

**Governor's Planning Council  
on Developmental Disabilities**

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**Minnesota's  
State Institutions**

**The report of a special com-  
mittee appointed by the Min-  
nesota State Federation of La-  
bor to make a Survey of State  
Institutions.**

**February, 1927.**

# Minnesota's State Institutions

To the Officers and Members of the Trade Unions of Minnesota:

The Convention of the Minnesota State Federation of Labor held in 1926 adopted a report of a special committee which recommended that the President of the Federation be empowered to appoint a committee to make a survey of the state institutions under the direction of the State Board of Control of the state of Minnesota.

Pursuant to this action of the convention, President Hall appointed Vice Presidents Starkey of St. Paul, Munkeby of Duluth, Fullerton of Minneapolis, and Geo. W. Lawson, secretary of the Federation, who was appointed chairman of the committee.

As an introduction to the report of this committee, it might be well to explain the conditions which were responsible for the action taken by our 1926 convention. In the 1923 session of the Minnesota Legislature a bill was introduced which would permit the Board of Control to establish industries in the various hospitals for the insane in this state. The State Federation of Labor officially opposed the enactment of this legislation and it failed of passage. In 1925 a bill was introduced authorizing the Board of Control "to establish, construct, equip, maintain, and operate, in connection with any of the State Institutions under its control and supervision a factory or factories, for the manufacture of woven wire fencing, cloth, and fibre furniture, or any or all of the same." This proposed legislation was also officially opposed by the Federation of Labor and failed of passage. Statements were made upon the floor of both the House and Senate during these two sessions of the Legislature that there were hundreds if not thousands of inmates of these institutions in enforced idleness and the labor movement was charged with taking a position against having them employed which would assist in their rehabilitation.

It might be pertinent at this time to point out that this is not the position of the organized labor movement of Minnesota. We have opposed, and do oppose, the establishment of industries in any state institution for the manufacture of articles to be sold in the open market in competition with free labor. We also oppose the exploitation of the inmates of the state institutions for private profit, or, in other words, the contract system. We have always maintained the position that articles manufactured in state institutions should be

used by the state or its subdivisions in their institutions, and the recommendations that this committee makes embodies that idea.

After the two attempts as outlined above to institute in our state institutions the establishment of factories had failed, the officials of the Federation realized that our movement as a whole was ignorant of the actual conditions in these state institutions and held the opinion that this ignorance applied to most of the people of Minnesota who did not come in direct contact with these institutions. It was apparent that if this question was to be discussed intelligently from the standpoint of our own position, that information would have to be gathered and a study made of the conditions as they actually existed. As far as we know, no other organization, or group of our citizens, have ever made a complete survey of all of the institutions under the State Board of Control. It was realized that such a survey would consume considerable time and cost some money, but the special committee which studied the question felt that the information to be obtained would be worth all the time and money necessary. With this explanation we feel that all interested parties will understand the reasons actuating the convention in authorizing the appointment of the committee which is now submitting its report.

The committee desires to emphasize the fact that it began this survey with no axes to grind, with no political obligations of any kind, with no favoritism as far as the Board of Control, the present administration in power in the state, or to those in charge of these institutions. The Committee's analysis of what it found and their suggestions are made with no regard as to who may agree or disagree with them. Their report is submitted in an earnest effort to convey information and arouse the interest of all the citizens of Minnesota in a very important question, and also to arouse them to a realization of their responsibility for these thousands of mentally, morally and physically defective that are in reality wards of the state.

A request was made of the State Board of Control for a letter of introduction to the heads of all institutions under their jurisdiction. This letter was gladly and cheerfully furnished with the additional statement that if the committee found any difficulty in securing all the information it desired or seeing all parts of the institutions it visited, that the members of the Board would be glad to see that its desires along these lines were complied with. The Committee desires to express at this time its appreciation of this courtesy upon the part of the members of the State Board of Control.

The visits to the state institutions were not made at any one period. They began in September, 1926, and were not completed until the 25th of January 1927. No institution had any knowledge of our visit previous to our calling upon the superintendent of the institution. Some of them were called upon at nine o'clock in the morning and others at four o'clock in the afternoon. The committee was permitted to see everything there was in the institution. There was no information requested that was not furnished. There was no part of

the institution that the Committee was not permitted to see and examine at length. There were no classes of inmates or patients that it did not come in contact with, and it desires to express in this report its appreciation of the treatment afforded to this committee *by* those in charge of the institutions it visited. They were uniformly courteous and anxious that the committee should have access to everything in the institution and to furnish it with all statistical information that it desired.

