

Nothing new about failure to fund welfare

Mayor Rendell is to be admired for his most recent clash with Governor Ridge over welfare reform. Ridge has never understood the implications of reform for big cities like Philadelphia or how those cities will be unfairly punished because of the abundance of residents on public assistance as well as by the lack of entry-level jobs to employ them.

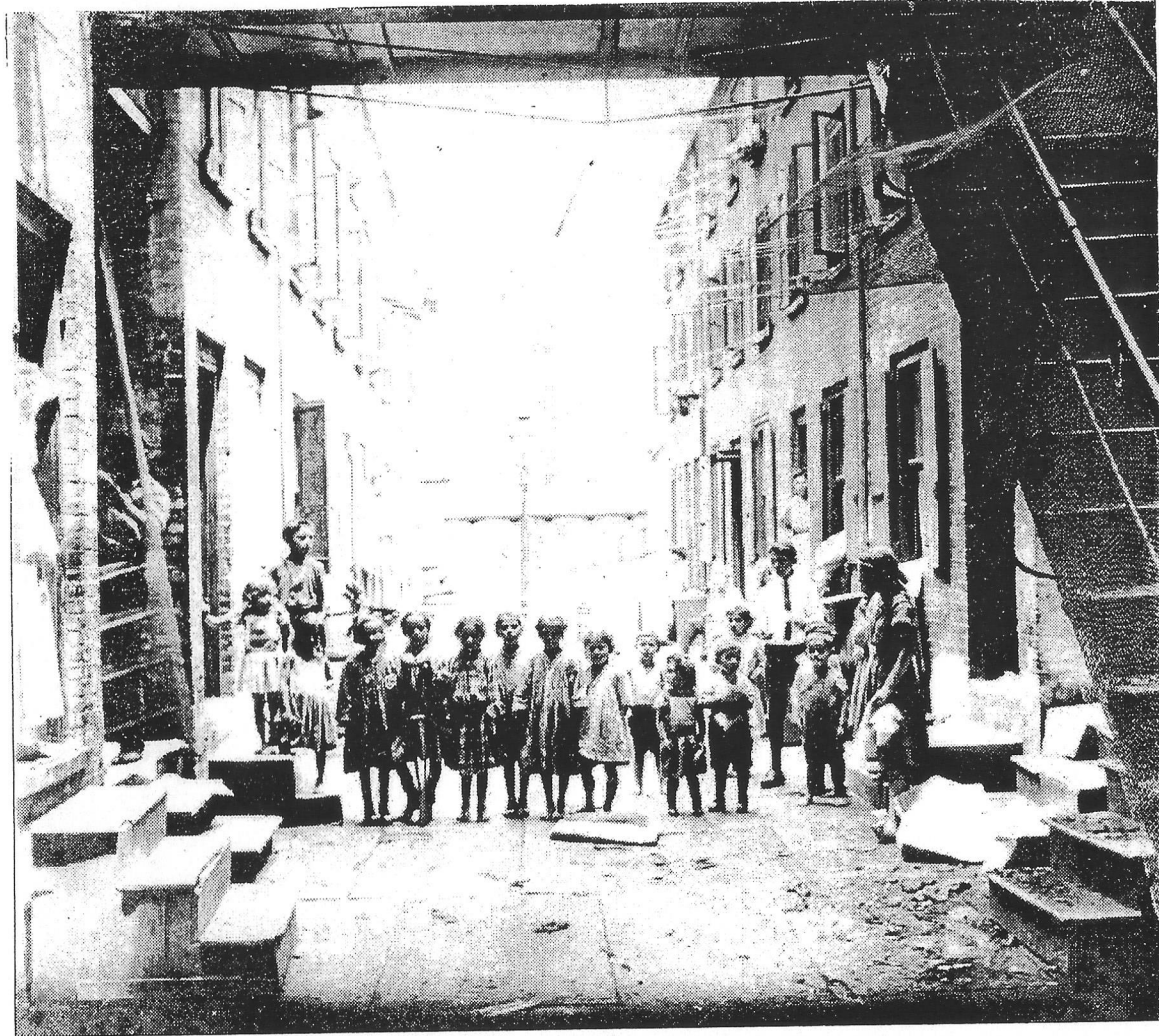
That is why Rendell's plea to

take the \$229 million windfall the state will save from welfare reform and apply it to improved child care, transportation and training opportunities for those on the welfare rolls will

probably never come to fruition.

Nor is there anything new about the state's extreme reluctance to assist the urban poor.

Historically, state government chose to view the poor as idle, unmotivated and personally irresponsible people who had only themselves to blame for their situation. According to John K. Alexander in his work, "Render Them Submissive: Responses to Poverty in Philadelphia, 1760-1830" (University of Massachusetts, 1980), the Pennsylvania Legislature itself was strongly influenced by officials who descended from rank and privilege and who believed that society depended on a lower class to work the farms and factories for the general welfare. They had no sympathy for the poor and routinely voted



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down any measure that would provide greater economic or educational opportunity for them. Whatever state funding was apportioned for public assistance was minimal and given as a method of social control — to check an increasingly dangerous poor by training or forcing them to accept their station in life deferentially.

Benevolent reform, on the other hand, had always been the realm of Philadelphia's religious groups and/or wealthy humanitarians, who saw their efforts as a means of uplifting the poor, both morally and economically. They understood that poverty was more often than not the result of economic circumstances that were beyond the individual's control. That there existed an "industrious poor" who had the ability and motivation to work and, if given proper training and employment, could easily support themselves and their families. And that there also existed an "indigent poor," the chronically sick, lame or very old, who had to depend on charity to survive.

Operating on this philosophy, Philadelphia Quakers, in 1713, built the first almshouse in the city. Despite repeated requests for financial assistance, it wasn't until 1732 that the Pennsylvania Assembly responded by sending the poor to a public workhouse or to debtor's prison. The education of the poor was handled similarly.

Together with the city's Episcopal, Presbyterian and Lutheran churches, Quakers established charity schools to educate poor children. Although the state con-

tracted with these schools to teach a small percentage of the poor, it refused to create its own tax-supported schools until 1836. Even then, those "public" schools were designed to educate the greatest number of children at the lowest possible expense, preparing them to assume a subordinate role as factory workers in the market economy.

During the early 19th century, Philadelphia experienced its first real "welfare crisis." Increasing migration of poor, unskilled blacks from the South and increased foreign immigration saturated the city's work force. High unemployment, racial tension, poverty and a growing incidence of crime followed. By 1820, 1,500 of Philadelphia's 161,410 inhabitants required public assistance.

Again, state government failed to respond effectively, leaving the responsibility largely to the city's philanthropists.

The benevolent societies and institutions these individuals created served to alleviate the miseries of the urban poor and, most likely, prevented a much greater incidence of civil unrest that Harrisburg would have been forced to address.

There is no question that the current welfare system needs to be reformed. Personal responsibility, a sense of pride and a stronger work ethic must take priority among those poor who are physically able to support themselves and their families.

But let's not punish those who need the additional time and training to make the adjustment from welfare to work. Instead of sermons about personal responsibility, Ridge should provide them with the resources they need to become constructive members of the work force and to realize that Philadelphia's religious groups and individual reformers can no longer do it alone. ■

William C. Kashatus is a Philadelphia historian who writes from Chester County.