PROBLEMS OF ORGANIZING CONSUMERS

CALIFORNIA

George Brunn

1. The principal problem we have encountered is how to do an even reasonable effective organizing job without any paid staff and officers and directors who are already extremely busy.

2. The problems are complicated for us by the size of the state. Our membership presently is concentrated principally in the San Francisco Bay Area and, to a lesser extent, in the Los Angeles Area. But we do have members spread from San Diego to Humboldt County - a distance of well over 700 miles.

3. Tentative plans which are now in process of formulation and will come before the Executive Board of the Association next month, include the following:

(a) Focusing on doing a few things well this year, as outlined below.

(b) Selection of packaging and weights and measures as the principal area of our concern this year.

(c) Planning and holding a conference dealing with the above area in the fall of this year, in conjunction with the annual convention of the Association.

(d) Developing exhibits and a program kit for use in speaking to groups. A start has been made in this direction by obtaining tapes of speeches by Helen Nelson and Mildred Brady.

(e) Start a bulletin dealing with consumer problems and Association activities. Initially this bulletin might be mimeographed and come out four times a year.

(f) Develop area chairman, responsible for organization in their region, together with materials to assist them and targets to aim for. One possible avenue of approach here is the development of local consumer associations to be affiliated with the state-wide organization. This is already taking place in San Diego and Sacramento, and our bylaws favor such development. In such an event, the state-wide organization might ultimately be a federation rendering educational, news and legislative services.

(g) Develop a legislative committee, with each person responsible for maintaining contact with legislators in his area and attending major hearings held there, and for seeing to it that others voice their views on significant consumer questions and bills.
(h) Exhibit at the California State Fair in Sacramento.

I should emphasize that all of the above plans are still in the formulating stage and have not been finally approved. They may change substantially and their implementation will pose obvious problems. We welcome the advice of other consumer groups and the benefit of their experiences.

MARYLAND

Henry Redkey

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.