

## **Selected History and Evolution of The Human Resources Administration**

### **Introduction**

“Welfare” was once associated with “well-being” and “prosperity.” It came to connote the opposite. The change in meaning evolved during the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first thirty-five years of the twentieth century. This was a time period when the United States developed a variety of programs to assist the poor. Public assistance went from being administered by charity organizations to being funded and controlled by government programs. “Welfare” as a term became part of the common vernacular in the 1960s and refers to the social service system and the financial assistance received by those in need.

Not only has the meaning of “welfare” changed over the years, but much of the language used in describing the destitute and the programs to support them has also evolved. By 1929, many labels to describe the needy were deemed derogatory. It was no longer acceptable to refer to people as “lunatics,” “bastards,” and “paupers.” People no longer went to “asylums.” Even the “poorhouse” became the “county home.” The terms relief, financial assistance and public assistance primarily replaced charity and alms. Social agencies themselves underwent name changes as their purposes were understood differently and their programs redirected.

### **Caring for the Poor**

As a system, America’s welfare roots date back to the English Elizabethan Poor Law of 1597-1601. However, it was the Dutch who first administered aid to the poor in New York City, newly settled as New Amsterdam. In less than fifty years after Henry Hudson dropped anchor in 1609, the first social workers were sent by the Dutch West India Company. Midwives and “zieckentroosters” (translated as “comforters of the sick”), who were lay and ordained clergyman, read scriptures and prayers to the sick. They also helped create the City’s first orphanage in 1656.

Complaints from church deacons that church funds were being depleted by needy people in surrounding villages prompted Peter Stuyvesant to enact New Amsterdam’s first poor law. It relieved the church of the responsibility of caring for non-residents. It was not long after that the English gained political control of the territory and New Amsterdam was renamed New York.

By the 1730s, New York was showing signs of a financial recession. The numbers of those in need of relief doubled those of the preceding decade. By the 1740s, public relief became a political issue and the first permanent Poorhouse was created as a result of campaign promises. The Poorhouse was three institutions in one building: a Poorhouse, a Workhouse and a House of Correction. The Poorhouse dominated the structure of welfare. An unfortunate outcome was that “outdoor relief,” relief in the recipient’s home, was almost completely eliminated by 1747. As the new colonies struggled for independence, New York City was experiencing all the signs of a financial depression. By 1763 there were not enough funds available to care for everyone in need. Wealthy New Yorkers created the Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Agriculture and Economy. A main purpose of the Society was to promote domestic

manufacturing to increase jobs. For over a year, spinning schools were set up for paupers' children and employed almost three hundred poor women.

Late eighteenth century New York City neighborhoods were even more poverty-stricken. The cities grew more congested and men began to leave to look for work elsewhere. Many never returned. By the turn of the century, more than 30% of households were headed by women; women and children made up the greatest number of almshouse residents.

By the early nineteenth century many merchants moved their families away from where they worked. Many moved to what is now the upper West Side of Manhattan as more of the laboring class moved in around them. The wealthier moved out of these neighborhoods. For the first time people did not live where they worked, perhaps providing less incentive to maintain a decent quality of life in these localities. Improvements in transportation afforded them the luxury of distance. The problem of caring for the needy grew. Distinctions began to be made between "worthy" and "unworthy" poor. "Worthy" poor were mostly women and children, while those deemed "unworthy" were classified as drunkards, shiftless and lazy.

Poverty became part of the social conscience of New York City's more prosperous and affluent population. Different charity-based organizations began administering relief to the poor in a variety of ways. One group of wealthy merchants, professionals, clergy and university faculty served on boards of educational and humanitarian associations. Some citizens were convinced that a permanent class of paupers posed a threat to the new city. The Society for the Relief of Distressed Debtors was created. It provided relief for those in the overcrowded debtors' prisons in the form of food, clothing, blankets, fresh water and firewood. Two soup houses were also created. Health issues became a matter of increasing concern. Using private funding, the Medical Society opened the New York Dispensary and state funding established New York Hospital as a "public hospital"- one that was open to the "sick poor."

