

The June Review

BLS celebrates a birthday

The Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) is commemorating its 125th anniversary this month. Congress passed legislation establishing the Bureau in 1884, and President Chester A. Arthur signed the bill into law on June 27 of that year. Carroll D. Wright, the Bureau's first Commissioner, took office in January 1885. Keith Hall, the current Commissioner of Labor Statistics, is only the 13th since the agency's inception. BLS has been part of the U.S. Department of Labor since the Department was established in 1913. The Bureau today has approximately 2,400 employees in its National Office in Washington, D.C., its 6 Regional Offices, and in smaller offices around the country. It employs economists, statisticians, information technologists, and data collectors, among other occupations.

As *Monthly Labor Review* readers are aware, during its long tenure BLS has been a leader in pioneering, refining, and disseminating critical measures of consumer and producer prices, employment and unemployment, compensation and benefits, productivity, and workplace safety. BLS also has long been a leader in producing career guidance information and the occupational projections upon which it is based.

In the preparation of its data and analyses, BLS adheres to widely recognized principles of objectivity and impartiality, timeliness, relevance, and transparency. The lead article in this month's *Review*, by Associate Commissioner William J. Wiatrowski, uses those principles as a roadmap to examine significant events

and changes to BLS programs and methods over the last quarter century, since our 100th anniversary in 1984. He notes that "Since its centennial, the BLS has witnessed rapid growth in technology, a movement towards instantaneous news, the advent of on-line pundits with quick access to data, and a constantly changing economy that can be difficult to measure. Much of what the Agency measured as standard work characteristics a quarter century ago is no longer standard, with such new phenomena as teleworking, medical savings accounts, employee leasing arrangements, green jobs, offshoring, and a host of others challenging the traditional means of measuring labor."



Change, in fact, has been a constant for the Bureau, as it has altered its programs and functions many times over the years to try and keep up with appropriately measuring a changing country and economy. In its early days, prior to the creation of many of the regulatory and mediation agencies we're familiar with today, BLS played a role sometimes far beyond measurement. Commissioners Wright and Charles P. Neill (appointed by President Theodore Roosevelt) were essential in mediating many labor disputes; in fact, Neill helped in settling around 60 railway controversies. Because this work absorbed such enormous amounts of time, Neill worked with Congress to set up the Board of Mediation and

Conciliation, after which Commissioners of Labor Statistics were no longer required to mediate labor disputes. Between 1908 and 1916, BLS administered workmen's compensation for Federal employees. Commissioner Royal Meeker (appointed by President Woodrow Wilson) was instrumental in expanding the program to cover all Federal workers and occupational diseases. He later worked with Congress to establish a Board to relieve BLS of this duty.

But the heart of the Bureau's mission always has been the collection of data and the preparation of descriptive and analytical summaries of the findings. The employees of BLS have striven to provide the public and policymakers with the fullest possible understanding of labor markets contemporary to their time. Commissioner Ethelbert Stewart (also a Wilson appointee) said in 1918, "For 30 years, I have been struggling to put some flesh upon the bony skeleton of mere tabulation." The analytical and editorial staff at BLS, through the vehicle of *Monthly Labor Review* and other publications, continues to happily engage in that struggle.

In today's world of ever-heightening scrutiny over government data and policy, it may be useful to remember the words stated by Commissioner Wright when speaking of the Bureau near the end of his term (which concluded in January 1905): "It is only by the fearless publication of the facts, without regard to the influence those facts may have upon any party's position or any partisan's views, that it can justify its continued existence, and its future usefulness will depend upon the nonpartisan character of its personnel." Words for a statistical agency to live by, and ones the Bureau has tried to adhere to for 125 years. □