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FRANCES PERKINS, Secretary

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MARY ANDERSON, Director

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Progress Report on Women War Workers' Housing

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INTRODUCTORY

Government and citizens are collaborating to overcome housing shortages for war workers in critical areas of the United States. Special emphasis centers on the acute problems of young women who seek living quarters in the community where they are employed in war industries or related service occupations. Some of the outstanding women's national organizations are awake to the need for permanent means of assuring more and better living accommodations at reasonable rates for young women working away from home, particularly those in lower-paid occupations and industrial employment.

From the outbreak of World War II, the Women's Bureau of the Department of Labor gathered information about housing facilities in the war-goods-production areas, with particular attention to accommodations for the women who inevitably must help man the industries. Personal visits to typical areas were made by the Director of the Bureau and investigations conducted in almost two score localities by field representatives from its staff. First-hand data were accumulated about housing, also other major factors that affect the well-being of women turning out the weapons of war. Numerous conferences were held with representatives of Government agencies and civilian groups, defining problems and developing solutions through cooperative efforts on the basis of known facts.

The Bureau, through its Director, called a conference at Washington, D. C., for January 21-22, 1942, assembling its Advisory Committee and the invited representatives of 25 national and international women's organizations. The objective, as declared in the conference report, was to find what could be done by Government and citizens to help the women in war plants become most effective in their employment. Imperative need was recognized for "a well-coordinated program involving training, placement, and maintenance of proper working and living conditions for women workers."

A special committee designated by the conference to consider community facilities for women in war employment found, from testimony of United Service Organizations representatives present and from reports on typical war-industry areas by the Bureau's agents, that at that time grave housing difficulties for women in many war industries were chargeable to (1) a scant supply of rooms for rent, (2) overcrowding in available rooms, (3) householders' aversion to

¹"How Women War Workers Live," a summary of Women's Bureau field investigations during the winter of 1941-42, appeared in Labor Information Bulletin for August 1942. Both the summary and the present report were prepared by Sara Louise Buchanan of the Research Division.

women roomers, particularly to women in industrial employment, (4) inadequate room-registration facilities, (5) lack of inspection of rooms offered for rent to young women, and (6) a dearth of low-cost living quarters for girls in the lower wage scales, as in the service trades.

The committee found that in a few important areas housing difficulties were intensified by lack of proper planning in the construction of "duration barracks" for women workers. Isolated location, inadequate transportation; absence of eating facilities, dispensary provisions, recreational or social opportunities for leisure time; and nondescript, cheerless furnishings—these combined to drive girls away from the dormitory accommodations rather than to attract them.

In view of these findings, the conference adopted at its closing session certain recommendations, with special emphasis on housing for women war workers, to guide further action by the Women's Bureau and voluntarily participating organizations. The recommendations proposed these procedures: (1) Mutual cooperation of the organizations' national offices and the Bureau in obtaining and distributing information about women's housing problems in critical areas; (2) contacts by the Bureau with the proper Government authorities regarding improved livability of federally built "duration dormitories"; (3) emphasis by organizations on the adequate representation of women on local councils dealing with housing; (4) local educational campaigns to stir community interest in the housing of women employed in war industries and service trades; (5) for privately housed workers, to investigate the advisability of rent-control boards in each critical area and the need for reliable room registries.

Accordingly, for its part, the Women's Bureau sought and was granted collaboration with the Federal authority in charge of dormitory planning, and succeeded in effecting desirable improvements. It cooperated with the Federal agencies charged with stimulating community action toward improved living conditions for immigrating war workers, freely supplying useful field data acquired by its agents. Its office staff prepared handbooks and educational folders, designed among other things to acquaint community leaders and interested citizens with accepted minimum standards of services in housing. These were widely used by public and private agencies in setting up local facilities.

Early in 1943 the Bureau invited the women's organizations that participated in the 1942 conference to assemble for Bureau use reports from their local groups in critical areas about community action during the year that had passed in assuring decent, adequate housing at reasonable prices for young women immigrating to war industries. Specifically, they were asked to report on (1) local sources of information about available rooms, (2) means of advising applicants about the respectability of neighborhoods, and so forth, (3) extent of regulation of boarding and rooming accommodations, especially on standards of cleanliness, decency, and safety, (4) the achievement of the community in solution of housing difficulties, and (5) urgent continuing needs in terms of housing for young women.