### **Women as Leaders of Charity**

Benevolence is in the roots of the making of New York City. Out of this benevolence came the beginnings of structured social work and social services in New York City. Wives of the wealthy, in particular Elizabeth Ann Seton, organized the Society for the Relief of Poor Widows and Small Children. Rules were established. Inquiries were made into the moral fitness of the poor women to determine if they were suitable for relief. Within two years, the Society was providing food, clothing, shoes, firewood and meal tickets to 150 women and 420 children. The Society for the Promotion of Industry gave women a distinct role in public affairs when it created the House of Industry. The House of Industry won a grant of five hundred dollars annually from the New York State legislature, which it used to find women employment as tailors, spinners, weavers, and seamstresses. In 1845, the American Female Moral Reform Society responded to the needs of women caused by the inequity in wages for men and women and the fact that women were excluded from many jobs. They established the Home for the Friendless. Impoverished, unemployed women could come to the Home, learn a trade and be educated in religion and morality.

Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell was the first American woman to receive a recognized M.D. degree, but she still found it difficult to practice. She opened the New York Infirmary for Women and Children which was comprised of an all female staff.

### **More Charity Organizations**

Throughout the early to the mid-nineteenth century, a variety of public relief organizations were established. Amongst them were the Humane Society and the Assistance Society. Both provided food, clothing and fuel. Home visits were made to investigate those individuals who applied to the Assistance Society.

One of the more significant organizations was established in Manhattan in 1843. Headed by Robert Milham Hartley, the Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor (AICP) took a centralized, scientific approach to poverty. Later that same year a second AICP was established in Brooklyn. Hartley, a devout Presbyterian, believed that pauperism was perpetuated by a mental set and was determined to stop indiscriminate almsgiving. His policies used relief for behavior modification. Home visits were made to the poor to “inspire them with self-reliance and self-respect.” The area was divided up into sections with sixty poor families in each. A Visitor was assigned to each section. People were discouraged from panhandling. Residents were encouraged to give beggars a card with the name and address of the nearest Visitor. Between 1845 and 1855 a Depression nearly wiped out all the AICP funds. A plea was made to the Municipal Almshouse Department to increase public spending on relief.

### **Municipal Relief**

While it was true that charity organizations were the primary administrators of relief, municipal funds were used to assist the poor. In the early 1800s, President Jefferson imposed an Embargo Act that prevented ships from leaving the nation’s ports. This left many sailors unemployed and impoverished. The Common Council of New York City responded by opening soup kitchens and organizing other relief activities. The Street Commissioner created a work-relief project. Capable men worked to raise streets and lots and dig the foundation for City Hall.

### **The Bellevue Institution**

Dedicated in 1816, the Bellevue Institution was a large complex of buildings located on 26 acres of land and encompassed a variety of services. The complex included Bellevue Hospital, an almshouse, a pesthouse, for those with contagious health conditions, a penitentiary, school, morgue, bakehouse, washhouse, soap factory, greenhouse, icehouse, and a shop for carpenters and blacksmiths. Those turned away from New York Hospital ended up at Bellevue. The seriously ill, mentally insane and those deemed as “unworthy poor” came there. The penitentiary housed both criminals and poor since little or no distinctions were made between vagrants and petty criminals.

### **The Role of Government and Charities in Relief**

By the winter of 1837, New York City was plagued with unemployment. Unions were destroyed, making it possible for employers to reduce wages and increase working hours. At least 10,000 jobless were in dire need of assistance. Horace Greeley, publisher of the weekly paper The New Yorker wrote of these despicable conditions and raised

public awareness. The City government responded by creating the Central Committee for the Relief of the Suffering of the Poor. Chaired by the Mayor, its intent was to coordinate relief operations with volunteer organizations.

By 1880, the Salvation Army entered New York City. They had an adamant anti-drinking position and professed grace, forgiveness and love. By Christmas 1891, the Salvation Army opened the Cheap Food and Shelter Depot. Staples and shelter were available at low cost. Those who could not pay were able to work in exchange for goods and shelter.

Josephine Shaw Lowell, commissioner of the State Board of Charities, established the New York Charity Organization Society (COS) in 1882. The COS combined the resources of over 500 churches and societies and over 1,000 families. The COS established a central Registry Bureau to avoid duplication of services. Working solely with volunteers, the COS felt that the salaried “Visitors” were out of touch with the poor and replaced them with volunteer “friendly visitors.” Through legislation the COS helped to create the Municipal Lodging House. In exchange for work in the COS wood yard, poor could receive food and a night’s lodging. Recipients were monitored and could not receive services more than three times per month.

### **Social Work Meets Government**

World War I raised recognition for the need of social work-oriented services to be included in public relief agencies. The expansion of Home Services and the American Red Cross caught the eyes of professionals. Lillian Wald, founder of the Henry Street Settlement, indirectly alluded to this when she remarked that there “will always be a need for a House on Henry Street.” The Settlement provided a place in the community where local residents could air their complaints. The Settlement interpreted these needs for the community at large and set out to satisfy them. Both sides fought inclusion of the other. Social Work Associations were denied membership in public agencies. Private agencies were against public agencies because they felt there was no service involved in assisting the needy and that funding without service was inadequate. As early as the 1890s, it was recognized that the social worker’s focus was on the individual. Social workers had the knowledge of economics, sociology and political science. Finally, by the end of the 1920s, more and more social workers were employed in public agencies and New York City became a national leader in developing social work-oriented public relief agencies.

### **The Depression, FDR and the New Deal**

The Great Depression was a catalyst for action using both long and short-term solutions to poverty. Relief expenditures were rising rapidly. By 1933, one in four workers was unemployed, one to two million people were homeless and those that were employed suffered a reduction in wages.

When Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) took the office of the President of the United States in 1933, his administration’s immediate goal was to alleviate the economic suffering of the nation. During FDR’s first hundred

days in office he established an unprecedented number of programs. In early March 1933, he called Congress in to an emergency session where they proceeded to enact fifteen laws in the next three months.

The New Deal was more than just a welfare program. It was a plan for economic recovery. This plan was divided in three parts: first, get a hold on the market system, second, balance the budget and cut spending wherever possible and finally, increase spending on government programs and public works to increase purchasing power and employment. The Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA), under the direction of Harry Hopkins, with the support of Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins, was created to carry out this plan. The FERA allocated a half billion dollars to state and local welfare agencies and established the Works Progress Administration (WPA). The WPA's function was to employ those in need of work. Overall almost eight million people were employed by WPA projects.

FERA organized welfare. The rules and regulations called for trained and experienced investigators to work in the local programs. Funds had to be distributed through public agencies. Half the money allocated had to be matched by state and local funding. The WPA reflected the ideology of the New Deal and the Roosevelt administration in that it was temporary and when the country recovered economically, private industry would replace government as employers.

FERA was the first step in the pathway that lead up to FDR signing the Social Security Act of 1935. It made some of the programs initiated by FERA permanent. Funded by payroll taxes, Roosevelt felt that people would be more willing to object to cuts in benefits if they paid for the program.

The Social Security Act was enacted on August 14, 1935. It included programs for Old Age Insurance and Assistance, unemployment and disability compensation and aid to assist poor mothers and their families known as Aid to Dependent Children. While balancing the budget was always a concern of FDR, it never superseded the needs of human beings. The magnitude of the economic conditions that created the need for FERA, the WPA and the Social Security Act of 1935 helped join the forces and expertise of the public and private agencies.

### **Creation of the Human Resources Administration**

The Human Resources Administration (HRA) was created on August 15, 1966 by Executive Order No. 28. It was the largest of Mayor John Lindsay's consolidated administrations. It was created to better coordinate and integrate the city's human services programs. In addition to HRA Central Operations and the Department of Welfare, HRA consisted of the following constituent agencies: Manpower and Career Development Agency, Community Development Agency, Youth Services Agency, and Addiction Services Agency.

The executive order stated that an Administrator will head HRA. It also stated that "nothing in this order shall be construed to impair the functions, powers, and duties of the Commissioner of Welfare or the Department of Welfare as defined by the New York Social Welfare Law or by any federal statute." Both positions were merged in 1970. At

present, the agency is more accurately referred to as the NYC Human Resources Administration/Department of Social Services (HRA/DSS).

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