Timeline of Social Welfare History

1619: First Africans arrive in Virginia as slaves for plantation owners.

1624: Virginia Colony passes the first legislation recognizing services and needs of disabled soldiers and sailors based on “special work” contributions to society.

1647: First Colonial Poor Law enacted by Rhode Island emphasizes public responsibility for “relief of the poor, to maintain the impotent, and to employ the able and shall appoint an overseer for the same purpose.”

1692: The Province of Massachusetts Bay Acts establish indenture contracting or “binding out” for poor children so they will live “under some orderly family government.”

1729: Orphanage established by the Ursuline Sisters in New Orleans to care for survivors of a nearby massacre

1773: First public mental hospital established in Williamsburg, Virginia

1789: U.S. Constitution ratified with clause equating slaves to 3/5ths of a white citizen and provision that slave trade would end within 20 years.
1790: First state public orphanage founded in Charleston, South Carolina.

1793: Eli Whitney’s invention of cotton gin sets stage for expansion of slavery in American South using slaves to pick cotton.

1798: U.S. Public Health Service created following severe epidemics in Eastern seaboard cities, which were caused by diseases brought into the country as a result of increased shipping and immigration.

1817: Gallaudet University for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing the first free U.S. school for the deaf is founded in Hartford, CT.

1824: The House of Refuge, the first state-funded institution for juvenile delinquents, is founded in New York.

1840: There were only eight “asylums for the insane” in the United States. Dorothea Dix crusaded for the establishment or enlargement of 32 mental hospitals, and transfer of those with mental illness from almshouses and jails. First attempt to measure the extent of mental illness and mental retardation in the United States occurred with the U.S. Census of 1840, which included the category “insane and idiotic.”
1843: Sojourner Truth, an African-American woman who escaped from slavery, begins lecturing for abolitionism.

1843: Robert Hartley and associates organize the New York Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor, which later merges with the Charity Organization Society of New York to form the present Community Service Society.

1851: Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) organized in Boston, Massachusetts.

1852: New York Children’s Aid Society is founded by Charles Loring Brace and began sending abandoned children to homes and farms in the Western U.S.

1857: Dred Scott decision by Supreme Court denies any possibility of citizenship for African Americans, imperils fugitive slaves, and sets back cause of abolition.

1859: John Brown’s unsuccessful raid at Harper’s Ferry, Virginia failed to incite slave rebellion heightens tension over slavery.

1860: On December 20, the state of South Carolina seceded from the Union after Abraham Lincoln’s election as president. Ten other states seceded by May 1861. In April, Confederate forces fired on U.S. troops at Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor. President Lincoln called for troops to put down “insurrection” in the South, beginning the Civil War.
1861: In February, the seceding states established the government of the Confederate States of America and created a constitution endorsing slavery but prohibiting slave trade.

1862: On September 22, President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, granting freedom to slaves in areas of the South in active rebellion on 1 January 1863.

1863: New York Catholic Protectory established. It became the largest single institution for children in the U.S.

1865: The 13th Amendment to the Constitution was approved, abolishing slavery in the U.S. (1789-1865 = 76 YEARS! So much for 20...)

1865: The Freedmen’s Bureau (Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands) is founded as a joint effort of the federal government with private and philanthropic organizations. The bureau provides food, clothing and shelter for freedmen and refugees; administers justice to protect the rights of Black men; protects freedmen and refugees from physical violence; and provides education.

1866: The 14th Amendment to the Constitution was adopted. It defines a citizen as anyone born in the U.S. (except Native Americans) or naturalized, thereby extending all rights of citizenship to African Americans.
1877: America’s first Charity Organization Society established in Buffalo, NY.


1883: Supreme Court Civil Rights Cases overturns the Civil Rights Act and rules that 14th Amendment does not apply to privately owned facilities, including hotels, restaurants, and railroads, leading to segregated “Jim Crow” laws, especially in the South.


1889: Hull House opened on West side of Chicago by Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr.

1890: Jacob Riis’s classic How the Other Half Lives: Studies among the Tenements of New York is published. A documentary and photographic account of housing conditions in the New York City slums, it helps initiate the public housing movement.
1893: Lillian Wald founded the Nurses Settlement, a private nonsectarian home nursing service. In 1895 it moved to become Henry Street Settlement.

