

Julia Lathrop and the Children's Bureau

| Paul Theerman, PhD

“WITH A LITTLE UNDERSTANDING of the importance of immunization and moral support from an older student, each child finds the process an interesting one.” So reads the caption on this photograph, one of a collection of some 160 photographs at the National Library of Medicine originally assembled by the Children's Bureau. Once part of the US Department of Labor and now an agency within the Department of Health and Human Services, the Children's Bureau was the first US agency devoted to the condition and welfare of the nation's children. It was also the first US agency to be headed by a woman. Julia Lathrop (1858–1932) was appointed the first director in 1912, years before women achieved the right to vote. She held the position during the formative first years of the Bureau, until 1921, and then devoted herself to international efforts on children's health and welfare.

Lathrop was one of a remarkable cohort of activist women at the turn of the century. Born in Rockford, Illinois, and her father one of the founders of the Republican Party, Lathrop graduated from Vassar in 1880. She then worked in her father's law firm before moving to Hull House in 1890, joining Jane Addams in the effort to document and address the living conditions of the poor. This led to her appointment in 1892 to the Illinois State Board of Charities, and a



Image originally produced by the Georgia State Department of Public Health, currently part of the Children's Bureau Collection, History of Medicine Division, National Library of Medicine, Bethesda, MD.

decade later, to heading the Children's Bureau.

Lathrop embraced the traditionally female topic of infant and maternal care and mortality with a distinctive program.¹ She strongly promoted the use of metrics, notably compilations of birth and death data; she mounted a coordinated program of producing authoritative brochures on infant care and advertised them through “Baby

Weeks”; and she emphasized social justice: “The Children's Bureau is an expression of the nation's sense of justice, and the justice of today is born of yesterday's pity.”^{2(p32)} Throughout, Lathrop maintained strong connections to the women of the country, recruiting a vast pool of volunteers from women's clubs to help her underfunded agency.

Perhaps the greatest success engineered by Lathrop and

her compatriots came in 1921, just as she was leaving office: the passage of the Sheppard-Towner Act. The act provided matching funding to states to help reduce infant and maternal mortality—with the funds administered by the Children's Bureau. In effect, the Sheppard-Towner Act extended the work of the Children's Bureau to the states, and it was the first time that the federal government

provided direct support for social welfare. But the act fell afoul of changing political and economic conditions, and it was allowed to lapse in 1929. Some of its provisions did make their way into the Social Security Act of 1935.³

By that time, the moment had passed. Lathrop's conjoining of metrics and justice had begun to pull apart: scientific sociology did not see her statistical work as sufficiently rigorous, and the new discipline downplayed the

passionate concern for social justice that motivated Lathrop and her colleagues. More significantly, it began to seem anomalous that women should be confined to a traditionally female part of the government. In 1933, Frances Perkins, a generation younger than Lathrop, became the first woman US cabinet secretary as head of the Department of Labor, where the Children's Bureau was located. But few believed that her gender should limit her mission. ■

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