Chapter Six

New Leadership and Welfare Work

Black Ohioans in the 1920s persisted in the effort to assist African American newcomers, who were exposed to poverty, substandard housing conditions, and other kinds of social problems that were characteristic of life in the neighborhoods of older urban districts, before as well as after African Americans settled in them. The agenda for this effort was set before 1920 and its concerns remained much the same; however, the struggle on the social welfare front was different in character and magnitude in the twenties than in the teens. Organizations providing coordinated leadership were central to the social work movement in Ohio throughout the twenties. This was lacking in the teens until almost the end of the decade when it appeared only in Cleveland, Cincinnati, and Columbus in the form of National Urban League–like local welfare associations. Each association established its organizational structure, identified problems, and formed programs addressing them while little time for implementation remained at decade’s end. This new coordinated leadership became the norm in many Ohio cities during the twenties with the founding of more local affiliates of the National Urban League. Social work was conducted on an unprecedented scale in the twenties as local welfare associations enlarged their bureaucracies and forged links with newly founded social service institutions. These welfare associations and their many affiliated institutions operated with greater funding and provided broader services than ever before.

In the teens and twenties different emphases were given to specific social services provided by National Urban League affiliates and their cohorts. When the wartime migration was in progress, high priorities were given to vocational training and assisting searches for jobs and
inexpensive shelter. While these were continued after 1920, new emphasis was given to social programs in the twenties that had been much less prominent in Ohio earlier. Those intended to improve public health were an example. Other programs given new attention in the twenties were those that provided arenas suitable for socially sanctioned activities. These efforts brought a previously unseen proliferation of black neighborhood centers that possessed facilities for recreation, meetings, and other community activities. Prior to 1920 such all-black facilities were rare. In some Ohio cities they could be found in buildings of black branches of the Young Men’s Christian Association or the Young Women’s Christian Association, whose facilities were open to members only. In the twenties, new black neighborhood centers were opened and maintained in African American churches, in all-black schools, and in buildings with links to Urban League affiliates. Rare before 1920, black institutional churches providing various kinds of secular community services multiplied in the twenties.

The nature of the struggle to overcome urban problems in black neighborhoods was more uniform across Ohio in the 1920s than in any previous decade. This altered the regional pattern of black-white relations in Ohio that first appeared early in the nineteenth century. In accord with the pattern's regional variations, black social service institutions were more often found in southern and central Ohio than in northern Ohio prior to 1920. In the period 1915–1920, for instance, many such black establishments existed in Cincinnati, while there were only two in Cleveland. At the same time, in Cleveland both blacks and whites were served at some social service facilities, for example, at a YMCA branch, while in Cincinnati blacks were excluded from institutions of this kind serving whites. In the twenties, the trend in northern Ohio was toward separate facilities. For instance, a black YMCA branch, a black community house, and a black maternity home were opened in Cleveland then. These changes accompanied increasing urban black population, changing white attitudes, and new African American leadership in northern Ohio.

African American welfare organizations largely sought to ease the problems of migrants in Ohio. They were intended to assist other needy persons as well. The welfare organizations emphasized assistance in the areas of employment, housing, health, and crime prevention. They also wished to enlarge educational and recreational opportunities and generally improve race relations. These were goals of the National Urban League’s Ohio affiliates, whose numbers grew during the decade. Prior to 1920 Urban League units existed in Columbus, Cleveland, and Youngstown. In 1930 the Urban League records also noted affiliates in
Akron, Canton, Cincinnati, and Warren. Ohio's Urban League affiliates enhanced their administrative structures and extended their services during the decade. In 1921 the Columbus Urban League hired an executive secretary in the person of Nimrod B. Allen, who was a trained social worker and a former executive secretary of Columbus' black Spring Street YMCA. Also, the Columbus Urban League organized auxiliary agencies including the Friendly Service Bureau, Colored Big Brothers, and Colored Big Sisters. The Friendly Service Bureau, established in 1925, worked in cooperation with the police department to prevent juvenile delinquency among African American youth. Similarly, the Big Brothers and Big Sisters were initiated in 1926 for the purpose of providing adult guidance to “semi-delinquent” youngsters. Also, in the 1920’s, Cleveland's Urban League affiliate hired an industrial secretary in charge of industrial and employment activities. The Urban League of Canton opened a Community House in 1923. The house was a center for welfare work and recreational activities and a headquarters for social groups.

