

Michael J. Begab, Oral History Interview – 3/21/1968
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Begab, a consultant on mental retardation for the Children's Bureau from 1957 to 1963 and executive officer to the Special Assistant to the President for Mental Retardation, Stafford L. Warren, from 1963 to 1964, discusses the President's Panel on Mental Retardation, the White House Conference on Mental Retardation, and legislation during the Kennedy administration on mental healthcare and research, among other issues.

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Michael J. Begab

Table of Contents

<u>Page</u>	<u>Topic</u>
1	Services to mentally retarded people before the Kennedy administration
3	The President's Panel on Mental Retardation
5	The Panel's report and recommendations
6	Results of the Kennedy administration's interest in mental retardation
8, 11	Legislation to fund mental healthcare and research
9, 12	Mental retardation programs in the department of Health, Education, and Welfare
14	White House Conference on Mental Retardation
17	State planning grants
18	Public relations
19	Advocacy groups and professional organizations
22	Stafford L. Warren's advisory committee
23	Government agencies that dealt with mental retardation

Oral History Interview

with

Michael J. Begab

March 21, 1968
Washington, D. C

By John F. Stewart

For the John F. Kennedy Library

STEWART: Why don't we begin by my asking you what you felt were the major deficiencies as far as the Children's Bureau was concerned in the efforts in mental retardation during the latter years of the Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower] Administration, let's say from 1957 to '61?

BEGAB: I think it's fair to say that the Children's Bureau had some interest in mental retardation dating back perhaps as many as twenty years. That interest was largely reflected in its basic responsibilities to investigate and report upon matters pertaining to all children, of which the mentally retarded were a part. Their activities, therefore, were limited largely to a few isolated studies in the field. Up until that time they did not include mental retardation as an integral part of their program activities either in their child welfare, maternal and child health, or on crippled-children's programs. Some of the states, by their definition, included the mentally retarded in their crippled children's program, but they were not identified as a special group with particular needs nor with any recognition that they needed to have special attention directed to them. This was the situation, largely, when I joined the staff in 1957.

I was hired by the Bureau primarily because of my background in mental retardation and by virtue of congressional interest, primarily Congressman Fogarty [John Edward Fogarty], who felt the government ought to give more attention to mental retardation. It was largely through his efforts that the Bureau was given staff position in mental retardation. I

was the second person to join the staff at that time with primary responsibilities in this field. The other staff member was concerned with the child welfare services components.

[-1 -]

It was my objective to work with public and voluntary child welfare agencies to stimulate their interests in expanding and extending services to this group and to help them, through various kinds of in-service training and consultation services, to make their child welfare staff more knowledgeable in the area.

STEWART: Was there any new legislation between the time you joined the staff and the Kennedy [John F. Kennedy] Administration that may have affected...

BEGAB: No, there was not any legislation specifically directed towards mental retardation. I might note, also, that it was extremely difficult to stimulate interest on the part of state agencies to utilize their limited budgets for any special services on behalf of this group. The budget was in a general category of child welfare services, and states had the responsibility for deciding on their own what their priorities were to be. In few instances did they regard mental retardation, at that time in history, as a priority item.

STEWART: Was there any real agitation, either within HEW [Department of Health, Education and Welfare] or by people such as Congressman Fogarty, to increase the mental retardation activities in the Children's Bureau?

BEGAB: I believe there was some pressure from the outside for a number of years. It stemmed in considerable measure from the National Association for Retarded Children and some of their friends in Congress, of whom Fogarty was a good example. I think there was always some interest on their part in stimulating further program activities, but specific legislation had not yet been promulgated for that purpose.

STEWART: Okay. Did you, do you recall, expect anything drastic as far as increases in your activities at the start of the Kennedy Administration? Or do you recall when you realized that there may be some change in the direction that the mental retardation programs were taking?

BEGAB: Yes, as I look back, the personal interest of the Kennedy family in mental retardation played an important role. The fact of their having a retarded member in the family was not too well known generally. I was unaware of it myself but recognized that personal tragedy could be a strong motivating force for action. It's difficult to credit that fact with any cause-and-effect relationship, for as I have already mentioned, other forces were also in motion. The beginning of increased activity at the Federal level took place with the establishment of the President's Panel on Mental Retardation and just before that, the President's

[-2 -]

message to Congress on mental retardation and mental illness. This was the first time that any president of the United States had addressed Congress on this major social problem. From my standpoint, and I'm sure from the perspective of many other people, this was a milestone in the development of the field. That message and the subsequent appointment of the President's Panel made me confident there would be a considerable change, not only in my activities but in other government agencies as well.

STEWART: Did you have any sizable increase in your own program, or was this just a one man operation as far as you were concerned? How large a staff did you have? Did you have...

BEGAB: There was just one other person, as I mentioned earlier in the health services and just myself in child welfare. The lack of additional staff was a major problem since I was trying to cover the entire nation and to stimulate interest on the part of so many state agencies.

Even among Bureau staff there was always the problem of establishing mental retardation as a program priority area. Every staff member was understandably concerned with his own specific area of responsibility and in our budget planning and with limited resources, we were always confronted with the need to set forth for the coming year particular areas of program emphases and to implement those emphases through allocation of staff and funds. Although mental retardation was always presented by me as an area needing further development and additional staffing and funds, these were not provided until the legislation was enacted at a later point. In brief, we had reflected within government the same attitudes that had characterized the field of mental retardation for so many years, namely, that it was a low priority concern.

STEWART: I think you mentioned that you had some association with the work of the President's Panel. Basically what did this consist of?

