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Research Note On The Children's Bureau

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The Children's Bureau was created to promote the general welfare of American children by Congressional act of April 9, 1912 (37 Stat. L., 79). Its mission was to: "investigate and report...upon all matters pertaining to the welfare of children and child life among all classes of our people, and ... especially (to) investigate the questions of infant mortality, the birth rate, orphanage, juvenile courts, desertion, dangerous occupations, accidents and diseases of children, employment, (and) legislation affecting children in the several states and territories." (Tobey, 1)

Lillian D. Wald, head resident of the House on Henry Street in New York City is credited with the original suggestion to Florence Kelley of the National Consumers League, who formulated the plan for the Bureau. Edward T. Devine was also involved in the discussions at an early stage and the three were engaged actively in discussing the proposal by 1905.

Creation of the Children's Bureau appears not to have stirred a great deal of national attention. The first bill was introduced in 1906 in the U.S. Senate by Sen. Murray Crane and in the House by Rep. Augustus Gardner, both of Massachusetts. President Roosevelt recommended adoption of the bill in 1909, and it was finally adopted with amendments on January 31, 1912.(1)

The first chief, Julia Lathrop, was appointed four months later on June 4, 1912 and the first legislative appropriation was approved on August 23 of the same year. Like an abandoned and neglected child, this new legislative creation was something of an orphan among the male-dominated cabinet bureaus of the time. Initially, the Children's Bureau was assigned to the Department of Commerce, and then transferred to the newly created Department of Labor within its first year of operations (Act of March 4, 1913; 37 Stat. L. 736) (2)

In response to this transition, the Secretary of Labor received a large volume of mail in support of continuing Ms. Lathrop as head of C.B. (This mail is incorporated in RG 174, 4/1, Box 5, General Records of the Department of Labor.) It would appear that this transition was accompanied by the first of many attempts to wrest the newly created Bureau from the largely female (with a few active males like Devine) child welfare interests and place it in the hands of patronage-oriented male politicians.

At any rate, not all of the mail was favorable to Ms. Lathrop. Ms. Harriette N. Dunn of Illinois wrote opposing Ms. Lathrop and enclosed a copy of her pamphlet "Infamous Juvenile Law: Crimes Against Children Under the Cloak of Charity." In her letter, Ms. Dunn sounded a note that is still recognizable when she wrote "this child placing business is a form of treason,

teaching children disloyalty to the land of their birth and the principles of American citizenship and forcing them to become unknown slaves of a King beyond the seas." The letter campaign was in response to the rumor circulating that the Secretary of Labor intended to use the reorganization to replace Lathrop with a man. The preferred Democratic candidate may have been Ms. Robert Wickliffe from Louisiana.

Suffragettes and child welfare advocates remained sensitive about the possibility of male political inference long after. In 1921, the original director, Julia Lathrop, stepped down and was replaced as Director by her assistant, Grace Abbott. Even after Ms. Lathrop voluntarily resigned in 1921, protest letters were received by the Secretary of Labor. Responding to one, the Secretary suggested that Ms. Lathrop had previously attempted to resign three times and he had finally been forced to accept the fact. (RG 174, Box 5, Folder 4/1) However, he expressed no regrets at her resignation.

The bureau began operation on August 23, 1912 when the initial appropriation of \$25,640 became available. The authorized staff size of 15 was reached in March 1913.(3) In FY1915, staff was increased to 76 along with an appropriation of \$164,640. (4) It's first study was of Infant Mortality in Johnstown PA. (3)

Organization

The original organization of the U.S. Children's Bureau included five divisions reflecting its original mission: Statistical; Library; Industrial; Hygiene; and Social Service. (4) By 1925, the library disappeared as a special division, and Child Hygiene and Maternity and Infant Hygiene were separate units, along with an Office of the Chief and office of the Assistant to the Chief. (32) The Social Service division was somewhat misnamed, being primarily concerned with "children in need of special care--the dependent, the delinquent, and the mentally or physically handicapped." (33) The Child Hygiene Division "serves in an advisory capacity to other units on all matters pertaining to hygiene." (34) The research focus of the industrial Division was on studies of 1) conditions, extent and causes and effects of child labor; 2) methods of regulating child labor; and 3) the transition of the child from school to work. (34) The statistical division gathered and tabulated data on a broad range of issues affecting children and the editorial division supervised the writing and publication of the many publications which were the principal product of the bureau for decades.

