

CITIZENS COMMITTEE FOR CHILDREN OF NEW JERSEY
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REPORT ON THE SYMPOSIUM ON THE GROUP HOME STUDY
(Conducted at the Ramada Inn. E. Brunswick, N.J.,
October 21, 1977)

NCJRS

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ACQUISITIONS

A. Introduction:

This report summarizes the proceedings of the "Symposium on the Group Home Study" held October 21, 1977 in the Ramada Inn, East Brunswick, N.J. The purpose of the Symposium was to bring together representatives of group homes, State agency personnel, and other individuals directly involved with residential child care to discuss a recently completed study: "The Experience of Group Homes for Teenagers in New Jersey: Administrative and Social Perspectives," by Dr. Albert L. Shostack.

The Symposium provided an opportunity to make the study's findings available to group home directors and relevant government agencies and facilitate an exchange of ideas on the issues raised. In addition, the information provided by participants concerning their recent experience and new program developments will be used to update and complete the final version of the study in preparation for possible publication.

The Symposium was sponsored and arranged by the Citizens Committee for Children of New Jersey and financed by a special grant from the Turrell Fund. Co-sponsoring organizations were the New Jersey Council of Group Homes and the New Jersey Association of Children's Residential Facilities. A total of 31 people participated in the all-day program, which was chaired by Carol Brodeen-Grecca, secretary of the Board of Trustees of Citizens Committee for Children of New Jersey.

Twenty participants attended representing 17 private agencies which operate 20 group homes or related facilities for troubled children. These comprise the majority of all such facilities in the state. The Bureau of Residential Services (BRS) of New Jersey's Division of Youth and Family Services (DYFS) was represented by the Director, Robert Nicholas, and three members of his staff concerned with monitoring and assisting group homes. Two caseworker supervisors who had represented DYFS district offices in the study were present, as well as a staff person from the State Law Enforcement Planning Agency (SLEPA).

Dr. Carl Fjellman, Executive Director of the Turrell Fund also attended. A complete list of participants is attached.

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The study discussed at the Symposium was based on a July 1975 survey of eighteen group homes. The purpose of the symposium was to gather information on the policies, procedures, and needs of the homes, to identify both achievements and unresolved problems, and facilitate the exchange of experience and ideas among group home directors and government agencies. A draft report of the study was distributed to participants a week in advance of the Symposium to afford time to read and evaluate the contents.

Almost all facets of group home operation were explored in the study. Major sections were devoted to starting group homes, financial aspects of group home operations, the referral and placement of children, staffing, everyday life, education and therapeutic services, building a therapeutic social milieu, behavior management, termination of placements, and services for children after they have left a residential facility. The Symposium participants discussed these topics in turn, devoting up to an hour to each of seven subject areas. Each period commenced with a brief presentation by a "discussant" and was chaired by one of the participating group home representatives. A copy of the agenda and a list of the chairpersons and discussants are attached.

B. Discussion Items:

The Symposium was characterized by wide-ranging discussion in which all attendees participated. It was not feasible to summarize all the stimulating exchanges within this brief report. The following items were selected for inclusion because they reflected recent developments, provided new insights on material in the group home study on issues of general concern to the participant.

1. Turnover

Turnover of group homes and staff has been substantial since the 1975 survey largely due to underutilization of the homes and financing problems. Five of the 18 homes covered by the study had closed by the date of the Symposium. They were YMCA-Paterson, Mary Anne Manor, Group Home Foundation, Berkeley House (one of two homes operated by Agape) and Renaissance House (subsequently acquired by the Children's Aid and Adoption Society). In a half dozen remaining homes, the directors who served as survey respondents were no longer employed. Barrett House, a privately operated home was the only home which opened for business after the survey.

2. Community Relations

Most of the group homes were no longer experiencing the community resistance and conflicts with local regulatory agencies that were reported so frequently in the 1975 survey. Two participants had appointed negatively-inclined members of the community to their governing boards as a means of gaining their support. One participant cited the use of unmarked cars by police whenever they visited the group home as an example of local government cooperation.