BEGAB: The President's Panel, as you know, was appointed in 1961, and part of their major effort was to collect as much information as they could on the existing state of services and knowledge. They, therefore, relied heavily, wherever information was available, on resources within government. As one of the persons carrying special responsibility in mental retardation, I was viewed as a source of information on existing services and resources and, I suspect, too, as a source of information on the nature of the problem itself. I was, therefore, in frequent liaison with the staff of the President's Panel acting in that capacity.

[-3 -]

STEWART: Let me go back just a little bit. As one who had been in the field for some years, was there any doubt in your mind that the establishment of such a

large scale commission was the answer or was needed at that time? Did you have any reservations about--that's what I'm after.

BEGAB: About establishing the commission itself? Oh, none at all. I felt it was long, long overdue. As one concerned with retardation for so many years, I shared frustrations of many professionals in the field in our uphill struggle to extend the resources of the country to this group. I was more than gratified by the later outcomes of the Panel's report. In light of the past resistances that I had so often encountered, I don't believe my expectations were as great as the results turned out to be.

STEWART: In working with the Panel while they were doing their studies, do you recall any major problems that they had or major deficiencies that you thought they ran into in the course of their work?

BEGAB: It's difficult to look back to the time they were in operation, but in retrospect I feel they were confronted with an extremely difficult task in assessing within the limited time available to them, both the quantity and quality of existing services and programs. The methods available to them, largely interviews with public officials throughout the country, necessarily had limitations. Some presented an overly negative view of the state of the art in an effort to stress needs, while others may have presented their programs in a more favorable light than warranted to impress others that worthwhile programs were underway. So, I'm not sure that the sources of information were of the most reliable sort, but considering the extensive search of the literature the Panel did as well, I'm convinced they did an outstanding job in assessing the status of services for the retarded.

STEWART: As far as your own work was concerned, exactly what changes did take place between January 1961 and the time of the implementation of legislation?

BEGAB: The changes within that period were probably not very extensive. It seemed to me the nation was kind of marking time, waiting to see what the outcome of this President's Panel report would be. As you know, various presidents have, at one time or another, established special commissions to study special problems. In many instances the resulting report has been filed with no effective implementation.

[-4 -]

I rather suspect that most people were adopting a wait-and-see attitude to determine whether or not this report would result in any effective action. I'm sure that this reservation was shared by many experienced professionals in the field. They had seen this sort of situation before--never involving the President of the United States, but certainly involving governors and the like--without a whole lot of success. So, I would say that between the appointment of

the Panel and the enactment of the legislation that there was probably no marked change in my activities.

One of the effects of the Panel report, however--and this was more substantive than legislative--was the visibility it gave to the culturally disadvantaged and deprived in the retarded population. Prior to that time there were many people even within the Children's Bureau who preferred to look upon retardation as primarily a biologically, organically based condition. They perceived the mentally retarded as a severely handicapped, totally dependent group for whom relatively little could be done in the way of behavior change. But with the emphasis of the Panel report on the disadvantaged, who for the most part could be helped to live socially useful lives through rehabilitation services, vocational training, social services, and education, a totally new perspective of the problem was promoted. I believe this encouraged many people to concentrate their efforts more in this area than they were previously inclined to do with a different image of the mentally retarded.

STEWART: Yes. Okay. Is there anything specific as far as the Panel's recommendations that you felt were, that you would take issue with or that you disagreed with, do you recall?

BEGAB: Well, as you know, there were ninety recommendations, and without having studied them afresh, I'm not sure...

STEWART: What I'm asking, is there anything that stands out in your mind that you were very heavily opposed to?

BEGAB: No. No, I don't believe there was anything I was really opposed to at the time. All the recommendations were well conceived. In retrospect, however, I think the limitation probably was a mistake. The Panel was in no position to prejudge the level of interest by universities in response to legislation enabling them to construct and establish research centers. The experience to date has been that there are many more universities who are interested in applying for funds under that program than have been able to receive them, largely because Congress has been guided by the tentative limitation imposed by the Panel when they indicated that ten centers should be built. This might have been a mistake.

[-5-]

I don't believe the President's report made any recommendation to construct university-affiliated facilities, but in the enactment of Public Law 88-164 two separate construction programs one for research centers and the other for university affiliated centers which had as their primary objective the training of professional personnel and demonstration of services was provided for. The separation of these two, I believe, was a mistake. Most universities regard research, training, and services as integral components of a single program. Our experience to date has indicated that many of the centers that applied for a construction grant have also applied for the other. Because of the separate legislation, however, they had been compelled to follow different administrative channels in getting

support for these programs. And it has resulted, in divisive efforts in many universities which are not best designed to carry out their objectives.

STEWART: Why was this split included in the legislation in the first place, do you have any idea?

BEGAB: I haven't the slightest idea as to why it was conceived in that manner. Apparently, it never came up as an issue. I suspect it was just a lack of foresight because nobody at the time, to my knowledge, challenged the separation of these two programs. And this may merely be a case of hindsight being better than foresight, but as we look back upon our experience to date, it appears that this might have been an error in judgment.

STEWART: You, I assume, were having extensive contacts with people in states throughout this whole period?

BEGAB: Yes, I was.

STEWART: Could you see a marked difference in their attitude or a marked change in their attitude, say, before the summer of 1963, before the White House conference and so forth?

BEGAB: You mean the different changes...

STEWART: I mean because they knew the Kennedy Administration was willing to push this area.

BEGAB: I think there was a change in attitude. I don't believe there was much change in activity because although there was an expression of sincere and greater interest than in the past in doing something, most, of the states didn't have the resources to do so. The states, if

[-6-]

they had to rely on their own means to implement an extensive, expanded program on retardation, probably would not have had the capacity to do so. They got the impetus from the federal legislation, which not only indicated to them the nation's concern with the problem but also gave them some of the means to develop programs.