The Committee visited thirteen institutions as follows:

The Insane Asylums at Anoka, Hastings, Willmar, Fergus Falls, Rochester, and St. Peter. The School for the Feeble Minded at Faribault, the School for the Blind and the School for the Deaf at Faribault. The Training School for Boys at Red Wing. The School for Girls at Sauk Center; the State Prison at Stillwater; the Reformatory at St. Cloud, and the Reformatory for Women at Shakopee.

The Committee did not visit the Colony for Epileptics at Cambridge; the Sanatorium for Consumptives at Walker; the Hospital for Crippled Children at St. Paul; nor the State Public School at Owatonna; feeling that none of these would really enter into the questions that were responsible for the appointment of this committee. As the history of the appointment of the committee brings forth, it was primarily a question of the industries and of the employment or unemployment of the inmates of these institutions that was uppermost. However, the committee had not gone very far in its work before its survey broadened naturally. It found problems that were not related to industry as such, and an effort will be made to point out some of these problems and our own suggestions for meeting them. For the purpose of this report and, we believe, an easier comprehension of the subject, the institutions will be divided into two groups; the penal and correctional in one, and the medical, supervisory and educational into another. In the first class naturally falls the State Prison at Stillwater; the Reformatory for Women at Shako-pee ; the Reformatory at St. Cloud; the School for Boys at Red Wing, and the School for Girls at Sauk Center. In only one of these institutions is there a problem of unemployment. That is at the Reformatory in St. Cloud. As far as the State's Prison is concerned, there was not a question of unemployment, but a number of inmates were working overtime. At the Reformatory for Women, all inmates were occupied either in the manufacture of clothing or in the maintenance of the institution. At the School for Girls at Sauk Center and for Boys at Red Wing, all were occupied at some task outside of school hours. The Reformatory at St. Cloud, however, has a problem in this connection. At the date of our visit there were 846 inmates, the average age being 22 years, ages ranging from 16 to 30. This is an increase of 200 during the past two years. Occupations now available employ 450 inmates, but some employment must be provided for the others. The State Board of Control in its report to the Legislature has recommended the establishment of a branch of the prison twine plant in St. Cloud. Your committee is not in accord with this recommenda-

tion. If St. Cloud is reformatory in effect as well as in name, then the recommendation does not solve the problem. No beneficial results to the inmates of St. Cloud can be visualized from working in the twine plant unless it be the idea that they are going to graduate from the St. Cloud Reformatory to the Stillwater Prison and be more adept at running twine machinery at the latter place. The Committee believes it possible to install at St. Cloud occupations that will provide a training for those men that they can use when they re-enter society, and will at least give them an opportunity to seek a livelihood in some business vocation. There could be installed at the St. Cloud Reformatory facilities for the manufacturing of institutional furniture, thereby providing all of the other state institutions with furniture that is now bought in the open market. Blankets for which there is a large demand and need in all state institutions; school desks, to be sold to the subdivisions of the state; auto license plates, for the use of the state, are also industries that could be installed. All of these enumerated industries would not only give employment, but be the means of teaching those who probably have no trade of any kind something useful and that they could find work at upon their release. However, it must be understood that these articles are to be used by the state or its subdivisions; it is not the essential thing with the St. Cloud Reformatory to show a profit; that these articles should not be charged to another institution or subdivision of the state at a price that was above the cost of manufacture, which has been done before, so that the cost to the institution of articles manufactured in other institutions has been in excess of what they could be bought for in the open market. In so far as articles necessary to maintain the state institutions can be made in other institutions it should be used to reduce the cost of maintenance to the entire group and not with an idea in mind that certain institutions shall produce a profit which in reality is merely a paper profit because it comes out of some other institution and all of them are supported by the citizens of Minnesota.