It was believed that cooperation in gathering and submitting the data would focus anew the attention of local women leaders on the vital character of the housing feature, and stimulate renewed effort where necessary. Six organizations responded, providing reports from 44 States and on at least one-third of the critical areas, including

all the larger, more congested ones. Approximately two-thirds of these are principally war-industry locations; about one-fifth are combined military and industrial centers; the others are military training centers.

URGENT COMMUNITY HOUSING NEEDS

Community reports stress for the respective localities certain requisites essential to the satisfactory housing of war workers. Well over one-third of the areas reported are said to need more living accommodations; that is, rooms, light-housekeeping quarters, efficiency apartments, dormitories, boarding homes, or residence clubs. More than one-tenth need a central registry of classified available accommodations that can be recommended to a young woman. Considerable emphasis is put on a trained full-time staff to maintain the registry in current condition. Another tenth bid for effective supervision over boarding and rooming houses, based on accepted standards of respectability, sanitation, cleanliness, and services. Competent supervision is sought for dormitories and residence clubs.

About 5 percent of the areas mention a need for lower rentals; some urge the importance of coordination among the separate community agencies interested in housing; a small group mentions a need for further education among home owners to persuade them to rent rooms to young women employed in war plants.

SOME FACTS DEVELOPED FROM COMMUNITY REPORTS

Early 1943 found a majority of the war-industry areas with continuing problems in the housing of young women. Smaller cities and rural areas with war industries had perhaps the greatest perplexities, since available accommodations usually were insufficient to house the influx of war workers, and additional provision had to be made, either through conversion of existing properties or construction of new ones.

Priorities on essential materials and equipment, also scarcity of workmen, frequently delayed conversion or construction. Dependence then fell on rooms in private homes. Households were slow, generally, to take roomers as a new venture. Among those who opened their homes, a majority preferred men roomers; some refused to take women, especially young unattached women. The inevitable result was overcrowding in the limited number of accommodations available to women. In numerous cases these accommodations were substandard in services and overpriced as to rates.

This situation left little room for selection by prospective tenants. In fact, several reports emphasized that young women workers in their communities were glad to get shelter even in lodgings that ordinarily would not be considered for girls at all.

In a number of cases, tardy relief came through federally built dormitories or through residence halls provided by the local war industry.

About one in every five of the areas reporting is a combination military-industrial locality; that is, in addition to a camp, camps, or base of one of the military services, one or more war-material production centers have developed there. One of the difficulties arising in this type of area is the housing of wives and families of men in the

military services who go to visit them. Some landlords have found it profitable to rent their rooms to these applicants at transient rates, so are disinclined to rent to women war workers on a permanent basis.

A few areas with particularly alert leadership made advance surveys of accommodations, had organizations set up to deal with needs as they might arise from proximity of war industries or camps. By contrast, some other areas, consciously facing an influx of women workers to replace men called away to military service or to increase the volume of production, made no preparation to meet the situation and continued to welter in confused planning while thousands struggled for living quarters.

Congestion in these localities prevents an effective listing and inspection service. The rush of applicants for vacancies leaves no time for these important preliminaries; the staff provided for listing and inspecting is too small to survey the area or to keep the listings current. Usually in these cases the referring office relies on chance knowledge by some staff member as to the general character of neighborhoods.

The supplying of information about rooms and other living quarters is attempted in most of the communities through room registries of various types. In about one-fifth of the reporting areas the Federal Government set up War Housing Centers, and in most cases these have full-time staff and systematic listing and classification services. These centers also assist householders in conversion of properties to rental quarters, and conduct intensive educational programs appealing on patriotic grounds for the sharing of homes with war workers. Other general registries are operated by chambers of commerce or by a few private commercial offices. The principal permanent source of investigated, classified, and recommended rooms for young women is the YWCA. Reports from numerous areas attest the important service rendered in this respect by the association, also its activity in meeting other war problems of young women away from home. Numbers of employing firms refer their young women workers to the "Y" for room listings. Its greater usefulness in this field can be assured by stronger public support to provide additional personnel and office facilities in existing branches, and to establish many new ones.

Other service organizations, such as the National Catholic Community Service, Protestant church groups, Red Cross, Traveler's Aid, and the USO, have supplied limited lists of accommodations, particularly for transients, in many localities.

Additional sources include newspaper ads, referrals by friends or relatives living in the area, and, in many cases, doorbell canvassing by the prospective tenant, who does his or her own inspection amid keen competition for each vacancy.

Rent-Control Measures.