STEWART: There were a few governors, namely the Governor of Virginia, who made some pretty strong statements against any further federal involvement in mental retardation activities of the states. Do you recall finding this in many states, running into this problem?

BEGAB : Well, I think you have reflected here the same phenomenon that I

mentioned existed at an earlier date even within the government. Every state, as well as the federal government has many groups and many social problems with which they're concerned. The problem has always been to choose between groups or between problems based upon some system of priorities, and this is necessarily tied to the availability of funds. There are others who shared the view of the Governor of Virginia, who felt they had other, more pressing problems than mental retardation, such as juvenile delinquency, for example. There was always this kind of competition. The mental retardation field has from its inception been confronted with the need to compete with other groups of people, other special interest groups, and other programs for the limited resources available. Clearly, the Virginia case was not an isolated situation.

STEWART: What was the reaction of people in the field like yourself when suddenly, during these three years of the Kennedy Administration, you found yourself, because of the President's and his family's interest in the field, you found yourselves in a greatly more favorable position?

BEGAB: Well, it was a little bit like coming into the sun. When you've been faced for many years, even by your colleagues, with the attitude of "What are you doing working with that group?" and you suddenly find yourself in the limelight and in a position to share some of the resources available, the outlook seems much brighter. Suddenly we were identified with a field no longer regarded as substandard or inappropriate for professional action. It certainly is exulting and uplifting to be identified with a movement that has the support of our national leadership--especially from the President of the United States.

STEWART: At the same time, was there considerable criticism by people that in the total allocation of medical resources this was a little bit unfair, simply

[-7-]

because of the President's personal interest in it?

BEGAB: Well, I don't know if anybody openly accused President Kennedy of backing programs on mental retardation primarily because of his personal interest, although I'm sure that this had some bearing on his activity. But there were many resistances to expanded programs and expanded use of federal funds for this group in preference to other groups. The legislation that was finally enacted did not sail through.

STEWART: No.

BEGAB: It had many obstacles. There were many Congressmen who were quite resistant to it, and as you probably know, the original bill did not go through in its initial form. There were some rather marked modifications of that bill, particularly with respect to initial staffing, providing the personnel to staff these

facilities. This provision was initially contained only in the Community Mental Health Centers Construction Act, but despite all the support that it received from the mental health associations around the country and other groups, passage of that part of the bill was initially blocked by Congressmen who felt, perhaps, that this was leading in the direction of socialized medicine. I'm not quite sure just what their resistances were, but there were many.

STEWART: On this question of staffing, I think I've read someplace or heard it said that the National Association for Retarded Children was opposed to the inclusion of the staffing provision because they felt it would tie the program down or would put limits on the program that didn't have to be there. Do you recall this?

BEGAB: In the original bill there was no provision for staffing for the mental retardation facilities, but, as you know, in more recent legislation they have made provision for staffing of the community facilities. I believe the parent's group did at first object to the provision of staffing funds, but apparently they did not object to it at this later point. I'm not sure what their original objections were. It is pretty clear that most states, in constructing these facilities, find it difficult to muster the additional funds necessary to support a widely expanded staff.

STEWART: To what extent were you involved in the translation of all the Panel's recommendations into either legislative proposals or action that the Children's Bureau or HEW could take on its own?

[-8-]

BEGAB: I was quite actively involved in that phase of activity as a member of Dr. Stafford Warren's [Stafford L. Warren] staff. I served as his executive officer during most of the time that he was in Washington as Special Assistant to the President.

STEWART: When did you join him? He came in December or January--I guess he came in January.

BEGAB: Yes, he wasn't really fully operational for several months after that, and I joined him in July of 1963 and remained with him till February of 1964. Several months later his position was terminated. The major responsibility of that office was to implement the recommendations of the Panel. Many of those, as you know, did not call for special legislation but merely meant bringing the various agencies together and helping them to examine their programs to see how they could independently act upon some of the specific recommendations made or join forces with other agencies where they had common interests. Our goal was to coordinate and integrate the activities of the many agencies within government, not only those within the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare but the other major departments as well, in an all-out effort to stimulate activity in this field. This was the major concern of that office.

STEWART: A few general questions. Did you people in Dr. Warren's office, in general, ever conflict with the people at HEW in the Secretary's office who had sort of the same responsibilities as far as coordinating was concerned?

BEGAB: Yes. There were many areas of conflict. I believe that rivalries or competition sometimes develops between the White House and some of its Executive branches. The Department of Health, Education, and Welfare had interests in mental retardation. They had already committed some of their resources to the development of programs in the area and probably wanted to run their own show, so to speak.

Dr. Warren's office was not really inclined toward taking the play away from them. We never regarded ourselves as an operational agency. We had no authority, no funds or staff to implement these programs. We did feel that with the prestige and backing of the White House we could coordinate programs and resolve conflicts between agencies that the agencies were unable to do by themselves.

STEWART: Now you're saying between agencies in HEW or...

[-9-]

BEGAB: Yes. Either between agencies within HEW or between HEW and other departments. One of the consequences of the legislation might be described as a bandwagon effect. Many agencies who throughout their history had been quite disinterested in mental retardation suddenly wanted a piece of the action and a part of this national program.

STEWART: An example?