In the matter of the Red Wing Training School for Boys, might we again say that if this is to be a training school in fact as well as in name, that these boys should be trained in occupations and under such conditions as will give them an opportunity of earning an honest, decent livelihood when they are released as wards of the state. We found in some cases at this school old and obsolete machinery used in training in some of the trades and those using this equipment would be totally unfit and unqualified to go into the modern shop or factory and work because of their lack of knowledge of modern equipment. This is a very short-sighted policy in the opinion of this committee. This is an important factor in making it possible for the largest possible percentage of these boys to make good and be an asset to society. Modern shop equipment, therefore, is a crying need at this institution. Another problem that confronts at least the Stillwater prison, the Reformatory at St Cloud, is a question of housing facilities for the inmates committed to their care. When this committee visited Stillwater in September, 1926, 225 inmates were sleeping in the cor-

ridors. The school room had been moved to the basement to accommodate cots. The population was 1,234 at that time. We understand that a new cell block will be authorized by the present session of the Legislature, but when that is completed they will be very little better off as it will be completely filled immediately upon its completion. The St. Cloud Reformatory is very crowded and the separation and grading of the inmates can not be done, which is absolutely necessary and fundamental in a reformatory of that nature.

The Committee found at Shakopee in January, 1927, ninety inmates which exceeds the number for which facilities are provided in the present buildings at that institution. This condition has made it necessary for two women to occupy the same room in several instances. This is not conducive to the best results and creates an additional problem for those in charge of the institution. This should not be permitted at Shakopee any more than it is at the Stillwater prison.

Your committee is not in accord with, and cannot refrain from characterizing as false economy, the failure to provide sufficient buildings to adequately take care of those committed to these institutions. We have inquired of every one of the heads of all of the institutions as to whether or not in their judgment there is any evidence that would lead to the belief that the population of these institutions was declining. All are in accord with the belief that they will continue to increase in population. In so far as those now in charge of the affairs of the state refuse to recognize the necessity for providing proper and sufficient buildings to house those committed to these institutions they are simply passing this responsibility to future administrations which will then be confronted not only with the necessity for providing for conditions of natural increase, but also for the condition that has been neglected by those now in authority. There is no economy in this kind of a procedure. It may be good politics, but in the final analysis the taxpayer will have to pay whatever may be necessary to provide accommodations for these wards of the state. It must be recognized that those in charge of these institutions have nothing to say as to the number of persons that may be committed to their care. The courts in the exercise of their functions commit men, women and children to these institutions. They must be accepted whether there is accommodation or not and the present condition of overcrowding in the institutions is certainly not to the credit of the State of Minnesota. Our state is not poverty stricken. It has ample resources, and its people are amply able to assume their obligations and to maintain these institutions. This committee is strongly opposed to a policy that necessitates the housing of these unfortunates in corridors, the doubling up of inmates that may result in further tragedies and produce ill effects upon those whom we hope may be returned to their useful place in society.

While dealing with the subject of penal and correctional institutions, your committee desires to give recognition to a claim that has been made quite frequently in recent months that the inmates of

these institutions are being coddled and are not receiving punishment in the accepted sense of the word for their violations of the laws. From our investigation and observation this is not true. The discipline in these institutions is very rigid. The supervision is very thorough. The rules and regulations of the institutions are strict and must be obeyed to the letter. It is true, of course, that they are housed in clean and sanitary buildings; that their food is clean, but it cannot be claimed that it is either of such variety and served to the inmates in such a manner as to make it an attractive place to eat, that they are not under-nourished; which is perfectly proper. They are expected to work and do work. And we hold that not one of our citizens demands that they are to be starved or to be confined in dungeons or insanitary places, but there certainly is no basis for the charge that the penal institutions in Minnesota are providing recreation places for violators of our laws. The other classification of these institutions taking in the hospitals for the insane, the School for Feeble-minded at Faribault, and the Schools for the Blind and Deaf at Faribault present an altogether different problem. Taking first the two schools, one for the deaf and one for the blind, they are, of course, not institutions to which the state commits any one but are in fact public schools conducted by the state. We found in the School for the Blind 100 inmates, 60 male and 40 female. In the School for the Deaf, 128 male and 128 female students at the time of our visit. We found them efficiently conducted and doing a fine piece of work for these unfortunate people. They were not, as in the case of other institutions, over-crowded. Of course, they are not compelled to accept students beyond their ability to take care of them. In the case of the school for the deaf, we believe that the industrial training in this school should be increased as much as possible because this is the only avenue through which these unfortunates can earn a livelihood. Where speech is necessary in the conduct of a trade or calling, they, of course, cannot function, and in so far as they can be taught some mechanical trade they will be able to maintain themselves. The committee desires to heartily commend the administration and the conditions as we found them in these two schools.

