

Feb 24 1936

THE WORKS PROGRAM

---Works Progress Administration---

For release in morning papers,
Sunday, February 16, 1936.

Aubrey Williams, Deputy WPA Administrator, Addresses American Association of Social Workers.

Individual relief from "the fear of hunger" is but a part of the larger problems of general insecurity and deep-rooted social maladjustments facing the entire nation, Aubrey Williams, Deputy Works Progress Administrator, asserted in an address before the American Association of Social Workers at the Mayflower Hotel Saturday, February 15, at 7:30 P.M.

Continuing "adequate" provision for the millions of American citizens deprived of their means of livelihood by forces beyond their control can only be made through the cooperative responsibility of Federal, State and local governments, Mr. Williams said. His address follows:

I propose to discuss with you tonight some of our mutual problems, particularly as they concern the Federal government's part in the relief of want and destitution. I am especially glad of the opportunity to talk with this group. First because you are the official representatives of the profession to which I am happy and proud to belong. Second and more important because I feel with this audience a sense of confidence in knowing that everyone of you, by the very nature of your profession, recognizes no values that take precedence over the welfare of human beings. I know that many of you take issue with the policies and methods of the present program of the Federal government. But I am confident that there can be no quarrel between us as to objective. Security, opportunity, and a decent standard of living must be made available to all of the American people. We, as social workers, have a responsibility both to lead and to follow in the struggle to achieve this end.

I am not here tonight primarily as an apologist for the present policies of the Federal government. No one knows better than I that need still exists, that security for all is still a dream, and that the vast majority of our people are denied

the broad horizons of opportunity which should be their birthright. Complacency on the part of any one of us, public employee or private citizen, is clearly out of place in our present situation. I do want, however, to lay before you the facts as simply and directly as I know how. I want you to know our problems not only so that you may understand our actions but also so that you may help us with your counsel.

I am sure that with this group it is unnecessary to labor the point that need exists. The American Federation of Labor estimates that approximately 11,400,000 of our people are unemployed. Even though other groups offer a slightly more conservative figure the total in terms of insecurity, suffering, loss of morale, physical debilitation, and waste of human resources is always stupendous and appalling. Add to this picture of need the vast number of persons who, though employed, enjoy from the fruits of their labor neither security nor a standard of living adequate in terms of health, decency and the proper gratifications of living. These are the realities which our profession must face.

I for one am delighted to see within the social work group a growing realization that these situations of specific and individual need which we meet in our work are but the symptoms and the outgrowth of a deep-rooted maladjustment affecting our entire economic life. Our concern for the relief of immediate need should not be permitted to obscure our realization of the necessity for dealing with underlying causes. Let us not forget that relief from the fear of present hunger does not answer the problem of an empty future for the man whose job no longer exists or the youth who sees no useful place in the world for his eager energies.

Immediate relief for the individual is, however, the problem with which our jobs are largely concerned: relief from social maladjustments, relief due to the incapacity or death of the families' normal breadwinner, and relief from need growing out of widespread unemployment. The service which social workers extend in cases of social maladjustment is generally recognized as the responsibility of private agencies or the more highly specialized public agencies. The problem is aggravated during the depression but only as a corollary to the economic problems of the second two categories. It is the economic need which, for the reason that it endangers human life and social institutions, holds the limelight in depression years.

Granting that immediate relief must be extended in cases of need, there are two practical problems which must be resolved: First, whose responsibility shall it be to extend this aid? Second, what form shall it take?

When the continued and growing unemployment of the depression made it apparent that the regular relief machinery, both public and private, was totally unprepared to meet the abnormal demands upon it, popular sentiment turned to the notion of special types of private relief as a moral but voluntary obligation upon the citizenry. We all remember the drives of 1930 and 1931 with their earnest efforts to appeal to the humanitarian impulses of the still employed and the instinct of selfpreservation of the still prosperous. The limitations of this approach to a catastrophic situation were surely apparent to us all.

