
Franklin D. Roosevelt — “The Great Communicator”
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Before Welfare Workers of the State, Executive Chamber, Albany,
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Unemployment Relief Program

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I am glad of this opportunity to talk to you about the Emergency Unemployment Relief program which the State of New York adopted at the Extraordinary Session of the Legislature. Most of us in Albany came to the conclusion the past summer that we wanted to do two things: the first was to recognize the obligation of the State, as representative of the Sovereign, to see to it that nobody starved,—that nobody came to real want; and the second was to set up a system which would be sound,—to avoid the mistakes that have been made in some other nations—such as the British dole. There are certain things that we have to bear in mind.

In the original concept of the idea and in the actual carrying out of the work, so far as I was concerned, through the appointment of the Administration—politics did not enter in. I think the membership of the Unemployment Relief Commission,—Mr. Straus, Mr. Wickser and Mr. Sullivan, is sufficient proof, that the Administration itself has been kept out of politics. It is important that everybody associated with the Commission must carry the work along on that general broad principle. We do not want it said even in any village or township, that an individual or family needing relief could not get it because they were Republicans in a Democratic community or Democrats in a Republican community—could not get it because, in polite language, they did not happen to be *persona grata*. That is a cardinal principle in relief work, no matter which political party happens to be in power at the moment. I also wish you would bear in mind that this twenty million dollar fund is not a mere matching of what is raised locally in communities, no more than it is a hand-out or a dole. The purpose of the fund is rather to supplement in those communities which are unable to bear the entire burden. Ought it not to mean that a community which does not need money will not go to the State fund? You and I know, especially those of you from the country districts up-state—like myself, that there are probably hundreds of townships and villages in this State which will be wholly able to take care of themselves this winter. I am referring particularly to the home relief feature of the work. I know personally, of many townships where the total number of individuals or families needing home relief this winter will not exceed half a dozen or a dozen, and where those individuals and families have been taken care of in the past, are being taken care of now, and in the future will be taken care of out of local funds, either town moneys or local contributions

For a community of that kind to come to the State unemployment relief administration and say "Please give us money" is an act of the grossest selfishness. It is getting something they don't need; and contrary to the spirit of the whole plan, it takes away from the Administration many dollars which are not needed in those communities. It means just that much less relief for many places in the State that do need these dollars.

You cannot base the need of relief on any basis of population. You and I know that conditions vary in every community, whether it be a city, a county, or village or a town.

I am perfectly certain that the spirit in which you people enter into this thing is going to do more than all the regulations, more than all the laws and rules that are laid down by the Administration and by their agents, more than all of the systems of inspection that can possibly be created.

In other words, I as the head of the State Government, and the Temporary Relief Administration—are relying on the individual good faith, so to speak, of you people who are representing communities and organizations all through the State. You can wreck this whole plan, but you are not going to. You can transform this into a mere system of communities coming with their hands stretched out. But you are not going to. We expect very great things of you. I know a very great number of you personally. I know of the splendid work of relief for social welfare that has been done through the communities of this State. We have probably made greater progress in social welfare problems in this State in the last ten or a dozen years than in the past century; and we have built up a splendid body of trained men and women who are familiar with the work and who are familiar with the needs, and who will give to this emergency this winter, the same honest service they have given in the past. We have to be unselfish, just a little bit more unselfish than ever before. We must realize that the State of New York is not an unfathomable well of money. We are going to be forced to raise taxation, because the existing tax receipts are falling far below the needs of government. Of the three hundred million dollars that the State now spends annually, thirty-five per cent. goes to the cost of education; and neither you nor I would dare, or wish to cut the education of our children of this State. Another hundred million goes for useful public work. This cannot be cut very much this winter, because we need that money to give employment to the unemployed. And so the margin on which the State can cut its expenditures is extremely small. That is why I am perfectly certain that you will realize that the Temporary Emergency Relief Administration must operate economically, insofar as possible; and I am very certain that they will not come back to me or the Legislature in January or February for money, unless there is a very definite human need for it.

I think, Mr. Straus, that I have expressed fairly well all of the points that I wanted to make to this perfectly splendid gathering. You have started in a magnificent way. You have a task that is twofold in its concept. The first is the actual relief of individual and family distress and need, and even starvation this winter. The second is a long-range objective—to have our type of government, our representative form of government, our sovereignty as a State, meet the challenge of a situation that is unlike any situation that we Americans have had to face in the past. We must answer that challenge. If we do not see this crisis, because it is a crisis,—if we do not make good in solving this temporary problem, then we must admit that there is something wrong with our government. You and I are leathe to do that.

That is why you have a very great responsibility to the people of the State of New York. I wish I could stay with you throughout this whole conference but I am engaged in trying to make the budget balance, as nearly as possible. I would like to be with you to learn more about this. It is a subject which I have been studying for a great many years. The more I learn about it the more there is to learn.

I will say good-bye for a little while. If there is any question, any matter on which I can give you assistance, let me help if I possibly can.