The Cincinnati Negro Civic Welfare Association’s structure and activities also expanded during the 1920s. Although no formal affiliation existed, Cincinnati’s black welfare association was implicitly related to the National Urban League, according to historian Andrea Tuttle Kornbluh. Its aims, form, and work largely reflected those of the league. By mid-decade, the Negro Civic Welfare Association had grown to include Executive Secretary James H. Robinson, a board of directors, ten committees, and many cooperating social agencies. Among the directors were blacks in various professions and businesses and locally prominent whites, most notably a member of former President William Howard Taft’s family, Charles P. Taft, II. The Welfare Association's Economics Committee was interested in developing thrift, home ownership, and industrial welfare. Its Civics Committee was charged with promoting good race relations, citizenship, and character. The association’s committees included Housing and Health, Relief and Institutional Care, Child Welfare, Recreation, and Education. In 1925, the Negro Civic Welfare Association described itself as “a clearing house and coordinating agency sponsoring the Negro social work of the city as a whole.” About thirty Cincinnati social agencies cooperated with the Negro Civic Welfare Association. Most were citywide agencies such as the American Red Cross, Associated Charities, Catholic Charities, and Better Housing League. A dozen of them possessed institutional facilities devoted to social work among African Americans.

Black welfare associations in Ohio cities cooperated with a range of local African American welfare institutions such as homes for the young
and aged poor, YMCA and YWCA facilities, shelters for working
women, and maternity homes. While most were founded earlier, some
black social work facilities opened in the 1920s. Among them were
Cleveland’s Mary B. Talbert maternity home and Cincinnati’s
Shoemaker Health and Welfare Center.9 Ohio’s African American wel-
fare institutions still operated on small budgets, but they were better
funded during the 1920s. Philanthropic support improved somewhat in
that prosperous time. In Cincinnati, the Negro Civic Welfare
Association reported that local black social work was supported not only
by important white philanthropists but by hundreds of black contributors
to the local Community Chest.10 After raising $500,000 in contributions
earlier in the decade, in 1928 Cleveland’s Phillis Wheatley Association
erected a new nine-story edifice to replace its small home for employed
young women.11 Prominent black Clevelander George A. Myers rated
the achievements of Cleveland’s Phillis Wheatley Association and
Negro Welfare Association in 1926. The Wheatley Association, he con-
cluded, was “doing excellent work, but [was] circumscribed by reason of
inadequate facilities,” while still in its old building.12 Myers held that the
good services done by the Negro Welfare Association were “practically
negligible” when compared to the need for its assistance.13 His assessment
would have applied equally well to the general spectrum of organizations
concerned with the welfare of African Americans in urban Ohio. Across
the state organizations confronted the various social problems affecting
black migrants. The fraction of aid seekers who came within their
purview undoubtedly benefited. But these organizations lacked the
financial resources, physical space, and staff necessary to assist many
other needy people.

In Ohio during the 1920s vocational training and employment serv-
ices were provided by Urban League affiliates and various institutions
devoted to African Americans. Urban League representatives further
developed contacts with industrial and commercial employers and urged
them to hire African Americans. The high percentage of job applicants
placed by the Cleveland Negro Welfare Association declined once the
wartime labor shortage eased in 1919. Its placement record remained rel-
atively good in the prosperous 1920s until the demand for labor dipped
in the manufacturing sector in 1927. Although most blacks were
employed in unskilled work, the Cleveland Negro Welfare Association
placed six black personnel workers and eight black foremen in Cleveland
area industrial establishments in 1920.14 This Cleveland Urban League
affiliate was especially helpful to migrants seeking employment. Almost
two-fifths of the job applicants placed by the Cleveland Negro Welfare
Association in 1923 had been in the city only two months.15 In 1924, the
Cleveland Urban League had about 9,300 job applicants and succeeded in placing 43 percent of them. Some employment gains were made during 1925–1928 when Urban League affiliates in Akron, Canton, and Columbus carried out “industrial campaigns” promoting the hiring of African Americans. A national director of the Urban League took a hand in Ohio as the job market for blacks soured. T. Arnold Hill, who directed the league’s Department of Industrial Relations, visited Akron in 1928. There he met officers of several rubber companies and asked them about the job security of black rubber company employees and opportunities for prospective black job applicants.16