The institution for the feeble-minded at Faribault should be given immediate attention. On the day of our visit to this institution there were 1,900 inmates, 970 male and 930 female. Out of this number approximately 400 are children. About 400 of these inmates are engaged in some occupation. Some in the maintenance of the buildings, in the manufacture of brushes and rugs; the farm, of course, in the summer time taking care of some that are not so usefully employed in the winter time, and the tailor shop using a number of women. The balance of these inmates are not able to perform any occupation because of their mental condition. The institution is horribly over-crowded and while the institution at Cambridge will permit, we understand, the transfer of those who are epileptic, our information is to the effect that the waiting list for Faribault will continue the present over-crowded condition. The state must recognize that in this institution there is a large group of people that are

not subject to any rehabilitation, that they are permanent wards of the state as long as they live and, unfortunately, there is apparently a steady increase to this class. It might be pertinent to suggest that more attention be paid to the causes and conditions and circumstances that bring about this increase in this class of mentally deficient persons. No means, in the opinion of your committee, are too drastic to prevent the propagation of the feeble-minded, the imbecile, *and* the idiotic. And in so far as the laws now on the statute books of Minnesota can be improved to prevent this steady increase of this class of moral and mental defectives, it should be done, but in the meanwhile proper housing and other facilities should be provided for the proper grading, separation and study of this group, and this is not the condition at the Faribault school today.

The hospitals for the insane at Rochester, St. Peter and Fergus Falls are receiving hospitals; that is, they must accept patients committed to their care by the probate courts of our state. The hospitals at Willmar, Anoka and Hastings receive only patients transferred from the other hospitals, and, of course, the latter almost invariably receive only chronic cases that had been found in the other hospitals not to respond to treatment. These latter for this reason are not in the over-crowded condition which exists in the three receiving hospitals. There were in these six hospitals at the time of our visit 7,297 patients, 4,134 of whom were male, 3,163 female. There were 3,034 of these employed, either at some occupation or in maintenance, leaving 4,263 unemployed. However, this unemployment is caused through mental and physical inability to perform any task whatever. It must be recognized that these patients cannot be compelled to work. They must be persuaded. The occupational therapy departments in these institutions are very well officered and should be extended to the extent that the number of patients capable of being used in this department is available. We found that the articles made in this department are to a great extent easily disposed of. An increase, of course, in this department would mean additional supervision. Facilities at present are such that the superintendents of these institutions are not able to grade the patients so as to separate them in accordance with their mental condition. It is apparent to any one who investigates these institutions that the mingling of those not totally mental defectives with those that are in a very low grade of mentality is not conducive to the rehabilitation and cure of the former. It is the judgment of this committee that the state should establish another hospital for the insane; that it should be built and planned for the care of those who are in the lowest grade mentally; that the present hospitals should be relieved of this class of patients who are, in most cases, unable to care for their own person, and those for whom there is no hope of ever coming back mentally to a sufficient degree to be released. If this was done, the care and supervision now necessary in these other institutions for this class of patients could be given to those that have a chance and their chance would thereby be increased.



We found at the St. Peter Asylum, the department for the criminal insane. We made a thorough inspection of this department. We were impressed with the fact that the State of Minnesota is certainly taking some desperate chances under the present conditions existing in that institution. It is not built for this purpose. It is far from being adequately safe from the standpoint of the ability of the insane to escape. There are no facilities for any occupation for these men, most of whom are dangerous, and your committee is in hearty accord with the plan, which we understand is contemplated, to build in conjunction with the Stillwater prison a building for the housing and care of these criminal insane. And it might be possible to enlarge the facilities now at St. Peter after the removal of these criminal insane so that the idea expressed above in this report with reference to the segregation of the total mental defectives could be worked out at that institution.

