

FERA: Aiding the Cities And States, FDR-Style

The current crisis of local revenues, and resulting disastrous poverty, in American cities and states, is only comparable to the situation which faced President Franklin Delano Roosevelt when he took office in March 1933. After initial measures to bring banking under control, and begin to address youth unemployment with the Civilian Conservation Corps, FDR rammed through the Federal Emergency Relief Act (FERA) on May 12.

The key was speedy, non-bureaucratic action. The bill called for the establishment of one Federal Relief Administrator who would cut through the bureaucracy to get aid immediately to those millions in need. FDR gave the job to the man who performed a similar function for him during his governorship of New York State, Harry Hopkins.

Hopkins immediately communicated with all the state governors, telling them to set up state agencies; he began to review requests, and send off the

money—reputedly \$5 million in the first two hours. The first objective was to bring families back from the edge of starvation, put clothes on their backs, and give them shelter.

While half of the FERA funds were supposed to be dispersed as matching funds for what the states had previously spent, half was for outright grants. Hopkins concentrated on getting the money where it was needed. But his major concern was to move immediately from cash relief to providing jobs. By June, FDR, who shared Hopkins' objective, convened a conference at the White House to outline the kind of local projects he envisioned being funded by FERA funds.

From this time on, until FERA was effectively replaced by other public works programs, its monies poured into the funding of local and state jobs—teachers, road building and street repair, parks, and so forth. According to author Nick Taylor, FERA ultimately put some 2 million people to work, mostly in local road repair, but also tens of thousands of teachers, and other public servants.

Is this not precisely the kind of support our states and cities need today?

—*Nancy Spannaus*