

City of Philadelphia



Council of the City of Philadelphia
Office of the Chief Clerk
Room 402, City Hall
Philadelphia

(Resolution No. 260280)

RESOLUTION

Celebrating Viola Sanders for her life's work in advocating for economic justice and welfare rights for the impoverished and underserved in Philadelphia on the occasion of Women's History Month.

WHEREAS, Ms. Viola Sanders (née Allen) was born on January 29th, 1932, to the late Irvin and Viola Allen in Philadelphia and passed on November 5th, 2008, at 76 years. One of 16 sixteen children, Ms. Viola, was born at the height of the Great Depression, enduring and understanding the experience of poverty from an early age. She moved into the Philadelphia Public Housing Authority's Cambridge Plaza development with her five children in 1957 and lived there until its demolition. Ms. Sanders relocated to Yorktown Arms Senior Apartments in 2001. She raised her children with the support of welfare income given health complications that barred her from employment. Despite financial hardship, she provided her children with a safe, joyful, and nurturing childhood. And although she did not have the opportunity to finish secondary education, Ms. Sanders encouraged brighter futures for her children, three of whom obtained a college education; and

WHEREAS, While caring for her children and struggling herself, she observed similar and worse hardships among her neighbors: Mothers raising children alone; adults lacking opportunities for gainful employment; children attending school hungry and without necessities like eyeglasses and other equipment for special needs. After a medical crisis that occurred in her early twenties and after finding inspiration in the powerful broadcast sermons of Emmanuel Institutional Baptist Church while bed-ridden, Ms. Sanders committed herself to a life of lifting people out of poverty: She co-founded the Philadelphia Welfare Rights Organization (PWRO) in the mid-1960s with Roxanne Jones. The organization provided social and legal services for hundreds of people weekly with housing, educational resources, welfare, or legal problems. She cared for sick and shut-in members of Emmanuel Institutional Baptist Church and co-founded its Redeemed Overcomers Drug Ministry in 1990; and

WHEREAS, Her work went beyond direct service to the people. Her fight for welfare rights included advocating to the City of Philadelphia and the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. With the support, guidance, and legal representation from attorneys at Community Legal Services, the

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PWRO filed lawsuits against the School District of Philadelphia to provide necessary resources including free breakfast, lunch, vision care, and other provisions for medically needy children. In addition, she and a delegation of advocates traveled to Harrisburg to oppose malicious reforms to the public welfare system for 13 days in 1983: By day, they negotiated with Governor Dick Thornburgh to continue crucial support for tens of thousands of poor Pennsylvanians. By night, they encamped inside the State Capitol Rotunda, cooking meals on hotplates and sleeping on the floor; and

WHEREAS, Along with advocating for the underserved in the halls of power, Ms. Sanders changed institutional culture and sat in front and center at decision-making tables. In prudence, she accepted no salary, but she served as the Acting Executive Director at PWRO. Through Welfare Pride, Inc.—the spiritual successor to PWRO—Ms. Sanders trained welfare recipients to teach sensitivity training classes to caseworkers at the Department of Welfare. In 1977, Ms. Sanders was elected to the Department of Public Welfare's advisory board. Throughout her life, she served on the Mayor's Advisory Committee on Graffiti, the Philadelphia County Board of Assistance, and the boards of the Greater Philadelphia Food Bank, Philadelphia Citizens for Children and Youth, the Maternity Care Coalition, Philadelphia Corporation for the Aging, and the Child Abuse Prevention Committee. Her career was committed to upholding the PWRO's slogan, "Welfare a Right, Education a Must." Ms. Sanders understood that the key to prosperity and social mobility lies in stable support for people in need and opportunities to develop oneself through education; now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED, THAT THE COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF PHILADELPHIA, Hereby celebrates Viola Sanders for her life's work in advocating for economic justice and welfare rights for the impoverished and underserved in Philadelphia on the occasion of Women's History Month.

FURTHER RESOLVED, That 4 Engrossed copies of this Resolution be presented to Derrick Sanders, ChrisAnne Smith, Lynn Sanders, and Larry Sanders as evidence of admiration and respect of this Council.

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CERTIFICATION: This is a true and correct copy of the original Resolution, Adopted by the Council of the City of Philadelphia on the twenty-sixth day of March, 2026.

Kenyatta Johnson
PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL

Elizabeth McCollum
CHIEF CLERK OF THE COUNCIL

Introduced by: Councilmember Brooks

Sponsored by: Councilmembers Brooks, Phillips, Gilmore Richardson,
Landau, Lozada, Harrity and Squilla