Some problems remain in this area. One person indicated that local authorities are resisting the 1974 State legislation which authorized the location of group homes in areas zoned for single dwellings in cases where the group home is affiliated with a parent organization. One group home had to fight its designation as a commercial operation for insurance purposes. Scattered references to overly rigid fire and building codes were made.

3. Initial Funding

The problem of securing sufficient capital to start group homes was a matter of the past for most participants. However, one organization endeavoring to open a second facility was finding that the problem had not eased over the years. The DYFS Youth Facilities Incentive Aid program has been helping some existing homes that faced repair or renovation bills, but new homes still had to raise funds from whatever outside sources they found available. Bob Nicholas announced that DYFS has included a request for "start up" money in its proposed budget for next year.

4. Operating Costs

The inadequacy of financial resources to meet current operating expenses remains a problem for a substantial proportion of the group homes, and probably contributed to the closing of some of the facilities in the last two years. This condition exists despite the increase of the maximum standard board rate from \$500 to \$650 since the survey. A recent increase to \$750 will be helpful as the homes become eligible for the raise at the expiration of their current contracts.

Facilities that have vacant beds continued to endure financial hardship. One participant proposed that DYFS pay for all fixed costs of a group home regardless of the number of children in residence. There was insufficient time for the symposium to consider possible solutions to the pressing financial problems.

Bob Nicholas, director of BRS, asked whether group home care has become so costly that the homes are "pricing themselves out of the market." According to this view, current board rates are not significantly lower than those of residential treatment centers, despite the intention that group homes serve less severely disturbed youngsters and avail themselves of inexpensive community support facilities.

5. The Intake Process

Deficiencies in the referral and placement process, identified in the group home study, have still not been fully corrected. The current system still relies on the autonomous judgments of numerous district office case-workers to identify the most appropriate residential facilities for each

child. As in the original survey, group home representatives alleged that the caseworkers lacked up-to-date knowledge of the capabilities of each residential facility, depended on an informal "grapevine" for information about facilities, and sometimes provided incomplete information about children referred for placement. A DYFS staff member confirmed that the average residential unit caseworker still has a caseload of 50 to 55 children.

Communication between DYFS' Bureau of Residential Services and the district offices and between DYFS and the group home continues to be a problem. One participant reported that some caseworkers still criticize group homes for rejecting seriously disturbed children who probably could not fit into a community-based program. High vacancy rates were said to reflect bottlenecks in the referral process. On the other hand, there were some examples of cooperation between district office caseworkers and group homes. Favorable mention was also made of recent DYFS policy to reduce the number of children placed in out-of-state facilities.

Symposium participants made some recommendations for improving the intake process. Several urged that more information about each home be made available to the caseworkers and that coordination between BRS and the district offices be strengthened. A DYFS representative suggested that the group homes should strive to develop good relations with their local district offices which might then present favorable reports about them to other district offices seeking to place children. One participant suggested the centralization of referrals in DYFS headquarters. Another stressed the importance of continuing to allow the child a role in the placement decision.

6. Staffing

The Symposium had time to touch on only a few of the issues concerning staffing that were raised in the group home study. Participants concentrated mainly on the role of the child care worker.

There were insightful comments on the relative advantages of employing shift workers vs. houseparents. One attendee pointed out that the resignation of a shift worker does not have as shattering an effect on the residents as the departure of houseparents, since shift workers are less likely to have close emotional ties with the children. Shifts in this group home are staggered so that residents do not perceive a discontinuity of care.

Participants agreed that adherence to federal and State minimum wage/maximum hour laws continues to present difficult problems, particularly in those homes which employ live-in houseparents. One facility had been compelled to pay heavy penalties for violating the overtime pay provisions of the law. Various suggestions for adapting payment practices to both legal requirements and group home conditions were discussed. However, one

participant urged, that the choice between houseparents and shift workers should not be made on the basis of salary costs, but on the basis of their relative effectiveness in meeting program needs.

