Negotiating Relief

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CHAPTER THREE

A Contest for Home Rule

THE NEW DEAL FEDERALIZES SOCIAL WELFARE

VAN BUREN COUNTY’S supervisors were less than enthusiastic about the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, despite the county’s acute financial crisis. The minutes of the Van Buren County Board of Supervisors reveal a pattern of inattention, if not contempt, for the new program. They approved the use of office equipment by the Welfare Relief Commission, but tabled “until some future time” a request to use highway funds for a work-relief project, likely because the project fell under WRC supervision.1 Numerous other communications regarding the WRC were also tabled, with no discussion or description in the minutes, including a letter from Governor William Comstock.2 Comstock’s letter requested that the supervisors contribute the county’s share of gasoline-tax money (eleven thousand dollars) to emergency relief. Although the minutes record no formal action, the Hartford Day Spring reported that the supervisors refused to comply with the request. One supervisor called the governor’s proposal an “insult to every board of supervisors in the state.”3

Van Buren County, although among the most resistant to FERA, was not

3. “Solons Refuse Cash to Governor: County Not to Yield Gas Tax to Relief Fund,” Hartford Day Spring, January 10, 1934, 1.
alone. Franklin Roosevelt’s administration greatly expanded federal intervention with the New Deal. FERA prompted the creation of a mass of state and local agencies to administer the new programs. Success demanded cooperation between local, state, and federal governments. The state’s extreme financial need clashed with the ideologies of many local officials. Federal intervention in relief threatened the long tradition of local control of relief programs. Home rule, fiscal localism, and the role of professional social work were the core issues of conflict in the early days of FERA.

Fiscal localism, coupled with home rule—minimizing expenditures and maximizing tax relief, and the belief that local administrative control was best, regardless of who provided funding—was at the center of the conflicts over FERA. But while local officials defended home rule, political scientists and policy makers criticized the organization of local government and the state’s cumbersome structure of the township system. Local government was often comprised of multiple and, at times, overlapping units. Tax revenues in many cases were not enough to provide for basic services, including poor relief. The authors of a 1933 study pointed to the cost and inefficiency of the township system, and recommended consolidation in the counties and reorganization of county government. The stress of the Depression, and its escalating relief costs, eventually strained and, in some cases, broke the local system in place. A key problem was that while American society and its economy had changed profoundly since the eighteenth century, poor law had not. Resistance to change was significant, but given the conditions of the 1930s, “Confrontation with the idea of local responsibility as understood in America was inevitable.”

The increasingly desperate financial situation of most local governments fueled support for federal aid from some governors, state legislators, municipal leaders, and social work professionals. A survey of local Michigan agencies conducted by the American Association of Public Welfare Officials found that areas around Detroit, Grand Rapids, and the Upper Peninsula were in need of either state or federal help. The report noted that Upper Peninsula counties faced “much distress and practically no financial resources.”

7. Ibid., 83.
social workers supported federal aid by the spring of 1932, although the American Association of Social Workers did not endorse federal aid until January 1933.\textsuperscript{10}

The growing demands resulted in the passage, in July 1932, of the Emergency Relief and Construction Act, which authorized the distribution of $300 million through the Reconstruction Finance Corporation. Federal funds were to be loans paid off by a state’s federal highway funds. RFC funds became grants-in-aid to the states, but government officials did not know that in 1932.\textsuperscript{11} Eventually about 60 percent of the total appropriation went to seven states, including Michigan, California, Illinois, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin.\textsuperscript{12} Michigan received $21.8 million, a portion of which was spent on highway construction. The remainder was distributed to local public welfare agencies through the state unemployment commission. But RFC funds were not enough to alleviate the extreme financial problems facing local governments. Fiscal localism again emerged, as both state and local officials balked at the “loans,” fearing to commit themselves to further debt when their coffers were so empty.

Roosevelt’s administration greatly expanded the federal government’s role in social welfare. The most critical New Deal relief programs were the Federal Emergency Relief Act, the Civil Works Administration, and, later, the Works Progress Administration. All three dealt with relief in some form, and FERA and WPA also used investigative social work methods to determine eligibility. FERA included an appropriation of $500 million and had a two-year limit. FERA provided aid in two major forms: work relief and direct relief. The plan was for local governments and schools to create work-relief projects in their communities to employ local residents. Local funds provided the materi-

\textsuperscript{10} Resolution in favor of federal aid for relief, American Association of Social Workers, NASW Records, Box 18, Folder 196.
\textsuperscript{12} Brown, \textit{Public Relief}, 126.
\textsuperscript{14} Coll, \textit{Safety Net}, 25.
als, and federal funds furnished the payroll. Direct relief, or “the dole” in its derogatory terminology, was for those people and families who had no one employable to work on a project, or for whom no work was available. Direct relief was actually cheaper to provide than work relief, which required funds for project materials in addition to payroll, but public opinion, as well as most policy makers, favored work relief. Work relief reduced the stigma of welfare for recipients and provided some concrete product in return—either improved roads, buildings, or other public improvement, or else goods to be distributed to relief recipients: clothing, canned goods, or bedding.¹⁵