Many kinds of African American institutions in Ohio conducted activities meant to promote employment in the 1920s. These included schools, churches, children’s homes, working women’s shelters, and maternity homes. In 1926, the privately endowed Colored Industrial School of Cincinnati had graduated 597 students in its 12-year existence. Vocational training was commonly stressed in public schools whose students were largely or all African Americans, for example, Cincinnati’s Stowe School and Columbus’ Champion Avenue School. In rare instances black churches pursued employment missions. Cincinnati’s St. Andrews Episcopal Church offered a free employment bureau and a day nursery for employed mothers. Sometimes job training and placement services were provided in institutions whose clients were black females. One of these was Cincinnati’s Home for Colored Girls, which admitted children ages 8 to 16. Employment assistance was given in shelters for unwed mothers, including the Evangeline Home in Cincinnati and the Talbert Home in Cleveland.17 In such institutions black females were trained in household work and placed in domestic jobs. These employment programs were influenced by the fact that most whites would hire black women only in service-oriented positions. For example, 86 percent of the employed black females in Cleveland were in service occupations in 1929. The most active employment agency for black females in Ohio was located in Cleveland at the Phillis Wheatley Association’s home for employed single black women. PWA leaders worked constantly in the 1920s to enhance their domestic training and employment services.18 Wages paid for domestic labor were very low; consequently, even late in the decade, the Phillis Wheatley Association could not entirely meet the demand for domestic workers.19

Ohio facilities like Cleveland’s Phillis Wheatley Home served multiple purposes, but providing shelter was still their primary function in the 1920s. The Wheatley Home in Cleveland, Columbus’ Home for Colored Girls, and Cincinnati’s Friendship Home for Colored Girls were among Ohio institutions that only accepted employed single women as
residents. Likewise, shelter in black YMCA and YWCA branches was only available to employed single persons in urban Ohio. These institutions offered inexpensive rooms in well-maintained and sanitary buildings when decent housing was in very short supply for African Americans, especially for black newcomers, in Ohio cities. Undoubtedly, these few Ys and women’s shelters housed only a fraction of single black working men and women needing rooms. Their capacities were small and their charges for bed and board further restricted occupancies. For example, while it charged only $1.50 a week per bed, Cincinnati’s Friendship Home could only accommodate 25 female transients at a time. Cincinnati’s West End YWCA Branch had enough beds for 125 residents. According to a cost analysis by women’s studies scholar Patricia A. Carter, employed black women with below average incomes could not afford the West End YWCA’s combined weekly charges for bed and meals, although the room rent alone was relatively inexpensive. In 1928, undoubtedly responding to similar circumstances in Cleveland, the Phillis Wheatley Association Board of Trustees gave women receiving below average wages a temporary room rate reduction.

In urban Ohio, welfare organizations were practically impotent when faced with the shortage of decent low-cost housing available to migrants and other poor African Americans during the 1920s. New construction of low-rent houses affordable to the poor was uneconomical in the private market because building costs were inflated. Using taxpayer dollars to construct public housing for the poor, white or black, was not a viable political option at the time. White philanthropists rarely backed plans to construct inexpensive dwellings for African Americans. The concerned public, consequently, focused on ills arising from the housing shortage, especially bad living conditions and poor health. Welfare organizations generally attempted to improve existing housing conditions and prevent the spread of disease in dilapidated and unsanitary dwellings.

In Cincinnati extraordinary overcrowding existed in the River Basin areas that housed the bulk of the city’s black population. Undoubtedly the housing conditions of blacks there were the worst in the state in the 1920s. Cincinnati authorities addressed this housing issue. Historians Robert B. Fairbanks and Henry Louis Taylor, Jr., however, show that Cincinnati’s white housing reformers and city planners formed policies that actually perpetuated the housing shortage and the residential segregation of African Americans in the West End. In 1924 and 1925 Cincinnati approved a zoning ordinance and a comprehensive city plan proposed by local city planners and backed by the Better Housing League. Much of the river basin was placed in a zone restricted for commerce and industry. Each outlying area was zoned for a specified type of
residential property. Subsequently, construction of manufacturing, mercantile, and railroad facilities continued in the river basin. This economic development required the demolition of hundreds of residences accommodating thousands of families. Meanwhile, new construction occurred in outlying areas zoned for residential use, but no new dwellings were built in river basin sections where the black population was increasing. White urban planners and housing reformers, nevertheless, asserted that their city plan would ease the housing crunch for blacks in the West End. They predicted that the river basin’s white tenants who could afford higher rentals would move to newly constructed buildings in the residential zones. Consequently, vacancies would occur in river basin’s existing dwellings.24

Actually there was an exodus of working class whites, but it was insufficient to end the Cincinnati basin’s housing shortage. Most African Americans remained confined to the West End, where dwellings were generally old and substandard. The Washington Terrace Apartments for African Americans were an exception. The white-owned and quasi-philanthropic Model Homes Company constructed them on the eve of the wartime migration. Washington Terrace continued to provide African Americans desirable and sanitary accommodations at low rentals through the decade. Hundreds of black applicants seeking rooms were on the Washington Terrace waiting list in the 1920s.25 In short, multiple factors restricted most blacks in Cincinnati to poor housing in the West End. Better housing was unaffordable. As Taylor and Fairbanks show, white housing reformers employed city planning, zoning ordinances, and building regulations to reinforce Cincinnati’s residential color line. Further, the actions of white property owners, realtors, and bankers imposed this residential segregation.26

