

# **Shaping the Debate and Setting Standards: Foundation Philanthropy and Reforming Child Welfare, 1909-1940**

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The American approach to children and families in crises is decentralized, disorganized, and difficult to navigate. It involves complex interactions between federal agencies, state governments, which interpret federal mandates, administrative agencies, like state and county departments of Children and Family Services, the juvenile and criminal courts, and numerous nonprofit service providers. All of these actors influence the system in different ways, but from the viewpoint of the child, the system is most commonly represented by the individuals providing direct services to him or her from a contracted child welfare agency.

What is the history of these organizations? In a preliminary survey of the largest child welfare agencies across the U.S., over seventy percent were founded before 1920 as orphanages, and the vast majority of those originally had strong religious affiliations.<sup>1</sup> Now providing residential treatment, foster care placement and training, family preservation therapy, and other community based programs, they are the backbone of today's service network for dependent and neglected children. So how did our current child welfare system evolve from local networks of independent, religiously affiliated, nonprofit children's institutions that were created to meet the custodial needs of dependent children in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries?<sup>2</sup> And

how did they become the largest providers of comprehensive, government subsidized child welfare programs in the twenty-first century?

The collections at Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC) have been central to answering these questions. Initially drawn to the archives of the Russell Sage Foundation (RSF), a pioneer in the field of social science, I discovered that the Rockefeller Foundation (RF), the Commonwealth Fund (CF), and the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial (LSRM), were also influential in establishing social work as a legitimate field for research, education and social reform. More specifically, these foundations supported the development of child welfare as an important subsector of social work through direct funding of research, university based training programs, and national standard setting associations. By investing in the organizations that acted as strong advocates for the reform of orphanages, these philanthropic foundations helped to shape the debate about the role of children's institutional care, and the organizations they supported were instrumental to the transformation of orphanages into child welfare agencies in the second half of the twentieth century.

David Hammack and Helmut Anheier argue that foundations have gone through several historical periods. They refer to the early twentieth century as the "Classic Institution Building" period, and write that, "The best known foundations of this era ... succeeded by backing national cadres of institution builders and by funding and conferring legitimacy and prestige on new and reformed academic, professional, and research institutions."<sup>3</sup> In that vein, the RSF and the CF were fundamental to the creation of the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA), and the RF played the same role for the fledgling American Association of Schools of Social Work (AASSW). The LSRM, the RF, and the RSF supported the formation of professional training programs in social work at universities across the country, including three of the most influential:

the New York School of Philanthropy (now the Columbia University School of Social Work), the School of Applied Social Science at Western Reserve in Cleveland (now the Mandel School of Applied Social Science at Case Western Reserve University), and the George Warren Brown School of Social Work at Washington University in St. Louis.

The foundations' involvement in nurturing new institutions and professional associations was far from simple grant making. The RSF, for example, pursued a strategy of creating public/private partnerships that were marked by support of private initiatives conducted in cooperation with public entities to address major social and economic problems through social scientific research and debate.<sup>4</sup> The foundation's positive view of the association as a vehicle for change was an outgrowth of the charity organization movement, in which many of its board and staff members participated. The movement spawned groups like the National Conference of Charities and Corrections (NCCC), which served as a model of how to bring together public and private practitioners, researchers and advocates to reform state laws and private institutional approaches to the dependent, delinquent and criminal. The RSF's promotion of associations and private action for public reform through its grant-making made it "the nation's chief supporter and coordinator of research, program development, and management training in the fields covered by private charity," "a significant center for the analysis of measures concerning public health and the management of private welfare organizations," and many of its departments "set standards for a wide variety of charitable activities, supported the chief national organizations in their fields, and published the standard texts."<sup>5</sup>

The RSF, the CF, the RF and the LSRM did not simply impose their ideas on their grantees, but their grant recipients often engaged foundation program officers in decision making processes, and asked for advice about how to proceed in everything from designing social work

school curricula, to choosing committee members for advisory boards. Foundation staff were experts in their fields, and individuals like Hastings H. Hart of the RSF, and Sydnor Walker of the LSRM, and later the RF, had national reputations and decades of experience in their fields of activity.<sup>6</sup> As a result, grantees often used their program officers as consultants who were able to provide a broad perspective on internal problems, organizational vision, and plans for expansion or change. This kind of exchange created the opportunity for a small number of foundation staff members to influence the terms of the debate around child welfare in general, and the role of the children's institution in particular.