BEGAB: An example? Well, let's just speak in general terms for a moment. Research and training are both activities for which several agencies within HEW share responsibility. The National Institute of Mental Health had for many years supported training for social work students, with an emphasis on mental retardation. The Vocational Rehabilitation Administration supported similar programs. The Children's Bureau had been rather minimally involved in this sort of activity, but with the enactment of the legislation and the leadership role cast upon the Children's Bureau as the result of the additional funds given to them, they became far more interested in extending their activities in these areas as well. This set up a competitive situation between the agencies due to overlapping areas of responsibility. Each agency was competing with the other for available funds. And they couldn't work these things out between themselves very easily. The way the government is currently structured, the Office of the Secretary has the authority to tell its various component agencies what to do, but is somewhat reluctant to do so. The agencies operate fairly autonomously, and there are many instances where it is difficult to get the agencies to coordinate effectively on a given activity without the influence of some

outside group. Dr. Warren's staff convened the directors and agency administrators, brought them together around issues and tried to resolve some of these, and reach agreements on proper division of responsibility. The staff served a highly useful purpose, although I will admit that it did result in some conflict, sometimes overt between the White House on the one hand and the HEW operation on the other.

STEWART: The Secretary's office?

BEGAB: Yes.

STEWART: Was the Secretary himself ever deeply involved or involved at all in any of this, to your knowledge?

BEGAB: I would say that most of the activity from HEW was handled by his subordinates rather than by him personally. I'm sure he was not uninvolved, but in terms of active involvement, I would say probably no.

[-10-]

STEWART: Yes. This would have been Wilbur Cohen [Wilbur J. Cohen] primarily?

BEGAB: Yes, Wilbur Cohen was highly active, was probably the primary author of the legislation, and deserves unlimited credit for his role in bringing the whole thing about. He was involved, even before the Panel report, in establishing a Secretary's Committee on Mental Retardation, so that there had been some early activity antedating the legislation.

STEWART: What kind of relationships did Dr. Warren and his staff have with regular staff members at the White House? Were they ever placed in the middle of any of these situations between you people and HEW?

BEGAB: You mean the other people in the White House?

STEWART: Yes.

BEGAB: I would say they were definitely involved in the process of getting the legislation enacted. In other words, they were the liaison between ourselves, the Congress, and President Kennedy. There were many instances of reluctant Congressmen; that is, Congressmen who opposed the legislation. If we exhausted all our capabilities in modifying their views we would report this to the President's staff, who would sometimes initiate contact on their own. If they failed, too, and there was no alternative available, they called on the President himself for direct action. And there were frequent occasions when the President personally contacted the Congressman involved in an effort to get his support for the legislation.

STEWART: Who were two or three or four of the major opponents or the people in Congress you had the most trouble with?

BEGAB: Well, I think my memory is a little hazy on that point.

STEWART: All right, Congressman Rogers [Paul G. Rogers] from Florida, I think, had certain reservations and...

BEGAB: So did Congressman Harris [Oren Harris], who was in a key, position as Chairman of the committee. There were others. I can't recall them offhand.

STEWART: Do you remember Rogers at all or what his objections were or how serious his ability was to alter the thing?

[-11-]

BEGAB: Well, I don't remember his specific arguments against it--this was a number of years ago, and I haven't reviewed that material recently--but I think the fact that the legislation was passed is in part an answer to the second part of your question about how effective he was. It took some time for the legislation to be steered through--I don't remember the number of months; it was quite a few months, as I recall--but, ultimately, I believe his objections were resolved.

STEWART: Did you replace Dr. Brown [Bertram S. Brown], who had been Dr. Warren's...

BEGAB: Dr. Brown helped Dr. Warren set up the operation at the White House and served in this unique function. Dr. Brown recruited me for that staff, and I joined the staff in the capacity I've indicated--not as Dr. Brown's replacement, per se--he returned to his position at the National Institute of Mental Health. From that point on, it was myself, Pat Doyle [Patrick J. Doyle] who acted as Dr. Warren's deputy, and Dave Ray [David B. Ray] who carried a primary responsibility as legislative liaison to the Congress, who were the key members of the staff. Other people too, played very important roles, like Tom Murphy who was on loan from the National Association for Retarded Children, Mrs. Lois Meng who acted as the public information officer, and Donald Stedman [Donald J. Stedman] who was temporarily assigned to the staff to plan the White House Conference on Mental Retardation. These were the professional staff. It was a small operation but a very hard working one.

STEWART: In terms of the other government departments and agencies, didn't HEW or wasn't it recommended by the Panel that HEW have some sort of overseeing role the other programs of the federal government were concerned?

BEGAB: You mean an overseeing role of the other departments?

STEWART: Yes.

BEGAB: No, I don't believe it was ever interpreted in that light. I think it was always felt, and probably appropriately so, that the Department of HEW had a more central involvement in providing the kinds of services and resources that the mentally retarded needed and therefore would be the key department in government to implement most of the recommendations. I don't believe it was ever felt that they had a supervising role over the other agencies. In fact, this was one of the things, one of the real services I believe, that Dr. Warren's office was able to provide.

[-12-]

HEW was not in a position to coordinate Labor or Commerce or the Bureau of Indian Affairs or any of these agencies who had a stake in mental retardation as well as this office could.

STEWART: Were you at one time or another involved in any of the programs of the other departments and agencies?

BEGAB: Yes. I'm not sure I can answer that the way you phrase the question. I wasn't involved in an operational sense, but one of the first things we did was to examine closely the authorities of the various agencies and their program activities to see, first, whether they had anything going on in mental retardation. For example, the Bureau of Indian Affairs had many deprived Indian children who were functioning at a retarded level and had some special schools for them. And other agencies of the government had some minimal activities, but authority to do more. One of the first things our office did was to invite representatives from these various agencies to discuss their program activities and interests with them and to identify specific recommendations in the Panel report that we thought were pertinent to their agency's responsibility. Our bible, so to speak, was the report and its recommendations and our effort was to match the recommendations with the authority and resources of the various departments of government and to work directly with them toward implementation. We tried to identify what they needed in the way of funds, legislation, staff, or what have you, and where it called for any backing, to try to provide that.

