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978-0-521-88957-5 - The Limits of Voluntarism: Charity and Welfare from the New Deal through the Great Society

Andrew J. F. Morris

Excerpt

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## I

## New Alignments

For someone like Josephine Brown, the expansion of welfare in the 1930s had the delicious, added benefit of rebuking the pretences of the voluntary sector. Brown, a social worker, served as a field agent for Harry Hopkins, the head of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) and later the Works Progress Administration (WPA), two of the signature relief agencies of Roosevelt's New Deal. In 1939, Brown wrote *Public Relief, 1929–1939*, a celebration of the expansion of public assistance. She laced her narrative with sharp jabs at voluntary agencies that had opposed public welfare early in the Depression. “During the first two years, 1929–1931,” she wrote, “the private family agencies made a valiant attempt to carry staggering loads and, under the greatest pressure, to justify the faith of their leaders in the superiority of their methods over those of the public ‘dole’ system.” By 1931, however, “it was so obvious that unemployment relief had to be public.” Private family agencies, once the pillar of social work and financial assistance in many communities, had finally been displaced by broader, better-funded public assistance organizations. The index to Brown's book revealed her satisfaction with the chastening of charities; the first listing under “Private Agencies” was “Alleged superiority of.”<sup>1</sup>

What Brown did not tell her readers is that she was a veteran of the voluntary sector she now disparaged. Before joining FERA in 1934, Brown spent ten years on the national staff of the Family Welfare Association of

<sup>1</sup> Josephine C. Brown, *Public Relief, 1929–1939* (New York: Henry Holt, 1940), 63, 80, 520.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

America, the national organization of the private agencies she later took to task in her book. This intimate perspective on local conditions convinced her of the limits of voluntarism and the strong conservative strain that ran through the leadership of local voluntary institutions. As a specialist in rural social work, Brown was also keenly aware that voluntary institutions, such as family welfare agencies, were primarily urban phenomena and that thousands of counties across the country lacked any organized charity. Brown thus became an enthusiastic supporter of one of the signature policies of public relief in the early Roosevelt administration: that relief would flow through public institutions only, as a means of building up a welfare system that would serve everyone.<sup>2</sup>

The crushing burden of relieving unemployment led voluntary agencies to change their historic opposition toward public welfare. As one observer noted early in the Depression in 1930, “Twenty years ago, of course, public outdoor relief was disliked intensely by all private agencies and apparently as far as I can make out the private agencies have now changed their position.”<sup>3</sup> Some in the leadership of the voluntary sector even saw the imminence of a welfare state as an opportunity for voluntarism. Rather than crowding out the voluntary sector, they hoped public welfare would form the basis of a new division of labor, “New Alignments” between public and private, one more suited to the needs of a mass, industrial society and one that recognized the modest financial capacity of charities.

Such alignments were slow to come. Public welfare’s expansion radically diminished the proportion of financial need met by voluntary agencies, but voluntary agencies remained enmeshed in the welfare system throughout the decade. The gaps and inadequacies of public relief kept a steady stream of the needy coming to family agencies for assistance – and left many wondering if these formerly proud symbols of voluntarism would be forever reduced merely to plugging the gaps of a dominant public system.

<sup>2</sup> On Brown, see Emilia E. Martinez-Brawley, “From Countrywoman to Federal Emergency Relief Administrator: Josephine Chapin Brown, a Biographical Study,” *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare* 14 (June 1987): 153–85. Brown’s former colleagues in the voluntary sector were infuriated by her apostasy and believed she underplayed the support of private agencies for federal relief during the Depression. Joanna Colcord of the Charity Organization Department of the Russell Sage Foundation conducted a behind-the-scenes effort to make sure that reviews of Brown’s book addressed this issue. See “MLaB” to “MW,” Nov. 11, 1940, in “Membership, Public Depts,” Box 17, FSAA; Ruth Hill, review of *Public Relief* in *The Family* 22 (Mar. 1941): 29–30; Joanna Colcord, “Social Work and the First Federal Relief Program,” *The Compass* 25 (Sept. 1943): 17–23.