The Federal Office of Price Administration gradually exercised control, as need appeared, over rentals of living accommodations in all critical areas during 1942. Regulation covered dwelling space and boarding charges. Ceilings on rents were established as of dates intended to reflect a time of normal conditions for each particular region.

However, some difficulties resulted from ceilings. For example, rentals on new listings offered after the ceiling date could be, and sometimes were, boosted to unreasonable levels. Applicants paid the recognized overcharge without protest in order to get shelter.

Men Tenants Preferred.

Women seeking living quarters have had to face not only scarcity of space but pronounced aversion to their tenancy from many householders and boarding-house operators who had space to let. Quite generally, women are not desired as roomers, for reasons that are fairly uniform in character over the country. Objections to women as compared with men sum up in the following order from the reports:

1. Washing, ironing, cooking privileges sought.
2. At home more, disturbing family life.
3. Entertain more, especially men friends.
4. More critical of quality of service and accommodations.
5. Too great a responsibility.
6. Less profitable; can't pay so well as men.

This aspect of the housing problem changed somewhat with the departure of men tenants for military service, and landlords were left with vacancies. Women in war industries, now earning good money, began to be tolerated as essential revenue-producers.

Boarding and Rooming Houses Lack Standards.

Comparatively few well planned, coordinated programs in war-industry communities are aimed at improving the living conditions of young war workers. Some cities have effective supervision and regulation under a licensing system of boarding and rooming houses, but inspection bogs down for lack of trained investigators and public interest to spur the endeavor. Health and sanitation departments and law-enforcement officials exercise only nominal supervision in most places, checking up on specific places if complaint is made. Fire departments are reported in many instances as checking "on request of the owner." Evidence of any concerted activity by the community toward safeguarding of moral character and environment of boarding and rooming places for young persons is unusual. Much reliance is placed on knowledge of neighborhood character by personnel of the placement agency, especially in smaller cities.

Competent Group-Residence Supervisors in Demand.

Some dormitories provided by war-goods industries had little supervision other than a property manager. A few of the federally built dormitories, especially the earlier groups, likewise had scant supervision. Competent personnel for these responsible posts was not readily available.

Cooperation of Business and Industry.

On the whole, business interests have cooperated in tackling solutions of the housing problems of incoming war-industry employees. Conspicuous for its scarcity is the spirit of the newspaper that blocked establishment of a USO room registry in a southwestern locality on the ground that this move would reduce its advertising revenues; likewise, the selfish attitude of a few real-estate organizations in check-mating community efforts to provide temporary housing for war

workers. One of these in a great midwest industrial area ignored the excessive juvenile-delinquency rate among teen-age girls in its locality, and did little to help emphasize the Homes Use Program for augmenting decent living accommodations.

Municipal authorities in a few areas refused to suspend temporarily the zoning restrictions that in normal times are desirable to protect property values in residential sections but in wartime operate to prevent the sharing of desirable homes with war workers.

Cross purposes, selfish ambitions, and partisan jealousies cropped out in many places, handicapping moves to enlist community energies against housing congestion and related problems. Repeatedly community reports voice the need for coordinated effort among local authorities, agencies, and organizations—each interested in reaching effective solutions but unwilling to yield independent enterprise to pooled efficiency, even in the face of limited funds and dwindling staffs available to the separate groups.

Community Coordination Produces Results.

On the other hand, there is abundant proof of efficacy in cooperation from scores of communities. Complete and final solution of community problems arising from large immigrations is rarely attainable. But the method of assault on the housing difficulty for women newly employed in some congested areas, or in sparsely populated localities surprised by huge war industries, challenges applause for the community achievement and invites emulation by other areas yet struggling with similar problems.

Women's Organizations Supplied Leaders and Workers.

Unstinted acclaim is due the various women's organizations that shouldered cooperatively the solution of housing and other major wartime problems in fulfillment of accepted civic and patriotic responsibility. Only a few cases are reported where local councils refused the proffered help of an active women's group.

Also, grateful account should be taken of the varied tasks performed by a tireless army of volunteers, cooperating in vacancy surveys, investigation of listings, reporting on local situations, promoting share-the-home programs, and similar activities directed to improvement of living conditions in the war-industry communities. Though the community consensus declares the greater value of a paid, trained staff for a central room registry, in the absence of such personnel for most localities the contribution of the volunteer corps to the present emergency must be classed as indispensable.

HOW SOME COMMUNITIES ATTACKED HOUSING PROBLEMS

Representative specific methods that helped to relieve housing-shortage problems, particularly for unattached women workers migrating to war industries, are briefed in the following reports for their stimulative value:

In New England Area.

