

Concise History of Child Care in Westmoreland County
By Kierhan Boyle and Caley Garhart

The Children's Bureau's history, or prehistory, began in the late 1800s. It ultimately started with the development of the Westmoreland County Home, or Poorhouse, which opened in 1851. Leading up to this point, the Pennsylvania Legislature passed an act on April 5, 1849 that helped to get the approval of the citizens and those in the community. The General Election in November 1849 got the approval to purchase land/farmland, build buildings, elect officials and hire other necessary workers, and to follow compliance orders that regarded working with children and living conditions. After the General Election, the County Commissioners purchased about 180 acres of land from a William Snyder of Hempfield Township. The County Home was along present day U.S. Route 119 and on the land currently is the Westmoreland Manor, the Pennsylvania Regional Correctional Institute, and the Westmoreland County Juvenile Detention Center (Westmoreland Historical Society).

The primary motivations of the County Home was to take care of men, women, children, and the disabled. They provided housing, food, clothes, and basic necessities to those in its care. However, the care of the children differed from the care of the others in the home. Children were "apprenticed" to private homes to do various jobs like housekeeping, farming, carpentry, mining, and general labor. Those who taught the children or took care of them were referred to as "foster parents," although this differed from the modern use of the term. These children were more often than not orphans. In the *Orphaned & Dependent Children Residents of the Westmoreland County Poorhouse Apprenticed to Private Households 1882-1898*, there is a list of children's names, ages, length of apprenticeship, and job or duty that child was to perform. These apprenticeships were comparable to indentured servitude or even slavery depending on the condition or situation the child was in. Males could be apprenticed or indentured until they were 21 and females until they were 18. These orphans could be indentured multiple times in different homes. The first Westmoreland County Home burned down in 1862, the second in 1878, and the third building stood until the 1950s (Westmoreland Historical Society).

In May 1886 the Westmoreland County Children's Aid society received its first charter to create a new and separate home for orphaned children. Up until then, orphaned children would live in the County Home or Poorhouse as it was often called. The Westmoreland Children's Aid Society was founded by women who believed that the Poorhouse or County Home was not a suitable place for children to be raised. In 1889 it purchased its first property at on Division Street and at Ludwick from a Mr. George J. Merhling. They quickly outgrew their property and in 1897 purchased the Frank Shearer Mansion located at 514 West Pittsburgh Street for the price of \$7,000 and the Division Street property. This would become the Children's Home from 1897 until its closing in 1971 (Guerrieri). The Children's Home closed in 1971 due to a lack of funding and enrollment because of the changes in regulations of children's care in Pennsylvania.

The U.S. Children's Bureau was formally created in 1912 when President William H. Taft signed into law a bill creating a new government organization. It was not until 1921 that Pennsylvania created the Department of Welfare, which included a statewide Children's Bureau. In 1927 a home for children was founded in Westmoreland County to keep up with current regulations, but would only last for seven years before it was closed. The county saw it more beneficial to the children to place them in foster homes or have them placed in private institutions. (County Archives of Pennsylvania) According to the *Inventory of The County Archives of Pennsylvania: Westmoreland County Number 65*, "The Westmoreland County Children's Bureau was set up in 1931 as a central agency to provide for the dependent and neglected children who are in charges of the county" (p.284). The Westmoreland Children's Bureau received federal aid from the title IV of the Social Security Act. This allowed for grants to be made to the states for maternal and child welfare. Currently the U.S. Children's Bureau is considered part of the Department of Health and Human Services of Administration for Children and Families.

Timeline

1849 Westmoreland Poor House Founded

1851 Westmoreland County Home (Poorhouse) Opened

1862 First Westmoreland County Home Burned Down

1878 Second Westmoreland County Home Burned Down

1886 Westmoreland Child Aid Society Founded

1912 President Taft signed into law the creation of the U.S. Children's Bureau

1921 Pennsylvania Welfare Department and Children's Bureau Founded

1927 Westmoreland County Children's Home opened (closed 7 years later)

1931 Westmoreland Children's Bureau Founded

1971 Westmoreland Children's Home closed

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