Constructing new low rent buildings for African American occupancy seemed unfeasible in Cincinnati; consequently, improvement of conditions in old buildings in the West End was the focus of plans to remedy the black housing dilemma in Cincinnati. The Cincinnati Negro Civic Welfare Association formed a committee on housing and health issues in the 1920s. The association cooperated with the Cincinnati Department of Health, whose commissioner identified poor housing conditions as the primary source of disease among African Americans in the city. The Welfare Association also worked with whites in the Cincinnati Better Housing League to improve the living quarters of black tenants. The Better Housing League employed four African American “visiting housekeepers” whose assignments were to instruct black tenants in good housekeeping methods and to persuade white landlords to repair existing tenements. In 1924 these female “housekeep-
“ers” made thousands of “family visits” and carried out hundreds of buildings inspections and interviews with property owners. This limited reaction to the housing quality problem was overshadowed by broader efforts to assist African Americans whose health was threatened by exposure to unsanitary and dilapidated housing in Cincinnati.

During the 1920s a wide spectrum of Cincinnati’s public and private agencies acted to improve black health care. The Negro Civic Welfare Association usually coordinated these health related activities among African Americans. In 1924 and 1925 the Cincinnati Community Chest’s financial campaigns featured African American housing and health conditions. The National Negro Business League recognized Cincinnati’s Negro Health Week agenda as the best in the nation in 1924. The Cincinnati health department sponsored a healthy infants contest as a Negro Health Week event in 1924. Special lectures and institutes gave Cincinnati’s 17 black physicians rare opportunities for postgraduate training. In 1925, for example, Cincinnati’s health department, Public Health Federation, Anti-Tuberculosis League, and Graduate Nurses’ Association held a Tuberculosis Institute for black doctors.

In Cincinnati during the 1920s black women figured prominently both as care givers and receivers in health programs for African Americans. Cincinnati was the only location in Ohio where a Sheppard-Towner grant only was used to fund care for African American mothers and babies. Under the Sheppard-Towner Maternity and Infancy Act, Congress provided states with funds for local projects ultimately meant to lower the nation’s death rates at birth. Undoubtedly the Cincinnati health department was reacting to the fact that the black infant mortality rate in Cincinnati was three times that for white babies in 1922. Some of the federal funds were used to hire two African American nurses who joined three black nurses already regularly employed in the city health department. These nurses made thousands of home visits to give prenatal aid or provide health care to infants or preschoolers. Health clinics for new mothers were held at Douglass and Stowe Schools for African Americans. Also, a nurse regularly visited the African American Day Nursery at St. Andrews Episcopal Church. The racial disparity in the death rates of mothers and infants was still large in 1925 when the Cincinnati project ended, but the gaps were smaller. A 1926 study showed that the mortality rate for black infants in Cincinnati was a bit less than two times that for white babies.

Meantime in the 1920s maternity homes and shelters for unwed mothers existed in Ohio and other states. In Cincinnati and Cleveland, the Salvation Army operated small refuges for single mothers that
accepted African Americans. The Army’s Evangeline Home in Cincinnati was maintained solely for black women. Most mothers admitted there were 21 years or younger, many near puberty. They were given religious instruction and training in child-care, housework, and sewing. The Salvation Army assisted new mothers in searches for jobs and “boarding homes” for their infants. In 1925 the Evangeline Home had provided charity service to about 36 mothers and 24 babies annually since opening in 1917. Meanwhile, the home had almost as many private outpatients and annually delivered about five babies to married mothers. Nineteen black physicians had served on the Evangeline Home’s volunteer medical staff by 1925.  