The support of the LSRM, the RF, and the RSF for the establishment of graduate social work programs, and the AASSW, precipitated debates between administrators, faculty, and foundation officers about the role of social work education. Was it primarily to train workers for private agency work or to educate those entering the burgeoning fields of hospital social work, or for publicly funded jobs in county welfare agencies? Correspondence and interview reports document conversations around what facilities, faculty and courses of study are necessary to provide a comprehensive social work education. Administrators of university programs submitted copies of course catalogs, proposed new concentrations of study, and asked for recommendations about how to best position their program in relation to other schools.<sup>7</sup> The foundations funded research to try to answer these questions by measuring demand for trained workers, anticipating areas of expansion in social work, and tracking trends, in particular sub-fields.<sup>8</sup> The AASSW was created as an accrediting organization, and the RF hoped this new association would facilitate conversation among the many programs they supported and also help to disseminate best practices in flagship programs across the country.<sup>9</sup>

In one interview report, Walker describes interactions between the faculty at the New York School of Social Work, and social work educators at Vanderbilt University, the University of North Carolina, Scarritt College and Peabody College. The report also describes Walker's view of the school of social work as "a community asset ... furnishing a group of consulting experts."<sup>10</sup> The accrediting association provided the mechanism to support standards in a given field of social science by providing access to a stable of qualified 'consulting experts' affiliated with multiple university programs. The AASSW went on to help standardize a curriculum for workers in children's institutions, thereby bringing specially trained experts into individual child welfare agencies. No association did more to effect change in children's institutions, however, than the CWLA, and the RSF was its incubator.

Hastings H. Hart was the director of the Child Helping Department of the RSF from 1909 to 1925. He brought to his work direct experience as an administrator for both public and private social welfare agencies, including as the superintendent of the Children's Home and Aid Society in Chicago (1898-1909), secretary of the state-chartered Department of Charities and Corrections in Minnesota (1883-1898), and president of the National Conference of Charities and Corrections in 1893.<sup>11</sup> Hart was an influential figure in the shaping of child welfare policy, and in 1909 President Theodore Roosevelt appointed him to be the Secretary of the White House Conference on the Care of Dependent Children. Once at the RSF, Hart directed research studies, and also conducted his own studies, trained assistants in the methodology of social research, and disseminated the results of RSF supported studies, through publications and lectures across the United States. He was involved in campaigns to standardize child welfare laws, document the services available to children in urban and rural areas across the United States, and to convene and organize other individuals who also cared deeply about children's needs.

Hart's institutional background led him to focus a great deal of attention on the work of orphanages, poor houses and reformatories in the lives of dependent, neglected, and delinquent children. His experience in the regulation and inspection of both public and private institutions for children, as the secretary of the Minnesota Department of Corrections and Charities, influenced him to strongly favor institutional reform from the congregate model to the cottage plan, and to advocate for an increase in the placement of dependent and neglected children in carefully selected foster homes.<sup>12</sup> Hart argued that, ideally, normal dependent children (those without serious physical or mental handicaps), would be placed in foster homes, and only in emergency situations would institutional care be necessary. Hart viewed children's institutions as having an important, albeit increasingly limited role in child welfare:

The writer does not share the views of those who believe that the institution for dependent children should be entirely eliminated. He believes that there is a legitimate field for a certain amount of temporary institutional work for some dependent children; but no intelligent student of dependent childhood can overlook the fact that the trend of public opinion and the tendency in practice is away from the plan of bringing up children in institutions and in favor of the largest possible use of the family home as the natural and divinely established institution for the homeless child.<sup>13</sup>

Hart's writing echoed the report of the first White House Conference on the Care of Dependent Children in 1909, which he helped to organize, along with John M. Glenn, the director of the RSF; James E. West, secretary of the National Child Rescue League; Homer Folks, of the New York Charities Aid Association; and other prominent figures in the field of child welfare.<sup>14</sup>

Hart's correspondence files in the RSF archives provide insight into the terrific energy and commitment he dedicated to serving as an expert resource for children's institutions across the country. Not only was he constantly engaged in the research and publication of studies for a general audience in the field, he also kept up a lively correspondence with individual practitioners. He often received letters from superintendents and boards of directors of institutions that were *not* grant recipients of the foundation, asking for advice on everything from

constructing new buildings to inaugurating home-finding programs. Instead of brief responses, Hart replied in painstaking detail to their inquiries. To Jacob Kepecs, the director of the Jewish Children's Society of Baltimore, Maryland, who asked for Hart's opinion on the plans for a new facility to be built on the cottage plan, Hart wrote a ten page letter including recommendations on the situation of the institution's kitchen, the number of stories the administration building should be, and the desirability of having the institution's superintendent and family live in a separate cottage apart from the main building. He explained the numbers and qualifications of staff that would be required to conduct an institution the size of the Jewish Children's Society on the cottage plan (from house parents to a dentist), and suggested that Kepecs visit successful institutions in order to "see the practical working out of the problems which you are to undertake."<sup>15</sup>

In response to a grant request for funds to assist with their conversion to a cottage-plan institution that would serve more than twice its current population, from Floyd Shook, president of the Cleveland Christian Home, Hart skillfully avoided an outright denial of funding. Instead, he argued that the expansion should not be necessary in the first place. Hart describes a series of institutional consolidations in Baltimore, Maryland; New York; New Jersey; and among the Catholic and Jewish institutions in Cleveland. He goes on to suggest that increasing foster home placement, alongside the advent of Mother's Pensions and the sobering effect of Prohibition on potentially delinquent fathers, will only intensify the trend of consolidation, causing an overall decrease in the numbers of children going into institutional care. In conclusion, Hart writes:

I would earnestly advise that you make a study of the situation in Cleveland, and also that you follow the plan, which has been adopted by a number of orphanages, of employing a competent case worker to make a study of the home conditions of your children. If your experience is like that of others, you will find that the home-conditions are such that at least one-fourth of the children can be returned to their parents without prejudice to their real interests.<sup>16</sup>

Far from the terse rejection letter one might expect, Hart's two-page single spaced response educates Shook about national trends in the field, and urges him to consult with local child welfare experts. A brief visit to the Children's Home of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, whose board had invited Hart to come and provide advice, produced a nine-page response from him, praising their "wisdom in making a careful preliminary study before undertaking even limited repairs and improvements ... A great many mistakes would have been avoided by children's institutions had this plan been more generally prevalent."<sup>17</sup> Hart's interactions with practitioners demonstrated their keen desire for expert help and advice. They were not alone. In the midst of reform movements touching child labor, and the establishment of juvenile court systems and dependent children, state legislators responsible for drafting new child welfare laws wanted expert help, too.

Alongside other reformers, Hart championed the creation of child welfare legislation that would mandate the modernization of children's institutions, and expand foster care placements by providing public subsidies for home finding agencies and foster care families.