In support of the study's analysis of role strains, a participant noted that three successive houseparent couples employed in this group home (a facility that was not included in the survey) suffered marital problems and had remained on the job for one year or less. Another group home representative felt that child care workers should be regarded as professionals and that social workers should not be assigned to supervise them unless they were themselves experienced in child care. Two or three group homes for girls reported an interesting new development: employment of male child care workers. This experiment was said to have shown good results so far although it is too new to evaluate.

There still remains a pressing need to expand pre-service and in-service training for child care staff. A participant described one innovative training program which was comprised of weekly training/therapy meetings for the staff led by a psychologist. At these sessions, the staff is encouraged to ventilate their feelings and to analyze them as they relate to the job. Although this program was found to be very useful in improving staff effectiveness and morale, it was declared ineligible for funding by DYFS.

Chris Vasios, director of Barrett House, reported on a survey of staff salaries she conducted recently. Group home directors, including some employed part-time, earned from \$7,000 to \$13,000 per year. Child care workers received \$1.33 to \$4.00 per hour, with differences of education and experience accounting for some of the disparities. Earnings of support personnel were even more varied.

7. Everyday Life

In the group home study, the structuring of everyday life was viewed as a key component of the "therapeutic milieu" which all residential facilities try to achieve. The study identified wide differences in the concepts and policies of group homes in this area. The symposium confirmed that the disparity continues to exist.

One issue raised concerned the degree to which life in a group home should be structured, rather than left to the individual preferences of the residents. Several participants stressed the importance of allowing the children to exercise considerable control over their free time. Another group home representative, however, thought that the failure to arrange group activities sometimes might reflect an unconscious desire by the staff to avoid conflict-provoking situations. According to this view, some children who spend their time reading, watching TV, and in similar unstructured activities may have underlying human relations problems under the surface which should be dealt with in group activities by the staff.

Differences continue with regard to policies for home visits. Several group homes try to send their residents home on weekends while others favor the use of weekends for supportive programs. In one facility, group singing, sports, and other group activities have been introduced to create an "in home" life and sense of belonging.

There was a range of opinions about controls over relations between the sexes. Several participants thought that issues relating to sexuality have not been given adequate consideration to date. One attendee pointed out that the group homes must take into account the attitudes of the children's parents who are likely to question liberal policies concerning boy/girl relationships.

Several innovative suggestions were made for using community recreational and cultural resources to develop the personal skills and group spirit of the children. In one facility, an effort is made to develop traditions through adventurous outings and unusually interesting activities. If the youngsters are not inclined toward group activities, a few at a time are invited to participate in order to disguise the structured nature of the outing.

In another home, the director had successfully mined community resources to obtain dance studio scholarships, free "charm courses," and tickets to shows at discount prices to enrich the daily living pattern. The services of "Big Sisters," rewards under the behavior management system, "mystery trips," and other creative ideas are being used to encourage the people to participate in "optional" community and cultural affairs.

8. Education

Most of the group homes appear to have developed supportive relations with their local school systems, but some are still not satisfied with the level of cooperation and the quality of the educational programs. Some participants mentioned localities which lack vocational education and adequate special education classes. It was agreed that the recent "Thorough and Efficient Education" law has produced no verifiable improvement in services to date, but some participants hoped for an improvement over time.

Several participants said they were turning to private schools to meet the needs of their residents. One respondent in the original survey now has six youngsters attending a parochial school. Another is trying to utilize an experimental "alternative school". There was a suggestion that DYFS should provide special funds to permit the enrollment of exceptional children in private schools geared to their needs.

9. Therapy

Discussion of therapeutic services led to allegations that DYFS requirements were excessively rigid. Several group home representatives urged that the content of "treatment programs" should be left up to the group homes'

discretion. In this view, DYFS should not prescribe uniform treatment standards, but should allow group homes to develop individualized treatment plans adapted to the needs of each child. The facilities would be evaluated in terms of the progress shown by their residents rather than in terms of their adherence to inflexible DYFS requirements. It was pointed out that this approach might result in greater reliance on "milieu therapy," a willingness to experiment with innovative techniques, and reduced emphasis on traditional individual psychotherapy.

