Speech by Mrs. Ellen S. Woodward at Raleigh, North Carolina.

The following is the full text of a speech on "Winning National Well-Being Through Work," delivered by Mrs. Ellen S. Woodward, Assistant Administrator of the Works Progress Administration, before the Tri-State (North and South Carolina and Virginia) Conference of the Women's and Professional Division of the Works Progress Administration at Raleigh, North Carolina, Tuesday night, October 27, 1936:

Coming here to discuss the Works Progress Administration with a group of people who have contributed so much to its success, may seem a little like carrying coals to New Castle. But in my experience as Assistant Administrator, I have learned that because of the vastness of our country and the scope of the Works Program there are many things happening in one part of the nation which seem very confusing to persons living in an entirely different locality. Citizens of industrial cities like Chicago or Pittsburgh find it hard to understand the problems of the cotton or tobacco producer and of course the reverse of this is also true. I should like, therefore, to discuss tonight a little of the background of our program, to recall the events which made it necessary, to speak a little about how it developed and perhaps say something about where all this is leading us.

More than three years have passed since the present administration launched its plan of national aid to the victims of the economic catastrophe that struck this country in 1929. In those three years we have seen this program develop from the Hoover policy of doing nothing to a vast program of public improvements which will make this nation a happier place for every citizen.
To discuss this development with any degree of clarity it will be necessary to recapitulate briefly some of the highlights of what has taken place since 1933 and to refresh our memories with the conditions that existed at that time. It will also be necessary to have as clear a picture as possible of the relief set up, as it is functioning today.

In 1932, before the present administration was given the management of the nation, it was conservatively estimated that there were 15,000,000 unemployed; the income of the farm population had dropped almost two-thirds; banks were failing with increasing rapidity and a certain engineer was prophesying that grass would grow in the streets of our cities if the Federal government attempted to do anything about these conditions. Across the country marched an army of jobless men. With them went their sons, their wives, and in some cases their daughters. The tramp of their marching feet had a threatening sound as they began to ask the pertinent question, "Why do we starve and freeze in this land of plenty?" For those still working, wages were dropping rapidly and the income of the nation had fallen from approximately 81 billion to 39 billion dollars. Farmers, too, were on the march. Pitchfork in hand, they were defending their homes against foreclosures. Everywhere despair and fear for the future stalked the land, and still nothing was being done.

This then, was the situation which faced the present administration when it was voted into power almost four years ago. It was not a bright prospect for anyone to face, but one which was taken realistically in all its phases and approached with courage and determination by the present occupant of the White House. A determination and courage which soon proved equal to the task at hand.

At first, in order to put a stop to the actual physical suffering, a program of immediate direct relief was organized and applied. This temporary measure was in no sense the answer to the basic ills of the nation, but it served to alleviate misery while a more constructive program was being planned and put into operation.

It was evident from the beginning that while direct relief might keep people from starving, it did not preserve their skills and was ruinous to their self-respect.

After a thorough study and a number of experiments on a local scale, work-relief was launched on a nation-wide basis.
On November 7, 1933, the Federal Civil Works Administration was created. The responsibility for carrying this plan to fruition was given to Harry L. Hopkins. With the splendid cooperation of local officials everywhere, he took four million destitute people from the relief rolls and put them to work in a few weeks. That was three years ago, and the intervening period has witnessed such a phenomenal rise in the quality of work-relief that the United States Conference of Mayors declared publicly that the projects of the WPA "need no apology from anyone."

We learned a great deal from the application of the work-relief program. We learned the stories of many of those who had been depression victims. We discovered the deep-going currents of strength and fortitude which are a part of this great nation. I should like to take this opportunity to express my admiration for the unsung heroes of this crisis, who by their uncomplaining sacrifice, their initiative and ingenuity, have changed what might have been a complete rout into an orderly and constructive program which has beaten the depression. We learned, too, of the great reservoir of energy and ability that lies untouched, and in many cases undeveloped, in the back-waters of our social system. To some of us this new-found knowledge was a challenge, to others it implied a duty, but to all of us who were concerned with the social aspects of the problem it appeared as a tremendous opportunity to put into practice many of the principles which we had advocated for "to these many years."