When the decade began, separate institutions for blacks, like the Evangeline Home, were more common in Cincinnati than in Cleveland. In 1920 the Crittenton Home was one of the three maternity homes in Cleveland, all based on charitable and philanthropic support. It was linked with the national Florence Crittenton mission, which sponsored maternity facilities in several states. Admission of all regardless of religion or color was the stated policy of the Crittenton Home. In practice through 1930, however, no black woman was ever admitted to the Crittenton Home. The only Cleveland maternity home that actually received black women was the Salvation Army Rescue Home, whose patients were largely whites. The Rescue Home regularly admitted black women but usually not more than five at a time. In 1925 the Salvation Army stopped practicing racial integration at its Cleveland Rescue Home. Between 1917 and 1924 this institution’s Kinsman Road location changed from a white ethnic area to a largely black neighborhood. Salvation Army authorities then proposed that the Army’s Cleveland Branch establish another maternity shelter modeled after the Army’s Evangeline Home for black women in Cincinnati. The proposal was based on the fact the racial demographics on Kinsman Road had changed and on the assumption that it was unwise to accommodate black and white women together. The Cleveland Federation of Colored Women and the Cleveland Welfare Federation backed the proposed black maternity shelter. Consequently, in 1925 the Mary B. Talbert Home for unwed black mothers was opened in the old Rescue Home edifice after the white women were transferred to a shelter elsewhere in the city. Expectant mothers under care at the Talbert Home were given spiritual guidance and vocational training only suitable for jobs in domestic service. Its staff included black medical students interning in obstetrics. The Talbert Home also served private outpatients who were delivered by black physicians.  

In Cleveland during the 1920s there were sporadic bursts of interest and concern about housing and health issues in black neighborhoods, for
example, in 1928 when Cleveland’s municipal and civic leaders discussed these issues publicly. Early in April, E. J. Gregg, one of Cleveland’s black city councilmen, began to focus public attention upon substandard housing conditions in black districts. He discussed the subject in interviews that were published in the city’s daily newspapers. This was a theme that resonated with municipal officials in Cleveland’s public health administration. During the Progressive Era, Cleveland and many cities across the nation had established municipal health departments. Meantime, city councils in many states had formed health and sanitation committees that became forums for addressing citywide health issues. In this context, Louis Petrach, the white chairman of the Cleveland city council’s committee on health and sanitation, took a special interest in the matter that Councilman Gregg raised. Petrach noted that scores of dilapidated buildings, which had been repeatedly condemned by the city, had neither been improved nor demolished. Petrach advised the council to call for greater enforcement of fire and sanitation ordinances and employment of several more sanitation department inspectors.

In May 1928, a white civic group, the Cleveland Women’s Civic Association, adopted a resolution demanding that the city take action on these housing problems and related concerns. Selected association members toured the African American districts. Afterwards, Mrs. Eva L. Griffin, Women’s Civic Association president, stated: “I am shocked beyond words. I had no idea such conditions could exist in a supposedly enlightened city. The district is a breeding place for disease and crime.” At the minimum, the women’s association demanded that the city strictly enforce building and sanitation ordinances.

In June, Cleveland’s city council housing committee met to discuss housing and health concerns with representatives of several civic and welfare organizations, including the Cleveland Anti-tuberculosis League and the Negro Welfare Federation, the city’s National Urban League affiliate. The outcome of the meeting was a decision to make a thorough investigation of housing and health conditions in the Third Police Precinct, which was largely occupied by African Americans. The study was to be made by a select panel appointed by the city council’s housing and health committee. This interest and activity brought more thorough enforcement of city codes on housing and sanitation later in the summer. A large number of condemned buildings were demolished by the order of the city at this time. However, no attempt was made to provide housing for those who had lost their living quarters as a result of this demolition. The city found it necessary to station police to guard the debris of the demolished buildings to prevent the homeless from using it to construct shacks.
In Columbus, as well as in Cincinnati and Cleveland, the health issue was pushed to the fore by the intractable shortage of affordable housing for poor African Americans. As elsewhere, health education campaigns in the black community were the basic means to improve the group's substandard health. For example, the Columbus Urban League annually sponsored National Negro Health Week through the 1920s. Among its activities, the Columbus Urban League's Department of Health and Housing distributed health education literature, presented health lectures, and encouraged people to take physical examinations and immunization shots and to use dental clinics and other health facilities.

In Ohio during the 1920s, as earlier, African Americans recognized that vice and crime, like disease itself, were especially contagious in urban slums where impoverished people lived in overcrowded houses. African American civic leaders accused Ohio municipal authorities of turning a blind eye at vice activities in the most downtrodden black districts. Reportedly prostitutes walked the streets, narcotics were peddled, and speakeasies and gambling houses operated openly in Cincinnati's West End. Early in 1923 concerned African Americans living there formed ad hoc committees and held meetings dealing with the crime issue. At least six hundred people attended these meetings on crime and law enforcement. Committees representing the concerned black citizens called upon the Cincinnati mayor three times urging him, evidently to no avail, to crack down on vice conditions in the West End. In Cleveland the African American weekly Gazette periodically reported that gambling, prostitution, illicit-alcohol sales, and drug dealing were conducted “brazenly” in the city’s largely black Third Police Precinct and castigated police authorities for allowing vice activities to flourish there. Following Gazette Editor Harry C. Smith's lead, black critics of these vice operations in Cleveland occasionally campaigned for more effective law enforcement. For example, in December 1927 “businessmen, taxpayers and citizen residents of the Central Ave. district” petitioned Cleveland officials for greater police protection in the Third Police Precinct.

