

Chicago's Hull House closes after 120 years of service

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The Jane Addams Hull House Association, one of the largest non-profit social service organizations in Chicago, abruptly shut down on Friday, January 27th. On January 19, the organization announced that funding difficulties would force it to close in spring 2012. Three hundred staff members were given layoff notices and a final paycheck on the day of the abrupt closure.

The Hull House provided housing assistance, child welfare, education, job training, domestic violence relief and many other services to about 60,000 people in the Chicago area. According to former employees, other agencies cannot absorb the clients, leaving thousands of people without essential services.

The sudden shutdown, without a plan to maintain and transfer service and little notice to clients and staff, has raised sharp criticisms of the management of the organization.

The Hull House provided over 50 programs to communities across Chicago. The most prominent were childhood education, encompassing 19 percent of services delivered, economic development and job training at 16 percent, community schools services at 12 percent, child welfare at 12 percent and housing services at 11 percent. However, Hull House served clients of all ages, through domestic abuse services, homeless services, elder care and literacy programs.

Hull House services went overwhelmingly to children and young adults. About one fifth of clients were under five years of age, another one fifth were six to 10, and about one fifth were 11 to 17. Two thirds of clients were female.

Over 85 percent of the Hull House clients live below the federal poverty line, which was identified in 2011 as \$22,350 for a family of four, and over 30 percent of clients live in federally defined "deep poverty," which is a household income of less than \$11,025 for a family of four.

The closure came as a shock to many people in the Chicago area. The Hull House has provided services since Sept 18, 1889, more than 120 years, when it was co-founded by Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr on the near West side

of Chicago. Out of 400 settlement houses in the United States in the early 1900s, Hull House was the best known, with more than 40 locations in Chicago. At its peak, 9,000 people were coming through the doors per week.

Its main purpose was to be a center of educational and social opportunities for working people, catering to all workers, especially European immigrants. Addams and her team followed a principle that whatever race, gender or ethnicity a person is, if given the opportunity a person can accomplish what he or she wants. Her goal was to "aid in the solutions of life in a great city, to help our neighbors build responsible, self-sufficient lives for themselves and their families." Amenities ranging from health care, art galleries and citizenship classes to sports and gardening clubs were available.

In contrast to the usual practice of wealthy philanthropists, Addams and the Hull House staff lived where they worked, enabling them to gain a better understanding of the problems facing the poor and immigrants. Documentation of these social conditions led to Addams playing a role in progressive-era reforms to improve housing, sanitation, health, and working conditions, and abolish child labor.

In founding the Hull House, Addams was following the example of Toynbee Hall, a center of social reform founded in 1885 in the East End of London. It is not a coincidence that charity arose in response to the conditions of industrialization in Britain. The development of mass industry upended the relations between classes, devastating rural life and creating a new class of wage laborers in urban areas. With this came a shocking urban poverty of filthy, cramped housing and chronic unemployment.

In response to this social instability, the British bourgeoisie shunned systemic social reform or government aid, instead offering private charity to alleviate in part the miserable conditions of life. The socialist movement, by contrast, pointed to the social roots of poverty, and it earned mass support in Britain and across Europe as a whole.

In America, the huge immigrant workforce at the turn of the century was particularly susceptible to the influence of

socialism because of the traditions brought with them from Europe. Many played a role in the development of the socialist movement and trade unions in America. From the perspective of the ruling class, it was necessary to purge these workers of their socialist instincts and have them assimilate bourgeois values in order to fully integrate them into American society,

Hull House, working to improve the worst conditions of urban life that were especially prevalent in immigrant neighborhoods, strove to incorporate immigrants into American society. The settlement movement appealed for warm relations between classes, symbolized by the reformers leaving generally better lifestyles to live in the areas they sought to improve.

These reforms were presented to the business and political elite for consideration without the mobilization of the working class—even while some of the most militant strikes in US history occurred in Chicago during the same period. Private donations sustained the Hull House for this period and much of its existence, the byproduct of a combination of genuine charitable sentiments and fear of social revolution.

In the 1990s, Hull House began to shift away from private funding, which was stagnating, to seek government support. With welfare reform under the Clinton administration in 1996, state and federal governments began to offload social services from government agencies and instead provide grants to nonprofits. The Hull House saw total funding quadruple by 2001 as it gained government funding for expanding social work. Private funding eventually diminished to a mere 10 percent of the budget.

A hint of funding problems emerged when the Hull House froze its pension plan in 2002 and began to defer pension contributions. When the recession hit in 2008, a crisis of funding soon developed. Government funding cuts came simultaneously with increased demand for services.

In the last decade, Illinois funding for human services has dropped by \$4.4 billion, including funding for child care, substance abuse and domestic violence programs. Over \$4.2 billion more in funding has been delayed by Illinois, with payments to nonprofits and other vendors taking six months or longer. For these organizations, borrowing costs heavily increased, since they have to extend credit lines to maintain service while awaiting payments from the state.

By the time of the bankruptcy filing, the Hull House was millions of dollars in debt. With the closure, it is unclear how many clients will be able to find services elsewhere. Government grants will shift to other organizations, but they too face the same problem of declining funding and increased demand for services.

The layoff of 300 employees is among the largest recent mass layoffs in the Chicago region, which had an

unemployment rate of 9.3 percent in December.

Hull House employees also found out in their last week of employment that their health insurance had been canceled two weeks prior, without any notice. Some employees, hearing that they would lose their job and health care, went to the doctor during their last week, unaware that they had already lost coverage, and now face steep medical bills.

These circumstances have led to questions over why the agency was closed so quickly, and what was being done to prevent it. In an interview on WBEZ, the Hull House Association's board chairman, Stephen Saunders, stated that funding was sought from "other organizations, banks, community groups. As revenues continued to decline we had to shut sooner than we thought."

In the same interview, volunteer coordinator Mark Tisdahl noted that no public appeal for help was ever made. Saunders replied that it was "way too late" and that it "is difficult to ask for donations when people have been donating a lot of money over the last 4 to 5 years and see a noticeable decline in the organization."

No news has appeared of clients or staff speaking of a "decline." The board of the Hull House consists of high-ranking officials from financial, insurance, real estate, educational and architectural firms—a world where "charity galas" abound and corporate profits are at pre-recession levels.

Jane Addams and others had a genuine desire to help the less fortunate, as shown by their willingness to live and be in direct contact with the people from these neighborhoods. In the broadest sense, the organization represented a constituency for social reform among more privileged layers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

The cynical, pessimistic comments of the current Hull House board, and the way in which the organization closed, point to a starkly different attitude held by the privileged class of the present. Millionaires and billionaires abound in the Chicago region, but not even a few million could be raised to ensure an orderly closure of a historic charitable institution, let alone sufficient funds to sustain it.

The era when the bourgeoisie and its institutions sought to veil social problems through reform has passed into one of austerity, when social spending is seen as a drain on the wallets of the wealthy and will no longer be tolerated.



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