Carl C. Carstens, another member of the NCCC and the superintendent of the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, delivered an influential speech at the 1915 meeting of the NCCC, that led to the foundation in that same year, of the Bureau for Exchange of Information Among Child Helping Agencies (BEI), initially under the auspices of the RSF's Child Helping Department.<sup>18</sup> The purpose of the BEI was to conduct a survey of child welfare legislation across state governments, and make recommendations for a standardized modern set of child welfare laws. In the process of conducting the survey, Carstens and other researchers came across state legislators who were eager for guidance about how best to accomplish reforms in the systems for dealing with dependent and delinquent children.<sup>19</sup>



After the initial survey report detailed inconsistencies between states in the classification of dependent children, disparate levels of mother's aid pensions, the failure of the adult court system to deal with children in a humane way, poor regulation of adoption and foster care, and other glaring problems, Carstens recommended the establishment of a permanent organization for the development and promotion of a national child welfare reform agenda. Carstens and his staff would provide expert consultative services to legislators and institutional leaders like Hart had done, but on a more organized and focused basis. In 1920 the BEI became an independent association – consequently the CWLA. It was to become the major power in setting accreditation and regulatory standards for both public and private child welfare agencies nationally.<sup>20</sup>

The bulk of material I examined from the RSF dealt with research and dissemination of the best practices in the field of child welfare, particularly in the subsector of children's institutions. Material from the LSRM dealt with the establishment and curriculum of the School of Applied Social Sciences at Western Reserve University in Cleveland, and the material from the RF that I examined centered on the establishment and development of the American Association of Schools of Social Work. All three collections highlighted different aspects of the institutional landscape that helped to promote social work as a profession by establishing the social worker's field of activity, legitimate training programs for social work professionals, and more particularly, defining the field of child welfare within the social work profession.

How is this relevant to my work? It helps to explain the environment in which children's institutions functioned during the period from 1910 through 1945, when the pressures to reform originated. What kind of staff were children's institutions supposed to be hiring? What methods of child care were they supposed to be aware of and/or currently using? What kinds of institutional politics informed the places where social workers trained and what they learned?

How did foundations, by supporting standard setting agencies like the AASSW and the CWLA shape the actions of child welfare institutions? What were their public perception and their practices? Who benefitted most from these kinds of interventions, and which of these involvements created the most impact? Was it through direct support of research, through encouraging collaboration in the field, or through building individual university programs? The information available doesn't lead to any concrete answers to these questions, but all of the archival documentation leads to an understanding of how a concerned group of actors with access to both intellectual and financial resources was able to influence the debates within the field of child welfare and to shape practices within institutions across the country and for decades to come.

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The ideas and opinions expressed in this report are those of the author and are not intended to represent the Rockefeller Archive Center.

## ENDNOTES:

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<sup>1</sup> This data is taken from a search of Guidestar.org and organizational websites, conducted in 2009, for child welfare agencies with five million dollars or more in revenues in 2005, in thirteen of the largest Metropolitan-Statistical Areas, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. I plan to expand this search to include child welfare agencies with greater than five million dollars in revenues as of 2010, in the twenty-five largest metropolitan areas in the United States.

<sup>2</sup> A ‘Children’s institution’ here refers to a facility that provides residential care for children and youth, from birth through eighteen years of age, in a group setting. Although these organizations are popularly known as ‘orphanages,’ I prefer the term ‘children’s home’ or ‘children’s institution,’ because the vast majority of children in these facilities by the twentieth century were not orphans. Most were children of single parent families who were unable to support them. Poverty and neglect were the main reasons that children entered institutional care.

<sup>3</sup> David C. Hammack and Helmut Anheier, editors. *American Foundations: Their Roles and Contributions*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2010, p. 16.

<sup>4</sup> Alice O’Connor. *Social Science for What? Philanthropy and the Social Question in a World Turned Rightside Up*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation. 2007, pp. 13-47.

<sup>5</sup> David C. Hammack and Stanton Wheeler. *Social Science in the Making: Essays on the Russell Sage Foundation, 1907-1972*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1994, pp. 46-47.