The federal programs targeted employed people, or those who could work but were unable to find work. Unemployable individuals, unable to work because of age, health, disability, or family responsibilities, were confined to the local relief programs. Regulations specified that federal funds were not to finance mothers’ or old-age pensions, hospital care, or institutional (including infirmary) care; local governments were to continue to fund those services.¹⁶ Nationally, unemployables made up 20 percent of relief recipients, and in Michigan that number ranged from 17 to 24 percent in FERA’s second year.¹⁷

The distinction between employable and unemployable was made along gender lines, and also considered age as a factor. Many women, for instance, able to work but with children to care for, were classified as unemployable. Mothers’ pensions were meant to care for those women and their families, but more than thirty counties discontinued mothers’ pensions by 1934. Both Saginaw and Van Buren counties halted mothers’ pensions in October 1933 because of budget constraints.¹⁸ Furthermore, Michigan’s flawed old-age pension law of 1933 proved woefully inadequate and did little to alleviate the poverty of older Michigan residents. Thus FERA, through the local welfare-relief commission, often cared for unemployables prior to the Social Security Act in 1935. In states with no public welfare program before the New Deal, FERA instituted the creation of one.¹⁹

¹⁶. Carothers, Chronology, 8; and Brown, Public Relief, 237.
¹⁹. The New Deal’s federal funds prompted both states and municipalities to create welfare agencies, usually the local emergency-relief commission. See Jo Ann E. Argersinger, Toward a New Deal in Baltimore: People and Government in the Great Depression (Chapel Hill: University
FERA’s funds, and later the Works Progress Administration, came with strings attached; states were allowed to set up their own commissions and emergency-relief administrations to administer the federal program, but had to operate within federal guidelines. The federal authority extended to funds contributed by local and state governments: “When these powers of control are considered, it is clear that the FERA constituted not only a source of financial aid to the state, but also a very definite and powerful authority over relief activities in each state which received Federal funds.”

States that refused to conform to federal rules and regulations over grants—including Kentucky and Ohio—faced federal officials assuming control of their state emergency-relief programs. Although Michigan governors and legislatures certainly had conflicts with FERA officials during this period, they never lost control of the state emergency-relief administration. The state’s reluctance and some local governments’ unwillingness to allocate funds for relief frustrated federal officials, but such conflicts never reached the crises found in other states.

Michigan enacted enabling legislation for FERA on June 28, 1933, and appropriated twelve million dollars for relief. No funds were distributed, however, until August 3. The law established a State Emergency Welfare Relief Commission (SEWRC) to set policy for the State Emergency Relief Administration (SERA), and also established a welfare-relief commission (WRC) in each county. State-commission members were appointed by the governor, and county commissions, comprised of three county residents, were appointed by the state commission and approved by the governor. All communications with FERA went through the state administration, which also distributed federal funds to the counties. It was the state commission’s responsibility to ensure

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that county personnel were qualified under federal regulations, and that the operation of the emergency-relief administration remained nonpartisan and free from the interference of local government officials.  

The inclusion of a commission member and administrators with social work backgrounds contributed to the state commission’s willingness to accept FERA policies. Michigan’s commission appointed Fred Johnson of Detroit, who was secretary of the Michigan’s Children’s Aid Society and a recognized social work professional, as administrator of SERA. William Haber, an associate professor of economics at the University of Michigan who would succeed Johnson as administrator one year later, was appointed a field supervisor.  

State-commission members included Will Norton of Detroit. Norton headed the Children’s Fund of Michigan and also led the Detroit Community Fund (later the United Way) from 1917 to 1930. Johnson, Haber, and Norton shared the social work philosophy behind FERA, and sought to enforce FERA policies at the local level, rather than allowing local officials free rein. Although staffing and distance limited the state’s ability to enforce federal guidelines, they were willing to do so. FERA officials often complimented Michigan’s state commission, which appointed able commissions and administrators, and enforced federal policies. Howard Hunter, a FERA field representative, reported in 1934 that Michigan was “one of the best operated State Commissions in the country.”

William Haber, who served as administrator from 1934 until he resigned in 1937, was a critical force in SERA. He also served as deputy director of the state’s WPA program. Haber, who had been born in Romania and had come to the United States at the age of ten, served on the Mayor’s unemployment committee in Detroit and the state unemployment commission in the early years...
of the Depression. Besides teaching economics at the University of Michigan, he also taught in the university’s Institute of the Health and Social Sciences, which housed its first social work curriculum. He published widely on relief and unemployment issues, and his articles appeared in a range of publications, including social work journals. He earned a national reputation for his administrative abilities. The New York Times called Haber an “uncrackable nut” when it came to contests with local officials over relief. Federal officials admired his willingness to tackle difficult problems, and he became to many the face of FERA in the state. He would become a central target during the reorganization debates.

