

Case 6

Learning to Understand the Problems Faced by Cleveland: America's First Community Foundation

The Cleveland Foundation, 1915

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Background. As president of the Cleveland Trust Company in the early 1910s, Frederick Goff was intrigued by the prospect of providing to the community a means by which individuals could commit their wealth to charitable purposes upon their deaths. He thought such a means would be good both for revenues and for public relations. Devising a community trust as an entity to be shepherded by community leaders (initially bank directors), Goff envisioned a fund to which benefactors could leave their wealth for the improvement of the community. Aiming toward that objective, Goff created The Cleveland Foundation on January 2, 1914—the first community foundation in America.⁹⁸

Strategy and Impact. The Cleveland Foundation's initial purpose was to alleviate the social ills facing Cleveland, beginning with poverty. Its strategy would be to study the city in detail and to gain a deeper understanding of the problems it faced. Within six weeks of the creation of The Cleveland Foundation, Frederick Goff expressed his intention that the Foundation conduct "a great social and economic survey of Cleveland, to uncover the causes of poverty and crime and point out the cure." Goff envisioned a comprehensive survey modeled after an earlier Russell Sage Foundation survey of living and working conditions in Pittsburgh.⁹⁹ The Foundation created a five-member Survey Committee to oversee research administered by the Foundation's Distribution Committee. While the Foundation received numerous requests for surveys regarding a wide variety of problems facing Cleveland, it focused on a few specific areas to be funded primarily by Goff, his associates, and his company.¹⁰⁰

In 1915, the Foundation undertook a major study of the Cleveland public schools, forecast to cost \$50,000. In agreeing with the appropriateness of studying the school system, Goff underscored the Foundation's unique capacity to undertake such a study: "the schools are the very thing we ought to tackle. Nobody else dares do it." Goff hired Leonard P. Ayres, the education director of the Russell Sage Foundation and a former school superintendent, to lead the study.¹⁰¹

Ayers announced the Foundation's study in April 1915, and he and his staff began researching and presenting findings in the fall at public meetings. He proposed more than 100 recommended changes to the school system in the public presentations and in twenty-five public reports, including special education for the gifted, handicapped, foreign-born, and "the incorrigible;" expanded vocational training; the introduction of general science teaching and civics; free textbooks; and compulsory attendance.¹⁰²

The elected school board relied on Ayers's assistance in selecting a new school administrator to be appointed by January 1917. Over the next six years, nine-of-eleven school board seats were filled with candidates friendly to Ayers's recommendations; a follow-up investigation by the Foundation determined that three-quarters of the recommendations had been implemented. By then, the widespread interest in the education system in Cleveland sparked by the Foundation survey led to the passage of five school-bond issues.¹⁰³

For decades thereafter, the Cleveland school system was considered a model system, and about 100,000 volumes of the Ayers reports were sold to members of the community as well as to those interested in education reform throughout the world.¹⁰⁴

Propelled by the wide publicity and positive reception and impact of the education survey, the Survey Committee of the Cleveland Foundation decided to undertake a survey on recreation in Cleveland in late 1916. Recreation opportunities were thought to be too few in Cleveland and their

scarcity was believed to increase both the attractiveness of billiard parlors and the propensity of young people to populate the streets.¹⁰⁵

The survey consisted of an inventory of current offerings in the city as well as an assessment of the recreational needs of youth and adults. Of six contemplated reports, only three were completed before World War I brought the study to a halt.¹⁰⁶

Raymond Moley, then a young professor at Western Reserve University who would later become a member of President Franklin Roosevelt's brain trust and assistant secretary of state, approached the Distribution Committee of the Cleveland Foundation about the possibility of working on the unfinished recreation survey. Moley was hired in May 1919 to direct the study to completion; he completed the survey in late 1919 at a total cost of approximately \$35,000.¹⁰⁷

The recreation survey called for Cleveland to consolidate operation of the city's playgrounds into a single city office, to increased funding from the Cleveland Board of Education for recreational programming, and to create city-sponsored sports leagues. Most notably, the survey articulated the need for a new coordinating body to promote "wholesome sparetime activities."¹⁰⁸

The recommended coordinating body was established in 1920 as the Cleveland Recreation Council under the auspices of the Welfare Federation. The Council immediately pushed for passage of a special tax levy to raise revenues to purchase green tracts on the edge of Cleveland's outlying districts for the creation of parks. The levy passed, and the park board used the new revenues in creating Cleveland's "Emerald Necklace" of parks which encircle Cleveland to this day.¹⁰⁹

Notes

98. Diana Tittle, *Rebuilding Cleveland: The Cleveland Foundation and its Evolving Urban Strategy* (Ohio State University Press: 1992), 27–33.

99. *Ibid.*, 45–46.

100. *Ibid.*, 46.

101. *Ibid.*, 49.

102. *Ibid.*, 50.

103. *Ibid.*, 50–51.

104. *Ibid.*, 51.

105. *Ibid.*

106. *Ibid.*, 51–52.

107. *Ibid.*, 53–54.

108. *Ibid.*, 54.

109. *Ibid.*, 54.