

Veto No. 1984-3

SB 1324

October 4, 1984

To the Honorable, the Senate
of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania:

I have before me Senate Bill 1324, Printer's No. 2405, a bill providing for supplemental appropriations for the Department of Public Welfare.

This bill would, among other things, restore full General Assistance welfare benefits to a variety of able-bodied individuals for whom benefits were reduced by the 1982 Welfare Reform Act and would relax standards of proof that have been used to ensure the eligibility of welfare applicants.

Prior to the reforms enacted through Act 75 of 1982, Pennsylvania had become a national welfare haven. With only 5% of the nation's population, Pennsylvania had 20% of its General Assistance welfare recipients. The General Assistance program threatened the fiscal health of the Commonwealth as General Assistance costs more than tripled in the 1970's and soared to over \$350 million in 1981. Ours was the costliest General Assistance program per capita in the nation, costing five times more than the national average.

Not only were the taxpayers overburdened with supporting a system of runaway spending, but the neediest of our citizens — the handicapped, the elderly, and children — were finding it increasingly difficult to survive the ravages of inflation. Prior to this Administration, recipients of both General Assistance benefits and Aid to Families with Dependent Children had not had an increase in grant levels since 1975.

Our welfare reform program of 1982 enabled us to address this problem by redirecting scarce resources to those with the greatest need without increasing the tax burden on Pennsylvanians who work for a living. This year we increased cash grants for welfare families in Pennsylvania for the third time in this Administration and increased assistance to single adults for the second time.

Opponents of welfare reform have maintained a steady propaganda campaign to convince the public that our program has thrown the sick, the retarded, the disabled and the mentally ill into the streets of Pennsylvania with no assistance. This is simply untrue. The fact is that the ill and handicapped were not affected by welfare reform and continue to be eligible for increased full year-round assistance.

Pennsylvania's General Assistance program remains one of the most generous in the nation. Even after the 1982 reforms, Pennsylvania provides more welfare assistance to young, single, able-bodied individuals than most other states provide to their neediest recipients. Further, even able-bodied welfare recipients in Pennsylvania who were removed from the year-round General Assistance rolls under 1982 reforms continue to receive free year-

round medical care, food stamps and a variety of employment assistance and social services with their three months of cash assistance. We have also provided millions of dollars to county and local governments to provide shelter for any who are homeless and who desire it.

To make people automatically eligible for additional General Assistance regardless of need, as this bill does, would be an irresponsible disservice to our taxpayers and the hundreds of thousands of truly needy recipients as well. This bill would, for example, classify single pregnant woman as "unemployable" from the time of conception, despite the observable fact that many pregnant women do work and often do so into advanced stages of pregnancy. Under our existing welfare reform program, a woman is already eligible for full General Assistance benefits throughout her pregnancy upon certification by a physician that she cannot work.

This bill would begin the unraveling of our effective effort to make the best possible use of our limited tax dollars. It is a step backward which eventually would cost the taxpayers tens of millions of dollars more than are appropriated in this bill without any thorough review of need.

Where problem cases have been properly documented, the Department of Public Welfare already has corrected them through appropriate regulations and will continue to be alert to such situations.

We will not react, however, to distorted assertions, contrived cases and alarmist rhetoric. I cannot condone a sweeping effort to turn back the clock on welfare reform to the previous era of excess and abuse.

I am therefore withholding my approval of Senate Bill 1324. At the same time, I must note that section 5 of the bill, which provides for the appropriation of \$3 million for shelter to the homeless, is consistent with this Administration's past efforts and I would be pleased to sign new legislation providing for this particular appropriation should it be sent to me.

Therefore, I am herewith returning Senate Bill 1324 without my signature.

DICK THORNBURGH