FERA’s power to appoint county welfare-relief commission members and relief administrators would take center stage in the conflicts with local officials over relief that followed, but also would earn the praise of federal officials. Home rule ideology was at the heart of these debates. County WRCs were comprised of three residents of the county, and no supervisor could serve either as a commission member or as administrator. FERA officials hoped to remove politics from relief by requiring trained workers, if possible, or at least supervision over the workers by professional social workers. They also sought to minimize the granting of jobs as political gifts and to ensure that relief cases were adequately investigated by professionals. The exclusion of supervisors from this process alienated many supervisors from the WRC even before it began work. Long responsible for relief, many supervisors greatly resented the loss of administrative control. Although caseworkers often consulted supervisors on recipients in their townships or cities, supervisors were on the outside looking in and most did not like it.

The state commission also approved the appointments of county administrators, who were to handle the daily administration of the programs, including the hiring of staff, with the county WRC providing guidance and

31. Michigan report by Howard Hunter, June 1, 1934, FERA Michigan Field Reports, Box 138, Folder 2, National Archives.
32. By October, sixty-nine of Michigan’s eighty-three counties had established welfare-relief commissions. Minutes of the State Emergency Welfare Relief Commission, Box 2, Folder 1: July 17, July 28, August 11, and October 13, 1933. Studies of both Illinois and Ohio reveal similar views; both states adhered to the concept that local officials, and not social workers, should administer relief. See Maurer, “Public Relief Programs in Ohio, 1929–1939,” 77; Cole, “The Relief Crisis in Illinois during the Depression, 1930–1940,” 285–91.
Each county agency had to have one “trained and experienced investigator” and also at least one supervisor who was “trained and experienced in the essential elements of family case work and relief administration.” Administrators were not always social workers, but investigators were to be, if possible.

The establishment of the county WRC did not entirely exclude township supervisors and superintendents of the poor from the relief process. In many counties, township supervisors continued to be consulted on most cases, particularly those in rural areas. WRC workers in Van Buren County often consulted local township supervisors as one of three required reference checks on new applications, and usually followed their lead. WRC workers also sought suggestions from township supervisors on long-term cases, and informed officials regarding who was on relief in their county. Both WRC staff and township supervisors in Marquette County saw the supervisor as a part of the investigation process.

Township supervisors were consulted on a less systematic basis in Saginaw County, although they were permitted to write relief orders on cases approved by the ERA.

Such attitudes are less overt in records after the Social Security Act was implemented in Michigan, but remained a part of the case-file records in the earlier days of the New Deal.

The size of relief grants varied from county to county, and most increased during the second year of FERA. The average grant in the state for the first fiscal year of FERA (ending June 30, 1934) was $5.18 per month for an individual, and $21.22 for a family. That average increased to $9.14 per person the following year (ending June 30, 1935) and $32.79 per family. The average grant per family nationally in May 1933, two months before FERA was implemented, was $15.15; that figure rose to $24.53 one year later—slightly more than Michigan's average grant. By May 1935, the national average was $29.33, less than Michigan's average grant.

34. Haber and Stanchfield, *Unemployment and Relief in Michigan*, 44–46.
39. Haber and Stanchfield, *Unemployment and Relief in Michigan*, Appendix, table 3; Haber and Stanchfield, *Unemployment, Relief, and Economic Security*, figure 11, 42; table 16, 84; and Appendix, table VIII.
Despite nondiscrimination requirements, studies found racial disparities in grant amounts, and such variations were not confined to the South. Relief grants in Detroit in 1935 averaged $39.42 for all family recipients, but the average for whites was $40.90 while grants to black families averaged $35.13. Such disparities were found in numerous cities throughout the United States, with average grants for blacks at $24.18, while whites received $29.05. Explanations for the differential included smaller case sizes or the lack of an employable household member in black cases. In the latter instance, blacks would then be ineligible for work relief, which paid higher benefits. Many historians have documented the effects of local administration under federal guidelines in New Deal programs, and in areas with minimal state and federal interference, administration of the programs often replicated discriminatory practices already in place. In some cases, different budget formulas were used for the two groups. Most studies find that minorities gained much greater access to public relief programs, particularly in the South, but such access was by no means equal.

Breakdowns by counties reveal greater variation in the amounts of grants. Although the average grants in all counties increased from the first year to the next, significant differences between counties remained. Van Buren and Saginaw had the lowest average grants, while Wayne County’s remained the highest in the state for both years (see table 3.1). Many of the counties paying the lowest grants were in Michigan’s southern agricultural region, including Van Buren.

