

Children's Aid Society Sued for Trying to Help the Poor

The Children's Aid Society is being sued for trying to help children living in poverty. Honest.

The Board of Trustees of the Children's Aid Society voted in December to sell the Philip Coltoff Center, including the school on Sullivan Street in Greenwich Village. The board's decision is driven by the Society's need to focus its finite resources on low-income New York City neighborhoods. Average household income in Greenwich Village is nearly \$125,000, while one in four children in New York City is living in poverty; that's over 500,000 children living in households with income of less than \$18,530 for a family of three.

A lawsuit was filed in a bid to prevent the closure of nursery school programs run by the Society, a local fixture for over 100 years. A hearing to demand that the Society keep the preschool at the Center open until June 2013 was recently cancelled to give both sides an opportunity to discuss a settlement.

Changing Demographics

The Philip Coltoff Center opened in Greenwich Village in 1891 as an industrial school to serve the large population of immigrants living in the area. The demographics of Greenwich Village have changed dramatically in the last 120 years. It has become one of the most affluent areas of the city as well as a neighborhood with one of the smallest number of black and Latino families in the city.

Yet tuition at the school hardly reflects the household income of the families with children enrolled. Yearly tuition is \$12,000, versus \$32,000 at the Little Red School House, a few blocks away.

The Society board's decision is driven by its need to focus its resources on low-income New York City neighborhoods. Since its founding in 1853, the Society has had a single mission: to serve New York City children living in poverty. Its resources are finite and must be put where they will do the most good. At present, the Center is siphoning off resources that should be used to help children from poor households.

The Society's programs and services evolved with the changing needs of families and of communities. Over the years it has relocated services repeatedly in order to be where the need is greatest. It has opened and shut other facilities as community needs changed over time. The 45 locations the Society operates now are not the same locations it occupied 100 years ago or even 50 years ago.

Children's Aid Society president and CEO Richard R. Buery explained: "We at The Children's Aid Society are proud of our commitment to achieve transformative change for children living in low-income neighborhoods in New York City, and it is clear that those children need our support now more than ever.

"We cannot meet the needs of all children in New York City. Every choice to serve children in one neighborhood is a choice not to serve those in another, and our mission requires us to make those

choices in favor of children and communities with more limited resources. Throughout our 157-year history, we have closed centers in communities where other layers of support are available to children and families in order to open centers in communities where those supports don't readily exist. We preserve our highest standards of excellence during periods of transition."

The Society felt it must focus its efforts and resources on communities such as the South Bronx, Washington Heights, Harlem, and East Harlem. In the Morrisania section of the South Bronx, the Society opened a health services hub, a teen center, foster care and preventive services offices as well as seven community schools within the last 10 years because the agency saw a great need for its services there.

Shrinking Resources

It seems to me that the lawsuit was both misguided and frivolous, especially considering the mission of the Children's Aid Society and the relative wealth of the families with children attending the nursery school at the Center. The Society has agreed to keep the nursery school open until the deadline for students who are already enrolled. The argument made by a lawyer for the parents filing the lawsuit that the Society's decision discriminates against more affluent Greenwich Village residents is ridiculous. These are people with all sorts of options for their children. In a time of shrinking resources, their insistence that the school remain open denies help to children – particularly black and Latino children - living in low-income areas of the city.

A resolution to this situation, without the financial and emotional drain that attends many legal proceedings, should be pursued. In any event, the mission of the Children's Aid Society – to serve the city's children living in poverty – should be uppermost in any decision.

David R. Jones is president and CEO of the Community Service Society (CSS), the leading voice on behalf of low-income New Yorkers for over 165 years. The views expressed in this column are solely those of the writer. The Urban Agenda is available on CSS's website: www.cssny.org.

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