

THE COUNTY PLAN OF PUBLIC WELFARE

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THE PUBLIC welfare movement may be said to have grown up as a protest against the wasteful, unscientific methods of public and private administration of poor relief. This statement is especially applicable with respect to the lack of supervisory powers over the expenditures of public moneys for the poor and unfortunate classes generally of human society. The first state board of public welfare was set up in Massachusetts in 1863. This board was charged with the duty of supervising the relief activities of the towns and cities in that state. The Massachusetts board merely had the power to visit state institutions; it did not have power to enforce its recommendations.

From 1863 to the present time the public welfare movement in one form or another has been adopted in forty-five of the forty-eight states. Only Mississippi, Nevada and Utah are without a state board of public welfare. The fact that state boards of public welfare have spread to practically every state does not mean that the job is done. Many of these boards are lacking in the power to compel the adoption of their recommendations. The greatest weakness, however, and the most common one is the lack of a sufficient personnel. Only a few states have provided staffs that come anywhere near meeting the needs. The result is that while we have state boards of public welfare in 45 states the work of these boards is largely obviated because it is impossible for the one or two persons composing the staff to maintain supervisory relationship over a wide range of penal and eleemosynary institutions, state, county and municipal prisons and jails and at the same time to look after the large number of juvenile and adult offenders on parole.

Such is the situation that prevails today in Oklahoma. The entire personnel of the state department of public welfare is composed of the commissioner and assistant commissioner of public welfare, one or two stenographers or clerks, and one field worker. This field worker, with the assistance of the commissioner must maintain supervision of the state penitentiary and reformatory for adults, the four training schools for juvenile delinquents, the three insane hospitals, all the child caring institutions, of which there are a great number, tuberculosis sanitariums, the feeble-minded institution, all county and municipal jails in the 77 counties of the state, to say nothing of the supervision and care of the large number of paroled persons from the prisons and training schools. Obviously, therefore, to be effective the personnel of field workers needs to be increased many times over.

Other states have found themselves in the same position as Oklahoma with the lack of a sufficient staff of field workers. A few of these states have solved the problem by the adoption of a county plan of public welfare. This plan, wherever it has been adopted, has been getting commendable results and seems to lend itself to adoption by most localities better than any other plan as yet worked out; and as far as can be detected is admirably suited for adoption here in Oklahoma.

To lend concreteness to the discussion a plan actually at work will

here be described. It is fairly generally conceded that the North Carolina plan is best adapted for use on a county basis especially in those states that are still fundamentally rural. For this reason the North Carolina plan seems peculiarly suited to the needs of Oklahoma.

The arrangement of the North Carolina plan is as follows: first, there is an unpaid state board of public welfare of seven members who serve for terms of six years each, rotating in groups of two; second, there is a state commissioner of public welfare who is the executive head of the system. The members of the board are selected by nomination by the governor and are appointed by the legislature, and the commissioner is appointed by the state board and removable only by this board.

The state board or its executive officer, the state commissioner, is specifically charged with the following duties:¹ first, to investigate and supervise the whole system of penal and charitable institutions in the state and counties; second, to study the causes of maladjustment such as unemployment, poverty, vagrancy, housing, crime, public amusements, treatment of prisoners, desertion and divorce; third, to study and promote the welfare of dependent and delinquent children and to provide for their supervision while on parole; fourth, to provide for the inspection of private child caring institutions; fifth, to act as a licensing agent; sixth, to be responsible for the publication of facts relating to social conditions; seventh, to employ a "trained investigator of social service problems to be known as the commissioner of public welfare"; eighth, to recommend legislation; ninth, to encourage counties to appoint county superintendents of welfare; and tenth, to attend conferences of social work.

The principal distinguishing feature of the North Carolina plan, however, is the provision requiring the appointment of full time superintendents of public welfare in all counties having a population of 32,000 or more in 1920 and enabling counties with a population of 32,000 or less to provide such officer in case they so desire. A check of the counties in 1927 showed that 54 of the 100 counties in the state had provided full time superintendents of public welfare. The law further requires that in those counties not required to provide a superintendent of welfare the county superintendent of schools shall act as superintendent of welfare, and that the county must provide additional clerical help to enable the superintendent of schools to take over such duties of the superintendent of welfare as the enforcement of the school attendance laws and other duties relating to school attendance problems.

The county superintendent of welfare is elected biennially by the joint action of the board of county commissioners and the county board of education, but with the approval of the state commissioner of public welfare. A recent ruling further provides that a person to be eligible for the office must have had training in a school of social work.

The duties of the county superintendent of welfare are as follows:² first, the enforcement of the school attendance laws; second, the supervision of the poor and poor funds of the county; third, the supervision of persons discharged from insane hospitals and other state institutions and all paroled prisoners in the county; fourth, the care of dependent and delinquent children, especially those on probation and parole; fifth, the

¹Kelso, *The Science of Public Welfare*, pp. 134-5.

²From State Laws Governing Public Welfare in North Carolina, 1927.

oversight of recreation and commercial amusements; sixth, assistance to the unemployed in finding work; seventh, the study of causes of poverty and other forms of maladjustment; and eighth, the investigation of applications for mothers' aid and the administration of mothers' aid funds.

A further interesting feature of the plan is the provision in the law creating a county board of welfare in each county. These county boards are composed of three persons appointed by the state board of public welfare who serve for terms of three years, one person retiring each year. The duty of the county boards of public welfare "shall be to advise with and assist the state board in the work in the county, to make such visitations and reports as the state board may request, and to act in a general advisory capacity to the county and municipal authorities in dealing with questions of dependency and delinquency, distribution of the poor funds, and social conditions generally."³ The members of the county board of charities and public welfare serve without pay and are removable only by the state board of public welfare.

The law further requires that the county board meet at least once a month with the county superintendent of welfare "and advise with him in regard to problems pertaining to his office." The county superintendent of welfare acts as secretary at these meetings.

The chief claim for recognition of the North Carolina county plan of public welfare is that it works. Here is a plan that for the first time provides for the effective enforcement of the school attendance laws of the state by specifically placing this responsibility on one person. Incidentally, the superintendent of public welfare, through the enforcement of the school attendance laws, becomes also a positive agent for the better enforcement of the child labor laws of the state since these work in conjunction with each other.

A second significant contribution to the science of public welfare made by the county plan is that in the person of the superintendent the several counties have for the first time a parole and probation officer to supervise youths and adults on parole. Whereas the practice of probation and parole has in recent years been widespread, no corresponding development in follow-up work has been accomplished. Consequently, there has been little or no supervision of the delinquent or near delinquent. The result has been that the principles of probation and parole have been sadly abused in practice through sheer neglect to provide for follow-up work, which has in turn resulted in the total or partial discrediting of both systems in some localities. One of the primary duties of the county superintendent of welfare is to act in the capacity of probation officer to follow up the persons on parole in the effort to see that they do not again fall into delinquency. This officer, therefore, steps in to fill a gap in our penological as well as relief giving activities, and hence supplies a need no forward looking county and state can hardly be without.

³Ibid. p. 5.