Variations in grants stemmed from numerous factors, including the cost of living and poor-relief traditions; areas that had formerly paid low relief rates tended to continue that trend. The climate and the availability of work, including seasonal agricultural work, also affected the size of grants. Fuel costs were much higher in Marquette County than in Van Buren County, and the ability of a family to raise food in a garden or to earn supplemental income in the agricultural season was much higher in the latter county. Gardens were

43. Haber and Stanchfield, Unemployment, Relief, and Economic Security, figure 11, 42–43.
44. Similar arguments can be made about variations in grants among states. Contributions by states to relief funds were a major reason for discrepancies in grants. See Patterson, The New Deal and the States, 54–55.
expected of people in areas with suitable soil and climate, and relief could be refused if space was available and applicants failed to attempt to raise a garden. Agricultural areas, like Van Buren County, also reduced relief rolls during the planting and harvest seasons, as officials believed ample work was available with local farmers.

Rural parts of Saginaw also had agricultural employment available, particularly in the sugar beet industry. Relief clients were expected to accept work if it was available, but only at a “living wage.” When sugar beet company officials asked the State Emergency Welfare Relief Commission to deny aid to those families who refused employment in the sugar beet fields, the commission would not, “as the amount of wages is not such as will enable [relief clients] to provide for themselves without the aid of relief agencies.” It is not clear whether cases received supplementation from the WRC or if relief recipients were empowered to refuse sugar beet employment altogether. The SEWRC

45. Carothers, Chronology, 41, 51; SERA Letter #7, 1934, Michigan State Emergency Welfare Relief Commission Papers, 1934–1939, Box 1, Folder January to June 1934; and “Ask Relief Clients for 1,000 Gardens,” Hartford Day Spring, April 24, 1935, 1.

46. State Emergency Relief Administration Letters #353 dated May 1, 1935, and #579, dated May 18, 1936, reminded county administrators to review relief cases for those who could take temporary work. See SERA Letters #353 and #579, SEWRC Records, Box 1; see also Devra Weber, Dark Sweat, White Gold: California Farm Workers, Cotton, and the New Deal (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 130.
did rule that “where a living wage is offered for an honest day’s work,” families refusing such employment should be removed from the relief rolls.47 When sugar beet representatives renewed their request just two weeks later, the commission reiterated its earlier stand, noting “that they deemed it their duty in the interest of humanity to see that labor is decently paid,” and asked administrator Fred Johnson to inform people “that the Commission was not going to be an instrument in forcing labor into the sugar beet fields at a starvation wage.”48 Farmers in Manistee County also complained of an inability to secure workers for their fields, but WRC administrator Louise Armstrong argued that they paid “disgracefully low wages, if they paid cash wages at all.” Some farmers paid their workers only with goods, and sometimes at prices far inflated above the market value. Some workers also received no wages until the farmer sold the crop.49

Conflict over relief grants and the availability of low-wage labor occurred throughout the country in the implementation of New Deal relief programs. Local demographics determined what groups were the targets of efforts to preserve low-wage workers. Critics charged that relief grants encouraged workers to reject low-wage employment, including agricultural work in Michigan. The issue was particularly significant in the South, where local and state officials resisted attempts to disrupt the low-wage labor supply, thus explaining in part the lack of access blacks had to direct and work relief. When access to relief was granted to blacks, it was granted partially to ensure that they did not leave the area, which would preserve their availability to work during planting and harvesting seasons. Devra Weber found a similar trend in California, where growers protested the granting of relief to migrant workers, either through direct relief or the transient program, arguing that it cost them workers. As in Michigan’s sugar beet fields, California’s growers found that their wages were far less than relief grants, which were already meager enough. The availability of relief instituted a “de facto minimum wage,” Weber contends, and enabled agricultural workers to bargain for better wages.50

The SEWRC ruled that wages for agricultural work had to equal minimum

47. Minutes of the State Emergency Welfare Relief Commission, Box 2, Folder 1: May 23, 1934.
48. Minutes of the State Emergency Welfare Relief Commission, Box 2, Folder 1: June 6, 1934.
relief grants. The SEWRC rulings, however, did not preclude local agencies from implementing different policies until state or federal officials became aware of them. Other local discriminatory practices certainly existed, despite federal regulations, including the denial of benefits to people of color and to noncitizens. As with other regulations, federal supervision was not thorough enough to prevent suffering by specific groups. The problem occurred throughout the country, although its specifics varied with local demographics and practices. Ultimately, supervision of WRC policies, including relief for migrant and agricultural workers, diminished with the demise of FERA.