Meantime, Ohio's large municipalities did employ black police officers who were usually detailed as patrolmen in predominantly black police precincts. At least for a time, some Ohio police department's apparently believed that more black policemen were needed to patrol growing black neighborhoods in their cities. The number of black police officers in Cleveland more than tripled to 22 when Cleveland's black population growth boomed between 1910 and 1920. The Columbus Police Department regularly hired African Americans for two decades after 1903. The number of black police officers in Columbus rose from
12 in 1920 to 18 in 1923. Usually Columbus’ black officers patrolled beats in largely black districts located on the city’s East Side and in “Flytown.” No more African Americans joined the Columbus police force after 1923, and with attrition the number of its black officers declined to 13 at decade’s end. Cleveland employed 10 fewer black officers in 1930 than in 1920. Likewise, there were fewer black policemen in Cincinnati and Toledo in 1930 than ten years earlier.48

Welfare association programs in urban Ohio were aimed at reducing delinquency and crime problems affecting African Americans in the 1920s. Impoverished young people living in vice-ridden slum districts were especially vulnerable to the seductive aspects of illicit activities. In Cincinnati about 25 percent of the male juvenile delinquents were black in 1924, a proportion much larger than the black ratio in the city’s population. In response, Cincinnati’s Negro Civic Welfare Association worked in cooperation with the Hamilton County Juvenile Court and the Juvenile Protective Association. A black worker was employed to assist the Juvenile Court in adjudicating African American delinquency cases.49 Likewise, disproportionate numbers of African American juveniles and adults were arrested in Columbus. The Columbus Urban League used its Colored Big Brothers and Colored Big Sisters programs to curtail juvenile delinquency among African Americans. Under these programs troubled youngsters were given mentors who provided general adult guidance and help with specific problems. Also, the Columbus Urban League cooperated with the Columbus police department in 1925 when it opened the Friendly Service Bureau, a crime prevention agency headed by a black police officer.50

These anti-crime and anti–juvenile delinquency programs in Ohio cities were manifestations of a larger National Urban League plan to shape the behavior of black migrants in the urban North. Starting in the previous decade, the Urban League informed black migrants from the South about values and public conduct approved by the white middle class in the North. Racial uplift efforts in this period to promote middle class values in African American urban life are the subjects of current scholarly inquiry.51 The Urban League’s instruction in proper middle class behavior covered the spectrum of personal conduct in cities. For example, thriftiness in personal affairs and reliability and efficiency on the job were valued. Loud talk and raucous behavior on streetcars and in public places were disapproved. In this way, prosperous blacks in northern cities intended to aid the poor migrants’ adjustment to city life. But their motives also were self-serving. Blacks in the business and professional classes in northern cities sometimes thought that the disapproved behavior of poor black migrants intensified white prejudice against all African
Americans. In 1926, for example, black journalist Wendell P. Dabney noted that wealthy and educated African Americans were not admitted to Cincinnati’s public accommodations as in the past and suggested: “the conduct of low class Negroes has a lot to do with the rise of prejudice.”

Black weekly editor Harry C. Smith editorialized against loafers on Cleveland streets who yelled and cursed in the presence of women and children. Likewise, Columbus Urban League Executive Secretary Nimrod B. Allen suggested that “thoughtful citizens” in black Columbus were concerned about possible trouble because the prime African American business block on East Long Street had “become the rendezvous for ‘hangers-out’ both night and day” and that persons passing by were “forced at times to walk off the sidewalk.” Subsequently, the Columbus Urban League “worked ‘to control and improve the behavior and conduct of Negroes in the streets and other public places in the Negro community.’” Meanwhile, Cincinnati’s Negro Civic Welfare Association designated committees to promote citizenship, character building, and thrift. Similarly, Cleveland’s Urban League affiliate launched “thrift campaigns” in the 1920s.

