The Home Relief Controversy in Philadelphia, 1782-1861

Whether or not to give needy persons relief away from the almshouse ("home relief," also known as "outdoor relief") was a subject much debated in many American communities before 1860, and in none more so than in Philadelphia.\(^1\) A 1782 act which authorized any overseer of the poor in the city, with the consent of a justice of the peace, to give up to £3 (\$8) within a three-month period, in cases of "sudden necessity," was the first statute dealing with the issue.\(^2\) Meanwhile, the practice of granting paupers regular weekly allowances (pensions) developed, but in 1796, after the guardians of the poor (as the unpaid municipal officials in charge of public poor relief were now called) had been informed by the city solicitor that there was no legal authority for this, the board resolved to discontinue the practice. In October, 1796, the guardians were reminded that as pensions were illegal, they should "pay particular attention to the Situation of the Poor, in their respective Wards and grant such relief as may be necessary," provided it was in compliance with the 1782 law. The £2,915 spent on outdoor aid in the fiscal year ending March 25, 1797, was almost £500 less than the previous year's amount; total current poor expenditures came to £10,547. The very next year, however, outdoor expenses were £4,607, and in 1798-1799 they climbed to more than £6,000. Probably about this time the fact that pensions were deemed illegal no longer perturbed the guardians, and they restored the system.\(^3\)

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\(^1\) See the author's doctoral dissertation, "Public Poor Relief in America," ch. III (available on microfilm). The author is indebted to Dr. Robert J. Hunter for making available to him the rich collection of manuscript records of the Philadelphia Guardians for the Relief and Employment of the Poor. The volumes are kept in the vault of the Old Blockley Historical Museum of Philadelphia General Hospital. Footnote references are abbreviated GP, followed by the number of the volume, and the date of the entry.

\(^2\) *The Statutes at Large of Pennsylvania from 1682 to 1801* ([Harrisburg], 1904), X, 403 (Act of 1782, sec. 4).

\(^3\) GP, XVII, June 6, 1796. But on Aug. 5, 1796, the pensions of five shillings a week for the parents of George Fox and his brother were continued, as was one for Hannah McLeod's mother on Oct. 6, 1796.
The act of 1803 consolidating and amending the Philadelphia poor law continued the $8 clause, but did not specifically enlarge the powers of the relieving officers. Such an extension of powers might be the purport, however, of a section which authorized any two guardians acting jointly, after a personal visit to the applicant, to give "reasonable and moderate relief" on a day-to-day basis in cases where a pauper required immediate assistance and could not be removed to the almshouse "with safety and convenience." Such a case was to be reported at the next meeting of the full board. If the guardians then thought that the pauper should go to the almshouse, but he refused, he was to be removed from the poor list; if the pauper had not been ordered to the almshouse, the guardians could direct the continuance of home relief.4

Since many applicants indicated that lack of work was the cause of their need, the guardians decided, logically enough, to give a portion of outdoor poor aid in the form of employment. In November, 1806, about 140 women were spinning flax at one cent a cut, tow at one and a half cents a cut, and wool at twelve and a half cents a pound. By 1810, however, the scale of the program had been greatly reduced; rarely were more than thirty paupers employed at any one time. The scheme appears to have been dropped entirely in November, 1826, this despite the fact that several years before a citizens' group had proposed that weekly relief be given only to persons working on tasks assigned by the guardians, unless the recipients were old, infirm, or had small children to support.5

But the practice of granting pensions continued. As an economy measure during a period of business depression (April 1, 1820), the pensions of those aged and infirm paupers receiving more than seventy-five cents a week were reduced to seventy-five cents; fifty cents was to be given to persons over sixty capable of some labor, and persons under sixty who were disabled or in poor health. Parents of