<sup>3</sup> National Social Work Council Monthly Meeting, Apr. 4, 1930, Folder 53, Box 6, NSWA.

Cambridge University Press

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Andrew J. F. Morris

Excerpt

[More information](#)*New Alignments*

3

## THE COLLAPSE OF CHARITY

As the American economy crumpled and unemployment soared in the early 1930s, civic leaders in hundreds of cities promoted voluntary institutions as the principal source of relief. Building on past experience with earlier recessions, and taking their cue from President Herbert Hoover, the political and social work establishments of many cities sought to put existing social institutions to work in the emergency. Although the face of the effort in the first several years of the Depression appeared to be voluntary, local situations revealed a dizzying array of public-private institutional arrangements jerry-built to meet what most assumed would be a temporary, if severe, economic downturn. The crisis also demonstrated the eagerness of many voluntary agencies to rid themselves of the burden of relief and to encourage public responsibility for the unemployed.<sup>4</sup>

More than the stock market crash of October 1929, the winter of 1929–30 signaled the magnitude of the economic downturn to family agencies. In Toledo, Ohio, where the city's largest employer cut its payroll from 26,000 to 6,000 in late 1929, the family society's case load increased to the point that in January 1930 it had 2,727 applications for aid, compared to 1,000 a year earlier, and was making "no pretense" of being able to keep up a "high grade of social casework" under such a load.<sup>5</sup> The national association of voluntary family agencies, the FWAA, assigned Josephine Brown (who had not made the jump to the public sector yet) to the task of conducting surveys of member institutions on how cities were meeting the problem. The results indicated that caseloads had increased roughly 200 percent between January 1929 and January 1930.<sup>6</sup>

Cities across the country followed a similar pattern of addressing the unemployment crisis. They first fell back on voluntary institutions; when these became overloaded, they mobilized civic leaders to raise extra money for them, and then, as voluntary money ran thin, they buttressed the voluntary sector with municipal and state funds. The huge cities of Chicago and Philadelphia exemplified these trends. Both cities raised enormous amounts

<sup>4</sup> Standard works on Hoover's approach to voluntarism and relief include Ellis Hawley, "Herbert Hoover, the Commerce Secretariat, and the Vision of the 'Associative State,' 1921–1928," *Journal of American History* 61 (1974): 116–40; Albert Romasco, *The Poverty of Abundance: Hoover, the Nation, and the Depression* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), 10–23.

<sup>5</sup> Margaret Rich, *A Belief in People: A History of Family Social Work* (New York: FSAA, 1956), 109–10.

<sup>6</sup> FWAA Board of Director's Minutes, Jan. 22–23, 1930, Folder 6, Box 4, FSAA; "Unemployment and Family Societies," *Social Service Review* 4 (Mar. 1930): 98–9.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

of money through voluntary fundraising and channeled both public and private money through the charitable sector. But by 1932, the needs of the unemployed overwhelmed local voluntary and public resources in both cities, and the businessmen who headed the relief campaigns – steel magnate Edward Ryerson in Chicago and banker Henry Gates Lloyd in Philadelphia – appealed to the federal government for financial assistance. Cleveland and St. Louis, as well as smaller cities such as Ann Arbor, Michigan, and Topeka, Kansas, centered their efforts on the administrative machinery of the local charitable establishment. The usually inadequate relief doled out in these arrangements often made the charities targets of protests by organized groups of the unemployed.<sup>7</sup>

The experiences of Baltimore and Wilmington emphasize the institutional trauma that the Depression imposed on voluntary relief agencies. The early Depression, both in the Mid-Atlantic and across the country, taught a generation of voluntary leaders a clear lesson of the limits of voluntarism. In Delaware, anxiety at the Associated Charities increased slowly. Executive Director Ethelda Mullen noted a steady increase in early 1930 in their caseload and an “unprecedented” increase in relief. While local businessmen confidently described improving business conditions in the spring of 1930, Mullen bluntly informed her board that “contrary to the general thinking of the community, and perhaps the Board of Directors themselves, conditions are not showing much improvement and the burden of the community’s dependent citizens is falling most heavily on the Associated Charities.” Nor did things improve over the summer; the caseload in July 1930 was 43 percent larger than a year earlier, and relief expenditures had doubled. The agency’s money was going primarily for food, a mix of grocery orders to be redeemed at local stores and direct cash relief, but an increasing amount went for help with rents as landlords grew less patient with delinquents. Surrounding New Castle County had cut its outdoor

