

Lifting the Poor Out of Poverty: A Background Paper

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This paper was prepared for the NASW Commission on Social Policy by Alan D. Wade, Ph.D., who is Associate Professor, School of Social Service Administration, University of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois. The paper provides background for a policy statement on income maintenance, which, in revised form, will be presented to the Delegate Assembly of the National Association of Social Workers in April 1967. It is hoped that it will provide a common base for discussion that can lead to agreement on a national program directed toward the elimination of poverty.

The United States is the first nation in history with the economic capability of eliminating absolute poverty, as presently defined in economic terms, through the redistribution of a portion of the national income to the poor.¹ That this can be done is a matter of general agreement. Whether it will be done is more closely tied to political willingness to take the necessary steps than to the country's economic capacity to provide an adequate income for all Americans. The idea of a guaranteed annual income is not new. However, discussion concerning its feasibility and methods for implementation has moved in recent months from the academic into the public arena.

While movement toward substantial new domestic programs has been postponed by national preoccupation with the Vietnam War, it is important that continued serious attention be given to the issues posed and the potential for elimination of poverty offered by the guarantee of a minimum income for all Americans.

The National Association of Social Workers historically has had responsibility for leadership in the development and support of measures for achieving such an income floor through expansion of employment opportunities, improvement in wage-related security benefits for those who have served in the labor force, and assurance of more adequate and universally available cash payments for those unable to take advantage of rising technology and productivity. This responsibility was reaffirmed and updated by the 1964 Delegate Assembly's adoption of a revised policy statement on income maintenance.²

The purpose of this paper is to provide a common base for discussion leading to agreement by the 1967 Delegate Assembly on the charting of the association's course in national political action toward the elimination of poverty. Recommendations for such a course of action that have been approved by the NASW Board of Directors include the following combination of approaches, some to be considered as alternative choices, others as interlocking necessities: (1) expansion of work opportunities in the general economy and in the public services, (2) improvement and expansion of the social insurances, (3) development of a dignified and

efficient means for restoring income deficits for those outside the labor market, either through the negative income tax, a family or children's allowance system, or other related programs, (4) reform and reorganization of the public assistance system as the ultimate guarantor against economic poverty. These recommendations will be discussed in series, following attention to the historical context of poverty, the nature of modern poverty, and the limitations of current programs of income maintenance.

POVERTY IN HISTORY

For centuries poverty was taken for granted as an accepted concomitant of the human condition. At certain periods in history, however, poverty has emerged as a topic for public concern and anxiety and has caused men to raise questions about the inevitability of the classic dictum: "The poor ye have always with you."

At the beginning of the industrial era, poverty became a topic of special concern in part because the possibility of eliminating it seemed within grasp. The dramatic contrast of the "two nations"—the dichotomy between fantastic expansion of wealth on the one hand and the stubborn persistence of grinding poverty on the other—led men to conceive of poverty as remediable.

The history of social welfare is closely identified with a series of campaigns in the long war against poverty. In the past, efforts to deal with poverty were frequently motivated not by any special concern on the part of the dominant classes to help the poor, but rather by the effort to ward off the dynamics of economic change and social disruption in the early phases of the industrialization of society.

Efforts to deal with poverty during the nineteenth century were, as in more recent times, intimately linked with prevailing ideas about the human condition. It was believed that poverty was the result not of economic forces that could be controlled, but rather of personal inadequacies and the refusal of men to follow the guidance of an Almighty whose unseen hand would move them toward the

¹For a discussion of the history of efforts to define poverty in economic terms, see Sidney Zimbalist, "Drawing the Poverty Line," *Social Work*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (July 1964), pp. 19-26. The process by which the Social Security Administration's present poverty line was determined is described in Mollie Orshansky's article, "Counting the Poor: Another Look at the Poverty Profile," *Social Security Bulletin*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (January 1965), pp. 5-29.

²This appears in *Goals of Public Social Policy* (rev. ed.; New York: National Association of Social Workers, 1966), pp. 53-54.