

Josephine Shaw Lowell and the Founding of the Charity Organization Society

by Ethan G. Sribnick

In the midst of the Great Recession, one organization that has led the efforts to help the poorest New Yorkers is the Community Service Society (CSS). In doing so, CSS is fulfilling the mission of poverty relief it set out for itself since it was created through the 1939 merger of two nineteenth-century charitable organizations. Over time, CSS has reoriented its focus away from simply providing assistance to the poor and towards providing avenues to lift poor families out of poverty. Since the welfare reforms of 1996, explains David R. Jones, CSS president and CEO, the organization has concentrated its attention on workforce issues. “We were looking at the ability of people to move from school or non-work into work, and how do you support primarily low wage workers and improve their standard of living and ultimately give them a career path into [the middle class],” Jones elaborates. “Then the recession hit,” and a lot of these programs have “gone into overdrive.”

The efforts of today’s CSS to help poor families become self-reliant reflect the efforts of one of CSS’s predecessor organizations, the Charity Organization Society (COS), during the economic downturns of the late nineteenth century. In 1873, the collapse of an investment bubble wreaked havoc on the economy, striking New York City, the nation’s financial center, particularly hard. By the winter of 1873–74, 25 percent of New York’s labor force was out of work and those who continued to work faced declining wages. The economy would not recover until 1879; in later years, this period would become known as the “Long Depression.”

This portrait of Josephine Shaw Lowell when she was 37 years old was taken shortly before the founding of COS.



The depression’s social problems—families struggling to pay for rent and food, vagrants wandering the streets—spurred the development of social science, as reformers conducted detailed investigations to generate the most efficient solutions to these dilemmas. One of the leading figures calling for systematic investigations of society and scientific charity was Josephine Shaw Lowell. A descendent of the Boston elite and a Civil War widow—she dressed in black for the remainder of her life—Lowell began her career as a volunteer for the State Charities Aid Society, a private organization advocating modernization of New York’s charitable institutions. In 1876, based on her impressive investigative work, Lowell was appointed by the governor to the State Board of Charities making her the first woman named to an official position in New York’s history.

Lowell’s most important contribution was founding New York City’s Charity Organization Society (COS) in 1882, an effort to provide a coherent structure to the provision of charity in the city. Lowell and the other COS founders recognized that the city’s most destitute needed assistance to survive. Yet, Lowell believed that unrestrained charity contributed to pauperism—dependency on charity—a state that was bad for both the individual and for society. “As long as indiscriminate almsgiving continues,” Lowell wrote, “so long will the streets be full of beggars.” Lowell, however, was optimistic about the future of society. “Vagrancy and homelessness need not be permanent evils,” she wrote, “... they can be cured and they ought to be cured.” This cure rested in scientifically organized private charity



This photograph portrays the friendly visitors associated with the Junior Sea Breeze Hospital, a hospital for children in Brooklyn, New York.

that could effectively oversee charitable assistance in the city. The termination of public cash relief in New York City in 1876 provided Lowell with the opportunity to test her theories of scientific charity through COS.

Scientific charity promised to connect each aid-seeker with the charity best suited to their needs. For this to be effective, COS had to procure an agreement with every one of the city's charities. The organization quickly accomplished this task; in its fifth year of operation, COS proudly announced they had enlisted "nearly every important and influential relief-giving agency and nearly every self-supporting church in the city."

At the heart of COS's method were the friendly visitors. These volunteers, mostly women, served two roles. First, they investigated families seeking aid to ensure they were deserving of assistance and to match them with the most appropriate charity. They evaluated whether applicants

were "well conducted and industrious" and "temperate and steady," as well as the family's "general moral condition." Second, the visitors attempted to form a personal bond with the families to provide, in Lowell's words, the "moral oversight for the soul" needed to lift a family out of poverty.

Over the late nineteenth century, COS created a more sophisticated system of investigation and relief than the city had ever seen. Dividing the city into districts, COS set up an office in each and appointed a committee to oversee the work of the friendly visitors. Lowell herself volunteered on a committee on the Lower East Side. Each week the district committee would meet, review the visitors' findings, and determine the next step for each family. The visitors' and committees' work was thorough, not only were the family and neighbors interviewed, but letters were written to anyone that may have had contact with those in need. The records kept by COS and their contacts across the city

created a web of knowledge about poor families. By the mid-1890s, COS had already compiled records on 170,000 cases.

Based in their belief that excessive charity would lead to pauperism, COS would sometimes use these investigations to cut off assistance. When one woman applied for assistance in 1896 claiming that her husband had fled to England and abandoned her, COS traced her history back to 1882 when she had first appealed for charity. The woman's long history of requests and her prior refusal to accept work led COS to reject her claim.

In most cases, however, COS hoped to recreate the neighborly charity of small towns that was lost in the anonymity of the city. One woman who appealed to COS had been deserted by her husband and left to care for a 12-year-old girl and an 11-year-old boy. Initially, COS found her work as a domestic, but her "inefficiency" lost her every job. Finally, COS located a "well-to-do sister" and sent the family to live with her, transferring "the burden of the community to her own kith and kin." A German family with five children in which the father was seriously ill provided another success story for COS. The organization found a place for an infant in a day-nursery, an early form of day care, so the mother could work. Additionally, they found

This photograph, taken by reformer Jacob Riis in the late nineteenth century, shows poor children at work in their home.



This late nineteenth-century image portrays a mother and her four children living in a tenement in New York City.



work for the older daughters, aged 15 and 12. "In this way," COS reported, "the family was made self-supporting, and continue to do well."

The history of COS provides a mixed legacy for those on the front lines of fighting poverty today. Lowell and her colleagues often blamed the poor for economic conditions that were outside of their control. At the same time, they developed structures and methods that still inform today's social service providers. We should not have "too rosy" a view of Lowell's work, cautions Jones of CSS, but there are "echoes in terms of our work today." Lowell's desire to "get data" and provide a scientific portrait of poverty in the city still drives the research conducted by CSS. Lowell and other early leaders of COS also understood the importance of getting "the message out to the public and policy makers about what should be done." Jones points out that "they were using the new media of the time," publishing reports and photographs, "to provide an understanding to the public about what was going on." Today, concludes Jones, "we use some of the same techniques." ■

ICPH's resident historian, Ethan G. Sribnick, takes an in-depth look at the history of family homelessness, poverty, and the development of social services in New York City in the third in this series of columns.