

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

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Contents

	<u>Page</u>
Executive Summary	iii
I. Local Employment Initiatives at the Beginning of the Depression	1
II. Temporary City and County Jobs for 26,000 Workers in the Winter of 1933-34	4
III. Federal Grant Programs for County Relief Workers: High of 16,500 Employed	8
IV. WPA Projects in Milwaukee	11
A. 12,000 WPA Jobs Sponsored by the City of Milwaukee in 1936	13
B. Construction of the Village of Greendale: A Joint WPA-RA Project	20
C. Sewing Center Employing 1,000 Women	22
D. Light Manufacturing for 1,350 Unskilled Workers	22
E. Examples of 1940 WPA Projects Operating in Milwaukee County	27
F. Accomplishments of WPA Projects in County Parks and the Museum	31
V. Construction Projects Under the PWA: Preference for Union Members on Relief	35
VI. Employment Programs Targeted at Young Workers	38
A. Six Civilian Conservation Corps Camps in Milwaukee County	38
B. National Youth Administration Sewing, Parks, Vocational Training Projects	41
VII. Wisconsin Work Programs for Unemployed Teachers	44
VIII. Milwaukee County Work and Relief Programs through the 1960s	47
IX. A Reluctance to Serve the Hard Core Unemployed in Federal Public Service Employment Programs in the 1970s	51
X. CETA Public Service Employment in Milwaukee County: 1974-1982	54
XI. County Work Experience and Training Program: 1969-1981	60
XII. Continued Evolution of County Work Relief Programs During the 1980s	65
XIII. Milwaukee County's Current Work Relief Program	67
Appendix A: Relationship Between Unemployment and County General Relief Caseloads	71
Appendix B: Theories Underlying Early Wisconsin Work Relief Programs	85
Endnotes	89

List of Graphs

CWA Workers Employed in Milwaukee County: January 19-April 5, 1934	6
Average Hours Worked Per Week by CWA Workers in Milwaukee County: 1934	6
Governments Employing CWA Workers: January 1934	6
Skill Levels of CWA Workers in Milwaukee County: April 1, 1934	6
General Relief and Unemployment: Milwaukee County 1949-1973	72
General Relief and Unemployment: Milwaukee County 1974-1994	72
Milwaukee County Cases on Relief or in Federal Employment Programs: 1930-1943	78
State of Wisconsin Relief Population: Average Caseloads by Program, 1933-1947	79
Characteristics of the City of Milwaukee Labor Force, Ages 25-54: 1930-1990	82
Characteristics of the City of Milwaukee Labor Force, Ages 55-64: 1930-1990	82
Full-Time Employment of Males Aged 16 and Over: 1970 and 1990	84

List of Tables

CWA Milwaukee County Park Projects: 1934-1934	7
WPA Construction Projects: City of Milwaukee, 1936	14
WPA Education, Health and Recreational Projects: Milwaukee, 1936	16
Modernization of City Records and Systems: Milwaukee, 1936	17
WPA Projects Building Infrastructure for Parklawn Federal Housing Project	19
Production Units of the Milwaukee Handicraft Project	25
May 20-26, 1940, Open House of "White Collar" WPA Projects	28
Examples of Construction Work Completed by the WPA in the City of Milwaukee: 1940	30
WPA Work in Milwaukee County Parks: 1935-1941	32
Partial Listing of Milwaukee County PWA Construction Projects	37
Examples of CCC Projects for Milwaukee County	40
Report on the Milwaukee NYA Training Program: 1940	43
County Work Projects for 1,939 General Assistance Recipients: December 1961	50
Targeted Populations as Percent of Public Employment Program Workers	52
Summary of Milwaukee County CETA Expenditures	54
Examples of CETA Title VI Public Service Projects: Milwaukee County	55
Characteristics of Participants in CETA Public Service Employment: Milwaukee County	59
Work Assistance Program Participants Compared to General Assistance Caseload: 1970-1979	63
Examples of Work Relief Jobs for Milwaukee County General Relief Clients: July 1994	69
Expenditures for Categorical Aid in Milwaukee County: 1930-1939	77
Expenditures for Work Relief and Public Assistance in Milwaukee County: 1930-1939	77

V. Construction Projects Under PWA: Preference for Union Members on Relief

In 1933 the federal government appropriated \$3.3 billion for public works projects for federal, state and local governments. These funds were intended to support capital improvements projects, handled by private contractors and employing non-relief workers. About a third of the funds were appropriated for federal projects and the remainder for state and local construction. State and local governments applied to the Public Works Administration (PWA) for funding for capital improvements projects. If approved, the federal agency paid 30 percent of the cost of labor and materials and the local government 70 percent. (In 1935 the federal share was raised to 45 percent of project costs.) The PWA loaned funds for local costs at 4 percent annual interest. Local sponsors let bids to private construction contractors who agreed to pay prevailing wage rates.

The PWA regulations required preference in hiring to union members on the relief rolls. In practice, the number of workers taken from local relief lists was relatively small. In a 1941 review of federal work and relief programs, government researchers observed, *"The relatively large expenditures which must be made for materials on the PWA type of projects has meant that, for the total spent by the agency, direct employment figures are not high."*¹⁰⁵ Federal staff emphasized that the high spending for materials and equipment generated additional private sector jobs.

