
ORIGIN & FUNCTIONS

Created in 1975, the Department of Human Resources serves families and individuals who, due to financial hardship, disability, age, chronic disease, or any other cause, need help in obtaining the basic necessities of food and shelter. Children in particular are the concern of day care, foster care, adoption, and protective services that also extend to vulnerable adults. The Department directs State programs for homeless persons, refugees, migrant workers, victims of crime, and women who are displaced, battered, or assaulted. At the same time, it also administers federally funded programs such as Family Investment, Food Stamps, and Medical Assistance (Medicaid).

Many functions of the Department originally were administered by county government from the colonial period to 1900. State government assumed certain responsibilities in 1900 when Maryland's first State agency of public welfare, the Board of State Aid and Charities, was formed. In the 1930s, State efforts were joined by the federal government.

County Poor Relief. Although colonial settlers were nearly all young and able-bodied, disabling accidents and other disasters deprived some of their means of livelihood. Separated by the ocean from family and kin, such unfortunates had nowhere to turn. As early as 1650, an order of the Assembly authorized a tax levy to provide maintenance for the maimed, lame, and blind of St. Mary's County. Still, few people applied for assistance. Creation of a bureaucracy such as existed in England under the poor laws was considered unnecessary and wasteful, even though several governors recommended it. County governments tried to limit their financial obligations. They required persons harboring a stranger to post bond that the stranger would not become a charge on the county. Parents of bastards also had to post bond for their support.

Predating other child-protective agencies by centuries, county courts in 1658 began to protect the welfare and estates of orphan children in probate matters. An orphan was any minor who inherited an estate and whose father had died. The court appointed guardians and oversaw administration of a child's resources until the child came of age. When the estate was insufficient for the child's maintenance, the court bound out the child to learn a trade.

In the seventeenth century, Maryland's need for labor was such that no able-bodied person lacked work. Acquisition of land and upward mobility was possible for nearly everyone. As available land was taken up, however, economic conditions changed and, prior to the Revolutionary War, fewer opportunities existed for persons without capital and property.

Two methods of poor relief developed in Maryland. The first was to provide direct payment of money for support, a method which began in the colonial period and continues to this day. The second was to house the poor in a county almshouse, later known as the county home.

As early as 1650, direct support payments (later called out-pensions) developed from annuities granted by the county courts to provide for persons too old, crippled, or young to work. Parish vestries also administered poor relief in some counties, as in England. After the emergence of almshouses in the late eighteenth century, persons receiving relief outside of the almshouse were known as out-pensioners and received an annual pension from the county tax levy. By 1799, out-pensions were granted to the bedridden and people "whose peculiar circumstances may render a situation in the poor-house particularly unsuitable for them" (Chapter 65, Acts of 1799). Annually, the legislature passed laws authorizing persons to receive a pension. These laws indicate that many out-pensions went to relatives caring for orphaned children or a lunatic family member. The 1799 law limited to ten the number of out-pensioners in each county and to thirty dollars the annual amount of each pension, but this law continually was amended.

County Almshouses. The county almshouse became the primary public institution for the destitute. The legislature in 1768, recognizing that "the necessity, number and continual increase, of the poor within this province is very great, and exceedingly burthensome," passed an act to relieve the poor by creating almshouses, or workhouses, in five counties (Chapter 29, Acts of 1768). Later built in other counties as well, almshouses did not function until after the Revolution. The concept behind almshouses was punitive: the original act vested absolute power in each county's five Trustees of the Poor "for the better relieving, regulating and setting the poor to work, and punishing vagrants, beggars, vagabonds and other offenders" (Chapter 29, Acts of 1768). Initially, persons were sentenced to the almshouse, and required to wear a badge on their sleeve with an emblazoned "P" for pauper. This punitive attitude towards the poor also was reflected in the Constitution of 1776, which prohibited men without property from voting. They were disenfranchised until 1801 (Chapter 90, Acts of 1801).

Because the intent was to make the inmates work for their upkeep, almshouses were situated on farms. A workhouse was part of their structure when they first were built. Nonetheless, despite the efforts of trustees and overseers, during most of their history almshouses were not self-supporting; they relied on county tax levies. Because those accepted in the almshouse were adults and children unable to support