As in the original survey, sharp differences of opinion still exist concerning the value of individual psychotherapy administered by outside practitioners. Some homes are still requiring all or most residents to enter individual therapy. Other homes provide individual psychotherapy only to exceptionally disturbed children. One director of a home in an inner-city location currently has no residents in therapy and regards individual treatment as oriented to the needs of educated middle class persons. At the other extreme, a director, who relies heavily on individual therapy by outside practitioners, felt that it was not feasible for group home staff members to serve as therapists because of their emotional involvement and role conflicts.

Time did not permit discussion of the relative merits of group therapy and other issues raised in the study. There was an obvious need for a more definitive evaluation of the effectiveness of various therapeutic techniques in the group home setting. One participant commented that the Medicaid payment for individual therapy is substandard and had to be supplemented from other resources of the home.

10. Building A Therapeutic Milieu

An important new development that emerged from the discussion on how to build a "therapeutic milieu" was the growing acceptance of coed group homes. Unlike the responses in the original survey, the opinions of a large majority of the Symposium participants were now favorable toward this concept. The representative of the Ewing Residential Center reported that they have recently opened a coed group home, the first for teenagers in the State, which is operating satisfactorily. The move away from segregating the sexes was also evidenced by the fact that several facilities reported they had hired child care workers of the opposite sex and that they relate well to the children and exert a favorable influence. One participant indicated that local police authorities had advised against mixing children of different sexes.

Some of the Symposium attendees did not agree with recommendations in the group home study supporting efforts to utilize group processes and group awareness as elements of a therapeutic milieu. They contended that staff members lack sufficient skills to employ Guided Group Interaction or other sophisticated groupwork techniques, excessive emphasis on the group detracts from the child's orientation to his or her family, and group homes should not try to change or homogenize the personalities of their residents. One person added that the value of groupwork varies

with the age of the children.

In contrast, a few attendees favored the use of group process as a therapeutic tool. Since the survey, one home has begun to actively encourage its residents to participate in decision-making and self government.

The participants confirmed the finding of the study that the assignment and admission of children to particular homes was often influenced by the racial and ethnic characteristics of the children. This often occurs because caseworkers, parents, and group home staffs want each child to be placed in an anxiety-free setting geared to his or her background. A desire to avoid community antagonism also plays a part in decisions to admit children. Several persons thought that the social class of a child rather than race was more likely to influence relationships with fellow residents and community people.

The importance of the home's physical plant in shaping the social milieu was stressed by two participants. They referred to instances in which their program was adapted to the existing plant rather than the reverse.

There was virtually no time to discuss behavior management systems an important aspect of the milieu therapy which was described at length in the group home study.

11. Aftercare

The absence of formal "aftercare" and follow-up programs to help residents released from the residence make the transition to life in the community was still a serious problem. Only two of the organizations represented at the Symposium were operating formal transitional programs funded by DYFS. In these programs, older youths being readied for independent living were helped to find outside housing, employment, and educational opportunities. During the transition, the group homes provide counseling and other supportive services, and pay part of the cost of rent, food, clothing, and other necessities. The homes are reimbursed by DYFS at the rate of \$350 per month for each youngster.

The participants pointed out that the formal programs are limited because they can only serve youngsters up until they are 18. One director stated that it is sometimes best to place a resident into aftercare at age 17½ so that he or she will have at least a half year of transitional experience before becoming ineligible for DYFS money at 18. A DYFS staff person indicated that the agency does support youngsters over 18, even after graduation from high school. However, this occurs only in rare emergency circumstances.

Because the need for aftercare to these youngsters is great, several facilities have provided this service to youths over 18 at their own expense. Typically, the agency helped the youngsters find jobs and housing, and provided social work services to those who were having difficulty making it on their own. Two facilities recruited foster parents from the Big Sister program for their children, but at least one of them found that the relationship between "Big Sister" and child deteriorated when the former assumed a foster mother role.

