MEETING THE PUBLIC WELFARE NEEDS OF POLK COUNTY

By Emil J. Bagley, Executive Secretary,
Polk County Welfare Board

As a preface to the report on Public Welfare work in Polk County, it is fitting to say that the State of Minnesota, has through its hundred years of history, been in the forefront among the states in its public welfare programs. Minnesota, as a state, has been one of the leaders in vocational rehabilitation in its penal and corrective institutions. Vocational guidance and rehabilitation have always been outstanding features of the training given in our state schools for the deaf, dumb, blind and other physically handicapped and in the Schools of Correction of youthful criminals. A significant step in progress in dealing with juvenile delinquency problems during the past decade has been the creation of the Youth Conservation Commission. This Commission is charged with the responsibility of rehabilitation of youthful offenders of the law, outside the walls of the State Institution. Another step in progress in public welfare has been the removal of all physical restraints in our State Mental Institutions and the adoption of modern methods of diagnosis and treatment of mental patients.

Dependent and neglected children were provided for by the building of a State Public School in 1885. A Children's Code Commission was created which was responsible for several laws, pertaining to children, which were enacted by the 1917 session of the Minnesota Legislature.

Public relief needs, prior to 1932, were met by the communities and townships. In 1932, the relief needs were so great, during the depression, that the Federal Government made funds available for relief through the Reconstruction Finance Corporation. These funds were disbursed in Minnesota through an emergency state organization. In 1933, the Federal Emergency Relief Administration was created and a similar state organization was formed in Minnesota. Through this state organization, funds were distributed as direct relief or as work relief. The necessary staff of workers for the administration of the relief work was hired and paid from Federal funds. This staff in Polk County worked with the Board of County Commissioners and a Child Welfare Board. The Child Welfare Board worked with the welfare of children did not get authority to give funds.

The Minnesota Legislature, in 1937, passed one of the most important pieces of Welfare Legislation which created a County Welfare Board in each county of the state. The law charged these Boards with the duties of administering all forms of public assistance and welfare to both children and adults. These Boards were given also, responsibility for enforcement of all laws for the protection of defective, illegitimate, dependent, neglected and
delinquent children, under supervision of the Minnesota State Board of Control.

The organizational meeting of the Polk County Welfare Board was held at the Court House on July 8, 1937 and an accurate record of the minutes of the first and subsequent meetings has been kept and is on file at the Welfare office. The first Welfare Board was composed of three County Commissioners and two lay persons. The law stated that a woman should be one of the Board members. The membership of the first County Welfare Board in Polk County consisted of: Peter Ofstedal, Chairman, Adolph Skyberg and William Eichoff, commissioners with Mrs. Amanda Hegtvedt, secretary and Carl P. Tronberg. The Executive Secretaries of the Welfare Board include: Robert Muit, July 1937 to August 1937; Mrs. Dora Thom Jukkola, August 1937 to December 1939; Oscar Skibness, December 1939 to December 1953; Emil J. Bagley, January 1954 to date.

The 1941 Legislature passed a law enlarging the County Welfare Board to seven members. Since that time all five of the County Commissioners plus two lay persons serve on the Welfare Board. When the County Welfare Board was created in 1937, provisions were made to secure a professional staff of workers to administer the program. The positions authorized at the beginning of the program in 1937 were:—Executive Secretary, Case Supervisor and five case workers. Two case workers were added in 1958.

Personnel standards and qualifications for the professional staff have been raised over the years in keeping with the increased duties and responsibilities expected of the Welfare Board. Case workers are now required to have a college degree and successfully pass a written examination before being eligible to apply for a case-work position. A State Merit System program has been created to recruit, select and qualify persons for positions with County Welfare Boards.

Additional social services are now mandatory for the Welfare Board, especially in the area of medical care, physical rehabilitation, mentally retarded, mentally ill and to the Juvenile Court in providing services to children.

Since the creation of the Welfare Board, funds have been made available on a matching basis to the county from Federal and State governments. The amount from the different levels of government varied through the years. County’s share is about 25%.

**Polk County Welfare Expense Comparisons, 1938, 1948, 1958**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Cost</th>
<th>County Funds</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1938</td>
<td>$418,720.00</td>
<td>Breakdown of funds not shown</td>
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<tr>
<td>1948</td>
<td>$557,853.00</td>
<td>$141,000.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>1958</td>
<td>$1,114,529.90</td>
<td>$400,000.00</td>
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The number of people receiving assistance in Polk County today is about the same as in former years but the costs have increased greatly. This is due in a large measure to the increased cost of living during the past thirty years plus the greater amount now spent for hospital, nursing home and other medical care.
Buildings of the Red River Valley Winter Shows in use 1918-1961, Left to Right: Livestock Barn, Ash Street; Livestock Pavilion, Crops, Broadway; Industrial Building on 4th Street; Poultry in rear.