Jobs for Workers on Relief in Milwaukee County, 1930-1994

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I. Local Employment Initiatives at the Beginning of the Depression

After the Depression hit Milwaukee in 1929, the city and the county responded with programs to find increased employment for local residents as well as provisions of public financial assistance. Milwaukee County, which had responsibility for "outdoor relief" to indigent individuals and families, appropriated large sums not only for direct relief to needy families but also for paid work. Milwaukee Mayor Daniel W. Hoan described the magnitude of the community's relief effort in his book City Government: The Record of the Milwaukee Experiment. Hoan wrote, "Milwaukee was the first large community to provide made work for those on relief who volunteered for it, and to pay cash wages therefor. Our county, moreover, paid cash wages for relief work and to those wholly dependent on relief, furnished cash, food, fuel, light, gas, and rent."

The county Department of Outdoor Relief paid fifty cents an hour for unskilled labor and the union minimum wage rate for skilled labor, with the number of hours of work dependent upon the amount of relief the family was receiving from the county. Workers continued to receive county aid supplements if their pay did not meet their family budgetary needs. Municipalities paid for costs of supervision, materials and tools, and workmen's compensation. Mayor Hoan explained the county's rationale for the voluntary nature of the work relief program:

No client was required to work. The plan was voluntary in every respect. Since there were at no time jobs enough to go around, it would have been absurd to have made work compulsory. After a man went to work, should he at any time desire to quit, he was free to do so and could automatically return to the ranks of those receiving direct relief. There was, of course, an inducement to work, for these families were paid in cash. . . . A working agreement was made with the local grocers to provide some discount on the presentation of a card which would identify the customer as working on the program. Arrangements were also made with the gas and electric companies to grant the men certain privileges not permitted to their regular customers.

"Let it be said that Milwaukee County led every other community in the country not only in the promptness in which it assumed the job, not only in the efficiency and dispatch of its efforts, but in the adequacy and generosity of the relief measures themselves."

-- Daniel W. Hoan, Mayor of Milwaukee
"The Park Commission operated from 7 to 10 field kitchens, each of which was capable of feeding from 1,000 to 1,500 men. Men from the crews were assigned the job of cooking the daily ration of stew and coffee. The palatability of the meals varied with the ability of the cook."[4]

"Outsiders, attracted by the rumor that business was good in Milwaukee, flocked to the city, and even though they could not obtain jobs stayed here during the winter."[5]

--- Milwaukee Citizens’ Committee on Unemployment, 1930

Many of the work programs for persons receiving county outdoor relief payments were in the parks. The Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors appropriated $100,000 in April 1931, another $100,000 in June 1931, and $102,000 in 1932 to employ workers on parks projects. The work was designed to be labor-intensive with limited funds expended for materials and equipment. Employment was targeted to men with large families who were on county relief and long-term unemployed. One month of employment was provided at fifty cents an hour.[6] Projects included grading picnic and athletic areas, constructing trails and walks through wooded areas, constructing lagoons, preparing shrub beds, installing drainage systems, thinning underbrush, and cleaning and thinning in the parks. At Whitnall Park crews graded a mile-long roadway and prepared an 18-hole golf course. Of 7,000 applicants for park work, 5,000 persons were selected. Initially, workers were employed for four eight-hour days, but the number of persons applying for work made it necessary to move to two shifts each working three eight-hour days a week with noon meals provided. Men employed by the projects received part of their pay in cash and part in supplies from the county relief department. Groups of men were employed for thirty days at a wage of fifty cents per hour.[7]

The full impact of the Depression of 1929 hit Milwaukee later than many other cities, and local unemployment problems were compounded by the addition of unemployed workers migrating to the city in the early months of the depression. According to the City of Milwaukee Citizens’ Committee on Unemployment, "The superintendent of the public employment office reported in March [1930] that 51 per cent of unskilled and 15 per cent of skilled laborers applying for work were from outside the city. . . . it was found that about 20 per cent of those who registered during the summer were transients."[8]