The September 1935 administrative orders for the PWA exempted contractors from the requirement to hire 90 percent of their work force from the relief rolls. In assigning workers to projects, employment agencies were expected to give preference to workers from the municipality sponsoring the project and secondly to residents of the county where the project was located. In cases where the contractor requested union labor, the following procedure was required: *"First, those members of such unions who constitute regular employees of the contractor and who are on the local public relief rolls; Second, other members of such unions who are on relief; Third, upon the exhaustion of union members on such rolls, any other members of the union."*¹⁰⁶ In cases where the unions could not refer qualified workers, the contractor could chose other qualified workers referred by the employment agency.

*"[T]he large percentage of specialized and skilled workers needed for the PWA heavy construction work would make it impossible for many persons from relief rolls to qualify."*¹⁰⁷

"A contractor, when he contracts to take a [PWA] job ... knows all about his crews of men. He knows their capabilities and abilities and he bids on that. If he has to take people that are given to him from the relief rolls, he is going to be very loath to bid on a project."

-- Harry L. Hopkins¹⁰⁸

"P.W.A. is not
W.P.A."

The Wisconsin Construction Industries Advisory Council supported the PWA as a means to revitalize the construction industry, and emphasized differences in philosophy between the PWA and WPA programs in a 1938 promotional tract entitled, "*A Total Construction Program of 66 Millions is Possible Under the P.W.A. for the State of Wisconsin. Think of the Possibilities this Program Has for Sound Employment.*"

**Perspective on the PWA by Construction Trades
Wisconsin Construction Industries Advisory Council: 1938¹⁰⁹**

Do not confuse P.W.A. with W.P.A. W.P.A. is the work organization which employs relief clients at prevailing hourly wages for short intervals of time per month so that the relief workers can only secure a minimum subsistence wage. These workers must definitely be on relief before they can secure work under this program. They work on projects presumably requiring a minimum of materials and maximum of hand labor. . . . The projects themselves are performed by the day-labor method in which there is no definite requirement on anyone's part to get production for any required cost or completion within any definite time limit. The selection and approval of the projects themselves is a complicated process involving divided local and federal responsibility.

The P.W.A. program, on the other hand, uses the established organizations and the competitive contract method of the construction industry. It produces projects of lasting value to the community, and pays the prevailing wage at the site. The workers are on a full month work basis, are non-relief taxpayers, unemployment benefit and old age benefit insurance paying citizens. They work on projects of a more complicated type requiring definite skills, substantial amounts of materials, and a definite time performance at definite costs. Whereas under W.P.A. the relation of direct labor at the site to materials is as four-to-one, the relationship of direct labor at the site to indirect labor under P.W.A. is as one-to-three. . . . It is the contention of the construction industry that the P.W.A. program (a 100% construction program), by maintaining normal trade relations and trade volumes, prevents unemployment, and, thereby, offers a positive solution to the unemployment problem.

In spite of its massive appropriations, the PWA was slow to get projects off the ground. The largest PWA project in Wisconsin was construction of the City of Milwaukee Linwood water filtration plant, a \$4.6 million construction project employing about 1,700 men for a year. The PWA also helped finance sewerage system expansions, construction of elementary schools, and additions to high and vocational schools.

Partial Listing of Milwaukee County PWA Construction Projects¹¹⁰

City of Milwaukee Projects

- water filtration plant
- Gaenslen school for handicapped children
- Manitoba Street school
- Windlake Avenue school
- addition to Riverside High School
- water department storage tank and pumps at the Soldiers' Home
- concrete roof over Kilbourn Park reservoir

County Projects

- central laundry
- county incinerator
- additions to county institution buildings
- drain and sprinkling system for Pulaski Park
- pedestrian tunnel at Hubbard Park

Projects in Other Milwaukee County Municipalities

- West Allis schools
- road and bridge construction in West Allis
- street lighting system in West Milwaukee
- water mains and sewers in Fox Point
- River Hills sewerage system and bridge
- new village hall in River Hills
- Shorewood auditorium
- Fox Point water works and sewerage system
- Wauwatosa swimming pool
- addition to Wauwatosa High School
- addition to Cudahy High School
- addition to Cudahy Vocational School
- addition to Cumberland School in Whitefish Bay
- Cooper School in Greenfield

Sewerage District

- Jones island sewerage plant extension
- new connections and extensions

Milwaukee was also selected as a site for a PWA-Housing Division apartment development. Upon advice from city officials, the federal agency purchased a 42 acre tract of land on the outskirts of Milwaukee and committed \$2.6 million to construction of 518 "low-rent" apartments on the "Parklawn" site.¹¹¹ As noted, the city used WPA workers to prepare the infrastructure for the project, including sewers, water mains, streets, lighting, fire and police alarm systems, and a playground.

"[The PWA] Housing Division's construction costs will stand comparison with any but the cheapest frame buildings built by private enterprise at the same time and under similar conditions."¹¹²