CONFLICTS OVER LOCAL CONTRIBUTIONS

A key factor in the size of grants was the amount of federal and state funds available. Estimated ahead of time, grants could prove inadequate if relief rolls increased more than anticipated, thus causing the reduction of all grants because of fund shortages. Often the problem stemmed from a lack of local contribution to emergency-relief funds; once federal funds were exhausted, the expected share of local monies was intended to fund relief. But in counties that rarely provided funds, such as Van Buren and Manistee counties, grants were reduced and sometimes eliminated. This was especially true by late 1935, when SERA and FERA officials began to withdraw state and federal funds from counties that refused to provide local matching funds. The conflicts centered not only on whether the county could pay, but also on who (often state-appointed social workers) was administering the funds; county officials were often reluctant to provide money over which they had no administrative control.

During the first year of FERA, Michigan counties contributed varied amounts to the local county WRC, with the state average at a low 6.18 percent. The availability of funds was a key reason, but the county officials’ attitude toward SERA and the relief program also played a role. Counties like Van Buren and Manistee, which had major conflicts with SERA, contributed the least. Saginaw and Marquette, whose relationships with SERA were more amiable, were among those counties contributing the highest percentage of relief funds statewide (see table 3.2). Overall for the fiscal year ending June 30,
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Table 3.2
PERCENTAGE OF RELIEF FUNDS FROM COUNTIES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>County</th>
<th>1934 Percent of Local Funds for Emergency Relief, FY</th>
<th>1935 Percent of Local Funds for Emergency Relief, FY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kent</td>
<td>1.69</td>
<td>9.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manistee</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>3.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marquette</td>
<td>23.64</td>
<td>23.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saginaw</td>
<td>27.86</td>
<td>27.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Van Buren</td>
<td>4.96</td>
<td>3.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wayne</td>
<td>3.96</td>
<td>11.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State average</td>
<td>6.18</td>
<td>13.42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Haber and Stanchfield, Unemployment and Relief in Michigan, figure 12, Appendix, table 3; Haber and Stanchfield, Unemployment, Relief and Economic Security, figure 8, p. 35.

1934, local funds accounted for slightly more than 10 percent of all relief funds expended, while state dollars contributed 22 percent and the rest—more than two-thirds—came from federal dollars.54 No county was able to contribute more than 38 percent of relief costs in the program’s first year, in part because few counties had the money available.55 Contributions from most counties increased in the second year, but Van Buren was one of the few counties to actually contribute a smaller share the second year, when just three counties provided a smaller percentage of relief funds than Van Buren.56

Contributions varied depending on the economies of the counties involved; the major industrial counties tended to contribute much higher amounts to relief than agricultural, mining, or lumbering counties. Wayne County and the other ten largest industrial counties contributed 90 percent of all local relief dollars in the state in 1937–38.57 Michigan’s problem of changing economics—and the decline of mining and timber industries with no viable replacement industries—translated into the inability of some counties to finance their

54. Ibid., figure 9.
55. Haber and Stanchfield, Unemployment and Relief in Michigan, 54.
56. Ibid., figure 12; Haber and Stanchfield, Unemployment, Relief, and Economic Security, figure 8, 35.
share of relief. As industrial counties increased their contributions, other areas decreased. Counties with high relief rates tended to have the lowest contributions. In a report to Harry Hopkins, Howard Hunter expressed frustration with Michigan’s refusal to appropriate funds for relief: “These people have been mollycoddled by the Federal government for over a year.” Hunter did not fault the state commission, but rather local and state officials, who “believe that Santa Claus will keep on coming down the chimney no matter how bad they are.” But all three state reports on emergency relief recognized the inability of some counties to finance even a small portion of relief. Conflicts arose with counties that the state believed could do more, including Van Buren County.

Local governments contributed more to work-relief projects. Contributions tended to center on materials for the projects; local units, for instance, provided more than 60 percent of all materials and equipment on the projects. Overall, a 1935 report showed that local funds provided about 24 percent of the costs of projects, while nearly 71 percent was from federal ERA monies. Counties were more likely to contribute to work relief than direct relief; this was particularly true after the WPA began in 1935. A 1939 report states that contributions to the WPA came at the expense of emergency relief. By 1937–38, counties were contributing $4 million more dollars to WPA than to emergency relief, with local contributions for direct relief at about $11.7 million, as opposed to $15.5 million for the WPA.

Conflict in the projects centered on administrative control and on determining who would work on the projects, rather than on the contributions themselves. Under the FERA and WPA programs, all workers were certified through the relief agencies, thus eliminating local county and city officials from the process. (Under the Civil Works Administration, the predecessor of FERA, workers did not apply through relief agencies, nor did they have to prove need. About half of Michigan’s workers in the first year came from the relief rolls; others were simply unemployed.) Home rule again appears. Van Buren County supervisors were among the most opposed to federal work-relief programs. Federal supervision left local officials little say in who was hired on those projects. Before the New Deal, supervisors had recommended

59. Michigan report by Howard Hunter, December 1933, Box 58, FERA-WPA Narrative Reports.
men from their own townships to work programs using county funds or state highway funds. Work projects now fell under the county WRC, which coordinated work assignments. Some supervisors resented the loss of that authority, again believing they knew best who needed and deserved aid. They also disliked the project application process, arguing that “CWA projects were obtained only by pilgrimages to Lansing.”

