

9. Social assistance

The issue of the social care and treatment of victims was influenced above all by the Bundessozialhilfegesetz (Federal Social Assistance Act, BSHG), which took effect in June 1962 and was regarded in bureaucratic circles as a genuinely progressive law. Thus it hardly comes as a surprise that government officials answered the queries of many affected persons with references to the BSHG. Yet many of those affected were dissatisfied with such responses. Not only did problems arise in the enforcement of the new law at first, the victims also found themselves faced through no fault of their own with a state of emergency that could have resulted in a huge financial burden. In this situation the political Contergan debate shifted progressively to the question of the extent to which the causes of disabilities were the determining factors when it came to decisions regarding social assistance services. Beginning in the early summer of 1962, calls for special regulations and funding for children with disabilities multiplied in the media and among those directly affected, who believed that the government was responsible as well. The majority of representatives of government authorities and political bodies denied government liability and took the position that all children with disabilities were to be treated equally, regardless of cause. Thus the proposal to create a hardship fund was initially rejected in favor of a broad interpretation of the BSHG, according to which the prescribed copayment would not be required for persons with incomes below a certain amount. Ultimately, the fundamental idea behind the BSHG remained in effect despite the founding of the Contergan Foundation. For until 2009, the funds contributed by the government did not benefit Contergan victims alone but were also used in support of the integration of disabled children and youth as well.