

Summer, 1964

COFO
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Jackson, Miss.

Progress and Problems of the COFO Community Centers

I. Progress

The community centers were originally conceived as providing a place for Negro teenagers to hang out, to read, study, talk, dance, play ping-pong, etc., and for adults to get together for educational and political meetings. There was need to make some form of organization in the typical Negro community to supplement the religious and social or fraternal organization. The library project, for which thousands of gift books were already pouring in from interested people in the North, was a natural addition to the center idea. As time went on, more and more of COFO's hoped-for plans were added to the centers, youth house-repair and conservation projects, job training, classes in literacy sewing, arts and crafts, dancing, singing, etc.--all of the social and recreational aims of various people were incorporated into the grand plan of community centers. At the Oxford orientation of Miss. Summer Project volunteers, this was condensed into four simple programs which could most easily be used to launch the centers--get them off the ground.

1. day care--activities such as arts and crafts, music, dramatics, supervised recreation and help with reading and writing for the children who come to the center. This has been successful in every center which tried it.
2. citizenship--discussion groups and VR training for adults. Areas suggested were voter education, Negro history, current affairs, etc. This is harder to start than day care, because adults are more difficult to reach, but it has started in nearly every center, too. The citizenship teachers in the SCLC Citizenship Education program have helped with the program in many centers.
3. library. Success has varied. All centers have books, but whether they do something with them or just put them on shelves depends upon the center staff. There are too few librarians, and people interested in promoting the use of the books.
4. health program. This has worked most successfully with teenagers, taking the form of first aid or future nurses' classes, rather than the original conception of reaching adults with prenatal care and child development classes.

Since the beginning of the summer we have learned several things about the centers. There have been strenuous efforts to find local people who were able and willing to carry on the center's program after the summer volunteers leave. As we have met these community people, and discussed the center's program to them, we have realized increasingly that local people are primarily interested in a place for "our young people to go" other than to the bars, etc. which provide the only places in many towns for Negro youth to relax and have a good time. The programs of adult education are not so urgent in their minds.

II. Problems

A second major point we have learned this summer is that there

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are no facilities really suitable for a center in most communities. You will find that most centers have plans or hopes to build new buildings. In Meridian and Greenville these plans are definite, except for the financing, and building can begin as soon as the money is raised. In Harmony Community (in Leake County) the building has begun for a modest center with a modest budget, and the new center will be ready before fall. In Clarksdale, the center is an old store front which is adequate until better facilities are available (the staff has remodeled the interior). In Canton, the center is looking for a suitable place for a new center. In Batesville, fortunately, there is an excellent school building which has been abandoned as a permanent educational facility, and which we can have after September. Hattiesburg and Holly Springs have their own plans for continuing the center on a permanent basis in existing buildings. Obviously, the centers which started out in church basements and houses have taken hold, and the communities are preparing for a permanent program around their centers.

The plans for permanent physical facilities are going very well; the plans for permanent staffing are shaping up also. The original plan was to recruit local people and train them to carry on the center's programs after the summer. This has been only partially successful, i.e. there have been some people recruited this way who will be able to continue, but not enough. It seems clear that in each center there needs to be at least one full-time worker or couple who can take responsibility for the total program. Part-time people can assume responsibility for part of the program, but it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to run a center with a committee of part-time community people. In Holly Springs, the COFO project has recruited a local couple to live in and operate the community center after the summer; in Meridian, Leake County and many other places, the summer volunteers are planning to stay. There will be at least two Freedom School teachers with each project, offering the educational program in the evening. The problem of recruiting permanent staff has been solved in nearly every project, but the problem of how to support them remains.

The final problem of making the centers a permanent addition to their local communities is in finding finances for the furnishings, equipment and operating expenses. COFO can probably find money to pay phone bills, and can appeal for donated typewriters, etc. for a few centers, but the regular resources probably cannot be stretched to meet the constant demand for new centers in new communities. Similarly, the local communities themselves can support part of the center's cost, but they probably cannot completely underwrite the program. Certainly the local communities cannot support the kind of program which requires expensive equipment such as sewing and typing instruction, or job training, or which require trained personnel such as literacy and job training. It stretches the capacity of local supporters just to help with the regular bills and cheap programs such as a jukebox for dancing. To meet all these demands for money, we will have to find support in large doses from outside the state.

These, then are the major problems facing the center program at this point. There is a great need for more money, people, equipment, and community mobilization if we are to put the centers on a solid foundation which can serve the community permanently.

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Besides the overall, long-range needs, there are concrete, specific needs right now:

1. People--even where there are people who plan to stay after the summer, more people are needed now to help organize community support, and to help the present programs operate smoothly.
2. local welfare communities--This program is a part of the centers which serve especially impoverished communities. The outside support for the welfare and relief program will increase after the summer, when the need is greatest, so we need to organize committees in needy communities to handle the distribution of food and clothing.
3. equipment--office supplies and arts and crafts supplies are needed all the time. Most of all, we need equipment for films, a very popular program which we haven't been able to handle adequately. Besides projectors and films, the most-needed items of expensive equipment are sewing machines, typewriters, and duplicating machines. There is constant need for good Negro history books also. We can use, besides the above, yard goods and sewing notions, art prints and good library books, especially children's books.
4. Money--in three categories: money for building new centers, money to support permanent staff and money for continuing expenses such as films, supplies, etc.