

THE GAY COMMUNITY SERVICES CENTER
1614 Wilshire Boulevard
Los Angeles, California 90017

Position Paper

"Why doesn't the Center charge for its services?" is a question that is apt to be asked more and more frequently. On the one hand our need for funds is intense, and our ideas of how to use the money, when it is available, are expanding. On the other hand we are attracting more professionals to our staff who are accustomed to being paid for their services. They're raising questions about the Center's policy not to charge.

Fees are customarily used for reasons that can be legitimate. They help the professional or the agency survive and continue to offer services. They are a measure of a person's readiness to accept help, which is no small part of his being able to benefit from the service.

Are we right in not asking for fees? Or was this a practical plan only when we were smaller and our services not as competent?

My own opinion is that we were on good grounds in setting this policy at the beginning and that what was true then is still true. Recently, when someone asked me why we don't charge for our counselling, I answered facetiously that, since I benefit so much myself from the counselling I do, I couldn't decide who should pay the fee.

The serious point behind this response has to do with the nature of what we're doing at the Center. A wide variety of services are offered. There are also a large number of people involved in making these services available. In fact, the distinction between staff and non-staff is not very clear. This follows from our basic premise that what we want most to do is to create a community of gay people, who, by sharing their skills and knowledge, move everybody in the community ahead. If it is I today who has something you need, tomorrow it will be you who has something I need. Should you pay me today, so that I can pay you back tomorrow?

Our success in attracting so many people to work at the Center and our consequent ability to offer such a range of services is a natural development of our basic point of view. It is no accident that at this point, about a year after we began, we have nearly 90 people giving their time without salary to the Center. It has to do with how we respond to people who come through our doors. We do not see people as clients or patients who have particular problems they want help with. We are not interested in fixing them up and sending them on their way. Rather, we typically ask them, as sisters or brothers, to become a part of our growing community.

When somebody needs a job or a place to stay, we help with this, and we also invite him/her to our rap groups, our dances, etc. They participate in many of our programs and begin to experience what it is like to be with other gay people in many of the things they do through the course of a week. From these people have come almost all of our staff. The carpenter who builds the shelves for the V.D. Clinic, the carpet layer who installs the carpeting in the rooms, the facilitator who leads a growth group, the counsellor who gives advise to the man facing the draft all give of themselves to people at the Center because they are also receiving important things from the people at the Center.

Our relating to each other, in other words, is at a peer level. We relate as gay people who are increasingly aware that we share a common oppression and that our capacity to be free and proud is also dependent on how much we stick together. I may have special expertise that is useful for one task, and you may have what's needed for another task. But, our importance to each other is not limited to those specialities. We are all gay people who see each other in several kinds of relationships during the week. We do not want to define our relationships in terms of a particular need that we present at any time. That is what charging fees implies.

This also says something about how we relate to professionals. They are also invited to become a part of our community so that, when they give of themselves, it is also with a sense of brotherliness or sisterliness that the rest of us experience. There is no inherent bias against professionals in our operation. We do believe, however, that certain models by which professionals have related to gay people are detrimental to the development of the sense of community so necessary for the liberation of gay people. We want to replace those models with the kind of relating described above. Fortunately, some professionals agree.

Of course, some people are in a position to give money. Our policy of accepting voluntary contributions at any time makes it possible for any person to give money when that is his/her choice.

Dick Nash
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