<sup>7</sup> “Inter-Agency Relationships,” Oct. 1931, Folder 2, Box 32; “Big City Conference on Unemployment,” Jan. 29–30, 1932, Folder 6, Box 7, both FSAA; “Municipal Departments of Welfare,” *Social Service Review* 6 (Sept. 1932): 511–12; Alma R. Vanek, “A History of the St. Louis Provident Association, 1930–1935” (Master’s thesis, Washington University, 1938); Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919–1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 218–27; David Katzman, “Ann Arbor: Depression City,” in Bernard Sternsher, ed., *Hitting Home: The Great Depression in Town and City* (Chicago IL: Quadrangle Books, 1970): 47–59; Bonnie Fox Schwartz, “Unemployment Relief in Philadelphia, 1930–1932: A Study of the Depression’s Impact on Voluntarism,” in Sternsher, *Hitting Home*, 60–84; Florence Waite, *A Warm Friend for the Spirit: a History of the Family Service Association of Cleveland and Its Forebears* (Cleveland, OH: Family Service Association of Cleveland, 1960), 232–82.

Cambridge University Press

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Andrew J. F. Morris

Excerpt

[More information](#)*New Alignments*

5

relief, and the city of Wilmington had no public agency to turn to. “The private society cannot carry the burden of unemployment alone,” Mullen told the board.<sup>8</sup>

Wilmington then shifted to the model of exhortation by civic leaders that characterized many cities in this period. Mayor F. K. Forrest convened an Emergency Unemployment Committee in December 1930, stacked with Du Ponts, and chaired by Pierre du Pont’s personal secretary. The committee set out to raise money for relief from private sources, as well as to solicit work projects for the unemployed. The Du Ponts donated time and provided employment, with Pierre hiring additional workers at his estate. The committee spent \$279,506 in the first three months of work, most of it on wages for work relief but some also for direct relief distributed through the Associated Charities, the Salvation Army, and other voluntary agencies.

As the committee terminated its work in the spring of 1931, it turned relief responsibility back to the Associated Charities, which in January had changed its name to the Family Society of Wilmington to deemphasize its connection with relief. However, the Family Society also created a separate Unemployment Relief Unit to deal with applicants seeking nothing more than material assistance. Despite a mass meeting in June, an appeal printed in the newspaper, and a mailing to 3,000 potential donors, the agency was almost broke by the end of July. Lammot du Pont, chair of the Family Society’s finance committee, had to write to 200 of the wealthiest citizens in the state to raise the \$35,000 that the agency estimated it needed for August and September. By October, the Family Society had helped about 1,900 applicants with \$70,853 in relief. Half were black, for in Wilmington, as in most cities, African Americans were often the first fired as companies shed jobs. Despite the fragile financing of the city’s chief source of relief, officials of the Emergency Unemployment Committee and Delaware’s governor, Clayton Buck, proclaimed that Delaware was successfully providing for its own.<sup>9</sup>

By fall it was obvious that the problems had not ebbed. A new mayor in Wilmington, Frank Sparks, created a new relief organization in early

<sup>8</sup> ACW Board of Directors, Nov. 5, 1929, Feb. 18, 1930, May 20, 1930, Sept. 23, 1930, Oct. 28, 1930; Carol Hoffecker, *Corporate Capital: Wilmington in the Twentieth Century* (Philadelphia PA: Temple University Press, 1983), 101.

