

Women's Christian Alliance

Our History

The post World War I era sharply defined life for thousands of African-Americans who migrated from the rural south to the great seaport cities of the northeast. They came searching for jobs, housing, and safe communities where they could raise their families. For many migrants, Philadelphia was viewed as a beacon of light, an exciting destination, and a thriving, beautiful city, where they could blend into bustling urban communities and dream of new beginnings.

However, new beginnings for many Philadelphia-bound migrants proved difficult to achieve and often impossible to sustain. The ravages of Philadelphia's 1918 race riots; overt discrimination in housing, employment, and schools; difficulty in adjusting to the newness of an urban environment, and lack of traditional extended family support were problems that often hindered the pursuit of their dreams.

"People who leave their homes and come to the cities, especially the large seaport cities of the east coast seeking work, should really be somehow placed in the care of Christian guardians. Not that they should be forced by any law to become the wards of the Church, and not treated as free moral agents, but the Church should stand ready to meet them at the gates of the city and offer them protection and guidance..."

Bishop Levi J. Coppin, Pastor of the Richard Allen AME church in South Philadelphia in 1893.

During the early 1900s, the wife of Bishop Coppin, Melissa Thompson Coppin, MD, then one of 20 African-American female physicians in the United States, organized a group of Richard Allen churchwomen to help with the relocation, child care needs, housing and employment problems that confronted the new Philadelphians. Under the leadership of Dr. Coppin, in 1919 the volunteer churchwomen located a property in south Philadelphia, 610 South 16th Street, and established the Women's

Christian Alliance (WCA). Within two years, working as volunteers, WCA secured housing for several hundred women and their children, including 50 homeless women and children, provided care for children of working mothers, obtained employment for 204 people, coordinated respite care for convalescents in collaboration with other welfare agencies, and located homes for 108 dependent children that had been adjudicated by the City's Municipal Court.

The success of WCA's work with children, women and families soon gained recognition by Philadelphia's judicial system. In 1921, Philadelphia Juvenile Court asked WCA to become an official child placement agency to help reduce the gap in services and care for African American children. By assuming this historic role, WCA became the first African-American foster care placement agency in Philadelphia, beginning the legacy of encouraging "community families" to proudly accept responsibility for providing love and support for abused and/or neglected children.

After remodeling its existing facility to qualify as an official child welfare agency, in 1925 WCA incorporated its program, and received its Charter from the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania in 1926. With the dedicated support of Sara Sinclair Collins, a volunteer assistant to Dr. Coppin, WCA experienced an extensive period of growth, spanning two decades. Following Dr. Coppin's death in 1940, Mrs. Collin became WCA's executive director, and continued Dr. Coppin's legacy for more than 40 years.

With passage of Philadelphia's Home Rule Charter in 1951, mandating that the City care for all neglected and dependent children, WCA experienced a steadily increasing demand for its services for children and families. Celebrating its 40th anniversary in 1959, WCA expanded its core services of foster care placement to include medical, dental and psychological professional services, recreational and educational activities

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for children, employment counseling and job referrals, and family counseling for parents.

WCA was formally approved as an adoption agency by the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare, in 1958. By the end of its first year, WCA successfully completed 60 adoptions of African- American children.

Through the decades of the 1960's, 1970's, 1980's and 1990's, WCA continued to expand its programs to better meet the emerging needs of at-risk children and disadvantaged families.

Today, the majority of families served by WCA are headed by single parents living in sub-standard housing, and neighborhoods plagued by drugs, crime, domestic violence,

unemployment, truancy, teen pregnancy and welfare. Combined with this environment are caregivers who possess limited resources, parenting education, and lack academic and vocational skills.

Whether working to help abused, neglected or abandoned children find safety and stability in loving families, or to turn around the life of a troubled teen, WCA creates and implements interdisciplinary programs designed to enhance direct and ancillary services for its target population. WCA collaborates with an array of public and private institutions throughout Southeastern Pennsylvania to ensure that child welfare services and family stability programs are available to families in need as a basic human right.