

HOUSE No. 2619

The Commonwealth of Massachusetts

EXECUTIVE DEPARTMENT,
STATE HOUSE, BOSTON, July 3, 1952.

To the Honorable Senate and House of Representatives:

I am returning, without my approval, House Bill No. 362 entitled, "An Act authorizing Cities and Towns to examine Welfare Records and Administration.

After a careful review of the present laws which control the disclosure of information relating to public assistance recipients, I am convinced that the proposed legislation is both unnecessary and undesirable.

The present law has removed the abuses which obtained before its enactment. At that time relief recipients' names were published in town reports. Then the chief administrative control on Welfare expenditures consisted of making relief so shameful that many preferred hunger and cold to accepting it.

During the past twenty years our Commonwealth, with increasing help from the Federal Government, has been able to develop a comprehensive public assistance program in which every citizen of Massachusetts should take pride. Adequate monthly payments are provided to those groups who are obviously dependent — the blind, the aged, the disabled, and most important of all, the children deprived of normal parental support conditions because of the death, illness, or continued absence from home of the family breadwinner. This bill is symptomatic of an unremitting effort on the part of certain interests to repeal the social gains of the last twenty years.

"Let's shame them off the rolls", "We can save millions by this bill", are the clarion cries of certain interests who

apparently would be willing to bring back the alms house and pauper system. By re-enacting the poor laws of Elizabethan England they would be willing in the name of economy and efficiency to jettison those legal safeguards which assure some measure of security with dignity to our less fortunate brothers who receive public assistance.

While this measure purports to limit access to the records to certain public officials, it is clearly not administratively controllable and could lead to serious abuse. As presently drawn, it would enable boards or committees in each community to be appointed with full power to examine not only the relief rolls but the individual assistance records in which the most intimate details of family and individual situations have been recorded under a solemn assurance that the information would be treated in the strictest confidence. The proposed statute does not identify, qualify, or limit in numbers the persons who may serve on such boards and committees. Nor does it provide safeguards which will confine the members of such committees to a review of matters of financial interest only. Nothing in it compels them to treat with confidence the highly personalized data which would be available to them.

The bill has been properly termed "the snoop bill" and if enacted, would undermine the whole basis of successful interviewing and investigation on the part of public assistance officials. The whole technique of enlightened social service is founded on the concept that information secured from various sources will be treated with dignity and confidence.

We already have adequate administration of our public assistance program in Massachusetts. Every community of the Commonwealth, in addition to its paid Public Welfare workers, has a Board of Public Welfare of three or five members, elected in the towns and appointed by the Mayor, or the Council, or the Manager in the cities. These boards are the overseers of public assistance programs. They are in a position to assure the public that the programs are properly administered.

If the proposed law were as harmless as some of its adherents contend, then it would be meaningless and should not be enacted. Since I am convinced that it is dangerous and represents a malicious threat to all of the worthy achievements in the field of social legislation of the past two decades, I must withhold my approval.

PAUL A. DEVER,
Governor.