County administrators and WRC members played a crucial role in the negotiations for local contributions, and in relations between SERA and local officials. They were expected to provide detailed information about the relief efforts, including costs, caseload information, and the status of work projects. They were told to use the threat of withdrawal of federal and state funds as leverage in the negotiations of local-fund contributions. But they also were allowed to use their judgments in situations where counties or cities could not afford the expected one-third. County administrators were told not to wait for local officials to come to them, but to initiate contact before annual budget meetings, usually held in October. By the second year of FERA, they also were expected to help “sell” the ERA structure, and to persuade local officials that a professionally run social work agency was preferable to, and more efficient than, the old poor-relief system. This effort to promote the ERA structure became particularly important as Michigan entered its welfare-reorganization debates following passage of the Social Security Act in 1935. Van Buren County’s WRC had six different administrators in three years, an indication of the county’s rocky relationship with SERA. In recalling those years, Haber remembered the conflicts with state and local officials over the relief administration under FERA, and the need to persuade them of its merits. “It was not well received, because even in those days there was still a prevailing, a widely held point of view, that people on relief didn’t want to work,” he recalled forty years later.

63. “Hartford Will Have Share in Road ‘Relief,’” Hartford Day Spring, November 4, 1931, 1, 6; “Solons Refuse Cash to Governor,” Hartford Day Spring, January 10, 1934, 1.
64. “Solons Refuse Cash to Governor,” Hartford Day Spring, January 10, 1934, 1.
68. William Haber Oral Biography Project, transcripts, 205.
Conflicts often revolved around how much counties could contribute to relief. Fiscal localism and home rule are interconnected in this issue; local officials were reluctant to expend funds over which they had little control. The *Hartford Day Spring* reported “murmurs of dissatisfaction with the manner in which county welfare relief is to be administered” under the new program. A key criticism was that the new administrative setup would not provide much financial relief for the county or its taxpayers. Supervisors argued that not only were they required to fund one-third of the new relief program, under federal law, but also they retained financial responsibility for mothers’ pensions, the county infirmary, and hospitalization costs. Van Buren County believed those obligations should be considered relief contributions, while state and federal policies did not include them.\(^{69}\)

Fiscal localism was central in Van Buren County. County officials were unwilling to provide the one-third requested by state officials in January 1934 when federal funds ran out; relief recipients faced large cuts in grants. Supervisors eventually agreed to a contribution of $1,568.45. Given that SERA expended more than $311,000 in the first year in the county, the amount offered was hardly enough to solve the relief-fund crisis.\(^{70}\) The state again requested a one-third contribution from the county in October. The supervisors did adopt a resolution agreeing to partial payment of the funds it owed “insofar as funds are available,” but only after the year’s tax rolls were collected.\(^{71}\) The county would not commit funds to relief until other obligations were met and its revenues were collected.

Inextricably linked to the issue of local contributions was home rule: who would administer those funds and what expertise was needed in that administration. Van Buren officials agreed to contribute their share, but only if the “county ‘dads’ would handle [the] relief funds.”\(^{72}\) This paternalistic attitude was directed not only at the relief recipients but also at those involved in the state relief administration. The county supervisors extended this offer to the state:

> Resolved, that the board of supervisors of Van Buren county offered their services to the state welfare commission as so-called case workers in their respective townships at no expense to the commission, displacing present

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69. “Supervisors End October Session: Look for Spots to Further Cut County Budget,” *Hartford Day Spring*, October 25, 1933, 1.
71. “County Budget Totals $136,793.76,” *Hartford Day Spring*, October 24, 1934, 1.
case workers, and that the county pledges itself to contribute one-third of the total expense of the class of relief handled by the county commission, provided above offer is accepted and complied with, and in case this county receives its full quota of relief from state and federal funds.\textsuperscript{73}

Supervisors sought to regain control of relief administration, suggesting that they replace “so-called case workers,” which they clearly did not see as better able to administer poor relief. Van Buren’s supervisors argued that supervisors would perform their relief duties as part of the job of supervisor, thus saving the county the cost of professional social workers. The supervisors believed that they were more qualified to administer relief, an argument that would recur in the 1937 and 1938 debates.