In an important industrial city many large homes were converted into small apartments by private industry. Girls in war-goods production were placed in private homes through the Home Registry Office.

Another city has a permanent residence hall, operated privately for working women at very reasonable prices. It also has several organizations that are prepared to help women find living quarters as they come into the area for employment.

In Middle-Atlantic Area.

A hustling city has an ample supply of rooms. All agencies cooperate with the volunteer defense committee in making accommodations available.

A western New York manufacturing center has an information service available to young women applicants through the foresight of its Citizens' Planning and Housing Council.

Another, through its Council of Social Agencies, keeps a supply of inspected rooms, revised weekly, in cooperation with all housing agencies.

In the Nation's Capital Area.

From a Council of Defense Homes Registry, set up by the Washington Housing Association with the principal social-service organizations participating, and manned by volunteer civilian personnel, evolved first the Homes Registration Office. It operated with a paid staff, including a corps of trained investigators assigned for inspection of listings, a clerical force to classify these according to minimum standards established in collaboration with the Health Department of the District of Columbia, and a closely coordinated referral system to a central office. A young woman arriving in the city for employment could be directed by the Traveler's Aid Service from train or bus station to the Homes Registration Office, and there receive cards listing two vacancies that she might visit; if neither of these proved satisfactory she could return for another selection. She was referred by the listing clerk to a transportation adviser, who gave her directions for reaching the houses.

This staff was federally financed, due to the dire need for the effective service of a full-time trained personnel in housing the Federal employees who poured into the area. Ultimately the War Housing Center replaced the Homes Registration Office, continuing its listing and referral function as to private-home accommodations with intensified effort under the Homes Use Program, and in addition sponsoring the conversion of large homes and other buildings into apartments and rooming houses. The center also handled the allotment of accommodations in the residence halls, temporary dormitories federally built for young women in war work, as well as the family units in low-cost multiple dwellings built by Federal authority in the area. Some of these residence halls and family units were for Negro war workers, but the number supplied for them is considerably short of the actual requirements.

Concurrent with this central effort to house Federal employees, several large departments, including the War Department, set up personnel counseling offices, whose functions included providing new employees with information on living accommodations and other essential services of the community. These were correlated with the center.

Also, other residence clubs for girls, such as the YWCA, with its permanent register of auxiliary rooms in private homes, carefully inspected and classified, strained their facilities to the utmost to meet

the mounting demands for accommodations. As elsewhere in larger cities, the choice of young women centered on close-in locations, due to the desire to be near the principal work area and recreation and eating facilities, resulting in overcrowding and great scarcity of rooms down town while accommodations in desirable outlying residential sections went unappropriated. Transportation facilities had to be readjusted as to schedules and routes and augmented in supply in order to utilize more fully the suburban-room resources.

In Southern Area.

The USO-YWCA of a shipbuilding city set up a Womanpower Conference that made a survey of conditions, including housing for women in war industry. Assisted by the Council of Social Agencies the conference presented definite recommendations, based on the survey, to the City Health Department, the Police Department, other city officials, and the transportation company. Joint efforts of the conference and the council had three federally built dormitories allocated to the women, and a reception center provided for newly arrived women workers until they could find permanent accommodations.

A small inland town's war-industry plant bought several large homes and converted them into dormitories for its girls.

A coast city reported that a huge shipbuilding plant had provided dormitories for its women employees. At that time, however, the dormitories had little supervision.

In Central Area.

A large city in this great industrial region reported a residence hall for working girls, established years ago by a wealthy donor, which provides accommodations at very reasonable rates. It is administered by the YWCA but is an independent establishment.

The same area reports a group of residence halls owned and operated by the National Women's Trade Union League. These homes cater especially to the unemployed woman seeking work and to students whose incomes are low.

A great industrial city has lifted its zoning restrictions for the duration so that rooms are available in choice residential locations.

A lake shore town planned to use as dormitories three large boats of a lake steamship line if necessary to meet the growing demand for rooms.

In one community dormitories for women were built at an ordnance plant and supervised by the State Defense Corporation.

In Midwest Area.

A progressive city of this region provides up-to-date information on housing accommodations through its chamber of commerce. Frequent surveys of facilities are made and the lists revised accordingly.

Another city in this area reports many building-conversion operations under the Homes Use Program; also good cooperation among the Defense Council Housing Division, the Federal Housing Authority, and the local real-estate board.

