

DEFINING MOMENTS THE WPA— PUTTING AMERICA TO WORK



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President Roosevelt Discontinues the WPA

As the economy gained strength in the early 1940s, the federal government dramatically reduced operations of the Work Projects Administration (originally called the Works Progress Administration). By 1942 the national unemployment rate had fallen below 5 percent and the work relief program was deemed no longer necessary. On December 4, 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt wrote the following letter to the Federal Works administrator announcing his plan to discontinue the agency, which he praised as a resounding success.

In my annual Message to the Congress seven years ago I outlined the principles of a Federal work relief program. The Work Projects Administration was established in May, 1935, and it has followed these basic principles through the years. This Government accepted the responsibility of providing useful employment for those who were able and willing to work but who could find no opportunities in private industry.

Seven years ago I was convinced that providing useful work is superior to any and every kind of dole. Experience has amply justified this policy.

By building airports, schools, highways, and parks; by making huge quantities of clothing for the unfortunate; by serving millions of lunches to school children; by almost immeasurable kinds and quantities of service the Work Projects Administration has reached a creative hand into every county in this Nation. It has added to the national wealth, has repaired the wastage of depression, and has strengthened the country to bear the burden of war. By employing eight millions of Americans, with thirty millions of dependents, it has brought to these people renewed hope and courage. It has maintained and increased their working skills; and it has enabled them once more to take their rightful places in public or in private employment.

Every employable American should be employed at prevailing wages in war industries, on farms, or in other private or public employment. The Work Projects Administration rolls have greatly decreased, through the tremendous increase in private employment, assisted by the training and reemployment efforts of its own organization, to a point where a national work relief program is no longer necessary. Certain groups of workers still remain on the rolls who may have to be given assistance by the States and localities; others will be able to find work on farms or in industry at prevailing rates of pay as private employment continues to increase. Some of the present certified war projects

may have to be taken over by other units of the Federal Works Agency or by other departments of the Federal Government. State or local projects should be closed out by completing useful units of such projects or by arranging for the sponsors to carry on the work.

With these considerations in mind, I agree that you should direct the prompt liquidation of the affairs of the Work Projects Administration, thereby conserving a large amount of the funds appropriated to this organization. This will necessitate closing out all project operations in many States by February 1, 1943, and in other States as soon thereafter as feasible. By taking this action there will be no need to provide project funds for the Work Projects Administration in the budget for the next fiscal year.

I am proud of the Work Projects Administration organization. It has displayed courage and determination in the face of uninformed criticism. The knowledge and experience of this organization will be of great assistance in the consideration of a well-rounded public works program for the postwar period.

With the satisfaction of a good job well done and with a high sense of integrity, the Work Projects Administration has asked for and earned an honorable discharge.

Source

Roosevelt, Franklin D. "Letter to Federal Works Administrator, December 4, 1942." *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt, 1942 volume: Humanity on the Defensive*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1950, p. 505-6.