<sup>9</sup> Family Society of Wilmington Board of Directors, Jan. 20, 1931; Ethelda Mullen, FSW Annual Report, Oct. 27, 1931; Mayor’s Unemployment and Relief Committee, *Work and Relief in Wilmington, Delaware in 1931–1932* (Wilmington, DE, 1932); Barry Plimmer, “Voluntarism in Crisis: An Exploration of the Effects of the Great Depression in Delaware, 1929–1938” (Ph.D. diss., University of Hull, 1996), 12–17; Hoffecker, *Corporate Capital*, 102–4.

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

September, the Employment and Relief Committee, which again focused on finding make-work jobs and raising money for the Family Society to distribute to unemployables – financed this time through a combination of solicitation to large donors and a wider appeal to workers to donate 1 percent of their paychecks. Pierre du Pont, having weathered a season of wringing money out of his friends, family, and his own pocket, despaired of the likelihood of raising enough money. He wrote to Governor Buck in September that Wilmington needed help. Individuals could take care of the “charitable work,” Du Pont wrote, but the state needed to appropriate money for work relief.<sup>10</sup>

The state was ultimately forced to float a \$1 million bond for road construction projects, and Wilmington issued a \$400,000 bond. Because the legislature steadfastly refused to appropriate money for any direct relief, the Mayor’s Committee raised the funds on its own, distributing it through the Family Society at a rate of \$5,000 per week at the end of 1931, as well as through the Salvation Army and the Travelers Aid Society. From November 1931 to June 1932, the combined total of voluntary, municipal, and state expenditures was \$1.9 million for both direct and work relief, \$1.4 million of which went to Wilmington and New Castle County, drawn almost evenly from private and public sources.<sup>11</sup>

Private solicitation continued throughout 1932, but the returns dwindled. The city finally had to be bailed out with \$75,000 appropriated by a reluctant state legislature. Even so, the relief did not go far enough. Mullen reported having to turn away several dozen families for lack of funds. She worried about low levels of relief – as did the newly formed Unemployment Council of unemployed men, which unsuccessfully presented demands for higher relief allotments to the Mayor’s Committee in August.<sup>12</sup>

A similar pattern of quasi voluntarism that leaned heavily on the private family agency occurred in Baltimore, although on a grander scale than in Wilmington. The Family Welfare Association of Baltimore reported an increase of 33 percent in applications in January and February 1930 and noted heavy relief expenditures, “but not alarmingly so.” The alarms went off that summer, when an “unseasonable” increase of relief pushed the association into deficit, with no promise of help from the tapped-out Community Fund, itself in debt. The three major casework agencies (the FWAB, the Jewish Social Service Bureau, and the Bureau of Catholic Charities)

<sup>10</sup> Plimmer, “Voluntarism in Crisis,” 18–19.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 20–6.

<sup>12</sup> FSW Board of Directors, Dec. 15, 1931, May 17, 1932, Oct. 25, 1932; Plimmer, “Voluntarism in Crisis,” 26–33.

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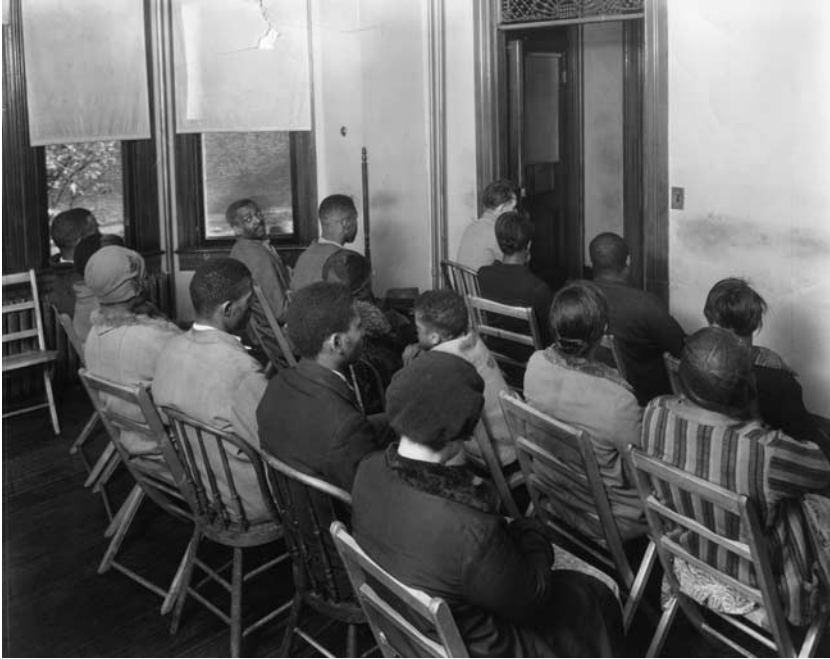
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FIGURE 2. The reality of relief: waiting room at Family Welfare Association of Baltimore, late 1920s; Ms. 360, The Family and Children's Society Papers, Special Collections, Sheridan Libraries, The Johns Hopkins University.

