

# The New Crusade for Children's Rights

By FRANK M. CHASE

**R**IGHTS—rights of women, rights of the public and now rights of children. Where? In Kansas, of course. One scarcely thinks of the Sunflower State nowadays without also thinking of rights of one kind or another. But what could be more natural than that the women of this state, the first to gain the right to vote, should lead in the crusade for the rights of their children? This they are doing, and with such vision and high purpose as to set new standards in social progress.

An unfortunate circumstance of child welfare work is the popular misconception of it. Our view of it, generally speaking, is distorted and narrow. Child welfare involves very much more than feeding and clothing the impoverished children of the slums or benefiting the abnormal boy and girl in some way. The needs of the normal child on the farm deserve as much consideration as those of his less fortunate cousin starving in the tenement. In its best sense child welfare is a perfect example of democracy, admitting of no class or racial distinctions.

Happily, such is the conception of the Kansas women. Acting on this broad basis they have laid out their program in such a way that every person in the state with the welfare of a child at heart, may pull together for the good of all the state's children. To accomplish the greatest good, for the most children, in the shortest time possible, is their high ideal.

The directing force of their effort is the Kansas Women's Committee on Child Welfare. This consists of one representative from each of twenty leading state organizations, who represent the special interests of children. It is better described in the words of its secretary and organizer, Dr. Florence Brown Sherbon, as "an adventure in teamwork, born of the desire of the women of the state to work together in some big organic effort, rather than in a multitude of isolated, unassociated projects."

Doctor Sherbon is chief of the Division of Child Hygiene of the Kansas State Board of Health. As the members of the committee would tell you, she is also the real inspiration behind this remarkable movement. Of winning personality and herself a mother, she is able to convey to others her broad vision of child welfare. To her ability to inspire and to arouse enthusiasm must be given much of the credit for the wonderful success in co-ordinating the women's organizations of Kansas into a powerful unit for advancing the interests of children.

Upon its organization, in October, 1919, the committee adopted the Minimum Standards for Child Welfare as a general working outline. These standards were formulated by the International Conference on Child Welfare held at Washington in May and June, 1919, and are being promulgated by the Children's Bureau of the United States Department of Labor. They are generally considered the best existing statement of the minimum protection that children should receive.

With these standards as a basis for its activities, the committee laid plans to proceed along three important lines: first, survey the entire state, to determine the existing conditions with reference to the various interests of childhood; second, engage in an educational campaign for the purpose of suggesting remedial measures for each community's particular defect; third, work for the appointment of a children's code commission.

To the great joy of the committee, the last-named phase of its work was the first to be accomplished, and practically without effort. Governor Henry J. Allen was found to be deeply sympathetic with the movement to better the opportunities of the children. On but learning of the plan of the Kansas Women's Committee on Child Welfare, therefore, he eagerly acquiesced in it. As a result the Children's Code Commission is now at work.

The survey, which has been in progress since last spring, is turning considerable new ground in the field of child welfare. To those persons who are accustomed to think of a child welfare survey as an investigation of an isolated district of a city, made by well-to-do young women spending their spare time in settlement work, the Kansas survey would appear as a revelation indeed. In the first place, it consists of a detailed investigation of the entire state, being the first child welfare survey to do so. It is also distinctive in that each community is surveying itself. Thus the community finds its defects through its own efforts; and, having uncovered them in this way, it may be depended upon to remedy them speedily. In the remedial work the state committee renders assistance, when called upon to do so, but the burden of providing the relief rests upon the local initiative. By thus applying the democratic principles of self-help and self-determination to the conduct of the survey, child welfare is given its rightful meaning as something for all children instead of for only those in need of special care.

The scope of the survey is limited to an attempt to uncover actual community conditions as to: first, children in industry; second, the health of mothers and children; third, dependent, defective and delinquent children. Every precaution is being taken to keep the survey strictly impersonal. That the entire procedure may be kept on a plane above gossip, the survey workers are instructed to permit no names or personal data in any written form. Facts, not names, are sought.

Determined upon doing a thing, Kansans usually set about their task with the ardor of crusaders. The campaign for their children's welfare is no exception to the rule. In the method of organizing for the sur-

vey and in the zeal displayed in carrying it out, indeed, one is reminded of the war drives in which the state successively "went over the top" with colors flying. And if the enthusiasm manifested in the surveys of the first counties is any criterion, the colors are not going to trail on the ground in the present crusade.

This survey, which will reach eventually into every nook where a child might exist, is being directed by the Kansas Women's Committee on Child Welfare through a succession of chairmen for the congressional districts, counties, and towns or cities. In the rural communities the school district is the survey unit, the local chairman appointing two or more canvassers for each district. In cities the territory is divided according to local needs and conditions. The canvassers work in the neighborhoods in which they reside, and there has been no difficulty in obtaining sufficient workers to conduct the survey or in securing the answers to the questions. The questionnaire used by the canvassers fills six typewritten pages, providing for the gathering of every possible bit of information bearing on the wel-



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fare of the state's childhood. The survey of Riley County, which was one of the first to be made, illustrates the organization necessary for gathering the statistics and the enthusiastic willingness of the people to do their share of the work. In this county the entire survey was planned and executed in one month. Despite unfavorable weather, the collecting of the information in the rural districts required but one week; while in Manhattan, the leading city of this county, the survey was completed in one day. About two hundred and fifty women were chosen to make the canvass in this city. At the blowing of a certain whistle at nine o'clock in the morning, the pre-arranged signal, every canvasser began her part. So carefully and minutely was the city districted that no worker had to spend more than one and a half or two hours in making her calls.