STEWART: What about the Civil Service Commission, for example? There was a certain increase in activity by them to hire retarded people in various jobs throughout the government. Was there much resistance to doing this? Was this something that people at the Commission undertook with great enthusiasm, or was it a slow, pushing type of thing?

BEGAB: Well, I'm not entirely clear on this point, and I'm not sure exactly where the idea started from. It might have just been a natural outgrowth of the

interest of the government in extending employment opportunities to the retarded and the feeling that what was right for everybody else might apply just as well to the federal government itself. There may have been some initial resistance on the part of the agencies themselves, who probably felt that there weren't many positions within their structures that a mentally retarded individual could fill. I do not recall any great resistance on the part of the Civil Service Commission to moving into this area, and I know from our own experience at this Institute... In fact, I was responsible for interviewing and selecting an

[-13-]

applicant from among several retarded youngsters. Our experience with them was very positive; many have done quite well. In fact, some have moved on to promotional positions with the government.

STEWART: What role did Mrs. Shriver [Eunice Kennedy Shriver] play in all your activities and all of the activities in Dr. Warren's office? Was she continually there involving herself in what you were doing?

BEGAB: Well, I think it would probably be fair to say that Mrs. Shriver was the President's right-hand man and was more actively involved, without question, than the President himself. Probably she was motivated both by personal interest and a commitment to the field. There isn't any question that she was on top of what was going on every minute of the day and played a very crucial role in seeing that things kept going. I believe that she probably had a central role in stimulating the sponsorship of the White House Conference as well as many of the other events that took place.

STEWART: Let me ask you about this: do you recall anything of the genesis of that idea for a White House Conference, or had this been underway by the time you got there?

BEGAB: No, it was not underway. I was very actively involved in the White House Conference, in its planning, in its execution and the like. I don't know to whom to credit the idea. I'm sure it occurred to me. I'm not sure whether I was the first one to express it. Probably not. Probably it was expressed by other people, too. It was a very natural thing to do. We recognized that, "All right, we've had a Panel report and many recommendations. What's the quickest way to give this problem national visibility and to involve in an active way all the representatives from the states?"

And I might say the response of the state people to the White House Conference was really far more enthusiastic than I would have expected. Since I was carrying a responsible role for the invitation of people and the program and the like, I was on the phone nearly all day long receiving long distance calls from the governors' offices. Many requested that they be allowed to send more people than we could allow them to send because of the limitations of space. It was partly a status thing; they were anxious to be a part of that conference.

STEWART: Hold it right here for a moment. I want to....

[BEGIN SIDE II, TAPE I]

[-14-]

STEWART: You were talking about getting people from various states to attend the White House Conference. Wasn't there a problem in the beginning of insisting that the people who came were, in fact, people who were involved in the mental retardation program and weren't just some people from the governor's office or something?

BEGAB: Some of those considerations were present, but it wasn't primarily that order. Our concern was to bring to the White House Conference those people in state agencies who had some responsibility for carrying out in action programs some of the ideas we hoped to present to them at the conference, as well as the recommendations that came out of the Panel report. And because we recognized retardation to be a problem for which many agencies shared responsibility, we attempted to identify for the governors specific individuals or the kind of program representatives we wanted them to send. We did not feel that we could dictate to the governor's office and say, "We want so and so," but we did want to express to them the kind of representation we thought was important. We wanted people from the Vocational Rehab Administration and the state education agency, its welfare agency, health agency, institutions, and the like: all of those who had a central responsibility for implementing mental retardation programs.

STEWART: Did you run into opposition from any governors or have problems with any governors or governor's offices, do you recall?

BEGAB: Ah, yes. As I said, I would get calls all day long protesting that they could only send so many people and they wanted to send more; there were some instances where they preferred to send people other than the type we had designated and in some instances these were politically oriented rather than program orientated. We did not insist too strongly that they send the specific person we wanted; we tried to convey our desires in this area, but it didn't seem politic to say to the governor, "No, you cannot send the person that you've designated." So we made many last minute accommodations. The conference was held at the Airlie House in Virginia. It is very limited in the number of people it can accommodate, and we had people staying at all the outlying motels in the area as well as Airlie House itself. Our original plans called for a conference of two hundred to two hundred-fifty people. The final tally was closer to four hundred.

STEWART: What was the--I'm trying to get at the real purpose of the conference. You said it was to heighten the visibility of the situations and to make sure, I

[-15-]

assume, that when the legislation was passed, it would receive ready acceptance by people in the states. Were the technical considerations of the discussions expected to produce something of value to professionals in the field, or was this sort of...

BEGAB: No, I don't think this was thought of primarily as a substantive conference, as an effort to set before the public officials the last word in what we know about mental retardation. It was far too short to carry out that kind of an objective and this was never really the intent. It was our desire to give them enough technical knowledge so that we would be speaking about the problem in a meaningful way, but it was not a scientific conference, either by our selection of speakers or participants. It was more a stimulation kind of effort, a rally around the mental retardation flag, so to speak.

STEWART: Was there any fear, do you recall, that possibly through this conference and all the publicity it got you would overstate what was going to happen or that the expectations would be too high?

BEGAB: You mean were we concerned that in our presentation of the problem that people would be concerned that we were asking for more than was possible to achieve ?

STEWART : No, I was thinking that in trying to get the states to accept, or get them in a position to carry out what the legislation was intended to do, was there any fear of overstating all that the legislation was going to do?

BEGAB: Oh. Well, I don't believe. At least I personally never felt that the legislation was the final answer to the needs of the mentally retarded throughout the country. It was a beginning step, certainly a very important step, more important than any that had been taken at any previous time through the legislative process, at least. But it was never considered by me, and I don't think in the minds of most people, as the end product of all that we needed in the field; it was just a starting point. And because services and facilities had been so long neglected in this area, there was little concern that we would be providing more than was needed. In fact, we are still struggling to bridge the gap between needs and facilities.