<sup>6</sup> During his career, Hastings H. Hart was the president of the National Conference of Charities and Corrections, a leader of the White House Conference on the Care of Dependent Children in 1909, authored dozens of papers, and delivered speeches across the country in his areas of expertise. Sydnor H. Walker, the assistant director of the Social Science Division of the Rockefeller Foundation, in addition to conducting research, presented at national conferences and wrote a book entitled, *Social Work and the Training of Social Workers*, in 1928 that gained national attention. A recent essay, “Considering Her Influence: Sydnor H. Walker and Rockefeller Support for Social Work, Social Scientists, and Universities in the South,” by Amy E. Wells, in *Women and Philanthropy in Education*, edited by Andrea Walton, details Walker’s importance as a representative of the Rockefeller Foundation to grantees, as a standard setter in the field of social work education, and as an advocate for the institutions and individuals with whom she worked.

<sup>7</sup> Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial Collection (LSRM), Series III-6, Boxes 59 and 62.

<sup>8</sup> Interview Report of Sydnor Walker on Conversation with Marion Hathaway, Walter Petit, and Arlien Johnson re: American Association of Schools of Social Work, June 24, 1940. Rockefeller Foundation Archives (RFA), Record Group (RG) 1.1, Series 200-S, Box 299, Folder 3570.

<sup>9</sup> RFA, RG 1.1, Series 200-S, Box 299.

<sup>10</sup> Interview Report of Sydnor Walker on Conversation with Walter Petit, November 24, 1925. LSRM, Series III-6, Box 59, Folder 643.

<sup>11</sup> Please see the following resources for professional information about Hart: Minnesota State Board of Corrections and Charities, *Biennial report of the State Board of Corrections and Charities to the Legislature of Minnesota* (The Board, 1899), p. 41. National Conference on Social Welfare, *Official proceedings of the annual meeting: index*, 2005, IX. <http://name.umdl.umich.edu/ACH8650.1874.003>, (1/8/2012).

<sup>12</sup> The cottage system tried to remake the children’s institution into a close substitute for a real home and family. In congregate care, dependent children were housed in groups of twenty-five to one-hundred, slept in open wards, had a regimented schedule, and often attended school within the institution. The cottage plan reorganized the institution around units of children in smaller groups of fifteen to twenty-five, housed in separate cottages, on a large campus or in units within a single large building, each of which had its own house parents. Children generally attended public schools, went on field trips out in the community, participated in chores, and in the best institutions, had access to a social worker.

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<sup>13</sup> Hastings H. Hart. *Preventive Treatment of Neglected Children*. New York: New York Charities Publication Committee, 1910, p. 69.

<sup>14</sup> U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare Social and Rehabilitative Service, Children's Bureau. "The Story of the White House Conferences on Children and Youth." Washington, DC: Maternal and Child Health Library, Georgetown University, 1967, pp. 2-6.

<sup>15</sup> Hastings H. Hart, letter to Jacob Kepecs, director of the Jewish Children's Society in Baltimore, Maryland, December 20, 1922, p 2. Russell Sage Foundation Collection, Early Office Files, Sub-series 155, Box 14, Folder 122a.

<sup>16</sup> Hastings H. Hart, letter to Mr. Floyd Shook, director of the Cleveland Christian Home in Cleveland, Ohio, March 16, 1923. Private collection of the Cleveland Christian Home.

<sup>17</sup> Hastings H. Hart, letter to the Board of Trustees of the Children's Home of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. June 15, 1918, p. 1, Russell Sage Foundation Collection, Early Office Files, Sub-series 155, Box 14, Folder 122a.

<sup>18</sup> Hammack and Wheeler, pp. 22-23.

<sup>19</sup> Hastings H. Hart correspondence, Russell Sage Foundation Collection, Early Office Files, Sub-series 155, Box 14, Folder 122.

<sup>20</sup> Jones, Marshall B. "Decline of the American Orphanage, 1941-1980." *Social Service Review* 67: 3 (September 1993), pp. 459-480.