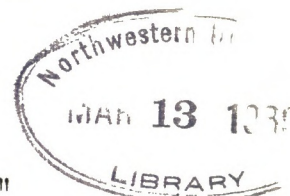


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WORKS PROGRESS ADMINISTRATION

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"MISCONCEPTIONS CONCERNING THE WPA PROGRAM"

The following address was delivered by Colonel F. C. Harrington, Works Progress Administrator, over the network of the Columbia Broadcasting System, at 10:45 p.m., Eastern Standard Time, Saturday, February 25, 1939, from the studios of Station WJSV, Washington, D. C.:

In the near future the WPA program will come in for a great deal of public discussion. Several proposals which vitally concern it already have been introduced in the Congress. There are proposals that the work program be turned over to state and local management, that the WPA be made part of a public works department, and several others. Undoubtedly, in the next three or four months, these proposals will be debated at length and in detail.

It is not my purpose, and I believe it is not in my province, to enter into public discussion of any pending Congressional legislation. As Administrator of the WPA, my job is to carry out for the Chief Executive the program as authorized by the Congress of the United States. Should the Congress call for my recommendations on any matters pertaining to the WPA, I shall of course give them. But I do not consider it proper to take issue with or to endorse proposals which are pending in the Congress.

However, in all discussion of the WPA, I think it is essential that the American people as well as their legislators should know certain basic facts about its program and the way it operates. A great

many people have basic misconceptions about the procedures and operations of the WPA program, despite all efforts on the part of this administration to explain it. It is my purpose this evening, in taking advantage of the generosity of the Columbia Broadcasting System, to try to clear up some of these basic misconceptions.

First, Is the program of the WPA Federal or local? There is a good deal of confused thinking on this particular point. People have referred to this administration as a Federal bureaucracy, bound up in red tape and operating without regard to the desires of the local communities of the nation. What are the facts?

About \$95 out of every \$100 spent by the WPA is for projects which are planned and sponsored by the localities in which they operate. In practically all cases the locality contributes to the cost of the project, and, in most cases, provides local supervision. That means that only some five per cent of the WPA program consists of projects operated directly by the WPA or by other Federal agencies such as the Public Health Service, the Department of Commerce, the Department of Agriculture, and others. It bears repetition that about 95 per cent of our program is made up of local projects, originated, planned and proposed to us by city, county or state officials.

The WPA concerns itself principally with four considerations in determining whether or not a local proposal should receive favorable consideration as a WPA project. Points we check on are: First, does unemployment exist and does the proposed project best meet the unemployment needs of the locality proposing it?



Second, have the sponsors offered to contribute sufficient local funds to the execution of the project so that the great bulk of the Federal money involved can go directly to wages of WPA workers?

Third, have all legal requirements been complied with?

And fourth, is the proposed project socially worthwhile and will it create a real and lasting public benefit?

If these four questions are answered in the affirmative, the proposal is favorably considered by our Washington office. In other words, we do not tell local communities what projects they are to have. We merely require that the projects which they propose meet the tests I have outlined and come within the scope of our operations as defined by law.

One can readily see, therefore, that the WPA program as it operates is not entirely a Federal program. It asks ~~---~~ indeed, it requires ~~---~~ local planning, local initiative and local financial support. The result is that in WPA work there exists a real partnership between the Federal and local governments.

It is true that the program is federally-controlled and administered, and all our experience indicates that such control is necessary. While local control of direct relief may be feasible, a work relief program financed with Federal funds must, in my opinion, be Federally administered. We speak in the light of considerable experience in that matter. Any attempt to have a work program administered by forty-eight states, more than 3,000 counties, and countless municipalities, with the diversity in planning and operation that this

would occasion, would inevitably lead to inefficiency, waste and confusion.

Another mistaken idea about the WPA is the belief that it gives direct relief--that is, money to people who are unable to work or to people who give no work in return. This is not true. In the initial attack of the Roosevelt administration upon the depression, such relief was given by the Federal Emergency Relief Administration through the medium of grants of Federal funds to states. However, the President in his message of January 4, 1935, said, "The Federal Government must and shall quit this business of relief." In consequence of this policy the WPA has not granted any direct relief since January 1, 1936.

So far as the Federal Government is concerned, its only contribution to direct relief is through the Social Security Act in providing financial aid to states which cooperate in caring for the aged, the blind, and for widows with dependent children. It is true that the Federal Government also participates in unemployment compensation benefits payable to persons who have lost their jobs, but this can not be placed in the category of relief, because it is really insurance as the name implies.

What the Federal Government has accepted as a national responsibility is to lead the attack upon unemployment through a work program for providing jobs for the nation's able-bodied unemployed. This is what the WPA program is. Its benefits are obtained only by working for the wages which it pays, and it employs as many able-bodied



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persons from local relief rolls as the funds provided by the Congress will permit. Incidentally, every poll of public opinion upon the question of direct relief versus a dole has shown that a large majority of citizens favor work relief, and the size of this majority has been continually increasing since the initiation of the WPA.