We asked ourselves at the time, "Must a man thrown out of work by forces beyond his control and certainly not of his making, be obliged to depend upon the generosity of his neighbors and former employers for the right to continued existence?" The insecurity and humiliation of this situation could not be tolerated.

Moreover, enthusiasm for voluntary giving is quickly exhausted. Not only our sense of fitness and decency but practical necessity required that we look to the borrowing and taxing powers of public governmental units for financial aid. Even though the Federal government still held itself aloof from any acceptance of responsibility, the concept of relief as a public obligation gained increasing acceptance. The emphasis remained on local rather than state responsibility, although one by one the states were obliged for financial reasons to come to the rescue of their struggling municipalities. Even prior to 1933, the Federal government was obliged to lend faltering, inadequate, and evasive aid to states through the loan provisions of the Reconstruction Finance Corporation.

By the time that the present administration took office the public was well accustomed to the idea of public responsibility for relief and admirably withstood the shock when Congress, by the enactment of the Federal Emergency Relief Act of 1933, openly accepted the Federal government's responsibility to share with the states the burden and obligation of providing for persons in distress.

Today there are those who feel that the time has come for the Federal Government to retreat from this position, to deny that it owes any responsibility

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to the unemployed, and to turn them back to the limitations of local resources and the mercies of private generosity. To my mind this position more accurately reflects a concern on the part of a handful of rich and powerful men for their own prerogatives and pocketbooks than a sincere interest in the maintenance of state and local rights.

On the other hand I do not hold with the theory, so expertly practiced in many quarters during the past two and one half years, that the Federal government should relieve states and localities of all responsibility for their own people. I am convinced that resources exist in states and localities which have not been tapped. I am equally convinced that they never would be tapped if the Federal government were meekly to continue aid for all persons in those localities. If we are ever to make adequate provision for need, whether it grow out of normal or abnormal situations, the responsibility must be shared by the Federal, state, and local governments.

And when we talk of "adequate provision" in what form do we envision that aid? Do we think in terms of soup kitchens appeasing, by mass production methods, the minimum demands of the body for continued existence at the lowest possible cost? Is this what we want for our people? Or do we think in terms of grocery orders which permit to the unemployed the greater privilege of going into a store and choosing their starvation fare from a limited number of commodities specified for them by all powerful guardians of the public purse? Is this all that we owe our unemployed? Or shall we give to each family a pittance in cash, figured for them recurrently with humiliating accuracy so that no unnecessary to their survival shall reach their hungry grasp? Is this what belongs to the workers of this country, the producers of our wealth? I will never believe that this rich and democratic country would tolerate such a policy on the part of its elected representatives.

I believe that the people of this country want work, useful productive work for which they receive wages owing to them for value which their work has created. I believe, moreover, that they want and are entitled to have security for themselves and their families when, through no fault of their own their working days are interrupted or ended.

Neither employment nor security benefits are a favor which they must crave on bended knee from the rich and powerful. These are their inalienable rights to which they are entitled without humiliation and without degradation.

There is no other approach to the problem of unemployment which I can accept as valid, decent, or worthy of the profession of social work.

The Federal government has embarked upon the arduous, slow, and bitterly fought task of realizing that goal. I grant you that we are far from its complete and perfect achievement, but our compass is set in that direction, the machinery is there.

I challenge any one of you to minimize the importance of the Emergency Relief Appropriation Act of 1935 and the Social Security Act, two monumental achievements of the last Congress. But the progress of these programs depends upon the force of an enlightened public opinion. This is the inherent nature of a democracy, and I am glad that it is so. But let us make no mistake in placing the responsibility where it rightly belongs.