In Fall of 1930 the Milwaukee Common Council appropriated $149,000 for public work and the Committee on Unemployment placed about 3,000 men on the city list for work, with preference going to men with the largest families. The committee established an office in city hall to register unemployed residents. As part of its community-wide effort to find temporary work for residents, the city prepared work order request forms which the dairy companies distributed to all city households urging them to identify odd jobs to employ local workers.
By the second year of the depression, the City of Milwaukee was taking aggressive actions to increase employment of city residents. In addition to a residency requirement for city employees, companies working on city contracts were required to hire local workers. The City Service Commission reported, "During the summer of 1931 it was discovered that more than one-fourth of the crews of certain contractors were non-residents. The immediate discharges of these men, and their replacement by Milwaukee citizens, was secured." The City of Milwaukee also initiated an unemployment relief program of labor intensive jobs during the winter months when work was in shortest supply. The work consisted of one ten day shift, and a possible second ten-day shift for men with large families. In all, the City of Milwaukee spent $600,000 in the winter of 1930-31 for work relief projects. This included about $483,000 for street sanitation, ash collection and other public workers, $50,000 for grading and other work on new playgrounds, $45,000 to extend the underground conduit system for fire and police alarm cables, $15,000 for Park Board projects, and $7,000 for painting of election booths and at the Public Museum. Men were selected based on the urgency of their needs and their family responsibilities.

In 1931 the city received about 15,000 applicants for work and hired 11,000 men for short-shift projects. In 1932 the commission received 28,470 applicants for work, and about 20,500 workers were employed sometime during the year. To avoid laying off city workers, Milwaukee initiated a 10 percent monthly pay cut for city employees with a corresponding 10 percent reduction in working time and used rotating schedules for other workers to reduce the number of complete layoffs. The seriousness of labor conditions was evident in the 1931-1932 annual report of the Milwaukee Public Employment Office, that "ordinarily, not less than 1,500 individual persons call daily." The report noted, "Not infrequently the office had a large number of applicants, all of whom were very much in need of employment and about equally well qualified for a given opening or position. In such cases, many applicants were keenly disappointed because they were not chosen for the job or position in question." By 1933 the City found it necessary to use the ten percent pay fund for general city operating costs and reduced additional city employees to rotating work schedules or part-time work. Some city departments used shortened work days, while others placed workers (particularly roadmen, laborers and civil engineers) on month-long furloughs without pay. Major relief came temporarily in the winter of 1933-34 when the federal government initiated a massive jobs program.

"The work furnished to these men is for the most part pick-and-shovel work, and is largely concerned with the development of new parks and playgrounds. While some of this work could be more economically done by machinery than by hand, the great majority of the men have taken their employment seriously and have striven to give real value for their wages."
Nationally, as the Depression wore on, it became evident that municipal and county governments could not handle the immense expenses of relief and unemployment in their communities, and that even with reductions in public services, a growing number of localities were facing bankruptcy. At the time the federal government aggressively entered the business of relief payments and job creation in 1933, over 14 million American workers, or 29 percent of the total labor force, were estimated to be unemployed. In March Congress authorized creation of the Civilian Conservation Corps and in May provided direct federal grants for unemployment relief through the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA). In June, Congress appropriated funds for a Public Works Administration (PWA) under the National Industrial Recovery Act and established a federal system of employment offices under the Wagner-Peyser Act. The massive jobs program anticipated under PWA was slow to get off the ground, however, and in November 1933 FERA administrator Harry Hopkins convinced the president to divert $400 million of PWA funds for a temporary Civil Works Administration (CWA) program during the winter of 1933-34.

In order to meet CWA’s economic aim to "to inject a vast quantity of purchasing power into the system in a short period of time," projects were expected to start immediately and be completed in a few months. The primary objective of the program was to "provide regular work on public works at regular wages to unemployed persons able and willing to work." Hopkins anticipated immediately employing 2 million persons from local relief rolls and another 2 million unemployed workers not on relief, who would be identified by the U.S. employment service offices.

The CWA established federal offices in each state to approve project applications. Most projects were planned by municipalities and counties, which were required to finance a portion of the costs. Under CWA the federal government provided 100 percent of wages and up to 25 percent of materials costs for CWA projects. In Wisconsin the federal CWA director appointed a county committee and a deputy director for each county, responsible for reviewing projects submitted to the Wisconsin CWA for approval, certifying and assigning workers for the projects, and maintaining records. Funds were distributed through the U.S. Veterans’ Administration with CWA workers paid as federal employees.
Rather than using the public relief model where work relief wages were paid based on each family's "budgetary deficiency," CWA paid the higher of prevailing or union wage rates. However, in order to provide sufficiently high wages for family survival while maintaining an incentive for workers to seek private employment, total hours of CWA work were limited to thirty per week (thirty-nine hours for clerical and professional employees). In Wisconsin CWA wage rates were established by the state Industrial Commission initially at 65 cents per hour for unskilled workers, 80 cents an hour for semi-skilled workers, and $1.20 an hour for skilled workers.