STEWART: I guess you answered my question. I was trying to get at the whole matter of whether the states were being led to expect that more was going to come out of this than actually came.

[-16-]

BEGAB: You mean were the states led to believe that they were going to get more from the federal government than they actually got?

STEWART: That they were going to get more out of the legislation than...

BEGAB: I think in some areas this might be the case. For example, the Community Facilities Construction Act provided a formula for grants to states based upon their inventory of resources and needs and their per capita population. The amount of money allocated to some states was really a mere pittance in terms of the overall need. Another area in which I'm sure there was a great deal of disappointment was with the planning grants. These were part of, I guess, 88-156. A total of 2.2 million dollars, as I remember, was allocated for the states, with each getting something like thirty thousand dollars. Now, I'm sure that many states were quite disappointed with that kind of an allotment and felt that it was totally inadequate to carry out the planning functions with which they were being charged. So there were specific aspects of the legislation that, although important as pump-priming efforts, were perhaps looked upon by the states as inadequate to their fiscal needs. Some dissatisfactions clearly existed.

STEWART: Let me ask you about these planning grants. This, I assume, was part of the initial legislation, of the initial proposal. Weren't there some problems as far as deciding or as telling the states what they should do with this planning grant; namely, that they would have to produce some kind of a written formal plan from it?

BEGAB: Well, there were several problems with respect to the planning grants. One problem was that the grant initially designated a single state agency, traditional approach in federal-state relations. In many states the agency that had been assigned primary responsibility for mental retardation was the mental health agency. There had always been a conflict in some states between persons representing the mentally ill and the mentally retarded, and the agencies and disciplines correspond to that kind of division. Mental retardation, for example, was represented largely, in terms of the medical group, by the pediatrics and psychiatry as to who should carry responsibility for mental retardation. There were also conflicts between the mental health agency in many states and some other agency, such as the public health agency or the welfare department as to who should be the single state agency to carry this role. Ultimately this was resolved, at least in part, by the interpretation

[-17-]

of "single state agency" as also applying to a committee, so that a governor could set up an inter-agency committee with authority, funding, and responsibility for planning. This kind of problem did exist both in the acceptance of the funds and in setting up some structure at the state level that could effectively carry out the planning assignment.

STEWART: Was this in fact what happened in most states, that it resulted in...

BEGAB: No. I don't have any detailed information as to the breakdown. I know in some states they did set up a governor's committee or an inter-agency committee or some structure that involved representation from the various agencies involved. In a good many others, however, I believe a single state agency was

assigned this role, and it was then their responsibility to involve the other agencies as appropriate.

STEWART: To what extent during the time you were with Dr. Warren's office were you involved in all of the activity relating to public information, relating to all of the public relations activities that were being undertaken?

BEGAB: Well, we had a great deal of public relations activities. You mean with respect to representatives from state governments and national agencies and the like attempting to interpret to them the goals and objectives of the federal government with respect to this legislation? Is that what you are talking about?

STEWART: That, and there was, as I recall, there was an attempt--there was a booklet put out that summarized the work of the President's Panel. And I think there was an effort by--they got the Advertising Council, didn't they, to put on a campaign explaining mental retardation or at least drumming up support for mental retardation activities?

BEGAB: Yes, there were several things the office undertook. Everybody on the staff was involved to some extent in the development of that material. I wrote some of it or edited some of it or contributed content to it or somebody else had the primary writing responsibility. But the Advertising Council campaign was also initiated by that office. I was not personally too actively involved in this effort because we had individuals--Tom Murphy for instance--from the parents association whose field was in public relations, and they were better equipped to carry that role than I was. But the entire staff was involved to some extent.

[-18-]

STEWART: By the parents association, you mean the National Association [for Retarded Children]?

BEGAB: Yes.

STEWART: Exactly what role did they play in this whole effort, and was there any resentment of the role that they were playing by either other organizations in the field or by anyone in HEW?

BEGAB: The NARC probably should be given the major credit for the events leading up to President Kennedy's special message to Congress and the legislation that followed. They had been active since 1950, when they were first organized, and carried as their primary role the interpretation to the public of the needs of the mentally retarded and a lobbying role with Congress. They were very effective in pushing through and getting citizen support for the legislation since they have over a thousand chapters around the country each of whom probably contacted their Congressman

or Senator when that legislation was pending. So their role in the enactment of the legislation was unquestionably a vital one.

I do think, however, that any group that is identified with a special interest must of necessity lock horns from time to time with other special interest groups since they are all competing, as it were, for the limited resources available. I'm sure that there may have been various people or organizations who felt that this group was pushing their own interest to the detriment of other groups in similar need. This phenomenon was noted not only at the federal level but the state and local level as well.

I know that in my capacity as consultant with the Children's Bureau I had occasion in many instances to meet with representatives from state agencies and state parent associations or local parent associations in efforts to coordinate the interests of several special interest groups around the establishment or use of a common facility: for example, diagnostic clinics. There were some local groups who felt that a diagnostic clinic might more appropriately serve a number of handicapping conditions. Cerebral palsy groups and the groups representing other kinds of physical disorders or emotional disturbance felt that a given local community couldn't afford a clinic just for the retarded and might be better advised to set up a clinic serving several groups. The representatives of the parents groups--now, this is not a universal situation--in many instances felt, and sometimes with justification, that if they joined forces with other groups, they would tend to be relegated to the low priority position they had occupied in the past. They were kind of gun-shy. Having finally achieved a more favored position in

[-19-]

competing for resources, they were reluctant to jeopardize this favored position by joining forces with other groups. Of course, in their unwillingness to do this sometimes this resulted in nothing being done, or perhaps not the best things being done. Certainly, in many instances it resulted in conflict between the representatives of that group and other groups.