African American welfare associations and black institutions worked to engage poor migrants in commonly approved social activities in the 1920s. They provided alternatives to socializing on street corners or in saloons, gambling houses, and the like. Multi-purpose African American community centers with social halls, meeting rooms, and recreational facilities existed in large Ohio cities. Most were founded in the previous decade, especially in response to the wartime black migration. These community center activities were expanded during the 1920s. Ohio Urban League affiliates reorganized or enlarged their social betterment programs. The league’s Community House in Canton, opened in 1923, was a center for recreational activities and a meeting place for social groups as well as a headquarters for welfare work. In 1927 the Columbus Urban League established the Northwest Community Center in the Sellsville area of greater Columbus. The Cleveland Negro Welfare Association social program was centered in its own Community House for a couple of years. The house’s services were like those in a standard YMCA facility. Evidently to avoid duplication, this Urban League affiliate transferred the community center’s activities to the building of a black YMCA that opened on Cleveland’s East Side in 1921. “Ys” were active and growing social centers in black urban neighborhoods across Ohio in the 1920s. For example, Cleveland’s relatively new black branch moved to a bigger building in 1923 and became known as the Cedar Avenue YMCA. In Cincinnati, the Ninth Street YMCA increasingly involved black youngsters in its social and recreational programs. Its
swimming pool and gymnasium with running track were available to men and boys, as were its bowling alleys and billiard tables. Separate club and meeting rooms were available to men and boys. The Ninth Street YMCA sponsored indoor basketball and volleyball contests and outdoor baseball games. The percentage of boys in the Ninth Street YMCA membership doubled between 1917 and 1925. Similarly, Cincinnati's West End YWCA Branch reported that its "Girl Reserves" program included 269 members in 11 clubs and that 5,868 attended recreational events in 1925. Springfield's Center Street YMCA and Akron's Perkins Street YMCA were important black social and recreational centers in Ohio cities with smaller African American populations. The "Y's" social programs were related to their underlying religious missions. Cincinnati's Ninth Street Branch, for example, reported: "The YMCA is an instrument of the church used to bring boys and young men under Christian influence."

The black church in Ohio was more likely in 1930 than in 1915 to directly conduct social service programs like those associated with "Ys." On the eve of the wartime migration, Ohio's black churches generally were not prepared or equipped to assist needy black newcomers. As in ages past, black churches in Ohio were most concerned with the spiritual welfare of their members. They were much less focused on the physical and secular needs existing outside the church's traditional sphere. There were very few black institutional churches of the sort that formed in some white Protestant denominations in the wake of the late nineteenth century Social Gospel Movement, which asserted the responsibility of Christians to improve social welfare. Prior to World War I, the Episcopal denomination established black settlement houses in Columbus and Dayton with the support of separate black and white Episcopal churches in those cities. Meanwhile, a couple of affluent black Baptist congregations in Cleveland and Springfield built new churches in the institutional style including rooms for recreational and social purposes as well as usual religious ones. Other black congregations joined this movement during and after World War I. In Cincinnati the St. Andrews Episcopal congregation adopted a community service mission ahead of other black churches. St. Andrew's new edifice included a parish hall and social center. In 1925 many other black congregations in Cincinnati conducted social betterment programs, supporting their own playgrounds, gymnasiums, and bathing facilities. At mid-decade, for instance, the Antioch Baptist congregation built a new church with social hall and library, gymnasium and shower, and dining room with a kitchen. Also, a number of black congregations in Cleveland, especially in Baptist churches, became more active in nontraditional community service during the 1920s.
Everywhere in Ohio, black institutional churches tended to have large and financially generous congregations. Evidently these black churches mainly offered recreational and social services to their own members. But a few regularly reached out to nonmembers in the black community who needed aid, especially migrants. Cleveland’s Antioch Baptist and Cincinnati’s St. Andrew’s Episcopal surely were the state’s most notable black churches providing community services to a broad clientele. Antioch Baptist Church was heading programs to assist orphans and to decrease juvenile delinquency in Cleveland when the wartime migration started. Antioch Baptist extended its community service activities in the 1920s, for example, by founding a Social Service Center and opening a recreational facility in a separate building. Meantime in Cincinnati, St. Andrew’s Episcopal Church housed community services including a job placement office, a day nursery, and a branch of the Cincinnati Settlement School of Music. St. Andrew’s also was involved in community service through its pastor’s leadership roles in several Cincinnati social welfare organizations. The Reverend Edmund H. Oxley was a director or trustee of Cincinnati’s Negro Civic Welfare Association, Juvenile Protective Association, and Evangeline Home for unwed mothers.