Some counties used their existing poor-fund allocations, if any were left, to provide their share of WRC costs. Both Saginaw and Marquette counties contributed a fair proportion of funds, but the effort came at a cost to services and salaries. There was little opposition to participating in the federal program, and initially local control was not an issue vocalized a great deal. In Saginaw, city officials opposed a county-wide tax because city residents already paid taxes for the poor commission, whose funds had been previously pledged, in large measure, to the county WRC.\textsuperscript{74} The county had stopped funding mothers’ pensions the month before, forcing those women to seek aid from the poor commission or their township supervisors. Instead, the county voted to contribute ten thousand dollars of the county’s poor fund, to be placed in reserve with the county treasurer for the WRC to draw upon for administrative costs.\textsuperscript{75} Marquette County also used its poor-fund budget to contribute to the WRC. Marquette County’s supervisors’ main conflict with SERA stemmed from their belief that while they had shouldered their share—and more—of the relief problem, other counties had not: “It might also be pointed out,” the Marquette County board writes, “that there are only three counties in northern Michigan that have apparently played ball with the state ERA.” Marquette was one of them.\textsuperscript{76}

\textsuperscript{73} “County ’Dads’ Would Handle Relief Funds,” \textit{Hartford Day Spring}, February 21, 1934.


\textsuperscript{75} “Relief Board Asks $10,000,” \textit{Saginaw Daily News}, October 18, 1933, 1–2; “Favor Relief Fund Request,” \textit{Saginaw Daily News}, October 21, 1933, 1; and \textit{Official Proceedings of the Board of Supervisors of Saginaw County, Michigan}, October 18, 1933, 95–96; October 23, 1933, 107.

\textsuperscript{76} “Proceedings of the Board of Supervisors, Marquette County,” vol. 8, February 15, 1939, 59.
Marquette officials saw the creation of the WRC as a way to share the work and financial burden of relief. Although the surviving records are not clear on the relationship between the WRC and the county’s decision to create, and then eliminate, the office of poor director, the two events seem connected. The county supervisors unanimously voted to eliminate the position just a few months after hiring a mining executive in August of 1933.\textsuperscript{77} It seems likely that the supervisors believed that the newly created WRC could coordinate the relief programs in the county, thus eliminating the need for the four-thousand-dollar appropriation for the director position.\textsuperscript{78} The WRC took over investigating cases of emergency and work relief, but the poor commission continued to investigate requests for medical care and unemployable cases. They also worked with the WRC on a work-relief project to repair the county infirmary, with the cost of materials for the project taken from the poor-fund budget.\textsuperscript{79}

The cost of staff and administration was a widespread criticism of the SERA. SERA issued a report in 1935 to counter those charges, and reported that 91.4 cents of each dollar went for relief, with just 8.6 cents spent on administration. Van Buren County administrative costs were about 8.29 percent of the total amount spent on relief. The greater amount of the cost rested in the salaries of staff, including caseworkers. The report defended these costs, despite the fact that they were much higher than pre-Depression days, and argued that in some areas, staffs were not adequate to fully investigate their cases. Careful investigations resulted in fewer people being able to “cheat” the system, the report argued.\textsuperscript{80}

State officials eventually took a more punitive stance toward counties unwilling to pay their share. Manistee County’s relief program closed briefly in 1934 over disagreements about the county’s contribution.\textsuperscript{81} Allegan County, immediately north of Van Buren County, experienced this in December 1935, when the state ERA cut off state and federal funds to the county because its board refused to appropriate twenty-four thousand dollars for relief needs. The county offices were closed, and at the same time state officials announced the

\textsuperscript{77} “Proceedings of the Board of Supervisors, Marquette County,” August 30, 1933; “Proceedings of the Board of the Superintendents of the Poor, Marquette County,” April 21, 1933.

\textsuperscript{78} “Making Progress Backward,” \textit{Daily Mining Journal}, September 6, 1933, 4.

\textsuperscript{79} “Proceedings of the Board of Supervisors, Marquette County,” October 8, 1934, 229.


start of an investigation into Van Buren County, which also had not contributed relief dollars to its budget. Van Buren officials argued that their share was covered through hospitalization costs, as well as through poor relief administered through the county poor commission, which still operated. The board of supervisors voted fifteen to five to provide for relief at the rate of two thousand dollars per month until the April elections, when the new board could tackle the issue that had perplexed local officials for more than five years. No county appropriation was forthcoming after April 1, and funds were exhausted by mid-June. County administrator Harold Humphrey reported in June that despite reductions in the relief load, funds would be gone before more state funds were forthcoming on July 1, 1936. And a shortage of funds had already resulted in reduced budgets and denials of aid, further resulting in “insufficient relief and suffering.”

Recipients approved for emergency relief had to seek out their local supervisor for assistance when the WRC ran out of funds. Jerry Brewster, a thirty-year-old farmer afflicted with inflammatory rheumatism, was approved for aid in April 1936. He and his wife, Lillian, sought a few grocery orders to carry them until he had recovered enough to resume farming. They were readily approved, and the caseworker approved aid for a longer period of time, as she believed he would need longer to recover. The WRC covered the grocery orders until mid-May, but then Brewster had to seek help from the township supervisor because the WRC offices were not able to extend aid until June 1. The records do not indicate whether he was successful. Other recipients faced similar problems, at a time when townships had little money and mothers’ pensions were no longer funded. Options for relief were few when the WRC could not help.