STEWART: Do you recall any conflicts between Dr. Warren's office and the National Association on any specific things they were pushing?

BEGAB: It's very difficult to speak in conflict terms of the activities of Dr. Warren's office, because Dr. Warren had a rare gift for not getting involved in conflicts, at least of any magnitude that anybody could really put their finger on. He was quite adept at convening people, at resolving some of the issues, at meeting their needs, or at least in evading direct conflict situations that would lead to a diversion of activity. I would say, as far as the parents group was concerned that part of the answer to your question is no, at least to the best of my recollection. I don't recall any difficulties between that office and the parents association. The only conflict that I am able to recall I've already referred to. This concerned HEW, and it was more a--it was not a conflict in terms of personality so much as a conflict in a struggle for power and leadership.

STEWART: In gaining support for the legislation, do you recall any opposition among professional groups? The AMA [American Medical Association], I guess,

at first was only lukewarm toward some of the legislation. Although I don't think anyone actually opposed it, were there any groups like that that you didn't get as much cooperation from as you would want?

BEGAB: Well, I would say that probably the AMA was one of the more resistant groups. In an organization covering so many different groups throughout the country, such as all the chapters of the medical association, it was very difficult to assign any cause and effect relationship between their actions and what finally occurred.

STEWART: Did you have any direct involvement yourself with the AMA, or did Dr. Warren or anyone from his office?

BEGAB: I frankly don't recall. I think that Dr. Warren probably did. I didn't personally.

[-20-]

STEWART: And there were no other medical groups that you had any contact with, that you recall?

BEGAB: None that I remember that were resistive to legislation.

STEWART: Were there any other kinds of groups that, again, that you felt you didn't get as much support from as you had hoped, or as you would normally expect?

BEGAB: Well, there are not--I think we have to remember that there were not too many organizations prior to that time who identified mental retardation as a primary interest so that their response was more one of indifference rather than active resistance. The only time they would resist would be if they thought the enactment of such legislation would take away resources from the groups they were responsible for. But just as they were not resistive, by the same token, a good many of them at least, were not overly supportive: they were just not there at all. Many of the National Organizations, to my recollection, like the Child Welfare League of America, the American Public Welfare Association, the American Public Health Association--certainly the National Association for Mental Health, because of their interest in the community mental health centers, were very active. The mental health group mounted a vigorous campaign against the deletion of that staffing provision I mentioned earlier; they were very, very supportive.

A number of national associations were certainly behind this. The American Association on Mental Deficiency ought to be mentioned here, too, because they have probably been involved for a longer period of time with this problem than any other professional association. They will be celebrating their hundredth centennial in 1976, and their only interest is in the mentally retarded. They played a supportive role, certainly, for the legislation, as well.

STEWART: This is an organization, as I understand it, that at one time had considerable difficulties, or at least wasn't making the headway that people assumed it should as a professional organization. Was anything done, or was this a concern by people during that time?

BEGAB: Well, it's difficult to assess this because you have to see that association in light of the historical developments of the period in which they existed. As I mentioned, their formation goes back to 1876. There wasn't a whole lot going on in this country in mental retardation then. They were a lone voice in the wilderness, and, for the most part,

[-21-]

they consisted of people identified with the institutional field because that was the only major program available for the mentally retarded at that time. On the positive side, we ought to note that it's one of the few organizations in existence, even today, that is multi-disciplinary in its composition, which gives it some added strength, at least in the mental retardation field that has so many components to it. I don't think that they could be excluded from the credits awarded for agencies that played a part in developments preceding the enactment of the legislation and the establishment of the President's Panel. Certainly the parents group had a lot more visibility, they were a lot more vocal, they had a special interest, they were fighting for their own children, they had more emotional appeal, and therefore probably made a greater impact in terms of public awareness of the problem than the American Association of Mental Deficiency. I'm sure that the legislation itself and the whole movement, which is another by-product, if you will, of President Kennedy's contribution, has been to strengthen that organization, too, because in giving the problem greater visibility it enabled them to recruit more members, to strengthen its own position, to play a more vigorous leadership role in the field.

It's very difficult to measure all the benefits that have accrued from those two actions of President Kennedy's. I think it would be a mistake to measure all the values strictly in terms of what's happened for the mentally retarded and for their families. I think it has contributed to a much greater awareness of the complexity, not only of this problem but many related problems. It has heightened the awareness of the need for inter-disciplinary activity on many problems confronting society. In the past I think that we tended to look at specific problems through the eyes of a single discipline--for example, the research centers for mental retardation which were promulgated on the concept of interdisciplinary research is a real step toward the integration of scientific effort from a variety of disciplines. These considerations seem to be somewhat removed from the legislation per se, but I think they are direct consequences of that effort.

STEWART: One other question here. I guess this will be the final one. Dr. Warren had an advisory committee, didn't he?

BEGAB: Yes, he did.

STEWART: In general, did this advisory committee perform any function of any great importance, or was it primarily just a committee to be there?

[-22-]

BEGAB: I think that they provided an important advisory function to Dr. Warren. Without detracting in any way from Dr. Warren's own contributions to the office, it should be remembered that he didn't come from an extensive background in mental retardation. In fact, he would be the first to admit that he was a neophyte in the field. He needed the advice and counsel of a group of experts. Some of it was provided by his staff, but even the staff couldn't be expected to know all that could be known about the problem, as could be represented by an expert group such as the advisory committee constituted. I think they offered a good deal of sound advice and guidance and played, I would say, an important contributing role to the total effort.