Social service activities in black churches grew during the 1920s; however, black ministers who were as active in social welfare work as The Reverend Edmund H. Oxley were still exceptional in Ohio at mid-decade. Church critics noted that funds available for community welfare programs were limited by rising church indebtedness accompanying the purchase or construction of church edifices at the time. In Cincinnati black journalist Wendell P. Dabney noted that black churches were losing their hold on the young and suggested that too many black ministers were out of touch with practical concerns in the black community. In 1926 Dabney advised Cincinnati’s black ministers and church members to unite “on a progressive, ameliorative program, or else in a few years there will be many empty churches and far greater financial stringency.” In order to succeed in the future, Dabney said, the black minister would have to make the church “a community center” and do practical things to aid the poor.

African American schools in Cincinnati also functioned as neighborhood social centers in the 1920s. Black principal Francis M. Russell made Douglass Elementary School a locus of black neighborhood activities in Cincinnati shortly before the advent of the black wartime migration. Douglass School, built in 1910, housed a public library branch, a parents’ club, and an auditorium where various community events were staged. Douglass School also conducted social activities in the 1920s,
some in its neighborhood clubroom and others in a separate community house on the school grounds. Cincinnati’s Harriet Beecher School, dedicated in 1923, sponsored a similar community activities program. Meanwhile, “St. Ann’s School and Social Center for Colored” welcomed African Americans of any faith, but mainly served the black congregation of St. Ann’s Catholic parish church in Cincinnati.⁷⁷

Some black community centers in Ohio exhibited characteristics atypical of black social centers in the state during the 1920s. Toledo’s Frederick Douglass Recreational Center, founded in 1919, initially was modeled after the YMCA and served young men, but had no Y affiliation. The Douglass Recreational Center also welcomed young women, starting in 1921, and later gained financial backing from the Toledo Community Chest.⁷⁸ Cincinnati’s Washington Terrace Community Center was unique in Ohio. This community center was a facility of the Model Homes Company that owned the Washington Terrace Apartments. The center reflected the philosophy and idealistic aims of this quasi-philanthropic private company. It wanted to maintain low rent and sanitary apartments for African Americans within the context of an ideal ethnic community. The Washington Terrace Community Center’s rooms in the apartment complex were especially arranged for social and recreational activities. For example, in 1925 these rooms were meeting places for five women’s clubs, a youth band, and the Washington Terrace Welfare Association.⁷⁹

In conclusion, it can be argued that the movement in the 1920s to address social welfare issues in Ohio’s black urban neighborhoods was relatively successful because its achievements were notably greater in this decade than in any earlier one. This was the first full decade of new leadership by local organizations that coordinated black social work conducted in Ohio cities. This leadership style evolved and spread to additional cities, and new black social service facilities were established. Black social work funding and programs were enlarged or broadened. In 1930, unlike ten years earlier, separate programs aiding black migrants and promoting black community betterment were a significant presence in urban centers of every Ohio region. Individual lives were improved through the social work of Ohio’s Urban League affiliates, black YMCA and YWCA branches, churches, and schools. Other persons benefited from the various services of new community centers and new public health facilities in black neighborhoods and from homes for black single working women, dependents, and unwed mothers. The accomplishments in this struggle grew out of the willingness of African Americans in Ohio’s cities to address local social issues. Black Ohioans working locally in the twenties were active participants in the struggle to alleviate the
symptoms of urban ills. Black social work programs in each city were
managed and staffed by African American local residents. The record
shows that African American neighborhoods in Ohio were neither
merely passive victims of urban pathologies nor merely passive recipients
of white philanthropy.

It must be concluded, as well, that the social service gains made in
Ohio's black neighborhoods in the 1920s were not nearly great enough
to match the size of community needs. The struggle with urban problems
was decidedly more advanced in this decade than in the past; however,
innumerable black newcomers and other needy African Americans in
Ohio received no assistance from social service programs because their
funds, facilities, and staffing were insufficient. Combined private organ-
izations, some for blacks and others for whites, did not have the means
to eliminate the social ills that had been endemic to urban slums in the
United States since the mid-nineteenth century. These problems were
still present in Ohio's cities in 1930. City center areas, some black and
others white, still were occupied by numbers of impoverished newcom-
ers whose health was threatened because they were overcrowded in ram-
shackle and unsanitary housing located in old high-crime districts.
African Americans comprised more of the needy in Ohio's inner-city
areas in 1930 than in the previous decade. Prior to 1920 mostly
European newcomers and their families occupied Ohio's urban slums
and experienced their problems of poverty, disease, poor housing, and
crime. During the twenties in Ohio, working class white ethnic families
with means relocated from slums to the suburbs. Meanwhile, the color
line restricted African Americans to Ohio's troubled old urban neigh-
borhoods. In these circumstances, black Ohioans increasingly organized
to address equal rights issues as well as social welfare matters.