The rural character of a county played a role in its relationship with SERA, even within counties such as Saginaw, which was both urban and rural. Saginaw County operated under the township system; townships were charged individually for their share of relief costs, and the county allocated no direct funds for emergency relief. Opposition to the WRC allocation of ten

82. Allegan County was also a rural, agricultural county and one that remained loyal to the Republican Party throughout the 1930s. “State Probes County’s ERA Funds,” Hartford Day Spring, Dec. 11, 1935.
83. “Solons Vote $2,000 Month Relief Fund,” Hartford Day Spring, January 15, 1936, 1; “Proceedings of the Board of Supervisors, Van Buren County,” January 10, 1936, 84.
84. “Administrator Gives Figures on Van Buren County Relief,” Hartford Day Spring, June 17, 1936, 1; “Proceedings of the Board of Supervisors, Van Buren County,” April 14, 1936, 4.
85. Case #5217, Van Buren County ERA Records (hereafter VB ERA), Box 1, Folder B.
86. Proceedings of the Council and Boards of the City of Saginaw, October 31, 1933; November 7, 1933.
thousand dollars in Saginaw County came from sixteen supervisors, many representing the rural townships.\textsuperscript{87} The core of the opposition centered on the equitable distribution of the relief burden among townships, as well as on the issue of home rule. As with Van Buren County, some Saginaw County supervisors believed they could more efficiently administer relief than the WRC. Although the administrative costs were funded by the county, the local shares of relief costs were to be paid individually by the townships and the city of Saginaw. The WRC paid the bills and then charged the local costs back to the township, while the city provided its poor-relief funds and then was later reimbursed by the WRC. The townships eventually paid the share not covered by the state ERA.\textsuperscript{88} Over the next three years, twenty-four of Saginaw's twenty-seven townships opted to participate with the WRC. The three townships that did not declined because their officials believed they were “able to look after [their] own.” Saginaw Township initially participated, but was cut off for six months until it paid the eleven hundred dollars it owed the WRC.\textsuperscript{89} Rural opposition was rooted in a desire for control over the administration of those funds, and a desire to minimize the taxes imposed on county residents. The antitax sentiments of the period fueled ideas about home rule and fiscal localism.

Wayne County, and the city of Detroit, faced such serious financial difficulties over relief funding that conflict with SERA was not an issue. DPW head John Ballenger had a friendly relationship with Fred Johnson, the first administrator.\textsuperscript{90} State officials did order an investigation into the disbursement of relief checks in 1934, and a state auditor handled the relief payrolls during that investigation.\textsuperscript{91} SERA prompted the department to improve its accounting and administrative practices, and Howard Hunter was particularly critical of the administration in Detroit. He believed that Ballenger was spread too thin and that the commission was susceptible to political influence.\textsuperscript{92}

\textsuperscript{87} Official Proceedings of the Board of Supervisors of Saginaw County, Michigan, October 23, 1933, 107.

\textsuperscript{88} The city of Saginaw's poor department investigated emergency-relief cases for the WRC and was reimbursed by the county for two-thirds of the funds expended. The other third was their share of the relief burden. WRSC Records, Sampling Survey of Local Relief Agencies, 1936, Box 7, Folder 6; "Relief Board Asks $10,000," Saginaw Daily News, October 18, 1933, 1–2; and Proceedings of the Council and Boards of the City of Saginaw, October 31, 1933, 367.

\textsuperscript{89} WRSC Records, Sampling Survey of Local Relief Agencies, 1936, Box 7, Folder 7, Saginaw County.

\textsuperscript{90} "Proceedings of the Public Welfare Commission," Detroit, July 18, 1933, 150–51.

\textsuperscript{91} SEWRC Minutes, April 18, 1934.

\textsuperscript{92} Joanna C. Colcord, \textit{Cash Relief} (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1936), 87; Sullivan, "On the Dole," 131–34, 139; and Report from Howard Hunter to Harry Hopkins, dated August 13, 1934, 1–2; June 1, 1934, 3–4; Harry Hopkins Papers, Box 58, Folder Michigan.
between Wayne County and SERA would escalate in the latter part of the decade, but remained cooperative in the early years of the program.

Fiscal localism and home rule worked in tandem in the early negotiations between officials in the administration of relief. While the issues were more muted in some counties, such as Saginaw and Wayne, in the early years, they emerged as strong from the start in Van Buren County. The difficulties of this era highlight the issues that came to the forefront in the debates over welfare reorganization. But the New Deal programs played a significant role in alleviating the hardship of the Depression, as well as in enabling local communities to improve public facilities and the state to improve its infrastructure. The next chapter turns to that story.