threatened to refuse further applications, which elicited an appropriation of \$10,000 from the Board of Estimates. The money was barely a drop in the bucket. In December, the FWAB found itself “in a rather helpless position because of its lack of funds. We are now giving inadequate relief to families whom we are now assisting, we are refusing assistance to all who can possibly get help from any other source, and we are not accepting even for investigation all the applications which come to us.” The situation deteriorated further in early 1931. Breadlines began to form, the Police Department discontinued its own relief program, and the FWAB reported that it was now handling 80 percent of the unemployment cases of the city. The private agency provided support for 1,859 families in January 1931, more than double the 865 of the year before.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> FWAB Board of Managers, Mar. 21, 1930, Oct. 31, 1930, Dec. 12, 1930, Jan. 7, 1931, Feb. 27, 1931, Folder 2, Box 27, FCSB; Argersinger, *Toward a New Deal in Baltimore*, 22–4; Dorothy Brown and Elizabeth McKeown, *The Poor Belong to Us: Catholic Charities and American Welfare* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 159–61.

Cambridge University Press

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Andrew J. F. Morris

Excerpt

[More information](#)

The creation of the Citizens' Emergency Relief Committee (CERC) in February 1931, a civic group charged with raising emergency funds, eased the situation only slightly. With the prospect of having to absorb the cases the police had dropped, the FWAB created a separate Unemployment Relief unit to handle cases that did not require casework and added 24 extra workers, but even with the infusion of \$8,000 a week from the CERC, they were still struggling to meet their payroll and were forced to borrow against their endowment in the spring. The \$300,000 the committee initially raised evaporated quickly, and the city was forced to appropriate more funds to continue relief. The FWAB threatened to shut down again in the fall, reporting a workload three to four times that of a year prior.<sup>14</sup>

The deterioration of the relief situation and the FWAB grew more intense in 1932. In January and February, the FWAB distributed \$362,000 and predicted expenditures of \$2 million for the year. With their funds diminishing, the FWAB cut back food budgets, which elicited protests from relief recipients, particularly those organized by Communists in "Negro districts." According to the agency, 41 percent of the black population was receiving relief from the FWAB – over half of the agency's caseload, an increase from roughly 20 percent in 1929, as unskilled black workers felt the "axe" of firings first. The agency reported some of its workers had had "unpleasant experiences" with irate clients in black neighborhoods and requested a police officer be stationed at its district offices.<sup>15</sup>

With the CERC out of money, Mayor Thomas Jackson, who had delayed aiding the private agencies, finally assured them short-term funding from the city. By the end of March, the city assumed full responsibility for supporting the FWAB's unemployment work. This arrangement – municipal financing with private agency administration – held until September 1933. The agency's caseload continued to mount. Intake workers reported that factories laying off workers sent them directly to the FWAB with instructions to

<sup>14</sup> FWAB Board of Managers, Feb. 27, 1931, Mar. 27, 1931, Oct. 20, 1931, Folder 2, Box 27, FCSB.

