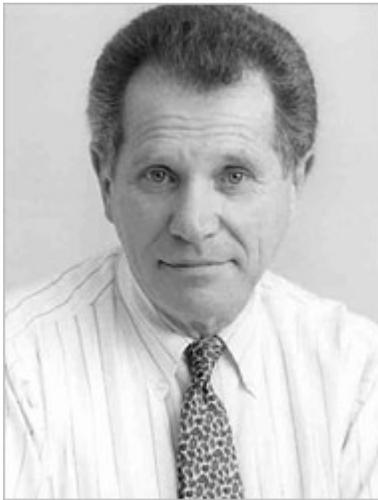


# Bernard Wohl, 76, Advocate for Poor and Homeless, Dies

By ROBERT D. McFADDEN  
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Bernard J. Wohl, a relentless advocate for the poor, the homeless and the forgotten elderly of New York and for 26 years the leader of Goddard Riverside Community Center on the Upper West Side, one of the city's largest private social service agencies, died on Thursday at NewYork-Presbyterian/Weill Cornell hospital. He was 76.



Bernard J. Wohl

The cause was complications of a blood infection, said his daughter, Carla Wohl.

Mr. Wohl, who lived near the center's headquarters at Columbus Avenue and 88th Street, was executive director from 1972 until his retirement in 1998. During his tenure, Goddard Riverside grew from a modest agency with a \$600,000 budget into a \$12 million organization with 150 staff workers, hundreds of volunteers, 550 housing units and dozens of aid, recreation and education programs.

In a city of great riches and progressive traditions where, nevertheless, such basic needs as food, shelter and help with addictions and mental illnesses seem endlessly unmet, Mr. Wohl was the man in the middle: seeking aid from foundations and city agencies, creating housing with onsite social services, sending kids to camp, fighting not-in-my-backyard lawsuits, negotiating with neighborhood leaders, confronting drug dealers, holding book fairs, even carving the Thanksgiving turkey for the homeless.

“Bernie Wohl stood for a very strong belief in social justice and social action, not only services and helping people, but also getting to the root causes of why people are poor and why there are differences among people in our society,” said Stephan Russo, Mr. Wohl’s successor at Goddard Riverside. “His legacy is a vibrant, dynamic community organization.”

Trained as a social worker, Mr. Wohl began a series of innovative programs for young, elderly and homeless people that have had a lasting impact on the Upper West Side and in Harlem, and some of which have been replicated elsewhere. In 1979, responding to a homeless crisis in the city, he created Project Reachout, in which mobile vans roamed the streets with teams trained to encourage homeless mentally ill people to accept assistance.

He also led drives for Goddard Riverside, often in the face of community opposition, to transform single-room-occupancy hotels with transient populations into hundreds of units of permanent housing with 24-hour services for mentally ill homeless people on the Upper West Side, and dozens of studio apartments for emotionally fragile and elderly people in Harlem. Many residents were able to leave city shelters.

In the 1970’s and 80’s, as the Upper West Side underwent extensive changes in an urban renewal that recast the cityscape and displaced thousands of residents, Mr. Wohl fought for housing for low-income people and helped to keep many residents in the community, Mr. Russo said. He also testified at City Council and state legislative hearings, appealing for funds for social services.

In 1983, on Mr. Wohl’s watch, Goddard Riverside completed the construction of Phelps House, a 168-unit apartment building for the low-income elderly that also houses the agency’s offices and spaces for counseling, recreation and community outreach programs.

The project drew considerable fire from opponents of additional low-income units in the neighborhood. But Mr. Russo noted that Mr. Wohl “didn’t shy away from conflict,” and the result from Goddard Riverside’s perspective was gratifying. “Many of those who opposed it became some of our biggest supporters,” Mr. Russo said.

Among Mr. Wohl’s many fund-raising efforts were annual book fairs, with up to 25,000 books a year donated by publishing houses he approached, and dinners at private homes with authors whose attendance he arranged, including Robert Caro, E. L. Doctorow, Calvin Trillin and Elie Wiesel.

While Goddard Riverside for many years owned and operated two summer camps for children in the Catskills, rising operating costs and declining government support forced their sale in the 1990's. "It killed me to do it," Mr. Wohl said of the closings.

Bernard Jay Wohl was born in Manhattan on Jan. 4, 1930, and attended Stuyvesant High School. He earned a bachelor's degree in psychology at Syracuse University in 1951 and a master's in social work at the University of Buffalo in 1953.

After two years in the Army as a psychiatric social worker, he was associate director of the United Community Centers in Brooklyn from 1955 to 1961. He taught social work at Ohio State University from 1965 to 1969, and was executive director of a settlement house in Columbus, Ohio, from 1961 to 1972, when he joined Goddard Riverside.

After his retirement, Mr. Wohl, the recipient of many awards for his work, taught at the Hunter College Graduate School of Social Work in 1999 and 2000. In recent years, he lectured and wrote extensively on social work, urban poverty and programs for troubled youths.

In addition to his daughter, of Los Angeles, Mr. Wohl is survived by his second wife, the former Mary Elizabeth Taylor, whom he married in 1995; his first wife, Doreen, of Manhattan; a son, Michael, of Boca Raton, Fla.; and four grandchildren.