In the time remaining to me, I want to discuss the Work Program with particular reference to the criticisms most frequently directed against it. Briefly these criticisms fall into the following broad categories:

1. It is political
2. Its projects are no good
3. It does not involve recurrent investigation and therefore
 . provides jobs for persons who no longer need them to live.
4. It is too costly
5. It does not meet the whole need

It is charged that the present administration is using the funds appropriated for relief in order to perpetuate its own party in office. I do not wish to linger on this point because, I believe, that in its proper perspective, it is relatively unimportant. You have noted that this is an election year. The party out of power is rarely kind to the administration in such periods. It is unfortunate, but probably inevitable that the Works Progress Administration and other agencies concerned with the expenditure of funds should be the focal point of its attack. Under the circumstances, we must have in jobs of responsibility persons whose loyalty to our program is not confused by adherence to principles and platforms which are opposed to its very existence. I think this is self-evident. But the continued services of incompetent persons for political reasons cannot be tolerated. And above all, the assignment of men to Work Program jobs for political reasons cannot be tolerated.

In this connection I should like to reiterate that I believe in the relief of destitution as a public responsibility. If it happens that in any locality or in any agency, local, state, or Federal the character of personnel and administration is not what we as social workers can approve, let us not kill the child to cure his ailment. This is a democracy and the electorate is the doctor.

I suspect that long after we are gone one contribution of the Works Progress Administration to the culture of the land will persist. I refer to that happy addition to our daily vocabulary, "boon doggling." Boon doggling is the expression used by our critics to cover those projects whose value they doubt. Thus the teaching of dancing to the children of the unemployed by unemployed dancing teachers is boondoggling. Music, played for the public in our parks by unemployed musicians, is boondoggling. In other quarters the building of a brick, well-lighted school for colored children while the windowless shack still stands may be branded as boon doggling.

We are proud of the work that we are doing. We think our projects are worthwhile and that the people who are working on them may take a workman's proper pride in their achievement. We do not think a good musician should be asked to turn second-rate laborer in order that a sewer may be laid for relative permanency rather than a concert given for the momentary pleasure of our people. The Federal Government has gone to the states, the counties and towns with this proposition: "We have labor to offer you. We even have some money with which to furnish you materials. All that we ask is that you develop and sponsor worthwhile projects which your people want". We ask nothing better than that the character of our projects should be determined by popular demand.

It has been said that people are working on this program who do not require their job to survive. Once a person is assigned we require no recurrent investigation of his need. It is possible that another member of his family may now have employment, he may receive a bonus, he may even have occasional odd jobs that supplement his security wage. I have no apologies for this policy. If funds were adequate, I would favor a program which assured a job to every man and woman in the country who wanted to work, regardless of need. I believe that a job is a right and that properly speaking a social investigation has no

"The present program is too costly". This is a criticism which comes from all sides. I do not deprecate its importance. I believe that the future of our democracy hinges on that simple phrase and the force which it represents. Can this country with its present economic, social, and governmental organization afford to provide adequately for its own unemployed people or can it not? If not, what right has our government to survive? That is the question.

I believe that it is a very rare person in this country, who, when confronted with specific and graphic need or with the horrors of mass idleness does not react with an immediate impulse to do something about it. I believe that people are basically kind and decent, that they want other people to have the same opportunity, security and happiness which they crave for themselves and their own. But people are easily wearied by unpleasant reality. It is easier to give credence to the story of the housewife who could not secure a maid for five dollars a week than to accept the thousand and one ever present evidences of the pathetic eagerness of the unemployed for any kind of work at all -- and their tragic frustration. It is far simpler to accept passively the assumption that persons are unemployed and needy because they are lazy, lack ambition and ingenuity, or are spoiled by governmental aid than it is to face squarely the cost of meeting the realities of the situation. Moreover there are powerful interests in this country which foster the growth of this insidious but reassuring belief that governmental aid is unnecessary and therefore a mere political extravagance. It is to the interests of their pocketbooks to do so.

