[No one] taking federal funds . . . is going to be called a pauper while I am running this Federal Relief Administration.

We are going to meet this situation whatever it costs. We are going to take care of the victims of civilization. They are the first charges on our honor as a nation.

—Harry Hopkins, 1934

Harry Hopkins seemed to be at the peak of his career in the late 1920s. He ran a prestigious organization, had a national reputation as a social work administrator, and took an active role in shaping standards for his profession. He had worked his way through personal tragedy and, while relations with his family would always remain problematic, he had arranged his private life to suit his public pursuits. Yet he was merely on the threshold of a career about to skyrocket. The Great Depression set the stage for Hopkins to display the talents he had refined during the past fifteen years. The enormity of the disaster forced him to draw on his entire reserve of energy and imagination, yet he never transcended the bounds of “the American Way,” remaining committed to
democracy and capitalism. If he did not feel as suspicious of the poor as most Americans did, Hopkins still shared in the general attitude that government handouts without some rather strict rules would enfeeble recipients. The federal programs that Hopkins eventually set up in order to alleviate destitution may have seemed radical to the business elite, but, at least before 1936, they operated within a culturally conservative ideology, emphasizing self-reliance, personal industry, and the sanctity of the traditional American family. Like Roosevelt, Hopkins often spoke in defense of the newly destitute American worker, but his solutions to the economic disaster always fell well within the traditional format for public assistance. New Deal programs targeted overwhelmingly the previously-employed, newly-impoverished industrial worker.

When the Great Depression plunged New York State into economic chaos, Governor Franklin Roosevelt provided New York social workers with access to power. This activist group urged him to take action. By November of 1931, the unemployment rate was nearing 25 percent in some industrial cities. The governor undoubtedly faced a crisis situation. Roosevelt, according to historian Kenneth Davis, overcame his “conservative ideological aversion to providing state relief to individual persons” and declared that the state government was obliged to ensure the welfare of these people thrown into poverty because of circumstances beyond their control. This notion of governmental responsibility certainly found common ground with Harry Hopkins, who had been in New York City struggling to secure diminishing private funds to support his work program. Hopkins recalled what it was like in New York City in 1929, stating that virtually millions of people had been thrown out of work: “Almost every time the clock ticked a man lost his job.” Relief efforts for unemployed and destitute New Yorkers reflected not what was needed but merely what funds were available. For every man put to work, hundreds of others were relegated to the bread lines. Hopkins did not accept President Herbert Hoover’s assertion that relief was a local problem and therefore a local responsibility. It quickly became apparent to Hopkins and to other social workers that their community no longer had the funds to relieve the destitution of the alarming number of unemployed workers. The Hoover administration, nevertheless, merely enjoined the people to rely on their proud national characteristic of “rugged individualism.” However much the industrial worker wanted to be self-reliant, Hopkins and his colleagues knew that the economy simply would not allow it.

The New York City social work community comprised a close-knit coterie that historian William Bremer called “a kind of interlocking welfare directorate,” a hardworking and dedicated group of men and women who took the lead in establishing policies that not only would sustain the morale of the