

**The  
Coalition**

**of Voluntary**

**Mental Health**

**Agencies, Inc.**

**at 25**

**A Casual History of the  
First Quarter Century**

The story of The Coalition would appear to begin in 1972, the year of our incorporation. However, to truly understand the fire in which the Coalition was forged one must turn one's attention to 1966, the year in which John V. Lindsay was elected Mayor of New York City. Lindsay appointed Gordon Chase Administrator of Health Services, and that's when things started to get interesting. Chase was a numbers guy. He was very focused on quotas and quantifiable results which left many of the agency people feeling that the intangible work they did--caring and nurturing of clients--was unappreciated. His approach was operationalized and restricted the latitude of agencies to utilize resources in the way which they felt was most appropriate to serve clients' needs. It was in response to the approach of his boss that DMH Commissioner Dr. Herbert Fill, reluctantly, handed down an edict to the City's mental health agencies.

In the middle of the contract year in 1972, Herb Fill's City Department of Mental Health handed down a new contract that was dramatically different from the agreed upon contract. It gave the City's article 31 agencies just a few days to agree to the changes and return the new signed contract. The agencies were trapped between the proverbial rock and a hard place. Failure to sign the contract and return it would result in the loss of the City funds on which they depended. If, on the other hand, they did sign the new contract they would be forced to work under the new much less equitable and workable rules. Something obviously had to give. Or so it seemed.

What the City did not anticipate was that these agencies, individually weak and relatively powerless, would coalesce into a powerful force that could sit down at the table with them and negotiate from a position of strength. If this edict had been the first time that the Chase administration had clashed with the City's mental health sector, perhaps the agencies would have quietly acquiesced, but this was another in what had become a series of irritants, and the City's largest agencies decided that enough was enough.

The Jewish Board's Jerome Goldsmith decided that getting mad wouldn't help, but leveling the playing field would make things more even. Enlisting the aid of friends at Catholic Charities and Federation of Protestant Welfare Agencies, Goldsmith set up a preliminary meeting and invited representatives from all of the other agencies in New York. Frank Harrelson was enlisted to chair the meet-

ing which drew a tremendous crowd. That first meeting was held in a Carnegie building across from the U.N. and had a character similar to that of the more famous coalition across the street. Everyone was given a chance to speak, and by the end a coalition was beginning to form to challenge the onerous contract changes that the DMH had handed down.

Now that the playing field was being leveled, it was time for the opening scrum. A meeting was arranged downtown with City and State officials. Along opposite sides of a table a la SALT II treaty negotiations, the agency representatives lined up across from the government officials and before the eyes of the assembled press, proceeded to argue aggressively and effectively for the rescission of the burdensome new regulations. The embarrassment of that event eventually led to the resignation of Administrator Chase.

The heady taste of success was sweet for the assembled agencies. They had overcome their traditional rivalries to achieve common goals. The experiment was a success, but was it sustainable?

Goldsmith thought it was. He decided that the union of these agencies was valuable enough that it should be made more permanent. Incorporation was necessary. With the Jewish Board's willing underwriting, Goldsmith donated the services of his assistant Michael Goldfarb to handle the task of incorporation. Werner Paul Kuhn, Esq. was hired to act as counsel for the fledgling organization, and the ball was rolling, except for one problem, the organization could not be incorporated without a name.

Goldfarb had his favorite. He recognized that the name was going to end up being very long, but that name recognition issues required something more succinct, something 'Like a snake with a long tail but a head that gets all of the attention.' He would periodically stop by Goldsmith's office and tell him that "This is a job for 'The Coalition.'" Goldfarb thought that he had found the perfect solution.

The work finally came to fruition when, on May 25, 1975, Secretary of State John P. Lomenzo returned to Lawyer Kuhn the approved articles of incorporation for "The Coalition of Voluntary Mental Health and Mental Retardation

Agencies, Inc.” Incorporated under Section 402 of the Not-For-Profit Corporation Law, the original Coalition board consisted of Joel A. Bennett, Dr. Jerome M. Goldsmith, Dr. Harold Kase, Miss Marie Mantel, Norris P. Phillips, Dr. Harley Shands and Joseph V. Shostak. The young Coalition was fortunate to receive good press and soon cast a very large shadow for an organization that only had one staff person.

Other help for the fledgling Coalition came from allies in Albany. Mental Health Committee head Frank Padavan, human Services Secretary Jeff Sacks and Bob Schiffer in the Department of the Budget all recognized the need that The Coalition filled, and were early supporters. Downstate help came in the form of powerful allies in the health care industry like Martin Begun. With their help, the unity of the Board’s vision and the power gained from cutting across racial, age and sectarian lines, The Coalition was thrust into a position of leadership and gladly seized the opportunity.

