

This paper has discussed the general nature of block grants, discussed social service experience with block grants via Title XX of the Social Security Act, and described the current social services block grant proposal and its potential impact on the clients and organizations involved in the social services system. The final page presents a series of questions that can be asked by concerned persons

in analyzing and trying to influence the implementation of the social services block grant. The information gained will provide a base of information for the development of strategies for intervention by concerned persons and interest groups.

GUIDELINES FOR ACTION, WHAT YOU CAN DO

1. How can the primary actors, groups and organizations influencing the block grant be categorized or described?
2. What effects have these actors or groups had on past decision making in the social services area?
3. Which agency or other organizational entity is responsible for channeling block grant funds, and how are funds directed from the state to the local level?
4. What programs does the block grant inherit from those previously funded under other titles or sources?
5. What is the history of involvement by the channeling agency in the funding of the programs included in the block grant?
6. What is the history of state and county support for social services from state and local funding sources? For example, at what point did the state reach its Title XX ceiling? What were the barriers to reaching it and how were they overcome?
7. What procedures or avenues have been developed to facilitate public participation in decision making?
8. What aspects of the block grant funding process can be influenced by public participation, and how can this influence be directed? Possible aspects include: needs assessment, development of priorities, balance of target populations, balance of direct versus purchased services, procedures and use of monitoring and evaluation, and requirements for matching funds.
9. What additional avenues for public participation should be developed and how can these changes be advocated?
10. What alternative resources can be developed for programs currently dependent on block grants?
11. What guidelines can be developed for the termination, continuation, expansion, and/or addition of new programs? How should they be developed and by whom?
12. What role can the block grant mechanism have in developing linkages and delivery systems among programs and agencies in order to make the greatest possible use of all available resources?¹¹

¹¹This is a modification of an abstract of a paper prepared by Deborah Zinn and Betty Rivard, entitled Who Owns Title XX and What Can You Do About It? (1981)

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