I am convinced that at least ninety-five percent of the criticisms directed against the present work program spring, directly or indirectly, from the fact that it is more expensive than direct relief. It is more expensive than direct relief for two reasons: first, our experience has clearly shown that if men are to be given useful, productive work in which they may take a genuine satisfaction, money must be provided for equipment and materials. We cannot ask a man to build a school without brick, or paint a mural without paint. The Work Program is more expensive in the second place because the unemployed man receives in his wage a greater cash benefit than was permitted under the penny pinching, pantry searching system of direct relief payments based on budgetary deficiency. These statements are based not on opinion but on fact.

Before the Federal government entered into the picture of direct relief, estimates indicate that the average relief payment to a family was seven dollars a month. By October, 1933, the Federal contribution had raised this figure to \$17.22. The increase revealed by our records over the next fifteen months, gaining dollar by dollar until the maximum was reached in January 1935 at \$30.30 a family a month, is the reflection of a struggle which no one who had any part in it can well forget. No penny was gained without a battle that was fought out in every county relief office in the country by numberless caseworkers desperately striving to achieve some standard of decency for the people whose plight they so well knew. No one could deny that it was the unswerving devotion, and perseverance of these social workers that made possible this monumental achievement - and no praise of mine could do adequate justice to their accomplishment.

But these figures reveal another development to those who know their history. This was the growing recognition that the way to meet relief needs was not through a cash or grocery order dole but through a work relief program which permitted the able bodied to earn the amount of their relief allotment at some form of publicly valuable employment. Omitting for purposes of brevity the program of CWA, to which many of us still look with pride, it was with its ending in April 1933 that the work relief program of the FERA began to dominate the relief scene. Coincidentally the average relief payment rose from \$17.66 in March to \$20.99 in April, to \$23.29 in May, and finally to \$30.30 in January 1935.

It is an interesting and highly pertinent fact that the public will accept the giving of a higher relief payment in return for work performed than it will countenance as an outright dole.

But even the work relief program was ambiguous and too closely dependent on the methods of direct relief to hold its gains. By September of this year the average relief payment had already receded to \$25.90 a family a month. Under the Work Program, on the other hand the wage payment averages approximately \$50.00 a month. Thus we have achieved through a Work Program in a month what two and a half years of a relief program could not accomplish!

It is little wonder that the Work Program is attacked by those to whom the best relief program is the cheapest relief program. But do not deceive yourselves that the same influences would not operate against a direct relief program.

As the realization grows that adequate assistance cannot be reconciled with reduced governmental costs, we may anticipate a growing drive to abandon the employment program in favor of a Work Relief Program, and work relief in favor of cash relief, and cash relief in favor of grocery orders. And when we again see the day that the unemployed have only bread lines, soup kitchens, and self righteous charity to thank for their existence, we may well ask ourselves of what we were dreaming when first we yielded the line.

That is why I say to you that the Federal government must adhere to its principle of giving work and not direct relief to the unemployed. And that is why I believe that those who seek a return to Federal relief are flirting with the forces of reaction.

The fifth count against the work program is that it does not meet the entire need. I accept the accusation. It is incontrovertibly true. The work program is providing jobs at the present time for something over three and one half million people, the maximum number of jobs made possible by present funds. For these people it is providing more decently and adequately than ever before. I do not think it entirely unreasonable that the states and localities should make provision for those who require relief, particularly in view of the provision of the Security Act for Federal aid in certain types of categorical assistance. But I note that your program calls for a Federal Work Program which should offer employment "to any person who is unemployed and able to work regardless of whether or not he is eligible for relief". I believe that this is a proposal wholly proper and worthy of the profession of social work. But I believe you should go further and recognize that even on the basis of our present security wage, which many of you regard as inadequate, such a program will call for a yearly expenditure of at least nine billion dollars. This is a conservative estimate based on present cost

All that I have said here tonight reduces itself to very simple terms. There is only one question of real importance, but we must face that question realistically: "Shall false economy and the interests of property or shall the welfare of all our people dominate the public relief policy?" Surely for social workers there can be only one answer.