When Hannah Achtenberg took over the role of executive director of The Coalition in the late 1970s it still had the feel of being David against Goliath. The City’s economy was in terrible shape, stagnant and on the verge of bankruptcy. In this situation, money for social services was scarce. The City decided that it could eliminate a lot of the political fallout of cutting programs by allowing the advocates for the disabled to decide who was most able to take funding cuts. This was clearly unacceptable. The Coalition instead pressed the City for necessary systemic changes.

Other Coalition accomplishments during this period include saving tax levy funds for mental health, and an increase in the Medicaid rate. The Coalition fought for a unified funding system to ensure that the money freed up by deinstitutionalization followed the patient into the community. The Bill was passed, but was so watered down as to be unfeasible. The agencies fought vigorously and valiantly against a torrential tide of funding cuts and economic downturns, just trying to retain the gains that The Coalition had made, but as Ronald Reagan prepared to take office, Hannah prepared to step down.

In the early 1980s things were looking glum for the Coalition. The poor economy of the 1970s had been particularly hard on agencies. Membership was down,

dues were not being paid, the operating deficit was becoming burdensome and the glamorous battles of the early years had been won. The membership's active involvement was needed. In December 1981 Peter Beitchman took over as Executive Director of The Coalition. During the 2 ½ years of his tenure The Coalition began publishing a monthly newsletter called *Coalition Briefs* that was very well received and served to create more constant connections between the membership and The Coalition. The Federation of non-contract agencies was brought into The Coalition, expanding the membership base. The Coalition fought to repair the damage of deinstitutionalization with a battle cry of "75-25" referring to what would have been a more equitable distribution of mental health funding between state and community facilities.

In 1982 The Coalition celebrated its tenth anniversary at Manufacturers Hanover Bank. Governor Cuomo attended the reception, first addressing the 200 assembled guests formally and then getting involved in an impromptu dialogue about the mental health system with the guests. In 1984 when Peter was ready to step down, the competition for his job was very fierce. From a fine pool of applicants, an exceptional successor was recruited and Cynthia Dames took the helm of an organization that after twelve years still consisted of just an Executive Director and sole staffer, Diane Diedrich.

Cynthia wanted to give The Coalition a more professional and ongoing presence in Albany and City Hall, so she set out to add to The Coalition's staff. The Coalition took on two additional professionals and an assistant to change a small startup group into a force to be reckoned with. With a larger staff, The Coalition turned its attentions to a larger membership base. Cynthia brought in more small and medium sized agencies, conscientiously recruiting those that represent people of color and other minorities. With a broader membership base and better staff support, The Coalition, under Cynthia's direction, was able to push for passage of the Community Reinvestment Bill, which was passed in 1992. After a ten year tenure, Cynthia stepped down to devote all of her time to lobbying in Albany (now including The Coalition in her portfolio) and was replaced by current Executive Director Phillip Saperia.

Faced with political sea changes both in Albany and in City Hall and with the inevitability of managed care in mental health care, Phillip and the Board aimed

to do whatever possible to see that The Coalition helped shape managed care rather than let it descend upon us. Coalition members would be provided with the best possible opportunity to compete meaningfully in the new environment. That has meant a renewed emphasis on technical assistance and an increased flow of information to the members on managed care and related matters.

A major accomplishment of this period was The Coalition's role in paving the way and providing the opportunity for more member agencies to be in the competitive race for Special Needs Plans. Specifically, we were the proud parents of Citywide Behavioral Network (CBN) which was quickly put up for adoption since The Coalition, playing no favorites, rooted just as lustily for IBHS and MCI to win contracts and compete favorably for mental health contracts. The very fact that these community based provider networks are in formation is evidence of moving closer to the goals set by Phil and the Board to help members be as competitive as possible.

Albany and City Hall continue to capture the Coalition's energies and several attempts to deconstruct the mental health system were beaten back. For the first time, The Coalition turned its attention to Washington, DC where Medicaid, welfare and immigration policies along with mental health parity required our modest input.

But The Coalition is first and foremost, a membership organization and Executive Directors come and go. Without the support of a first-rate Board and active membership, none of the Coalition's accomplishments could have been achieved. Their hard work, dedication, willingness to put aside differences, seize the common agenda and put resources behind rhetoric has made a powerful difference and created an influential organization that continues to make a significant contribution to the shaping of the mental health care delivery system in New York.

## **Founders**

Joel A. Bennett  
Dr. Jerome M. Goldsmith  
Dr. Harold Kase  
Miss Marie Mantel  
Norris P. Phillips  
Joyce Pilsner  
Dr. Harley Shands  
Joseph V. Shostak

## **Presidents**

Michael Friedman  
Ed Geffner  
Jerome Goldsmith  
Richard Hlavacek  
Sister Mary Rose McGreedy  
Peter Neaman  
Kenneth Popler  
Mary Redd  
Joe Wagman

## **Executive Directors**

Hannah Achtenberg Kinn  
Peter Beitchman  
Cynthia Dames  
Arlene Gibbons  
Michael Goldfarb  
Phillip Saperia  
Jeff Solomon