<sup>15</sup> FWAB Board of Managers, Jan. 22, 1932, Folder 3, Box 27; Elizabeth Hanna to T. Arnold Hill, Apr. 19, 1933, Folder 8, Box 31, FCSB; Grace Sperow, "History of the Baltimore Family and Children's Society" [n.d.], 62, Folder 26, Box 1, FCSB; Argersinger, *Toward a New Deal in Baltimore*, 25; Minutes, Milford Conference, Jan. 15, 1933, Folder 7, Box 1, NSWA. In Cleveland, the Council of the Unemployed presented a "serious, widespread problem" for the private agency responsible for the city's relief, with protests focused on inadequate relief allotments and payment of grocery orders, rather than cash, for work relief. New York and Chicago's private agencies also faced mass protest from organized groups of the unemployed; see Waite, *A Warm Friend for the Spirit*, 263–5.



Cambridge University Press

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Andrew J. F. Morris

Excerpt

[More information](#)*New Alignments*

9

cash in on the Community Fund contributions the plants had made in the past. Any publicity about relief brought new applications. The FWAB's total yearly caseload increased from 6,543 in 1930 to 12,837 in 1931 to 27,214 in 1932; relief expenditures rose from \$173,437 to \$614,355 to \$3.3 million. The city went into deficit spending on relief, backed by a pledge by Governor Albert Ritchie to float a state bond to reimburse the city. The governor and the legislature dawdled until early 1933, when Mayor Jackson, facing protests from taxpayers, proposed a city budget with no relief at all, prompting Ritchie to make good on his promise to back the city up.<sup>16</sup>

This pattern of running voluntary sources of welfare into the ground held in Baltimore, Chicago, Philadelphia, Wilmington, and a host of other cities. It was not a universal experience, however. In some places, private agencies split the relief load with either preexisting municipal or county public welfare organizations or newly created public emergency unemployment relief organizations. Boston and Detroit had relatively well-developed public welfare institutions that carried the overwhelming majority of direct relief cases, although the family agencies were also supplying monetary assistance.<sup>17</sup>

In many rural areas and small cities and towns, neither public nor private institutions were capable of even starting to handle the crisis of the Depression. The *Social Service Review*, published by the School of Social Service Administration at the University of Chicago, ran a series of articles in 1931 and 1932 documenting the breakdown or absence of relief in areas with little welfare presence, public or voluntary. "We cannot and should not expect these private organizations to handle alone a problem far beyond their capacity because of their limited resources," concluded Frank Bane of the Virginia Board of Public Welfare and the American Public Welfare Association.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> FWAB Board of Managers, Mar. 18, 1932, May 27, 1932, July 29, 1932, Folder 3, Box 27, FCSB; Sperow, "History of the Baltimore Family and Children's Society," 46–63; Anna Ward, "A Century of Family Social Work," Folder 1, Box 9, FCSB, 6–7; Argersinger, *Toward a New Deal in Baltimore*, 27–9.

<sup>17</sup> Rose Porter, "A Study of Nine Public Agencies," July 1932, in Pathfinding Committee Folder, Box 14, FSAA; Charles H. Trout, *Boston, the Great Depression, and the New Deal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 31–3, 85–7.

<sup>18</sup> Frank Bane, "A State Program of Public Welfare Work including County and Rural Work," *Social Service Review* 5 (Sept. 1931): 382–3; Wilma Walker, "Distress in a Southern Illinois County," *Social Service Review* 5 (Dec. 1931): 558–81; Grace Abbott, "Improvement in Rural Public Relief: The Lesson of the Coal Mining Communities," *Social Service Review* 6 (June 1932): 193–205.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88957-5 - *The Limits of Voluntarism: Charity and Welfare from the New Deal through the Great Society*

Andrew J. F. Morris

Excerpt

[More information](#)

#### CHARITY AND THE DOWNFALL OF THE ASSOCIATIVE STATE

This opinion ran contrary to the vision of President Herbert Hoover, who hoped first and foremost that voluntary resources could meet the challenge of the emergency created by the Depression. Hoover, as many scholars have shown, was not a voluntarist of the old order; he envisioned an active role for public authority in national life. His vision of an “associative state,” as



FIGURE 3. The Amherst Wilder Charity Building: This St. Paul landmark housed several of the city’s private social service agencies from 1913 through the 1970s, but the venerable building did little to dispel ideas that voluntary agencies remained sources for relief; Charles P. Gibson.