A number of group home representatives described their policies for readying children for independent living or return to their families. In one home, the child and director enter into a contract in advance, specifying the standards to be met before the child can be terminated. This home stresses preparatory work with the family and a follow-up visit after termination. In a second home, there is stress on vocational counseling, including visits to vocational sites and special projects. A third advances children along six levels, the last of which provides substantial independence subject to contractual limits. In still another facility, the emphasis is on teaching children to cope with the realities they will face after termination, since the group home can do little to change the families and community to which the children must return.

One attendee mentioned that several youths had enlisted in the armed forces upon leaving the residential facility. Most of the Symposium participants did not regard this as a positive long-term solution for young people still encountering significant adjustment problems.

Complaints continue to be voiced that DYFS does not act rapidly to remove disruptive children from the group homes. The directors of the facilities claimed that the only way to achieve prompt removal was by filing a formal complaint with the judicial authorities and transferring unmanageable cases to JINS shelters. They contended that a more streamlined DYFS removal procedure would make it unnecessary to subject the youngsters to detention and court action.

C. Conclusion and Author's Comments:

The Symposium proved to be a useful and stimulating meeting. Group home representatives expressed appreciation for the opportunity to exchange experience and ideas and take a fresh look at their activities in a neutral setting removed from everyday cares. Government representatives had the opportunity of learning about the progress and problems of group homes from the directors' point of view. All participants shared in providing valuable information for updating and strengthening the group home study prior to publication.

A review of the Symposium proceedings strongly suggests the need for continued efforts to improve the group home program. There is a need to consider whether there are better ways of funding new facilities and providing financial support to existing facilities. The system for classifying, referring, and placing children requires strengthening. More sophisticated staff development programs could help to improve staff skills in groupwork, milieu therapy, family counseling, and other specialized areas. Clearly, the agencies need to do more preparatory work with families and provide expanded aftercare programs to youngsters released from the group home. Finally, a need for further research was indicated along such dimensions as comparing the effectiveness of different group home policies, testing new approaches, following-up children released from the facilities and eliciting the viewpoints of non-supervisory staff members and the children, themselves.

A number of participants felt that the time allotted for the Symposium was too short. Moving from topic to topic in accordance with the pre-set agenda, they thought there was inadequate time for intensive analysis and the development of proposals for remedial action. The meeting had to skim over such key items as behavior management, peer group relations, and staffing patterns. There were also suggestions that the draft report of the group home study should have been mailed to participants a week or more earlier, to permit them to study it more thoroughly before the Symposium.

The observations of the participants suggest that it might be useful to convene a longer conference in the future or, better still, a series of Symposia devoted to particular facets of group home operation.

Comments on this report and the group home study will be welcomed by Dr. Shostack and Citizens Committee for Children of New Jersey.

Respectfully submitted,

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SYMPOSIUM ON THE GROUP HOME STUDY

CHAIRPERSONS AND DISCUSSANTS

I. STARTING AND FINANCING GROUP HOMES

Chairperson: Al Taylor, Janet Memorial
Discussant: Paula Rosenblum, Teaneck Group Home for Girls

II. THE INTAKE PROCESS

Chairperson: Rev. Robert Vitillo, Catholic Family & Community Services
Discussant: Lillian Hall, Union Industrial Home

III. STAFFING

Chairperson: Grace Sisto, Children's Aid & Adoption Society
Discussant: Kris Vasios, Barrett House

IV. EVERYDAY LIFE IN A GROUP HOME

Chairperson: Dr. Maurice Riley, Agape Group Home
Discussant: Peter Tenenbaum, Collier Group Home

V. EDUCATION AND THERAPEUTIC SERVICES

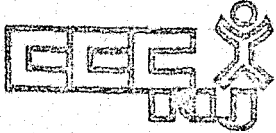
Chairperson: David Moorehead, Children's Home of Burlington County
Discussant: Anita McCaffery, Robin's Nest Group Home

VI. BUILDING A THERAPEUTIC SOCIAL MILIEU AND BEHAVIOR MANAGEMENT

Chairperson: Dennis Hamilton, Ewing Residential Center
Discussant: Greg Clarke, Past President, NJACRF