4 Pa., 1802-1803, c. 155, sec. 11, 12; 1811-1812, c. 192, sec. 2, amplified the meaning of sec. 11 of the 1803 act.
5 GP, II, Dec. 17, 1804, and Nov. 10, 1806. GP, Manufacturing Committee Minutes, I, II, III passim. Work for the outdoor poor had been recommended by a citizen's group in A Plan for the Government of the Alms-House, and for Ordering the Affairs of the Poor in the City of Philadelphia . . . (Philadelphia, 1805), 8, 15. The same was true of a report (c. 1820) by the Subcommittee on Poor Laws of the Pennsylvania Society for the Promotion of Domestic Economy, manuscript, The Historical Society of Pennsylvania (HSP).
an infant under eighteen months, or of more than one child under five years (if a girl) or seven years (if a boy) would receive a maximum of twenty-five cents a week for each eligible child, an amount which could be increased if the child was physically or mentally abnormal. Paupers actually confined to bed by illness were to be given suitable allowances. Significantly enough, no one of sound mind and body who was under sixty, or single, or the parent of only one normal, healthy child more than eighteen months old, was to be retained on the pension list. Instructions were issued in May, 1821, to the committee visiting the outdoor paupers, to strike from the list those who were thought able to live without relief during the summer; from this it may be surmised that able-bodied unemployed persons had again been put on the list in the winter of 1820-1821.6

In the year ending May, 1823, 1,222 persons were on a regular pension, while 330 others had received occasional aid. The weekly allowance was sufficient, a committee of the guardians explained, to afford the paupers "a bare subsistence" for themselves and their children, when added to the results of the recipients’ own industry. So extensive were outdoor grants, that in the decade ending May, 1824, considerably more had been spent on outdoor than on almshouse care: $621,000 compared with $470,000. This was said to have been contrary to the intentions of those who had established the poorhouse.7

By a 26 to 5 vote in February, 1824, the guardians decided to eliminate incidental relief, beginning in mid-March, except when the applicant was confined to his chamber by illness or disabled by an accident. Regular pensions could be granted only if a majority of the board approved. Outdoor relief was labeled a “prolific cause of pauperism” in a resolution setting up a committee to study the

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6 GP, VII, Feb. 15, 1820, and May 1, 1821. The same scale for children was adopted again in 1828. Ibid., XVI, Jan. 12, 1828. The committee was also supposed to decrease the allowances whenever they thought it possible. In the minutes of May 17, 1815, it is recorded that six women and a man were removed from the list of outdoor poor, “the season having arrived when persons for whom during the winter provision was necessary to be made, are able to provide for themselves.”

7 Pennsylvania Archives, 4th Series, V, 479; GP, XV, Oct. 6, 1824. Expenditures are net after deducting receipts from fathers of bastards, immigrants, medical students and others. Artemas Simonds of Boston observed that the crowded state of the almshouse resulted in almshouse expenditures of $60,000 a year, while outdoor aid had been $70,000 a year “for some years past [1835].” Boston Common Council, Documents (1835), No. 15, 15.
existing home relief system. May, 1825, found the board reversing its earlier stand: henceforth there were to be no more pensioners. Only incidental relief was to be given, "and that agreeably to the Letter of the Law." Differences of opinion led to proposals for a more liberal policy. After much discussion at a June meeting, a resolution was passed declaring it "expedient and agreeable to the spirit of the Poor Laws, and usage of this Board" to have permanent pensioners; the very next week certain paupers were put on the "regular list." In June, 1826, the guardians adopted a standing resolution of the previous board which allowed "aged infirm or disabled persons incapable of labour" to be given up to seventy-five cents a week, or sent to the almshouse, as the board might direct.  

The practice of an annual clearance of the regular pauper list developed. Thus on the second Wednesday in May, 1826, all the outdoor poor were to be taken off the list. At the end of May a committee was instructed to visit each pauper and place on the list the names of worthy ones; those meriting incidental relief were also to be listed. In June, 1829, though, a resolution to strike all the regular paupers from the list was defeated, probably because the guardians did not wish to take the trouble to re-examine each case. Instructions to the "visitors" (employees of the board who investigated applicants for out-relief) to visit all of the home relief cases at least once a month in order to prevent imposition were thought adequate to deal with the problem.

At the end of 1831, when there were more than 1,600 inmates in the poorhouse, the visitors were told to grant outdoor relief, rather than send paupers to the overcrowded almshouse. The same order was issued the following July because of a cholera epidemic at the institution. Evidently, during the late 1820's, the chief pretext for granting pensions was the lack of adequate facilities at the almshouse, where all types of inmates, virtuous and vicious, were crowded together.

8 GP, XIII, Feb. 4, 1824; XV, Mar. 3, 1824 (it was decided to make the change of policy effective in April), and June 2, 1824. The report is included in the minutes of Oct. 6, 1824; XV, May 11, 1825. The resolution was passed by a vote of 25 to 18. Ibid., XV, June 3, 1825. One proposal would have prohibited outdoor aid to all healthy persons of sound mind and body who had no children under eighteen months of age. Ibid., XVI, June 14, 1826.

9 GP, XV, Apr. 26, 1826; XVI, May 31, 1826; see also XVI, Apr. 5, 1827; XIX, June 25, 1829. Note that "visitors" was the preferred spelling of the period.

10 GP, XVI, Apr. 4, 1827; XIX, Dec. 26, 1831, July 23, 1832.
According to an 1827 report of a committee of the guardians, the receipt of outdoor relief "is calculated in an especial manner to blunt and ultimately destroy that noble pride of Independence, the birth right of every American Citizen on which the very pillars of our Republic, have their Basis—as its consequences are to create a de- pendence on the bounty of others, rather than excite the laudable ambition of creating resources of our own, it cuts the sinews of Industry and of consequence promotes idleness & not infrequently Crimes, its having become common has made it fashionable. . . ." Though conceding that many recipients of out-relief were worthy persons, the committee proposed to eliminate the granting of such relief to all persons who could be removed to the almshouse "with safety and convenience to themselves" (as the law specified). The evil effects of home relief were denounced in 1827 in similar terms by a group of citizens. They pointed out the discrepancy between the provisions of the law and the actions of the guardians, who, in practice, continued to make payments to paupers on the pension lists of their predecessors.

There was cause for concern on practical as well as philosophical grounds. Many were alarmed at the high and rising poor rates. An anonymous writer in the Analectic Magazine pointed to the tax as one reason why people were moving out of Philadelphia. Samuel Emlen wrote to Roberts Vaux in 1821 that if the taxes for the poor continued to rise as rapidly as they had during the previous thirty years, everyone would be a pauper at the end of a century. The guardians of the poor, while not engaging in such dire extrapolations, did recognize the $913,000 levied from 1816 to 1827 as a "serious grievance."

Agitation for an improved relief system was grounded not only on the deleterious effects of home relief on the pauper recipient, but also

11 GP, XVI, Apr. 4, 1827. A committee urged the erection of an additional hospital building to make room for a classification and separation of the almshouse inmates, "thus removing the principal objection against abolishing the system of outdoor pensions."


on the great differences in annual per capita poor expenditures between Philadelphia and other large cities—seventy-three cents, compared with forty-one cents in New York, for example. As a result, an act was passed in 1828 authorizing the erection of the great Blockley poor establishment, now the Philadelphia General Hospital. One important provision of this statute placed a ban on pensions, in language taken almost verbatim from the recommendation of the 1827 citizens’ report. After Blockley was completed, outdoor relief was to be of a temporary nature only.

Arrangements were accordingly made in January, 1834, for the visitors to note beside each pensioner’s name whether he or she was willing to enter the almshouse about to be opened. Those unwilling to be removed would be visited by the guardians to “ascertain and report those who ought not to receive outdoor relief.” The inmates of the old poorhouse were removed to the new one only at the end of July. Since all the buildings had not yet been finished—in particular, the house of employment—outdoor aid was still being given for the time being, when deemed “absolutely necessary.” The guardians reported with regret that as yet “the retrenchment of expenses for the support of the outdoor poor contemplated by law” could not be made. Finally in May, 1835, it was announced that as of July first, in accordance with the law of 1828, no outdoor aid would be given except temporary relief in kind. Nevertheless, a year after this, a resolution was tabled which would have disallowed the accounts of any guardian who did not distribute temporary relief “in strict accordance with Law.” In October, 1836, however, a visitor who had given relief to ten women for several months in succession was ordered to stop it.

14 Howard, To the Citizens of Philadelphia, Paying Poor Taxes (n.p., n.d.), I, 2. Authorship of this series of leaflets is attributed to Mathew Carey. Carey was among those who called a town meeting to correct the defects in the poor relief system and was chairman of the meeting. Poulson’s American Daily Advertiser, July 23 and 25, 1827.

15 Pa., 1827-1828, c. 79, sec. 8; Report of the Committee appointed at a Town Meeting, 14. The sole significant difference between the citizens’ proposal and the law was that the former did not envisage the complete elimination of relief in money.

16 GP, XIX, Jan. 27 and July 28, 1834; XX, Aug. 4, 1834; see also XX, Jan. 12 and May 4, 1835; XXI, May 30, 1836; XXII, Oct. 3, 1836. Mathew Carey noted in 1837 that “for some time past, the sufferings of the poor have induced the guardians to tolerate, in some cases, a barefaced evasion of the spirit, though perhaps not of the letter of the law . . .”; relief was being afforded for one or two weeks and renewed for as long as necessary. Citizen of Philadelphia, Reflections on the system of the Union Benevolent Association (Philadelphia, 1837), 10.
No sooner had the 1828 act been passed, than a movement for its repeal was begun. No less distinguished a citizen than the indefatigable septuagenarian Mathew Carey, a signer of the 1827 citizens' report, led the fight until his death in 1839. He praised the 1828 act as an improvement over the old system of "extravagant expenditure," but he felt that the outdoor clause was a mistake. Just because in the past profligates had been placed on the poor list, he argued, was no reason to compel worthy persons to seek relief at the almshouse; they would rather die than go there. Many, hitherto respectable and industrious, were reduced to begging because they had been deprived of their customary allowance from the guardians. Mothers had been forced to part with their children. How inhuman, deplorable, and uneconomical, then, was a system which relegated to beggary the self-respecting, whose aversion to becoming poorhouse inmates should rather have been encouraged, while supporting in abundance, worthless, intemperate almshouse paupers. The new system was inequitable for still another reason: no longer was the entire citizenry shouldering the burden of supporting the outdoor poor; instead, only the kindhearted were giving alms to those who had become mendicants. At the very least, Carey pleaded, legalize home relief for the categories of the infirm and those over sixty. The latter, it may be noted, comprised at least half of those who had formerly received pensions.

The guardians of the poor opposed the proposed repeal of the pension clause. A unanimous memorial to the legislature in 1829 referred to the "alarming magnitude" of that "engine of destruc-

17 Mathew Carey, *Essays on the Public Charities of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1830), 46; petition to the legislature circulated by Carey for public signature, *Poulson's American Daily Advertiser*, Mar. 24, 1838; Carey, *Letters on the Poor*, 9; *A Panoramic View of the Administration of the Poor Laws in Philadelphia*, Apr. 1, 1837, broadside, HSP; *Outdoor Relief* (proceedings of a meeting held in Philadelphia, Apr. 9, 1838, for the purpose of effecting a repeal of the prohibitory clause of the poor law), broadside, New York Public Library; *The Case of the Out-door Poor Once More* ([Philadelphia], November, 1838), 4; pamphlet addressed to "The friends of humanity, the friends of economy—the friends of the honour of the city and state" [June 1, 1839], 2, 4, HSP. See also Female Hospital Society, Annual Report, 1828, 1829, in *Articles of Association . . . and Reports of the Transactions . . .* (Philadelphia, 1831), 41, 45, and *Poulson's American Daily Advertiser*, Nov. 13, 1834, and Dec. 22, 1836, for other views favoring repeal of the 1828 clause.

18 Hazard's *Register of Pennsylvania*, VI, 266–267 (Oct. 23, 1830); *GP*, XVI, Aug. 30, 1826.
tion,” outdoor relief. Eight years later another, more detailed, memorial informed the legislature of the baneful effect of outdoor aid on the habits of the poor, and of the dangers of removing “the apprehension of want.” Admittedly, home relief was reasonable in cases of illness or other temporary need, but the 1828 law made provision for such cases. That not a single one of the 3,208 persons and families receiving outdoor aid in the year ending May, 1835, applied for admission to the almshouse during the long and severe winter of 1835–1836 was an additional justification for continuing the 1828 provision. To those who thought it desirable to grant outdoor relief when wages were inadequate to support a family, the guardians had a ready reply: wherever the attempt had been made to supplement inadequate earnings with public funds, experience showed that the effect was to lower wages still further; home relief was one factor responsible for the low wages received by some types of female labor in Philadelphia. To strengthen their case the guardians boasted (albeit erroneously) that the English Parliament “has followed the example of the Legislature of Pennsylvania, and abolished outdoor relief.” The reference was to the famous Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, which put an end to outdoor relief for employed persons. However, the English, contrary to a widespread impression, continued the regular distribution of home relief to the aged, infirm, and defective, and to widows and orphans, even after the union workhouses had been opened.

19 GP, XVIII, Feb. 2, 1829. It was urged, in an anonymous article on “Poor Laws” in the distinguished American Quarterly Review, XIV (1833), 89, that when Blockley was completed, outdoor pensions should be “wholly abolished.”


To Mathew Carey the statement appeared “almost incredible” (and rightly so) that none of the outdoor poor had applied for admission to the almshouse. A Plea for the Poor, 13. The guardians asserted that in the year ending July, 1836, there were fewer persons in the poorhouse than in the previous year. The average amount of cash relief distributed in 1833, 1834, and 1835 was $20,000. In 1836 the amount was only $2,242, but the amount of fuel given the poor (about $6,000 worth) was the same as before. In 1836, for the first time, $345 in provisions was distributed. Outdoor relief in each of these years also included about $2,800 in medical relief. Poulson’s American Daily Advertiser, Jan. 14, 1837.

21 4 & 5 Will. IV, c. 76; Sidney and Beatrice Webb, English Local Government: English Poor Law History. Part II: The Last Hundred Years (London, 1929), I, 143–145.
Regarding it as an attempt to remedy a defect in the poor laws, the legislature in 1838 was still willing to give a trial to the new system; the request of many citizens to increase the power of the guardians to extend outdoor relief was refused. But less than five years after the policy of limited outdoor aid had been inaugurated, in June, 1839, Harrisburg finally yielded to the flood of petitions which had been pouring in for a decade. Relief for a period of six months, renewable for a like period, was again made permissible.

The enduring consequence of the 1828 act in the area of outdoor aid was the improved administration made possible by the salaried visitors. More careful screening of applicants resulted in a secular decline in the total amount spent on noninstitutional relief. Not for two decades did these expenditures again reach the level of the middle 1820's, this despite a doubling of Philadelphia's population. Plainly, this form of assistance was being dispensed with greater caution.

Prompted by the recent great increase in outdoor expenses, the guardians instructed the visitors in January, 1850, to visit temporary relief cases every two weeks and pensioners every four weeks. Again in July, 1854, the visitors were told to make particular inquiries into the condition of all recipients, with a view to reducing their number. Still, the following year, a committee of the guardians was complaining about "indiscriminate distribution." The board enunciated the principle that out-relief should be limited to cases where there was a "just fear" that the withholding of such aid would lead the applicants to become almshouse inmates. The visitors were to look into each case promptly, and make up a new poor list. The guardian in whose ward the applicant resided was to receive a report on him and was to recommend to the board appropriate aid for not more than three months, renewable in the same way. Despite these measures, home relief expenditures rose to $80,000 in the fiscal year ending May, 1855, a period of considerable unemployment. To Mayor Conrad the increase of $23,000 over the previous year's amount represented unwise benevolence.

22 Pennsylvania House of Representatives, Journal (1837–1838), II, 470 (Feb. 3, 1838); Pa., 1838–1839, c. 210, which was passed June 25, 1839, approved Jan. 6, 1840, and printed with the 1840 session laws, ibid. (1838–1839), I, 1526. References to petitions are found in ibid. (1836–1837), I, 469; ibid. (1837–1838), I, 318, 528, 652, 656, 971; ibid. (1838–1839), I, 76, 100, 314. Outdoor relief statistics are in the minutes of the guardians; for the 1840's and 1850's, the published annual reports of the auditor were used.
Early in 1856, in a move to restrict home relief further, the guardians ordered that no more than fifty cents a week could be paid to a family, without special approval of the board. The city’s financial embarrassment resulted in the practical suspension of out-relief in the second half of 1856, and the offer of the almshouse to innumerable applicants, many of whom refused it. In January, 1857, there were 300 more inmates than in January, 1856. Mayor Vaux thought home relief beneficial in that the effect of withholding it would be to increase the number of poorhouse inmates. In his annual message of January, 1857, he expressed the fear that those temporarily in need would lose their desire to be self-reliant once they became inmates. Also in January, 1857, the president of the board of the guardians of the poor, though admitting that the issue of the desirability of granting out-relief had always been a subject of dispute, asserted that practical administrators had concluded that home relief was not only “highly humane and well calculated to preserve a moral tone” among the poor, but it was also cheaper. An almshouse inmate cost the city from two and a half to three times as much as the average of fifty cents per week paid to an outdoor pauper.

Despite these arguments, a Common Council committee cut by half a requested $80,000 appropriation for home relief for the year, calling the original amount sought an “astounding sum,” and making it plain that, in their view, such relief was at best a dubious expenditure of public funds. Let applicants for outdoor aid turn to relatives, friends, and private charities, they suggested. As a result, in July, 1857, the guardians had to suspend all outdoor aid for three months. Again in March, 1859, out-relief was suspended except in cases of “emergency or sickness,” and resumed only the following winter. Similarly in May, 1860, the guardians decided not to grant any home relief for the next three months, except in extreme cases.

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23 GP, XXVII, Feb. 4, 1850. On Jan. 28, 1850, the rule was two weeks for both temporary relief and pensions. Ibid., XXVIII, July 24, 1854; XXIX, May 28, 1855, and Jan. 7, 1856. Mayor Conrad’s annual message, Philadelphia Common Council, Journal (1855), appendix, 19.
Outdoor aid in 1860 took the form of $17,098 in groceries, $13,911 in coal, $4,718 in wood, $1,476 in medicines, $470 in burials, and so forth. Thus had the guardians once again settled the question of whether relief should be in the form of money grants or of goods and services.

A quarter of a century earlier, simultaneously with the ban on pensions in July, 1835, the guardians had been restricted by statute to giving relief only in fuel, food, clothing and medical care. The situation had met with the wholehearted approval of the poor officers, who spoke of "the baneful grant of pecuniary Pensions." When the law was liberalized in 1839, cash could again be distributed, but only after a majority of the board had approved it in each case; the guardians could suspend all money relief by a simple majority vote.

Apparently, the practice developed in the 1840's of giving money to pensioners, while other outdoor relief recipients generally received provisions. In the year ending May, 1833, $20,598 in cash had been distributed, as well as $5,525 in wood and $1,537 in medicines. In contrast, fifteen years later, only $3,962 was given in cash, in addition to $17,903 in wood, $4,179 in provisions, $800 in medicines, and the like.26 By 1860, however, no cash at all was distributed.

On the issue of cash relief versus relief in kind, just as on the more basic question of outdoor versus almshouse relief, the period under review had witnessed a seesaw battle. After a generation of debate, the president of the guardians of the poor could still conclude his report for 1861 with the observation: "The matter of outdoor relief and its effects is of importance and deserving of careful thought."27 Not until 1879 was a decisive answer given, when Philadelphia abolished all relief for the poor in their own homes except for medical care.28

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26 The ban on relief in cash was in pursuance of Pa., 1827-1828, c. 79, sec. 8; GP, XVIII, Feb. 2, 1829; XXI, Oct. 26, 1835; Pa. 1838-1839, c. 210; GP, XXV, May 18, 1846; Hazard's Register of Pennsylvania, XI, 361-364 (June 8, 1833); Philadelphia, Auditor's Report (1847-1848); Philadelphia Common Council, Journal (1860-1861), appendix, 487. In 1857 less than $200 in cash was distributed, and in 1858 the amount was under $700. Auditor's Report (1857, 1858). It is curious to note that in the early 1800's the guardians were cautioned time and again to give only wood or money, and not groceries. See GP, III, Sept. 28, 1803, Feb. 22, 1804, Aug. 21, 1804, Apr. 22, 1806.


28 Proceedings of the Conference of Charities and Corrections . . . 1881 (Boston, 1881), 149; Proceedings . . . 1896 (Boston, 1896), 476-477.