Not one person in this county refused to supply the information requested by the canvassers. This was largely due to the fact that a thorough publicity campaign carried on through speakers and the press had prepared the way for them. Everyone knew beforehand of the survey and its purposes.

In arranging the surveys the aim is to interest and give a share of the work to every local women's, civic, business and religious organization. Usually this is not difficult to do, the advantage of the child welfare survey to a community is so evident; for it should be remembered that such an investigation unearths the good points of a community as well as the weak ones. The extreme willingness of the people to share in this work is well expressed by Doctor Sherbon, who has said: "The people of Kansas were never so alive to the interests of the children as they are at the present moment. Everybody wants to do something for Kansas children. If 'everybody' can only get behind a plan which is organic, elastic and permanent, it should be possible to accomplish much during this

reconstruction period. Social ideals are now fluid, but will rapidly set into the permanent mold of post-war habits and traditions. Now is the time to shape these ideals for the lasting benefit of children and society."

From the beginning of the campaign the state committee has urged the women's organizations to discuss child welfare in their meetings, that their communities might be in better shape to remedy their deficiencies after the survey had unearthed them. To aid them in doing so, the Kansas members of the Association of Collegiate Alumnae prepared a set of twelve club study programs based on the International Minimum Standards.

These programs consist of references which have been carefully selected with a view to assisting interested groups in preparing popular presentations of the various phases of child welfare. They are so arranged that several short papers may be developed on each phase of the subject. The general topics are as follows: children in industry (in two parts); maternity; infancy; the pre-school age, two to six; school children (in two parts); adolescent children (in two parts); dependent children; defective children; delinquent children.

Through these programs the organized women of the state are being brought to see the many ways in which they can promote the welfare of children and to understand the community's relation to everybody's child. They are a new and distinct contribution to the literature on child welfare, and have been widely commended by public health workers. The college women have also prepared authoritative outlines containing extended references on each of the foregoing topics, for the use of communities desiring to make detailed studies of their particular problems.

Another valuable contribution to the educational part of the campaign was made by the Women's Bar Association of Kansas. This organization has a representative on the state committee, through whom it pledged to answer all requests of women's clubs for information concerning the state laws which bear on child welfare.

This survey which the women of Kansas are directing is no spineless and toothless affair. It is not being made, as many surveys have been made, for the purpose merely of gathering information. Its well-defined object is to find the weak spots of the state and its communities with respect to child welfare, in order that remedial measures may be trained upon them.

As soon as the results for the state as a whole are known and tabulated they will be placed before the Children's Code Commission, to aid it in shaping legislation to meet the special needs of Kansas. Each community will also be urged to follow up the survey by attending promptly to its greatest need. For its assistance the state committee has community programs worked out to fit the various local needs uncovered by the survey. Thus, if a community becomes aware of a bad milk situation, this committee is prepared to put it in touch with the best available aids and to offer suggestions for putting on a pure milk campaign. If the community decides, after the survey, that it should have a school nurse, or a county nurse, the committee will suggest methods of getting one. Another community may feel that the results of the survey justify it in trying to obtain a full-time county health organization. Still another may have a critical recreation, delinquency or school hygiene problem. Whatever the problem, the help of the state is volunteered in meeting it.

As an illustration, one of the first cities of Kansas to make its child welfare survey found that its special need was a children's health center. On the other hand it obtained much satisfaction through learning that it was caring especially well for its defective, dependent and delinquent children. The residents of this city, incidentally, were so well pleased with their good showing that they straightway volunteered the money for correcting its weakest spot.

It is not unlikely that the Kansas women will add to their other influence in bringing about the program for the rights of their children the power of the vote—their vote. "While the communities are carrying out their various follow-up activities," said Doctor Sherbon in addressing the survey workers, "the fall elections will occur. It is to be hoped that this survey will inject some new issues into local and state politics, and that the votes of the people will be given to those men and women who will pledge themselves to a platform of children's rights."

"When the legislature convenes and the Children's Code Commission submits its report, this survey machine should convert itself into a gigantic legislative committee to see that a constructive legislative program goes through."

"This federation of effort and interest should persist until every local condition inimical to the well-being of children is corrected, and until every weak law is strengthened, all necessary new legislation passed, and then be passed along to the next generation in order that the legislation may be enforced and social education proceed along its evolutionary course."

"Kansas women have won their rights. They are in a new crusade for children's rights. The thing which we have undertaken is tremendously important and significant. From the spirit shown it bids fair to be another achievement in which Kansas will lead out and set a pace for the world. Kansas has been at the head of the procession in prohibition, women's suffrage, and in cigaret and industrial legislation. It seems certain that she will be a leader in the new crusade."