VII. TERMINATION AND AFTERCARE

Chairperson: Linda Wood, CCCNJ
Discussant: June Hamlette-Bethell, St. Timothy's House



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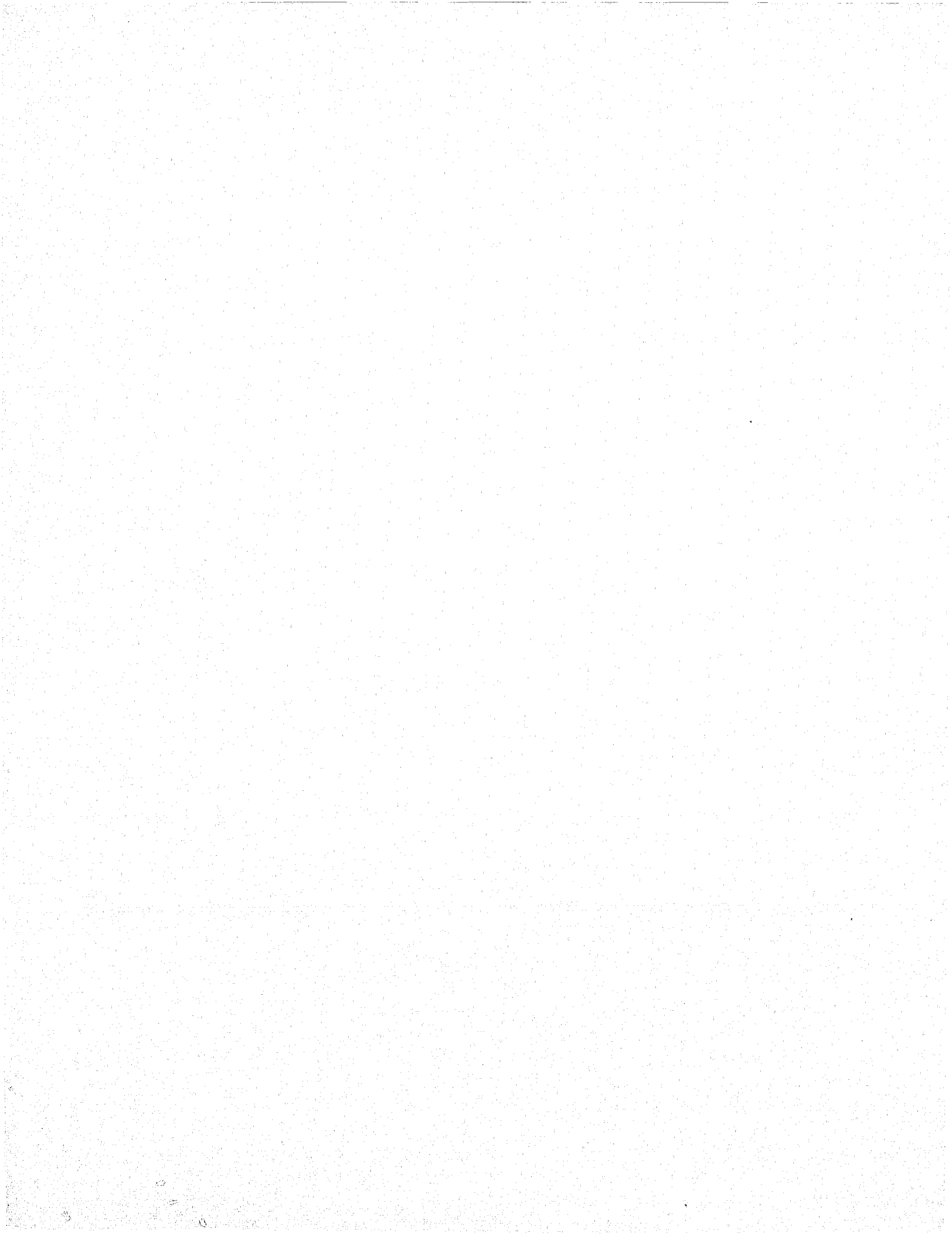
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