When, therefore, President Roosevelt announced that "the government must quit this business of relief" and then added, "We must preserve not only the bodies of the unemployed from destitution, but also their self-respect, their self-reliance and courage and determination," we rejoiced with the millions who would be the beneficiaries of this act.

What was the effect of such a program? Bank failures have stopped. For the first time in 55 years we have had a twelve month period — that ending October 1 — in which not one national bank failure took place. The farm income has increased 75 per cent. Industrial production is back to within 5 per cent of normal. The national income has increased from 39 billion to an estimated 60 billion dollars for 1936. Millions of American workers, men and women, have been given a chance to work and earn a living — a chance to escape the demoralizing effects of idleness while preserving, acquiring or increasing their skill in
useful occupations. Thousands of needed community improvements and services have been added to the nation's wealth.

In the short period that the WPA program has been under way, 130,000 miles of farm-to-market roads have been improved or built by relief labor. Traveling straight ahead on those roads you would travel five times around the world before reaching the end. What are such all-weather roads worth to a farmer when his wife needs a doctor, or when his perishable crops must reach market at once or spoil on his hands?

I could enumerate endlessly the things that have been created: more than 6,000 schools and 5,000 other public buildings; thousands of parks and playgrounds; water and sewer systems; airports; flood and erosion control projects.

"But over and above all of this," to quote Administrator Harry L. Hopkins, "are the restored human values in self-reliance, self-respect, renewed faith and hope on the part of millions of people which transcend everything material and provide the practical assurances that the American idea and ideal will persist. "And this should be so stated, for there are no dollar marks or decimals in the value calculations of true human progress!"

In that part of the Work Program which it is my privilege to direct in the 48 states - the Women's and Professional Division - the results are less easy to visualize, but in many cases, I believe, they are of greater import and more lasting value than those things we can count on our fingers and measure in dollars and cents. Who, for example, would try to compute in terms of money the benefits derived from the Public Health projects? How can we estimate the worth of the inoculation of 1,000,000 underprivileged children against typhoid and diphtheria? Can any list of the number of visits paid by WPA nurses to destitute families convey any idea of the suffering prevented?

One of the best examples of these health services is that provided by the Therapeutic Pool in the James Whitcomb Riley Hospital at Indianapolis, Indiana. Here in an immense, green ceramic tile pool, built by WPA labor, children suffering from infantile and other types of paralysis are now receiving treatment which will enable them to use their limbs again.

Of the many other similar services performed by project workers I only have time to mention a few. There is the library project which has recovered, repaired and restored to use tens of thousands of scrapped books and then by means
of bus, buggy and barrow brought them within reach of readers who had not even ac­
to a daily newspaper. The Braille project is translating thousands of volumes into books that can be read by the blind. The school lunch program is
serving hot lunches daily to 1,500,000 undernourished, needy school children. Then there are the sewing projects which have gone further than any others in
providing training facilities for unskilled women. This training has been the
basis for the re-entrance of thousands of women into private industry, and
has given tens of thousands an interest in, and hope for, the future.

Nor could I fail to mention the work done by the Art, Music, Thea­
tre, and Writer's projects, which have given a new impetus to the cultural life of America. These projects have taken from the bread lines and relief rolls
thousands of able artists and given them an opportunity to continue their life
work of adding to America's cultural heritage. Through the effort of the
Music Project more than 32,000,000 persons have been able to hear the work of
the masters played by master musicians. The great dramatic creations of the ages have been brought within the reach of millions more by the Theatre Project.
School and other public buildings have been decorated with murals and other
paintings by artists from the Art Project. An American guide book is being
prepared by the Writers' Project which will be the most comprehensive catalogue
of the nation's resources, historic shrines and beauty spots ever assembled.

Clerical and survey projects employing skilled clerks and research
workers have done invaluable work in digging out and preserving old court and
historical records. In Virginia, approximately forty counties have such projects
and their desirability is attested by the fact that the local sponsors are furn­
ishing much of the materials used and have employed expert supervisors to train
the workers, where it was found necessary. In South Carolina, there is a state­
wide historical project which is copying for the State University unpublished
manuscripts found in the twenty-three oldest court houses.

