

## Julia Clifford Lathrop (1858–1932)

Julia Clifford Lathrop was an activist and social reformer in the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries and the first chief of the United States Children's Bureau. In that capacity, she conducted demographic studies to identify links between socioeconomic factors and infant mortality rates. Lathrop mobilized the effort to increase birth registration and designed programs and publications to promote infant and maternal health throughout the US. Through her studies, she empirically linked poverty and lack of education with higher than normal risks of infant and maternal mortality, and her results supported legislation aimed at lowering infant and maternal mortality in the US.

Lathrop was born on 28 June 1858 in Rockford, Illinois, to Sarah Adeline Potter and William Lathrop. Lathrop had one sister, three brothers, and was the eldest child in the family. Her father was a lawyer and a member of the Illinois State Legislature in Springfield, Illinois and her mother was active in the women's suffrage movement. Lathrop's friend and colleague, Jane Addams, described the Lathrop household as a place where ambition and independence were encouraged equally in both sons and daughters.

As a child, Lathrop attended local public schools. Addams described her as a good student with a shy personality. According to Addams, when Lathrop was seven her anxiety about being tasked to run a note upstairs was interpreted by her teacher as a show of stubbornness and met with a curt remark. Lathrop later claimed that the moment stayed with her for years and informed her lifelong opinion that too many adults make no effort to respect or understand children. After graduating from Rockford High School in Rockford in 1876, Lathrop spent a year at Rockford Female Seminary in Rockford before transferring to Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, New York, as a sophomore in 1877. Addams described Lathrop as eager to experience the educational opportunities an institution like Vassar provided, although Lathrop found the atmosphere of social formality at Vassar difficult to adjust to. Lathrop spent three more years at Vassar, and received her bachelor's degree in 1880.

Women had few opportunities for careers, so after graduating from Vassar Lathrop returned to Rockford to work as a secretary in her father's law office. In addition to her secretarial and administrative work, Lathrop studied law. In 1889, Addams and Ellen Gates Starr, women Lathrop knew from her year at Rockford Female Seminary, asked Lathrop to join them at the Hull Settlement House in Chicago, Illinois. In settlement houses activists and volunteers, many of them women, lived communally in poor neighborhoods and assisted residents with food, shelter, childcare, and educational programs. Addams and Starr had established Hull House in a neighborhood of working-class immigrants and were recruiting educated women to live there and assist with community development programs. Lathrop agreed and moved to Chicago in 1890 to join the project.

During her time at Hull House, Lathrop participated in a range of social welfare activities. She worked to document potential abuses in mental health facilities, orphanages, and jails. In 1893, after she exposed poor conditions in county shelters and asylums, John Altgeld, the governor of Illinois, appointed Lathrop to the Illinois State Board of Charities to conduct further studies of those institutions and make recommendations for their improvement. Lathrop was also involved in a variety of child welfare efforts. She campaigned against the use of child labor and the incarceration of children in adult jails and worked to help establish the country's first juvenile court in Chicago in 1899. In 1908, she and a colleague, Graham Taylor, founded The Chicago School of Civics and Philanthropy in Chicago. The School instructed people in social work and research best practices and later became a part of the University of Chicago's School of Social Service Administration.

In 1912, Lathrop became the first chief of the US Children's Bureau, a new federal department established by US President William Howard Taft, that year. The Bureau grew out of the efforts of

activists such as Addams, Lillian Wald, and Florence Kelley, women with whom Lathrop had worked at Hull House, and organizations such as the National Child Labor Committee founded in New York City, New York. They had lobbied for the creation of a federal agency that would have the power to investigate, study, and develop standards and solutions for child welfare. Citing Lathrop's years of experience working on child welfare campaigns in Chicago, Addams and others encouraged Taft to appoint Lathrop as chief. After over twenty years at Hull House, Lathrop moved to Washington, D.C., for the position.

In June 1912, Lathrop gave an address before the Biennial Meeting of the General Federation of Women's Clubs in San Francisco, California, in which she outlined her plans for the first few years of the Children's Bureau. In that address, Lathrop stressed the need to approach social issues in a scientific way, using accurate metrics and employing rigorous use of statistics and field studies. She also addressed critics who argued that the Children's Bureau would replace local charities and welfare organizations. She assured them that her approach was to work together with such organizations as much as possible, arguing that such collaborations were necessary for the success of the Bureau's aims. She explained to the assembled Women's Club members that the Bureau's small staff could not accomplish all of its goals without the assistance of local community groups such as theirs. Lathrop suggested that Women's Clubs assist in registering births in their own communities, adding to the Bureau's effort to expand the collection of vital statistics.

When Lathrop became chief of the US Children's Bureau, the purview of the Bureau included issues like child labor, juvenile justice, and infant health and welfare. In a 1914 report to the US Congress, Lathrop argued that the most effective way for the Bureau to use its limited funding was to dedicate much of its effort to a single, well-defined project. For approximately the first decade of the Bureau's operation, Lathrop focused the attention of the Bureau on infant and maternal mortality. Citing census mortality statistics, Lathrop said that too many women and infants were dying of preventable diseases and accidents. In response, she commissioned the publication of booklets such as *Prenatal Care* (1913), which provided pregnant women and their families with pregnancy and birth related health and hygiene guidelines.

From 1913 to 1915, under Lathrop's leadership, the Children's Bureau conducted a large, eight-city study on infant mortality to determine what factors put infants at risk. Lathrop summarized the findings of the study in her 1918 article "Income and Infant Mortality". Lathrop found that poverty and lack of access to accurate information led to higher rates of infant mortality, which informed later projects at the Bureau. In other words, Lathrop found that infants from poorer families lacking access to medical information were more likely to die than infants from richer families.

Throughout Lathrop's time at the Children's Bureau, she received letters both from colleagues in the field and from individual women seeking advice. Historian Alice Boardman Smuts cited one such letter from a woman in Sweetwater County, Wyoming, who wrote Lathrop in 1916 asking for copies of the Bureau's informational booklets. In the letter, the woman expressed her fear at being pregnant while living in a rural area far from medical support, especially after experiencing complications during the births of her two older children. When Lathrop wrote back, she asked the woman for permission to publish her letter. Lathrop explained that the woman's personal story could be an effective way of showing the need for more access to health services in rural communities.

The Children's Bureau conducted studies of maternal mortality in rural communities of the southern and western US. Those studies indicated women faced a high risk of dying during childbirth in those areas. Lathrop argued that if those areas had more nurses to help women birth their children, then maternal mortality rates would drop in those areas. To test that claim, Lathrop urged for a nurse to be sent to one such location, and if the mortality rate dropped, more nurses would be sent to similar areas. In a 1917 letter to the philanthropist Ethel Dummer, Lathrop asked for her help in funding the project and presenting the idea to the Sweetwater County governing body. A nurse was eventually hired through the efforts of Lathrop, Dummer, and Katherine Morton of the Wyoming Public Health Association. Smuts notes that the experiment provided a working model for the kind of programs later funded under the Sheppard-Towner Act. Signed into law by US president Warren Harding in 1921, the Sheppard-Towner Act provided federal funds to states to establish programs and centers aimed at reducing maternal and infant mortality, particularly among rural populations. Lathrop testified before US Congress in support of it.