The City of Milwaukee implemented its CWA projects within three weeks of President Roosevelt's November 9, 1933 announcement of the program. By the end of November, city departments started work on projects which would total $6.2 million over the next four months. Since CWA officials would not approve major capital improvements that could be supported by future PWA projects, Milwaukee projects focused on landscaping, road grading, street repair and painting buildings. The Milwaukee Public Employment Office expanded to handle the work load of identifying able-bodied unemployed workers for city and county projects. It reported, "The CWA Work Program threw a tremendous load on the Office. Geared to a normal load of between four and five thousand applicants a month, we were suddenly confronted with the problem of registering all of Milwaukee County's unemployed." To process the large number of applicants, the employment office opened temporary registration centers in the basement of City Hall and in suburban communities. In one case, 4,000 men were put to work with less than 48 hours' notice. As described later by the Park Commission, "One of the largest projects, which involved the services of almost 2,000 men and many pieces of equipment was located at Lincoln Park. The Milwaukee River at this point originally made a complete S-turn which caused ice jams and floods every spring. As a result of the program, the river was relocated, a large lagoon developed, and four islands constructed. The largest of the islands was connected to the mainland by two stone faced reinforced concrete bridges, to become part of the Milwaukee River parkway drive extending from Lincoln Park to Kletzsch Park."

In Milwaukee 138 projects were supported at a total cost of $6,286,475 including $5,899,117 million in federal funds. At the Milwaukee Public Library, workers were employed to paint the rotunda lobby; the museum hired artists under CWA to paint murals for the exhibit halls.
CWA Workers Employed in Milw. County
January 19 - April 5, 1934

Governments Employing CWA Workers: Jan. 1934

Milwaukee County

Skill Levels of CWA Workers in Milwaukee County
April 1, 1934

Supervisors (3.0%)
Skilled Laborers (13.2%)
Semi-Skilled Laborers (6.6%)
Common Laborers (74.3%)
CWA Milwaukee County Park Projects: 1933-1934

- establishment of a county-owned quarry at Currie Park.
- completion of concrete swimming pools at Greenfield and McGovern parks.
- construction of the Lincoln Park lagoon and islands.
- installation of primary electric distribution systems for seven parks and golf courses.
- removal of overhead telephone wires and poles from 9 parks and installation of underground facilities.
- installation of sprinkler systems in the larger parks.
- installation of sewers for drainage in picnic areas and under baseball diamonds.

All CWA projects in Milwaukee County totaled $9,531,000. Parks projects included construction of a quarry at Currie Park, two swimming pools, and electrical and telephone wiring for parks and golf courses. The Milwaukee County CWA Commission reported a total of 26,187 workers employed on projects, including City projects, as of February 15, 1934. These included 25,731 men and 456 women. About 40 percent of the workers came from the county relief rolls, and 60 percent from the public employment office. African Americans made up 626 of the workers (2.4 percent), and ex-servicemen comprised 5,112 workers. An analysis of the 22,155 CWA workers as of April 1, 1934, showed 872 supervisors, 2931 skilled laborers, 1,439 semi-skilled laborers, and 16,913 common laborers.

The CWA officials in Wisconsin worked aggressively to fill the state’s quota of CWA workers, and three times they succeeded in getting the state’s quota increased. Possibly due to over-enrollment of workers in the state, federal funding for local CWA projects was terminated unexpectedly on March 30, 1934. City officials reported, "The City spent considerable money completing some of these hazardous projects and also provided barricades and lanterns on many others during the three month intermission between the closing of CWA and the starting of WERA. The CWA program closed abruptly one month before the contemplated closing date, which left many City projects incomplete and in a hazardous condition."
In 1924 the Milwaukee River flooded to the stage where residents had to use rowboats to reach their homes. Flooding control projects were started under CWA, continued under FERA, and finished under the CCC to reduce problems in the area.

Given the short duration of the CWA program, some approved projects were never started and many were not completed. Statewide, more than half of approved CWA projects were not completed under CWA; some were finished under the Wisconsin Emergency Relief Administration, while others were scrapped. The state Department of Public Welfare attributed the reasons these projects were not completed to overall limitations of the CWA program.

Although federal regulations required that CWA projects be socially and economically desirable, they also required that men be employed at once, that projects be commenced immediately, that work be carried on by day labor and not by contract which necessitated the creation by local governments of a competent supervisory personnel, that a maximum of human labor be used instead of machinery wherever practicable and consistent with sound economic and public advantage, and that only 25% of the cost of material for any project would be furnished the local governments.40

III. Federal Grant Programs for County Relief Workers: High of 16,500 Employed

While it phased out the Civil Works Administration programs, the federal government utilized the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) to provide grants to state governments for direct relief as well as for work programs for persons on the relief rolls. Nationally, FERA employed 1.1 million relief workers in April 1934, with many of the workers transferred from CWA projects. FERA employment peaked at 2.5 million in January 1935 and continued through December 1935.41

The FERA program offered a contrasting model from CWA, which was a top-to-bottom federal program funding work on local government projects for unemployed persons regardless of family need. Under FERA, grants were provided to state governments which then approved state and local work projects as well as payments for direct relief. In essence, FERA anticipated separating the unemployed population into "employables," who would be provided work programs, and "unemployables," who would be provided direct relief.
The FERA work regulations operated on several important principles: 1) work relief was targeted to persons on county relief rather than the total population of unemployed workers, 2) local social service divisions determined each family’s income needs and resources based on home visits and testimony regarding rent and other expenses, and 3) prevailing hourly wages were paid to FERA workers with hours employed limited to the number required to earn their family’s "budgetary deficiency."

In Milwaukee County eligible workers for WERA (Wisconsin Emergency Relief Administration) projects were identified by the Milwaukee County Department of Outdoor Relief (DOR). The department’s Annual Report described the social work orientation of the WERA program:

"This program was based on the theory that it was better for the client and the community if the head of the household were permitted to work and were paid in cash for his efforts. The desire of the clients to work was so great that it became a privilege to work on such a plan. Each family was on a budgetary basis and earned, with the exception of administrative jobs, as close to budget as was possible taking into consideration a maximum number of work hours in a month and a wage rate per hour commensurate with the type of work the man could do. The difference between the money earned and the DOR budget was supplemented by direct grants of aid such as milk, fuel, gas, electric, clothing, shoes, and when necessary, provisions."

Workers also received medical and dental care as well as car fare to and from work.

Unlike CWA, the WERA program allowed permanent improvement projects, although the local sponsoring governmental unit was required to furnish materials and equipment for the projects. The City of Milwaukee had WERA projects already planned and was prepared to initiate the program at the close of CWA in March 1934. However, state approval for projects was not forthcoming until June.
"The WERA program was better planned by the City than CWA and operated more efficiently in most ways. The WERA officials approved many projects for permanent improvements, such as buildings, sewers, wading pool, etc., but required that the City furnish materials and equipment for all projects."

--City Report, 1936

A total of $5.1 million was expended on City of Milwaukee WERA projects from June 1934 through August 1935 (when the WPA began), including $3.1 million federal funds, $1.2 million city funds, $691,000 county money, and $38,000 state money. The maximum force employed was 7,450 workers on 98 city projects during October 1934, with the largest expenditures for sewer, park and street construction and repair work.45

The challenge of providing relief jobs while not competing with private sector employment was seen locally in concerns expressed by the Milwaukee Citizens' Committee on Unemployment in 1935. The Committee reported, "Local employers, experiencing difficulty in locating and inducing former employees who were working on WERA to return to their old jobs, petitioned this committee for assistance. Arrangements were made with the relief department whereby all of its clients were required to register at the employment office. Several hundred placements in private employment of persons on the relief rolls resulted."46 However, in spite of the federal goal of placing all employable family "heads" in work assignments, as of January 1935, only about a fourth (9,561 cases) of the 40,176 county relief cases were employed under WERA. The program reached its highest employment rate in Milwaukee County in October 1934, when 16,500 clients were employed. Fund shortages subsequently reduced the numbers served so that from January to August 1935, a monthly average of 8,000 persons were employed.47 Expenditures for WERA in Milwaukee County, including the central city, totaled $8.1 million.48

Federal officials later assessed the FERA program and concluded, "Shortage of funds for materials, lack of skilled relief labor, insufficient supervisory personnel, and fear of possible competition with private industry, were the most important factors militating against the provision of work for all employable workers on the relief rolls. Direct relief was therefore an essential part of the FERA program and was continued under State programs after the cessation of FERA grants at the close of 1935."49 In spite of its shortcomings, officials reported, "The FERA had shown the value of the work method and those who drew up the Federal relief policy in 1935 accepted the proposition that work rather than direct relief should be the keystone of Federal policy with respect to needy employables.50