Another false impression will be corrected when it is generally understood just how these needy workers are selected. It is assumed -- soundly, I believe -- that local relief agencies which study the individual histories of people on their rolls are best able to judge who is in need and who is not. Therefore we require that, before we employ a worker on a WPA project, his local welfare agency must testify he is in need of the work and the wages it will bring. The fact that the WPA workers are selected locally should answer the charge of bureaucracy.

The question of WPA wages and hours also is widely misunderstood. Let me give you the facts: The average WPA worker, throughout the United States, earns about \$52.50 per month. There are four scales of wages -- for unskilled work, semi-skilled work, skilled work and professional or technical work. These scales vary, between different localities, according to differences in living costs and living standards. We pay what we call a security wage, which is a monthly wage and represents, insofar as we can determine, a subsistence standard of living in the locality in which the worker resides.

I have been speaking of a worker's monthly earnings. His hourly rate of pay is something else. The hourly rate paid by the WPA is

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required by law to be not less than the prevailing rate in the community. So, at this prevailing rate, the WPA worker is permitted to work only sufficient hours to earn the established monthly security wage.

Let me repeat, that the average WPA worker throughout the United States is paid about \$52.50 per month. When you consider that it is our policy to employ only one worker in a family, and that this \$52.50 represents in most cases the income of a family group, I do not believe it can be called excessive.

Another point on which there has been much misinformation is the administrative cost of the WPA program. I have heard speakers use the figure 20 per cent, and 30 per cent, and even 40 per cent, conveying to their audiences that it takes that proportion of our appropriation to administer the WPA. This is ridiculous on the face of it, because Congress has stated specifically that the WPA can not spend more than 5 per cent of the Federal money appropriated for this program on its administrative expenses. Were we to exceed the figure of 5 per cent for administrative expense, we would be violating the law and I have a healthy respect for the federal statutes. As a matter of fact, we have been operating our program on less than the permissible 5 per cent. The figure has been nearer 3 per cent. This cost includes the salaries of administrative and supervisory employees, and all expenditures for rent, heat, light, travel, telephones and telegrams, and other usual administrative costs. Anyone with experience in the operation of a large organization will readily admit that to hold these costs within the neighborhood of 3 per cent is a creditable achievement.



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One reason for the confusion concerning our administrative expense has been, I believe, that people have included the money we spend for materials and supplies as part of the cost of administration. Obviously, you cannot operate a works program without expending money for materials and supplies. You cannot build a school without buying bricks or cement or lumber. Nor can you build a bridge without steel or concrete or timber. To call such expenditures administrative expense is unfair.

The sponsors of our projects assume the major part of the cost of materials, supplies and equipment, thus reducing the Federal expenditures for these purposes, and permitting the major portion of Federal funds to be paid in wages.

Of every Federal WPA dollar spent, 86 cents goes directly into the hands of the workers in terms of wages; about 3 cents goes for administrative expense; and the balance, or approximately 11 cents, goes for materials and equipment. Putting it another way, the average Federal cost per month for each WPA worker is \$61. Of that amount, \$52.50 goes for wages. Another \$6.50 goes for materials and equipment and but \$2 goes for administrative expense.

Another misconception about the WPA is that it is almost entirely a large-city program. This is not so. The WPA program operates in practically every county in the United States. Wherever there is unemployed labor in need, the WPA cooperates in putting men to work on projects useful to the locality in which they live. As a matter of fact, one of the largest and, in my mind, one of the most important

undertakings of the WPA program has been the building of secondary roads. Such roads are of use almost entirely in rural or semi-rural communities. Over a two-year period, the WPA has built some 40,000 miles of such secondary roads, and improved 140,000 miles of existing rural roads which were badly in need of repair. Similarly, much of our work in conservation, public health, education, recreation and other phases of the program has been directed toward the rural and semi-rural areas. About one-eighth of all WPA workers are employed in counties where no community exceeds 2500 in population; and two out of five are employed in counties where no city exceeds 25,000.

It is a mistake, therefore, to think of the WPA program as entirely a large city program. A man can need a job just as badly out in the wide open spaces as he can in a great metropolis; and the WPA program furnishes work to the needy unemployed regardless of the area in which they live.

In the course of my remarks I have touched upon some of the most glaring misconceptions concerning this program. As I said in the beginning, I have done so not to take sides in a matter now before the Congress, but rather in the hope of correcting certain misunderstood ideas which are widespread, in the hope that public discussion on this vital question of unemployment relief may be based on facts.

The WPA program is a relatively new thing, and it is vast and complex. I believe that its record is commendable, and its steady, month-to-month improvement is remarkable. But I also know, and have



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said publicly before, that it still can stand plenty of further improvement and it shall be my earnest effort to advance along that line.

Whether one is a friend or a critic of the WPA, one owes an obligation as a citizen to understand what it is doing, and to discuss it fairly and accurately. The problem of unemployment which faces this nation is the most serious one with which we have to contend. I have no doubt but that it can be solved by democratic processes, but the solution will be facilitated and expedited if the true facts about the problem are clearly understood by the general public. The purpose of my talk this evening has been to attempt to promote that understanding by clearing up certain widespread misconceptions which exist concerning the WPA.

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