

Should Mother's Get State Aid?

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It is extremely probable that during the coming session the legislature of Ontario will enact a Mother's Allowance Bill. British Columbia and Nova Scotia are not unlikely to do the same. Already the three prairie provinces have such laws, Manitoba having led the way in 1916.

Like most of the social legislation in Canada it came from the United States. Since 1912, when the first law of this nature was passed in Colorado, it has spread over the entire republic, and even to Alaska. Thirty-nine states now have such laws. And of the nine who do not have them, five have been considering them. All of the states which have not such laws are in the south except Rhode Island.

It is worth while to itemize the divergencies of the laws in existence. No doubt, after a period of experimentation, these various laws will tend to become standardized, perhaps in one form, perhaps in several forms. In the meantime they show an amount of variation which may well puzzle the law makers of the provinces in Canada who turn to them for advice and information. I shall set down the broad differences which a comparison between these forty-odd statutes display.

I—Who are eligible for the allowances?

1. Any mother with a dependant child.
2. Widows only.
3. Widows and wives of prisoners, the insane and the physically incapacitated.
4. In addition, deserted wives. The period of desertion required to qualify varies from three months to a year.
5. In addition, divorced wives.
6. In addition, unmarried mothers.
7. In addition, expectant mothers.

II—Conditions on which aid is given.

1. The first condition is uniformly poverty. But poverty is variously defined as:—unable to support her children, dependent on her own efforts, unable without assistance to prevent her home being broken up, unable to prevent her children being taken to an institution or becoming a public charge. In some states the mother may not own property. In others she is allowed such tools and implements as may aid her in increasing her income.

2. The second condition generally includes the requirement that she is physically and morally competent to care for her children. In some cases she is forbidden to work away from home. In others she may work away from home no more than one day a week.

III—Residence qualifications.

These are complicated between the state and country requirements. Anyhow they range all the way from one year to five.

IV—Age of children.

The maximum varies from thirteen to seventeen. Fourteen is the most frequent figure.

V.—Amount of allowance.

In some cases no maximum is fixed, but the decision is left to the administrative body. In others it is two, three or three and a half dollars per week. Some states limit the amount which may be given to any household, and set this maximum at from 25 dollars a month all the way up to 60 dollars a month.

VI—Administration.

Here the variety is extreme. Probate Court, County Commissioners, Board of Trade Welfare, Supervisors of the Poor, State Treasurer and Board of Education have each their turn. In many states the administration is under the supervision of the State Board of Charities. In every case the administration is non-political, that is, it is not subject to review by the government of the state. In the three Canadian laws now in force the final authority remains with the Lieutenant-Governor-in-Council.

There is also considerable variation in the three Canadian laws, now operating in the west. Manitoba gives to widows and to wives of men insane, or prisoners, or who are physically unfit for work. Saskatchewan gives to widows only, Alberta to widows and wives of the insane.

Manitoba requires residential qualification of two years, Alberta and Saskatchewan of one year.

Manitoba refuses to aid any mother who possesses property of a value exceeding \$200. The other provinces set no minimum.

Each of these three provinces levy on the municipalities for the amounts expended. In Alberta the cost is equally divided between the government and the municipality. In the other provinces the proportion is fixed at the will of the government.

In Saskatchewan and Alberta the administration is vested in the Superintendent of Dependent and Neglected Children. In Manitoba a special Commission has been created, and under it are committees in the municipalities where the dependent mothers reside.

It is a curious thing that the Canadian laws should retain supervisory power for the provincial government. Perhaps we may flatter ourselves that the superior purity of our national politics makes this supervision a safe thing. But undoubtedly, in any country where party politics are not of a stainless character, this right of appeal to the politician is a dangerous thing. Anyone who has known anything of the workings of a charity department in a city knows how swiftly the predacious pauper gets after the alderman. Among the needy and deserving women with young children in their care will be border-line cases hard to determine, and cases where infirmity of character is suspected, and cases where the load of supporting the children, might most properly be borne by relatives at once rich and mean. These are the sort of people who turn more readily to someone whom they think has a pull than to someone who is keen to play fair by the law. Surely we know this much about the proper administration of social laws, that they should be placed in competent hands and that those hands should be trusted with power.

Another curious difference between the situation in Canada and the United States is the superior generosity of the amounts paid in Canada. The average sum given to a mother in Manitoba last May was \$61 to those domiciled in cities, and \$49.16 to those living in the country. Nowhere in the United States are these amounts equalled. In fact, the general criticism is made that the sums dispensed in the United States are too low. The inner meaning of such a law is that the mother is hired by the state to rear her children. They have become wards of organized society by reason of the loss of their natural provider. It is felt that the mother cannot be at once provider and train. The worries and woes of widows have proved that through many ages, and the minutes of the Juvenile Courts have come in these later days to confirm the lesson. If the woman is to mother her children she must be with them in the home. Thus the salary paid her should be large enough to allow her to remain in her home.

The administration of these laws is of supreme importance. The success which has been achieved in Manitoba is due to the assistance of trained social workers in initiating and continuing the operation of the act. As a matter of fact, the cabinet have not used the supervising power retained under the law for any purpose other than to approve the proceedings of the commission who have been intelligently guided by expert social workers all alone. There are many mothers in Canada who need constant help. They need it in order that their children may be born. They need it in order that, when born, they may survive. They need it, in order that if they survive, they may grow up into good citizens. Some body that knows how to befriend such mothers when their husbands have died, is necessary. And the all-important thing is that the befriending shall be wise. They need light as well as warmth.

I recall one Russian woman who appealed to the Minimum Wage Board of Manitoba for permission to work more than eight hours a day in the abitoir where she was regularly employed. On being questioned she admitted that her husband was working steadily at good wages and that she was the mother of two young children who were at school or playing around the neighbors while she was at work. When it was suggested to her that she ought not to be working at all she replied with spirit, "What would I do hanging round the house all day?" Such a woman would not immediately grasp the meaning of a mother's allowance, should she chance to be left a widow. And since the opening of this century many women have come to Canada from lands with low standards of motherhood. It is a significant thing