A large river city reports boarding homes operated by the Women's Christian Association, the Lutheran Church, and the Woman's Welfare League.

In one city the business and professional women's group initiated the room-placement plan for women war workers.

Another, through its USO, stressed continuously the housing needs of unattached women. Its program of education persuaded householders to change their former policy of "men roomers preferred."

Early in 1942 a capital city in one of the northern border States set up an Emergency Housing Commission of about 50 persons, representing its various community groups. It opened a housing office, which now cooperates with the National Housing Agency.

In Southwestern Area.

A housing authority here cooperates with the local Federation of Churches and social-service organizations in providing information and housing accommodations. War workers are reported to have adequate housing.

A State college for women considered in advance the probable need for war workers from industrial plants under construction nearby, also families of service men in adjacent army camps. The housing class of the Home Economics Department surveyed accommodations in hundreds of homes, classified homes and furnishings according to established standards, and made the listings available. The survey has been repeated in cooperation with the USO to provide additional accommodations.

Another city's war plant has built dormitories for many of its workers. However, there is a scarcity of accommodations for wives and families visiting their men in the army camps.

In West Coast Area.

The largest city of this area has had a girls' and women's Housing Bureau for 10 years. Presumably it provides recommended listings to applicants. It reports also a number of employed girls' clubs and residences sponsored by church groups.

Another city, a community of homes, waived its restrictive zoning ordinances for the duration of the war to permit the home owners to rent rooms to war-industry employees. Twenty county buildings were made into apartments for war workers under the conversion program.

A shipbuilding city reports that war apartments under construction by the City Housing Authority will provide accommodations for many single women.

At another industrial center where congestion persists, half the dormitories built for men employees have been converted for occupancy by women war workers.

SOME LONG-RANGE CONCLUSIONS FROM SURVEY REPORTS

A widespread need exists throughout the United States for clean, adequate, respectable housing at reasonable prices for young plant workers. As the standard of living rises, problems of accommodation for unattached persons become more acute. Families whose economic situation improves demand higher standards of housing and become less inclined to tolerate the crowding that may result from "roomers." This fact darkens the housing picture even more for the unattached employed woman, against whom a definite prejudice as to her tenancy already prevails because she likes to do her personal laundry; cannot

spend her evenings at the corner drugstore; entertains friends at home, especially men; insists on clean linen, good housekeeping, and so forth; sometimes is socially irresponsible; and usually has less income, so cannot afford to pay as much rent as a man can pay.

Many householders have shared their homes with young women war workers during the present emergency as a patriotic service. Will the actual experience with the modern young woman as a paying guest in numerous households vanquish much of the traditional prejudice against women roomers? The answer to that question is the responsibility of the young woman war worker herself. Indications are that some householders find young women quite satisfactory as roomers, and ask for more of them, after giving them a trial. If more approved home accommodations can be opened to young women employed away from their own homes during the period following the war, a much greater contribution than mere shelter will be made. Both Government and community leaders recognize the great influence exercised by pleasant environment, particularly that of a well-ordered home, on the individual welfare of the worker and ultimately on the quality of work produced. The social values of this particular contribution in terms of community gains have not been given the weight they merit by communities themselves.

For most of the employed young women it seems likely that group housing must be the answer, either in supervised residence halls and clubs or in rooming and boarding homes, especially for younger employees in the lower income groups.

The point is clear from the community reports used in this study that at present there is inadequate control and regulation of boarding and rooming houses throughout the United States. In view of the special public-service character of the boarding-rooming-house business, it is important that these controls be developed to meet the needs of women war workers. Community interest should be stimulated to give attention to this important function of government, also to provide and maintain for each locality to which young persons immigrate in numbers for employment a "bluebook" list of approved, recommended boarding homes. Such a list should be made available through room registries, plant offices, and other places of easy access, so that a young person, especially a young woman, could readily locate desirable, reasonably-priced housing accommodations.

A plan suggested as a wartime solution by one large industrial center could well be adapted for peacetime use. It proposes a full-time paid staff to register and regularly inspect all places where young industrial workers are housed. The staff could be connected with a local housing authority or board of health, and sponsored by such groups as industries, churches, educational systems, and welfare units; financing might be aided through chambers of commerce, employers' groups, and other sponsoring agencies; publicity could be given in railway and bus stations, the press, church bulletins, employing offices, and neighborhood drug stores. Thus the fusion of political authority and popular support can become potent in the regulation of commercial boarding and rooming houses.

