



JANET L. NORWOOD

1923 – 2015

A GIANT IN FEDERAL STATISTICS

Janet L. Norwood died March 27, 2015, at a senior living community in Austin, TX. She was 91.

Janet Sonia Lippe was born in Newark, NJ, on December 11, 1923. She graduated in 1945 from the New Jersey College for Women, now called Douglass Residential College of Rutgers University, and four years later received a Ph.D. in economics from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University in Massachusetts. She married Bernard Norwood in 1943 and taught economics at Wellesley before starting her career in federal service in the 1960s. Dr. Norwood was a longtime Montgomery County, MD, resident and member of the Cosmos Club in Washington, a social organization that was founded in 1878 and first admitted women 110 years later. In 1995, she became its first female president.

Statistical Leader in Government Service

Dr. Norwood joined the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) in 1963 as a junior economist with a specialization in international economics. She spent her early career at BLS working in the price office, where she helped redevelop the international price program and manage the consumer price program. She was named associate deputy commissioner for data analysis in 1972, deputy commissioner for data analysis in 1973, and deputy commissioner in 1975. She was nominated by President Jimmy Carter and confirmed by the Senate as BLS commissioner in 1979, becoming the first woman to lead the Bureau of Labor Statistics. She was re-nominated twice by President Ronald Reagan and confirmed by the Senate for two more 4-year terms, before retiring in 1991.



She was a leader in developing a large number of program initiatives at BLS, including starting a continuous Consumer Expenditure Survey; setting up a cognitive research laboratory to improve survey questionnaires; nurturing federal-state collaborative statistical programs; rescuing the National Longitudinal Surveys of Labor Market Experience; and dropping the popular but statistically unsound Family Budgets Program. Her greatest challenge was to implement a long-overdue major change in the treatment of housing in the Consumer Price Index, which reduced the inflation rate, an outcome that was welcomed by some stakeholders but opposed by others. Opposition continued in the face of BLS's extensive research, testing, and production of experimental series to familiarize users with what was coming. Dr. Norwood often told the story that she was asked to accompany the Labor secretary to a cabinet meeting at the White House to justify going forward with the change, and that she had her resignation in her pocket if the Cabinet overruled her on a matter she firmly believed was the sole province of competent statistical agency staff.

Service to Federal Statistics after "Retirement"

During her service as BLS commissioner or following government retirement, Dr. Norwood served as head, board member, or senior adviser of many professional organizations, including the American Statistical Association (serving as its president in 1989), the International Statistical Institute, the American Economic Association, the Urban Institute, NORC at the University of Chicago, the Conference Board, the statistical organization State of the USA, Inc. (SUSA), the Consortium of Social Science Associations, the Committee on National Statistics (CNSTAT), and the Advisory Council on Unemployment Compensation. She also served on advisory committees of Statistics Canada and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

One of the first projects she took on after retirement was to write a book—*Organizing to Count—Change in the Federal Statistical System*, published by the Urban Institute Press in 1995. She proposed combining BLS, the Census Bureau, the Bureau of Economic Analysis, and the statistical policy function of OMB into an independent Central Statistical Board, believing that such centralization was needed to improve the system.

Service at CNSTAT and the Academies

Janet Norwood served two terms on the Committee on National Statistics (1992-1998), a standing unit at the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. She helped CNSTAT become more attuned to the needs of the principal statistical agencies, including BLS and others, by initiating twice-yearly luncheons of CNSTAT members and senior staff with the heads of the members of the Interagency Council on Statistical Policy followed by public seminars on topics of broad interest to the Washington area statistical, research, and policy analysis communities.

She served on and chaired a number of CNSTAT panel studies at the Academies, which produced the reports *Modernizing the U.S. Census* (1995), *The Bureau of Transportation Statistics: Priorities for the Future* (1997), *The 2000 Census: Counting Under Adversity* (2004), *Measuring Racial Discrimination* (2004), *Food Insecurity and Hunger in the United States: An Assessment of the Measure* (2006), and *Change and the 2010 Census: Not Whether But How* (2011). To each of these assignments, she brought dedication, collegiality, and a sterling reputation for objectivity and independence.

Legacy

Janet Norwood was known for her fortitude in the face of political opposition to create meaningful change in federal statistical programs. When she stepped down from BLS, *The New York Times* reported that she had a “near legendary reputation for nonpartisanship.” She won many awards over her career, including the Secretary’s Award for Distinguished Achievement in 1972, the Secretary’s Special Commendation in 1977, and the Philip Arnow Award in 1979. She was also awarded Presidential Rank as Distinguished Executive in the U.S. Senior Executive Service (SES). The School of Public Health at the University of Alabama, Birmingham, named an annual award for outstanding women in statistical sciences after her. She was inducted (posthumously) into the U.S. Department of Labor’s Hall of Fame on World Statistics Day, October 20, 2015.

This brief biographical note can only hope to convey the depth and breadth of Janet Norwood’s contributions to federal statistics. She stood tall and spoke forthrightly in support of impartial, high-quality information that could be trusted by everyone. While publicly a formidable presence, one on one, she mentored many individuals throughout the statistical system, including staff in CNSTAT. She is sorely missed.

