

UNEMPLOYMENT RELIEF IN
PERIODS OF DEPRESSION

FEDER

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UNEMPLOYMENT RELIEF IN PERIODS OF DEPRESSION

A Study of Measures Adopted in Certain
American Cities, 1857 through 1922

BY

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CHAPTER I

THE PURPOSE AND SCOPE OF THE STUDY

STORED away in widely separated, dust-covered files and out-of-print publications, the source material for an account of unemployment relief in the United States has remained scattered throughout the country. No short cut has been disclosed whereby the material could be centrally assembled in libraries. In investigating the subject, therefore, it has been necessary almost literally to "dig out" the story from the record vaults of social agencies, from old newspaper files, and in part from the recollections of persons still living.

With each depression, emergency measures were embarked upon, quite evidently without adequate understanding or appreciation of previously tried remedies. The present study, it is hoped, will make past experience available, in so far as it presents changes in methods and objectives as they reveal themselves in general practices during succeeding periods of unemployment. In recurring seasons of hard times, relief efforts emerge in singularly clear patterns of characteristic organization and administration.

Primary consideration has been given in the study to the development of methods of relief administration from depression to depression. Emergency activities of both permanent and temporary agencies have always, however, been closely related to the social work and social thought of the particular period and community, so that a history of unemployment relief is bound to be in many aspects a history of social work. Unfortunately emergency relief has usually assumed a more important role than have measures for the prevention or handling of future emergencies. Recommendations for the future, although put forward in print after each depression, have been left unheeded until the stress of another period demanded action to meet community needs.

For purposes of this study, unemployment relief is defined to include actual aid from public or private sources in cash, in kind, by

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wages, credit, benefit funds, or the providing of shelter. Planning, organization, and administration of such relief, under whatever auspices, include attempts to measure the problem and to co-ordinate the resources of communities. Services and the attempts to improve conditions through social case work, the planning for leisure-time recreation, education, industrial training, health supervision, and care are noted where evidence marked their importance. In treating the data of any particular period, an attempt has been made to emphasize the outstanding unemployment relief measures devised during that period rather than to analyze all the aspects of the problem.

The period selected for study began with the year 1857 and continues through the depression of 1920-1922. It thus corresponds to the era during which social work arose and became well organized in the United States.

Much as one might wish to record experiences of the depression that began in the autumn of 1929, the scope and intensity of which are beyond any before known to us, it was not possible to do so. At the time of writing this book the depression was heavy upon us. The measures and methods being used to provide relief or employment could not be appraised, nor could even reliable information be assembled. It only remains, therefore, to signalize with regret the omission of any discussion upon the years through which we are still passing and to offer the hope that the lessons learned may sometime be set forth by a discerning student of the history of the period.

For purposes of clarification, a period of depression is defined in the present volume as a general falling off in business and industry serious enough to require unusual relief measures. Specifically, the depressions treated are those recognized by standard authorities¹ as of major importance in the United States during the periods covered; namely, 1857-1858, 1873-1879, 1893-1897, 1907-1908, 1914-1915, and 1920-1922.

As pointed out in Chapter XI, because of the authoritative pre-

¹ Thorp, Willard Long, and Mitchell, Wesley C., *Business Annals*, National Bureau of Economic Research, Inc., New York, 1926, pp. 77-87; Ayres, Leonard P., *Cycles of American Industry for the Last Three Quarters of a Century*—a chart compiled for the Cleveland Trust Company's *Business Bulletin*—reproduced from the *Literary Digest*, May 30, 1931.