

Our Changing Economy

Budget, Not Need, Sets Relief Policy

By Philip Stoddard Brown

IN COLONIAL Virginia, families "cared for their own" so far as possible. Where necessary, indigents were helped by the Church, which had important civil duties in those days.

The vestry of the Parish of Truro, which included all the Northern Neck north of Occoquan Creek, undertook to employ able-bodied poor. Indigent children were apprenticed. Adults unable to work, or in special need, were helped in whatever way seemed best . . . At the last vestry meeting attended by George Washington before the War, a special levy of 10,000 pounds of tobacco was voted for "such poor as are at present unknown" rendered "absolutely necessary on account of the severity of the winter and scarcity of corn."



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The Truro records show payments of 400 pounds of tobacco in successive years to Nicholas Arnold, "a poor man," 250 pounds to John Harris "to find clothes for his wife," and a lump sum to Elizabeth Palmer "for support of an idiot." More typical, were grants to those who made a business of caring for poor people.

Budget Considerations Dictate

Public assistance 200 years ago was paternalistic and often arbitrary. But responsibility was assumed. Tithes were assessed according to the needs of the indigent. One year they might be 12 pounds of tobacco per head; another, 60 pounds.

Also, the assistance befitted the need—or, at least, that was the intention. One Daniel McCarty was ordered to find William Weston "such quality of Peruvian Bank and Port wine as he shall think proper for the purpose of effecting the cure of an abscess of his liver . . ."

Today, UGF goals are determined in part by willingness to give. The amount of public assistance is determined by "budget considerations." Relief is dispensed by formula rather than by need and is hedged by scores of legal and technical conditions. Negro boys are not allowed apprenticeship training. Jobs too are denied because of race.

It Just Ain't So

Today, as in the past, the public often displays a punitive attitude towards the sick and needy. It blames them for many of the social ills. As in the past, many people cling to false, oft-repeated beliefs:

- Chief among the excuses for niggardliness: "Most persons on relief are malingerers," or "It's their own fault they can't make out." Actually most of the aid to recipients of general public assistance, as well as to recipients of aid to totally disabled, is necessitated by illness and disability. (The death rate among the under-65 group on public assistance is very high.) Many who are not physically or mentally ill have to stay home to care for young children or relatives.

- Another phony assertion is "A large number of persons receiving public assistance are Negroes recently come to the District." Actually, Negroes are the older and more stable residents of the District: 87 per cent have lived here five years or longer, as against only 70 per cent of whites. Of all persons who received general public assistance in fiscal 1959, 20 per cent were born in the District and 60 per cent of the others came here at least 20 years ago.

- Another accusation is: "Indigents are attracted to the District by the over-generous relief payments." Actually, monthly payments for general assistance averaged \$18.54 less than the average for 18 large cities in fiscal 1959.

Have We Become Poor Businessmen?

It's a continuing shame that, despite the great increase in our real incomes over the past 200 years, we do not provide for all needy children, we do not encourage families to stay together—but, instead, encourage desertion—and we do not spend more on making people employable. Maybe, it's because Americans are poor businessmen in the conduct of public business.

In private business, we spend money to save money. In public business, we save one dollar on public assistance this year by incurring two dollars for relief, police protection and institutional care a few years hence. We do this, as Gerald M. Shea director of the Department of Welfare says, by laying down the rule that:

"to qualify for financial aid and the meager counseling aid provided by the Welfare Department, people have had to reach a state of unemployability or permanent and total disability, or family breakdown has to exist through the death, incapacity or absence of a parent."

Why this double standard Why is it good for a private firm to train and look after its people, but not good for the Government to give aid before an act of delinquency, before unemployability or permanent disability is reached, before the breakdown of a family?

Preparing for Bicentennial

In 1976, Washington will be on view as never before. Instead of devoting much of our energies and monies over the next 15 years to "promoting" tourism and industrial development, and to politicking for a World's Fair, would it not be better to concentrate on making Washington "a fair city"—a city of great beauty, a city where all men (and children) are afforded equal opportunity, a city where the less fortunate are treated humanely and wisely? Would not this be a more fitting commemoration of Thomas Jefferson and his colleagues?

The first step can be taken today by more generous contributions to UGF. A second important step is to implement the well-conceived and constructive proposals of Shea in his recent report, "Public Assistance in the District of Columbia." A third step is to provide adequate housing for the less fortunate. A fourth step is to draw upon some of the world's great architects for public and private projects in the Washington area, as the city fathers did long ago.