

MARYLAND

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Perhaps the newest of the state consumers organizations was organized at Rockville, Maryland in May, 1961. How does an organization of consumers start? What conditions must exist before it can catch its first breath and begin to do something for consumers? In our case the spark came from the Co-op Congress, an elected body representing 23,000 members of Greenbelt Consumer Services - the largest consumer cooperative in the United States. Just why did it start when it did? Probably because all consumers were gradually getting more uneasy about the things they bought that didn't wear well, or that cost too much, or that were packaged in weird sizes and shapes. But there had to be a channel. The Co-op Congress was a good channel for articulate Co-op members who were accustomed to working together for the things they wanted. Through the Speaker of the Congress, they simply called upon the Board of Directors to appropriate some money to hold a conference to which other consumers from all over the state would be invited.

But there are other channels for consumer discontent. Among some of the most useful members of the Council today are the "Carter Girls". Mrs. Virginia Carter wrote an angry letter to one of the Washington newspapers about poor quality in consumer goods. Soon housewives all around Washington were chiming in in letters to the editor, who sent the originals to Mrs. Carter. She loaned them to the Co-op committee who invited them to the workshop.

Workshops cost money, particularly if out-of-town speakers with reputations are desired. Having obligated its first \$500, the Co-op committee decided it would like to share the credit with a co-sponsor who could furnish the dowry. Nationwide Insurance, backer of many Co-op projects, and persistent supporter of the consumer point of view, responded with another \$500, plus staff with needed skills. The workshop cost about \$1100, and was considered a good investment by all concerned.

The program listed such authorities as Harry Culbreth of Nationwide, the Rev. Robert J. McEwen, the Hon. Philip A. Hart - U.S. Senator - Dr. Richard L. D. Morse, and Miss Persia Campbell. Following each speaker, there was plenty of time for well-organized small group discussions, chaired by especially coached discussion leaders.

How about the people? Seventy-two registered for the workshop. Among them were representatives of about 20 organizations, including the Maryland Farm Bureau, Maryland -D.C. A F of L-CIO, the Grange, several cooperatives including a rural electric Co-op, Group Health, Greenbelt Consumers Service (a consumer co-op), Southern States (a farm co-op) and Potomac Cooperative Federation. Other organizations included the Maryland Home Economics Association, women's clubs, the Weights and Measures Association, and the Maryland State Council of Home Makers. Among the individuals were college professors, housewives, and a variety of state and federal employees, many of whom were highly sophisticated concerning consumer problems.

To wind up the workshop just after those present had voted to form a permanent organization, the clerical staff surprised everyone by presenting each participant a bound copy of the proceedings, containing the papers presented, summaries of each group discussion and the minutes of the business session at which the action to form a permanent organization was taken.

So much for getting started. It may have been the easiest part. There were delays, but the Council is now formally incorporated and has officers and a temporary board of directors which will serve until the first annual meeting in May, 1962. Committees on membership, finance, legislation, publicity and program for the annual conference are organized and busy. Organization memberships range from \$25 to \$125. Individual dues are \$5.

A very distinguished technical advisory committee is being recruited from the large number of well-qualified technical people in the Washington area.

Much will depend upon the 1962 conference, or workshop. Present plans are to use local authorities from such agencies as the Food and Drug Administration, the Federal Trade Commission, the Department of Agriculture, etc. The Council will shortly start publishing a newsletter. A goal of 50 organization memberships and 500 individual members has been set for this year.

The Council has been active on only one legislative issue: "Truth in Lending". It has had some influence upon the thinking of the state government on consumers' problems, but its work and influence lie ahead of it.

One thing I can say to this audience with complete confidence and that is that Maryland is eager to learn from every other consumer organization. Please tell us how you did it and if you didn't do it,

maybe it would help us to know what didn't work for you. Our president is Mrs. Sarah Newman. She will welcome ideas from any of you. It seems to us that everyone comes to Washington sooner or later. Please give your Maryland counterparts a ring.