## SUMMARY

In summarizing the things that this committee has found and its suggestions, permit us to say that in the matter of the employment of those committed to these institutions we have thoroughly satisfied ourselves that there is no unemployment with the exception of the St. Cloud Reformatory as we have pointed out, and that those who are not engaged in some occupation are mentally or physically unable to perform any task. There is no justification for the charge made on the floor of our Legislature during the past two sessions that many of these wards of the state are sitting in idleness and could be usefully occupied. Your committee recognizes that its suggestions and recommendations mean the expenditure of money, but we are of the firm conviction that the proper care, rehabilitation where possible, and proper treatment of these unfortunate members of our community is of greater importance to the state and to society than any plea for economy that can be made. Every one of these men who can return and take his proper place in the scheme of things becomes an asset to society instead of a liability. There are too many of us who do not like to think of the unfortunate among us. There are too many of us who are totally unaware of the ever increasing number of these unfortunates. Unless they are members of our own families or near to us in some way, we do not like to be bothered, nor do we like to think of this tragedy that is close to our doors. However, to the extent that we neglect this very vital question, to that extent we will pay the price for this ulcer on our civilized community. Nothing should be left undone that will protect society from the vicious, the criminal, the defective and the degenerate. We cry for the confinement of these misfits in society, but we do not at the same time consider that if we are to confine them and care for them and protect society from them we must provide the means for carrying this desire of society into effect. There is, of course, a deeper question involved and while it is not strictly within the province of this committee, we desire to suggest that the causes for the ever increasing number of misfits of society should receive more attention than the question of what to do with them after they become misfits.

We have crime commissions appointed for the purpose of studying the question of getting more misfits into our institutions and keeping them there, as if this would solve the problem and reduce the number of such misfits. In the opinion of your committee this is not the remedy. We are spending too much time and effort on the effect and are either afraid to attack the cause or indifferent to the cause that creates the effect. The fact that we have today over thirteen thousand wards of the state under the jurisdiction of the Board of Control is not merely an accident. In every individual case there is an underlying cause. It may be hereditary. It may be environment. It may be abject poverty. But in the final analysis there is some reason for these moral and mental derelicts being a charge upon society. How much research, investigation, honest endeavor to arrive at the cause has there been done by the society that desires protection from these human beings that have become outcasts from society? This, it seems to us, is the gravest problem now confronting modern civilization. To the extent that we measure up to the solving of this problem do we justify ourselves. Locking up the morally and mentally defective is very simple, but the rapid increase of this class should be a challenge to our claim to being a Christian, as well as a civilized community.

There is one phase to this investigation that this committee cannot help but comment upon, and that is that Minnesota is particularly fortunate in the personnel that is in charge of all these institutions. As we said in the introduction to this report, the committee in making this survey had no favorites to play, nor had we any bias or preconceived notions as to what we would find. The men and women heading these various institutions we believe to be of the highest type. Many of them have served the state in these various capacities for many years and we can say with perfect frankness that there is no politics being played in these institutions. Every man and woman heading one of these institutions is doing everything possible in the interest of those committed to their charge as far as the facilities furnished them will permit. They have a keen realization of their responsibility to the State of Minnesota, as well as their responsibility to those intrusted to their care, and any effort upon the part of any individual or group of individuals in our state to change the present system in Minnesota so as to make these institutions the political football of the party in power should arouse every decent citizen of our state to a united protest. The Committee desires to register its opinion that those in charge of our state institutions are administering the institutions committed to their care with a full realization of their responsibility to the state as well as to those placed in their charge. It is to be regretted that a very small percentage of our citizens know anything about those institutions. It was the universal comment of those in charge of these institutions that those placed in charge of our courts and law enforcement agencies, yes, lawmakers themselves, apparently are not enough interested to spend even a day in a thorough investigation of the conditions in, and problems of, these institutions.

Your committee feels that the time and money expended in making this survey has been very much worth while. If by the submission of this report the trade union movement can in any way bring about an awakened consciousness of the responsibility of all the citizens of Minnesota in the matter of the care of this group, it has contributed something of value to society. The members of the committee, of course, cannot convey to any one, the many tragedies in the lives of these unfortunates that were brought home to it so vividly during this investigation. If they are permitted, in a small way, by this investigation to reduce the number of these tragedies, to promote the interests that will serve in the assisting of the rehabilitation of those that it is possible to help, the members of the committee have indeed been fortunate.

With this hope and an appreciation of all of the courtesies extended to us, we respectfully submit this report.

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