Responsibility for Sheppard Towner Act

The Maternity and Infant Hygiene Division was added in 1921 in response to the Sheppard Towner Legislation of that year. In many respects, the Sheppard Towner Act set a pattern for later federal-state social legislation in the U.S.: Under the act, the federal role was to act as a clearing house for state

plans; to provide advice and technical assistance to the states; to distribute funds to the states and to receive reports on state activities. (35)

Sheppard Towner was clearly the big assignment of the Bureau in the 1920's. During the debate over continuation of S-T, Grace Abbott informed the President, through the Sec. of Labor that on Jan. 1, 1929, there were 467 full time county health units and in the 1929 fiscal year, 361 counties were receiving assistance in developing a local nursing service from m & i funds. Sheppard Towner had an automatic expiration on June 30, 1929. In November, 1921, the Attorney Gen of Mass had offered an opinion to the state legislature that the S-T law was unconstitutional. By that time, the program had been adopted by 42 states, and plans of work had been adopted by 31. (Abbott memo to the Secretary, May 18, 1922)

The Mass. action was in reaction to an opposition campaign coordinated by the Mass. Civic Alliance and the Anti-Suffrage Assn. Their opposition had first been to passage of the bill. (Memo from Grace Abbott to Mr. Cook, Nov. 18, 1921)

A memo from Grace Abbott to the Sec. of Labor on Nov. 16, 1928 indicates that a report from the Treasury Department (re: renewal of M & I was unfavorable.

(RG174, Box 181, Folder 167/684)

Hearings were held by the House Judiciary Committee on June 1, 1922 on a proposed Constitutional Amendment relating to child labor. (RG 174, 20/170B)

Incorporation was one of the topics on which recommendations were made to the President by the 1909 W.H. C. on Children. (RG174 , Box 127, F.75/1)

Constituency

As the first annual report of the Chief, Children's Bureau, published in 1913 puts it: "It was early recognized that much advantage might be gained through cooperation with the women's clubs in the different States." (RG 102, 8-6-1-1, C437)

Planning

The first annual report of the Children's Bureau also shows evidence of planning, not only in the request for additional appropriations, but also in explicit plans for extending their infant mortality inquiries, child labor investigations, information regarding exceptional children and mother's pensions, juvenile courts, the feeble minded, legislation affecting children and expanding the departmental library. (RG 102,8-6-1-1, C437)

Budget

The budget proposal included with the first annual report requests a staff of 76 and a budget of \$164,640, including salaries of 106,640 and "miscellaneous expenses" of \$58,000. It apparently worked, for the second report indicates just that amount was appropriated on July 16, 1914.

In the fourth annual report in 1916, this was increased by 57 to 133 staff and the appropriation grew from \$187,520 to \$352,160. Justification was to continue and expand studies and organize a clerical office force "adequate to meet the needs of the work in progress and of such other work as may develop during the year."

"The bureau's most serious administrative embarrassment has been caused by lack of clerical service." Lathrop said in her report.

Archive Notes

RG174, Box 79, contains three full folders (20/170) on the politics surrounding the passage and opposition to child labor legislation.

References

Tobey, James A. *The Children's Bureau: Its History, Activities and Organization* Johns Hopkins University Press Baltimore MD 1925

There was also an interesting-sounding publications called:

Evans, H. C. (1926). *The American poorfarm and its inmates*. [Des Moines: Iowa.]. (No publisher listed)

U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Bulletin #386 *The Cost of American Almshouses*.