

Caring for Mom and Dad

Throughout the twentieth century, the United States implemented social policies targeting the needs of dependent parents – parents who were no longer able to work but lacked sufficient financial resources to support themselves. These parent dependency policies either encouraged or required family members, particularly adult children, to provide support as an alternative to government benefits. Debates over how best to support aging parents centered on conceptualizations of dependency and the moral obligations the family owed their parents. Measures of dependency often inhibited aging Americans' access to benefits they needed, focusing instead on ensuring that they were, in fact, dependent and that other family resources were not available. Susan Stein-Roggenbuck highlights this understudied aspect of the modern US welfare state, highlighting the limited support provided to aging parents and the hardship they and their adult children endured in the efforts to minimize public expenditures.

Susan Stein-Roggenbuck is an associate professor of writing and American social policy in James Madison College at Michigan State University. She is the author of *Negotiating Relief: The Development of Social Welfare Programs in Depression-Era Michigan, 1930–1940*.

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-009-20328-9 — Caring for Mom and Dad
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Parent Dependency and American Social Policy

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Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge CB2 8EA, United Kingdom
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314-321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,
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103 Penang Road, #05-06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of Cambridge University Press & Assessment,
a department of the University of Cambridge.

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education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781009203289

DOI: 10.1017/9781009203272

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First published 2024

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.

*A Cataloging-in-Publication data record for this book is available from the Library of
Congress.*

ISBN 978-1-009-20328-9 Hardback

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For Mom

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Acknowledgments

Parental care was more an abstraction when I started researching parent dependency policies. At that time, my parents were retired and living in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. Mom was a cancer survivor and she and Dad were healthy otherwise. They enjoyed cross-country skiing and snowmobiling, and spent their summers sailing the northern Great Lakes. As I worked on this project, Mom's cancer returned and we lost her in 2017. This project became less abstract as my own parents aged and we cared for Mom in her final illness, and then for Dad as he created a new life alone after 56 years of marriage. Conversations with friends and colleagues revealed so many stories of aging parents. They shared their experiences in caring for parents, from helping with errands, medical appointments, and household tasks to paying for medical care or mortgages. Many provided significant support for parents, and some balanced caring for aging parents with raising their own children. I began to see how many people were quietly helping parents navigate their later years. The stories I encountered in this research recounted challenges similar to my friends and colleagues – adult children seeking to help parents in a social policy system that only recognized elder care when it suited the needs of the administrative state.

Many people helped move this project from an idea to a book. No historian can work without the knowledge and assistance of librarians and archivists. From my first trip to the National Archives at College Park, Maryland, Tab Lewis helped me navigate the records of the Social Security Administration and other collections. Archivists at the California State Archives in Sacramento, the Archives of Michigan in Lansing, the National Archives in Washington, DC, and the Indiana

State Archives helped me find the sources that illuminated the story I was trying to tell. Many librarians were also critical, including state library staff in California, Indiana, Missouri, North Dakota, and South Dakota. Their generosity of spirit is most appreciated. The Interlibrary Loan department at the Michigan State University Library fielded countless requests from me. Kasey Wilson in the MSU Map Library created the maps for this project, as he has for earlier research projects. I thank him for his expertise and good humor.

James Madison College has been my professional home since 2003, and colleagues and students contributed to its completion. Research funding made travel to archives and libraries possible. Student research assistants Christie Teske Mayer and Lucas Hesskamp were diligent in their efforts to track down state public assistance laws – among other tasks – in the early stages of research. Colleagues Gene Burns, Mark Largent, and Jen Sykes read early drafts of what would become this manuscript. Kirstin Hasler Brathwaite is a valued friend and colleague who has shared many conversations about this project and our research. She and my friend Judy Hill were critical contacts for Dad when my family traveled. Jeff Judge was a model of how to care for an aging parent – his mom – with generosity, kindness, and love. I also thank Lanie Millar and Tom Grano, whose conversations, support, and advice over the past eight years were so important to this project’s completion. I thank all who shared their experiences with aging parents.

Reviewers from the *Journal of Policy History* and the *Social Service Review* helped develop my analysis in early versions of this work. I thank the *Journal of Policy History* for permission to use parts of my article in the book: “Resisting a Right to Relief: States, Responsible Relative Laws, and Old Age Assistance.” *Journal of Policy History*, 30 (3), 400–428. © Donald Critchlow and Cambridge University Press 2018; <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0898030618000155>. I thank the *Social Service Review* for permission to use parts of my article in the book: “‘This Responsible Relative Racket’: The Persistence of Family Support Obligations in California.” *Social Service Review*. 91.4 (December 2017): 652–690. *Social Service Review* (December 2017). © 2017 by the University of Chicago. All rights reserved. <https://doi-org.proxy1.cl.msu.edu/10.1086/695478>. Audiences, panelists, and discussants at numerous Social Science History conferences shared ideas and insights. I thank the anonymous reviewers of Cambridge University Press, whose constructive but encouraging comments were invaluable. They helped me improve the manuscript immeasurably. Editor Cecelia Cancellaro was interested in

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the project from our first email exchange and encouraged me throughout the process.

I would not be writing this without the unfailing support of family. My niece, Katerina Crowley, is my fellow writer in the family, and we share frustrations and successes. One of the hardest parts of the first year of COVID-19 was not seeing her. I thank her for all the video and phone conversations, texts, and emails. She enriches our lives beyond measure. Frank and Jacob deserve the most thanks. Frank is my best friend and partner, and there is no one else with whom I want to share this journey of life. Frank covered the home front when I traveled and encouraged me through the research and writing. His quiet confidence in the project's value and completion was so appreciated. He is an important partner in our care for Dad. Frank and Jacob are the center of my life and words cannot capture the gratitude and love I have for them. Without them, none of this would have any meaning.

I dedicate this book to my mom, Lois Stein, whose generosity of spirit was unmatched, and whose infectious laughter and smile brightened any space. We miss her terribly. I wish she was still here to care for.

Abbreviations

AB – Aid to the Blind
ADC – Aid to Dependent Children
AFDC – Aid to Families with Dependent Children
BPA – Bureau of Public Assistance
CCB – California Council for the Blind
CCOAP – Citizens Committee on Old Age Pensions
CTA – California Taxpayers’ Association
DPW – Department of Public Welfare
DSW – Department of Social Welfare
FERA – Federal Emergency Relief Administration
IRS – Internal Revenue Service
NFB – National Federation for the Blind
NWRO – National Welfare Rights Organization
OAA – Old Age Assistance
OAI – Old Age Insurance
OAS – Old Age Security
OASI – Old Age and Survivors Insurance
OASDI – Old Age, Survivors, and Disability Insurance
SSA – Social Security Administration
SSB – Social Security Board
SSI – Supplemental Security Income
WPA – Works Progress Administration