STEWART: Is there anything else that you can think of that we didn't cover? Skip through here quickly. How about the creation of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, were you involved in this at all?

BEGAB: Not directly. As I recall some of the history behind this, there was some interest on President Kennedy's part, initially, in establishing a National Institute on Mental Retardation. When this idea was proposed to the National Institutes of Health, it was felt that an institute so constituted would be too narrow in perspective and that there were many areas of knowledge relating to normal human development that the National Institutes by their composition were not addressed to. As you know, the NIH has a series of institutes, each with a specific disease or organ system orientation. There was no institute looking at the interaction of various disease processes or looking at the normal processes of development. So it seemed in view of the interest in establishing another institute--I'm only speculating about the behind-the-scenes thinking on this--but I would guess that combining the President's interest in mental retardation and the awareness of the need for a broader approach to the problems of human development, a natural outcome of that thought process was to establish the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. And in a sense they retained both interests because this institute is regarded as the focal point for research in mental retardation within the National Institutes of Health. In brief, they accomplished both objectives.

STEWART: How about the establishment of the Division of Handicapped Children in the Office of Education? This was done, I think, during 1963, wasn't it?

[-23-]

BEGAB: I'm not sure that I could speak too authoritatively to this point. I know it was established then, and Sam Kirk was recruited to head it up, and this,

too, I think, emanated from the legislation and some of the recommendations. There was a feeling that the Office of Education needed to give more visibility to this program element and needed to do so through its administrative structure. It's almost a postscript to note that sometime after all this happened there was agitation to do away with that division.

STEWART: Oh, really?

BEGAB: And it was done away with, but it's been reinstated in a bureau of handicapped children in the Office of Education largely through the efforts of what's this congressman's name? I think it's Congressman Rogers.

I'd like to add another comment. I think that the role of Dr. Warren in the White House has not been given as much recognition as it really warranted. I'm sure that the explanation lies in part in the power struggle that stems from new developments in an area that had previously been underdeveloped and the fact that as a representative of the White House you have to play your cards cautiously. You don't want to become another operating agency, and you can't even if you wanted to; you don't want to ride roughshod over the wishes of the agency administrator. It's a very delicate kind of position, a very sensitive one, because of the political implications that are involved. You're sort of in-between the President and the Congress, on the one hand, and between the operating agencies and the White House on the other. It calls for a great deal of finesse in handling personal relations. We, on many occasions, had to call in agency representatives in response to program recommendations that were not being followed as vigorously as we thought they needed to be. Or when an agency, for example, submitted a plan for implementing recommendations that seemed totally inadequate with an attitude of, "Well, you're twisting our arm" sort of thing, "so this is what we're willing to do."

I know that in my capacity with the Children's Bureau, as I've indicated earlier, there were many instances where I had recommended an expanded activity. I could foresee the growing national interest, and although I did not have a crystal ball by which I could prophesy that there was going to be legislation enacted, the signs were fairly clear. You couldn't escape the groundswell of interest that was developing at that time. I wanted us to anticipate the demand of the field rather than to follow after the things had been developed.

Even after the legislation was enacted, there was some reluctance to move aggressively into an expanded staff. I felt that I was able to accomplish more for the Children's Bureau as

[-24-]

a member of the White House staff than I was able to accomplish for them as a member of the bureau staff, partly, I assume, because I had the backing of the White House, or at least of Dr. Warren. We had a different perspective of the overall problem than any single agency had. They could look at the needs of the mentally retarded in terms of their own program mission, but they couldn't always appreciate the overall government mission and all of the related parts that in some instances had direct bearing on whether they could carry their part very effectively. You know, if you have a good vocational rehabilitation program, it's not

going to be nearly as effective if all the services preceding adulthood are not given. Training in the home and proper schooling are important preparations for later vocational training.

All of the programs were interdependent and interrelated, and I think we brought that kind of perspective to it. This is not to suggest that others weren't as wise or didn't share the same views. I think the White House staff made an important contribution that probably could not have been made any other way. No one could look back and say the outcome would have been different had there not been a special assistant to the President; no one can say that with certainty, but I like to think it would have been very different in the absence of somebody in that position.

STEWART: Okay. Did you ever meet President Kennedy? Do you remember the occasion?

BEGAB: Oh, yes, several times. These are some of the fringe benefits of working at the White House. I met him at the reception of the White House Conference, for one, and I met him on a number of occasions in the Rose Garden receptions when foreign dignitaries came to the White House and I could observe him in action.

I'm sure that when all is recounted of President Kennedy's Administration, there will be many things that historians can look to as major achievements--and it may well be that when all these achievements are measured, that what has been accomplished in the field of mental retardation may not appear to rank very high. But in the perspective of someone who has dedicated a good many of his working years to this field--and I'm sure, this feeling is shared by other professionals--I would say that what he contributed to mental retardation would probably rank as one of his greatest achievements.

STEWART: Very good.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

Michael J. Begab Oral History Transcript
Name Index

B

Brown, Bertram S., 12

C

Cohen, Wilbur J., 11

D

Doyle, Patrick J., 12

E

Eisenhower, Dwight D., 1

F

Fogarty, John Edward, 1, 2

H

Harris, Oren, 11

J

Jefferson, Thomas, 1

K

Kennedy, John F., 2, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 14, 19, 22, 23,
24, 25

Kirk, Samuel A., 24

M

Meng, Lois, 12

Murphy, Tom, 12, 18

R

Ray, David B., 12

Rogers, Paul G., 11, 24

S

Shriver, Eunice Kennedy, 14

Stedman, Donald J., 12

W

Warren, Stafford L., 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 18, 20, 22,
23, 24, 25