Other professional projects in the state are making a survey of
harbors, rivers and dams. Here in North Carolina too, several hundred men and
women are engaged in indexing and cataloging county records. In all three states,
the support given these and the other projects, both in the Women's and Profes­sional Division and in the Construction Division, has been most gratifying. The
county and state officials in these states, have been most cooperative in provi­
ding space, light, heat, water, and in many instances, much material and equipment.
Only in rare instances has it been necessary for the Works Progress Administration to pay rent for work rooms. All of the projects are sponsored by local tax supported agencies.

Your states also have created many fine and lasting public improvements through your construction projects. More than 2,500 miles of new roads have been completed and another 4,000 miles are being constructed, improved or repaired in this area. Many splendid airports have been built or improved in the three states, notably at Durham, North Carolina; Lynchburg and Roanoke, Virginia; and Charleston, South Carolina. The improvement on the Charleston landing field led to that base being selected as the western terminus of trans-Atlantic service by the German government. North Carolina WPA labor has created 33 agricultural buildings which not only will serve their respective communities as improved market places but also are to be used as general meeting places. The station built by relief labor at William and Mary College, in Norfolk, Virginia, with its coliseum-like architecture, is one of the most beautiful in the country.

One of the most encouraging things about the Work Program is the fact that many of the project workers are rapidly returning to private industry. Many typical examples of this trend can be seen in the three states represented here tonight.

During the past sixty days, 500 women from sewing and other projects in South Carolina have been placed in private employment. In four northern counties of Virginia projects were asked for to employ 1,024 workers who had been certified as eligible for WPA jobs. Before the projects could be approved they had to be cancelled, because in that short period 837 of the eligible men found private jobs. In the city of Richmond alone 299 persons on relief rolls found private employment in August. Here in North Carolina I am told that a host of WPA workers have found employment in the tobacco industry. In Raleigh, a private construction job was recently started employing 37 men, of whom 31 were taken from WPA rolls. Work on the Greene County agricultural building had to be stopped because 21 of the 27 men left the project for private employment. In Charlotte, several projects which have been approved will not be started because the workers for whom the jobs were planned have since gone back to private industry.

It has been stated that WPA keeps workers out of private industry.
work on the projects has kept millions of workers fit to do their job. It has renewed their confidence in their own ability to provide for themselves and their families. It has raised their hopes for the future and helped them to keep their chins up when all the world looked black. What is more - tens of thousands of unskilled youngsters and untrained adults have been trained in useful occupations so that they are now equipped to hold private jobs. The fact that many thousands of these have left the projects for other jobs shows the effectiveness of this training. As Mr. Hopkins said only the other day, "Three percent of all those enrolled in WPA leave the rolls every month for private work - leave with their skill unimpaired and their morale still good."

That in brief is the story of the Work Program - a program which was launched in one of the darkest periods of our history - a program which has been largely responsible for the scattering of those black clouds of despair and fear which hovered over the nation three years ago. Now that we have again climbed up out of the slough of depression into the sunlight of economic recovery it should be time to consider our next goal.

Looking back we see that under the guidance of courageous, far-sighted and gallant leader we have made enormous strides toward a more equitable, democratic America. In these three years we have made greater advances toward the elimination of child labor, adequate educational aid, insured bank deposits, a more even distribution of the tax burden and a more equitable distribution of the national income than we made in the fifty years before. In short we have broken the economic chains which held us in bondage to the reactionary barons of monopoly - we have freed the forces of liberalism - the forces of PROGRESS.

Looking forward we can see the possibility of attaining those great goals for which we have struggled so long. It has been said that "eternal vigilance is the price of liberty," and so, as we look forward to even greater achievement in the fight for social justice, let us remember that what has been accomplished so far is the result of unselfish cooperation between neighbor and neighbor, between city, county and state, between all the states and the national government. Let us not slip back into the old selfish, every-man-for-himself way of living but continue to cooperate until a better, a more equitable, a more secure America is no longer an ideal but a reality.