

Agencies falter under high caseload burden

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OVERWORKED social workers are turning away more difficult cases in the face of expanding demand for family counselling services and shrinking funds to support those services, a prominent welfare administrator has claimed.

The director of Hongkong Family Welfare Society, Mr Thomas Mulvey, told the *Sunday Standard* the caseload for each of the society's social workers now exceeds 90.

Handling last year's load of 80 cases for each of the family counselling staff was "an almost impossible task", he said in the Society's annual report for 1985-86.

Even an average caseload of 70 for each staff member in 1980 was deemed too high by the Government, which proposed it be reduced to 50 for family counselling.

"That was not the ideal, but it was regarded as practical," Mr Mulvey said. The voluntary agencies which provide the lion's share of welfare services have seen their flexibility curtailed, net funds shrink and strain for staff members increase.

Mr Mulvey said almost all the agencies are caught in a no-win tug-of-war with the Social Welfare Department over the issue of subvention.

At the same time, he said, the cost

involved because they are too well-aware of the strain involved in dealing with mental illness and the high expectations many families of the mentally ill have of the service provided.

"So the social worker thinks it's better to keep out," he said.

Mr Mulvey said the society is unhappy with the situation and it has attempted to develop group work with the mentally ill to spread the limited staff resources to as many clients as possible.

Not only is group work inadequate — since some problems can only be handled as individual cases — but funding is not there. "Group work is not subventable — the SWD will only pay us for individual cases," he said.

According to the society's annual report, it is "widely recognised that family problems have increased and become more difficult."

Only "urgent" strengthening of manpower will help, the report said.

Mr Mulvey said as the nature of cases has become more serious, the clients' expectations of the service has also risen.

"It is not just that more incidents have emerged but that the public is more aware and expects something to be done," he said.

"That is good that the public is more aware and expecting them to be tackled, but it arises in a situation where the workload is increasing and we don't have the staff."

by
Stephen Morgan

subvention system meant to ensure that basic operational expenses are met has resulted in a decline in contributions from non-Government sources.

In 1984, those sources met 10.4 percent of the society's income; last year, non-Government sources accounted for only 7.8 percent, contributing to the Society's first deficit in several years incurred during 1985-86.

That meant the Society either had to look elsewhere for funds to try to reduce their social workers' caseloads or consider, reluctantly, turning away work.

"We have had to look at our caseloads to see what can be done to reduce them," he said. "We don't want to stop people coming to us, to hold on to their problems, but we have had at least to look at referrals from other sources."

Those referrals include would-be clients transferred from hospitals, Government departments and other agencies. But family counsellors already face awkward decisions about taking on difficult cases involving behavioural or mental illness among its walk-in clientele.

Said Mr Mulvey: "We are suppose to work with the mentally ill and their families. We, in fact, can't."

"Social workers are afraid to get in-