1909: The Niagra Movement stimulates the formation of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People by a group of Black and White citizens committed to helping to right social injustices.

1909: Christodora Settlement House Annual Report Published

1909: First White House Conference on Children convened by President Theodore Roosevelt.

1912: The U.S. Children's Bureau is established as a separate government agency, based on an idea initiated by Florence Kelley and Lillian Wald. Julia Lathrop is appointed the first chief.

1917: Social Diagnosis published by Mary Richmond. It is the first textbook on social casework, marking the development of a body of social work knowledge and techniques.


1920: ACLU (American Civil Liberties Movement)
1921: The Sheppard-Towner Maternity and Infancy Act of 1921 was the first federally funded social welfare measure in the United States. Sponsored by Texas Senator Morris Sheppard and Iowa Congressman Horace Towner, it distributed federal matching grants to the states for prenatal and child health clinics, information on nutrition and hygiene, midwife training, and visiting nurses for pregnant women and new mothers. It did not provide any financial aid or medical care. According to some historians, the Shepherd-Towner Maternity and Infancy Act became the model for most of the social welfare legislation for the rest of the century.

1929: The Great Depression creates an economic, political and social welfare crisis in the U.S.

1931: The Nobel Peace Prize is awarded to Jane Addams, the founder of Hull House.

1932: The Council of Jewish Federations and Welfare Funds is founded.


1933: Frances Perkins is appointed United States Secretary of Labor
1933: The March 1933 issue of Survey Midmonthly carried the first in a series of columns that would continue for a decade. The subject of the columns — Amelia Bailey — "Miss Bailey" to most people — was a 1930s-style virtual-reality public relief supervisor.

1933, May 12: Federal Emergency Relief Act signed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

1933, June 16: National Industrial Recovery Act signed.

1935: August 15: Social Security Act is signed into law.

1939: A food stamps plan to dispose of agricultural commodities is begun in Rochester, NY.

1944: The Servicemen’s Readjustment Act, the “GI Bill of Rights” provides education and training through state-administered payments to educational units; subsistence allowance; loans for the purchase or construction of homes, farms, or business property; job counseling and employment placement; and 52 weeks of adjustment allowances, i.e., the “52/$20 Club.”
1946: On July 3, President Harry Truman signed the National Mental Health Act, creating for the first time in US history a significant amount of funding for psychiatric education and research and leading to the creation in 1949 of the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH).

1955: National Association of Social Workers founded by a merger of seven social work membership groups

1962: Michael Harrington's *The Other America* is published, awakening the American public to the nation's increasing level of poverty.

1963: August 28, March on Washington DC for Jobs and Freedom

1964: Civil Rights Act of 1964 passed. Title II and Title VII forbid racial discrimination in "public accommodations" and race and sex discrimination in employment.

1964: President Lyndon B. Johnson declares War on Poverty. The Economic Opportunity Act passed by Congress on August 20. The legislation established the Office of Economic Opportunity and called for the creation of Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA), Job Corps, Upward Bound, Neighborhood Youth Corps and Community Action programs.
1965: Voting Rights Act is passed.

1965: The 89th Congress enacts a number of pieces of social legislation, among them: the Older Americans Act is passed creating the U.S. Administration on Aging, the first central federal body dealing with aging; the Elementary and Secondary Education Act is passed, initiating the first major infusion of federal funds into the U.S. educational system; Medicare is enacted as Title XVIII of the Social Security Act; and Medicaid is enacted as Title XIX of the Social Security Act.

1965: U.S. Administration for Children and Families (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services) is established.

1969: President Richard M. Nixon proposes the Family Assistance Plan in an historic message to Congress. He asserts the existing welfare system has failed and recommends a federal welfare system with a virtually guaranteed annual income. Eventually the plan is withdrawn.
1972: Social Security Amendments of 1972 established the Supplementary Security Income (SSI) program, a federally administered welfare program to replace the state/federal programs of ((aid for the aged, blind and disabled)) populations.

1990: On July 26 President George H.W. Bush signed the Americans with Disabilities Act

1990: Ryan White HIV/AIDS Program.

1990: WIC Supplemental Nutrition Program. (Women, Infant, Children)


1996: On August 22, President William Clinton signed into law the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, ending “welfare as we know it.”

Present: The heart of the new legislation is Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF).