

Veto No. 1994-8

HB 2102

December 28, 1994

To the Honorable, the House of Representatives
of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania:

I hereby publicly proclaim and file with the Secretary of the Commonwealth my disapproval of House Bill 2102, Printer's No.4238, entitled "An act establishing the Self-Help Clearinghouse within the Department of Public Welfare; and adding to the powers and duties of the Department of Public Welfare."

This bill would create a clearinghouse on self-help groups within the Department of Public Welfare, which would maintain a computerized directory of self-help organizations, operate a toll-free inquiry line, publish newsletters and directories on self-help activities and foster the creation of self-help groups.

While there are numerous organizations which help individuals confront personal problems and more people could take advantage of these opportunities if they were aware of them, this legislation is extremely vague and imprecise. The bill contains no definition of self-help groups, other than to describe them as groups which "provide mutual support for individuals and families sharing a common problem, situation, characteristic or condition, including abuse, addiction, bereavement, disabilities, health, mental health/mental retardation, parenting and life situations." Any organization which meets these very broad parameters could rightfully ask to participate in the clearinghouse. This could include such reputable organizations as Alcoholics Anonymous, but it could include other, less widely respected organizations. It could include reputable, nonprofit groups which counsel cancer survivors, as well as for-profit diet workshops. Participation in the clearinghouse will inevitably carry with it some sense that the work of each of these groups has been recognized and sanctioned by the Commonwealth. Yet, the legislation does not provide the department with the requisite authority to deny an organization access to the clearinghouse, nor the ability to remove an organization for cause.

Many of the most successful self-help organizations are community based. They serve a local population and are known to the community-at-large. Many are supported through charitable contributions and are regulated as charities. These groups are beneficiaries of United Way campaigns, work closely with local social service, health care and education officials and are visible in the communities in which they are located. Oftentimes finding these groups is as simple as looking in the phone book, calling the United Way or asking a doctor. In many cases, these groups are also affiliated with national organizations.

Self-help organizations are often voluntary associations with frequent

changes in leadership. The legislation provides no resources for the department, but the resource demands on the Department of Public Welfare to assure that the listing of organizations and contacts is current will be substantial. Moreover, the clearinghouse may not necessarily result in any greater access to these organizations by people seeking services. It is more likely that someone who is seeking a local support group for survivors of breast cancer will talk with their doctor for a reference than contact the Department of Public Welfare for that information.

Promoting the use of self-help support groups is certainly a worthwhile endeavor. House Bill 2102, however, would create a structure which duplicates efforts which already exist, would not necessarily result in expanded access and would be difficult to operate. For these reasons, I hereby withhold my signature from House Bill 2102, Printer's No.4238.

ROBERT P. CASEY