

OREGON LAW CENTER

921 SW Washington Street, Suite 516, Portland Oregon 97205

Testimony of John Mullin, (503) 867-6236

House Human Services and Housing Committee HB 2712

February 27, 2013

Madame Chair, for the record, my name is John Mullin, and I am here to testify in favor of HB 2712. I appreciate this opportunity, and I will keep my comments brief so that others will have ample time to present their stories and experience. I will briefly summarize General Assistance (GA), recent attempts to re-fund the program, and the new approach our GA coalition is presenting to you for your consideration.

Background - States have long had general assistance programs, and the origins can be traced back to "Relief" programs from the Depression era. With some variation, states fund programs that serve people with disabling conditions who are not receiving federal disability benefits, and who are not otherwise eligible for workers compensation or unemployment insurance. The recipients are very low income individuals or childless couples with very few assets. Although state funded, states may claim reimbursement of the cash assistance paid to clients when recipients qualify for federal disability benefits. This is an incentive to encourage states to maintain GA programs.

Oregon's Program – GA was a flexible program before the establishment of the federal Supplemental Security Income (SSI) program in 1974, and for some time thereafter. However, it was never very well funded, and was often offered up as a potential program elimination to balance the budget of the Department of Human Services (DHS.) A person could qualify for GA: on a temporary basis (e.g., a day laborer with a broken arm); on an ongoing basis (e.g., a client in long term care); or on the basis of meeting impairment and financial eligibility criteria and agreeing to apply for federal disability benefits.

By 2002, GA was essentially limited to the last category, and was structured as a pre-federal benefit program. Clients had to have no more than \$1,500 in assets, of which only \$50 could be liquid assets, have little to no income, and had to be unable to work for a year or more. Advocates often referred to this population as the "poorest of the poor." The statewide caseload was about 2,500 people. The program had three basic features: cash assistance (\$314/month); Oregon Health Plan (OHP) Plus eligibility; and case management assistance to help the clients qualify for SSI and/or Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI.)

GA funding was eliminated January 31, 2003, and then re-opened in November of 2003 as a program for those people assessed as likely to qualify for SSI. Anyone with work history that might qualify for SSDI was excluded. This very limited program continued

until September 30, 2005, and has been closed since that time. ORS 411.710 to 411.730 are still on the books, and the statutes are very “general” indeed.

Attempts to restore the program – Advocates worked to restore full GA funding in the 2007 and 2009 legislative sessions. Although very well received, unanimously supported, and passed by the House Human Services Committee, the bills never emerged from the budget writing Ways and Means committee. In 2011, the Coalition recognizing the economic climate, explored a smaller, targeted pilot project to serve a limited number of high needs people with disabilities. HB 2725 was introduced, reflecting changes to the statute that would have created the basis for restoring GA as a pre SSI/SSDI program. Our strategy was to get the bill passed, and limit the funding to a pilot. However, the House was tied 30-30, and all committees had co-chairs. In order for legislation to move in committee, Co-Chair agreement was necessary. When agreement did not emerge, we pulled back our request for a hearing.

Times have changed - While the economy appears to be slowly improving, many changes are taking place, and GA should be considered as partial solutions in the following areas:

- The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are winding down, and returning veterans have needs for assistance. GA could be a bridge.
- Homelessness continues to be a statewide concern. For single individuals and childless couples, GA could be a path to a better life.
- There is a renewed interest in looking at alternatives in public safety. GA could be an appropriate resource to help people to stay out of jails and prisons.
- There has been a spotlight on those 55 years of age and over, not yet eligible for Social Security, with low income, and limited employment opportunities. GA could be a tool to help this very vulnerable population.
- HB 3650, Health Care Transformation, passed in the 2011 session. The emphasis on “person centered care” the integration of physical, behavioral, and oral health to be managed by new “Coordinated Care Organizations” (CCOs), provides new opportunities for consumers. CCOs, and their panel of providers, will be responsible for quality outcomes while ensuring health, improved healthcare delivery, and reduced cost. Housing and human services will need to be part of the mix in order to achieve results. Without GA funding, these results will be harder to achieve for the most vulnerable.
- National and Oregon focus on mental health issues, including the increase in the Governor’s budget, and statements by the Senate President, demonstrate a growing awareness of an incomplete system of services and care. GA is a missing component in making a difference for those low income individuals with mental health problems.
- Recent updates from the Department of Human Services show that there are 3,010 very low income people who are presumptively eligible for Medicaid due to disabling conditions. Since there is no GA funding, these individuals are not getting cash assistance and are not receiving case management support to apply for federal disability benefits.

For all of the above reasons, our GA Coalition has worked on HB 2712. We have bipartisan support for this bill, as demonstrated by co-sponsor interest, and we have numerous organizations, statewide associations, businesses and individual advocates who are supportive.

I hope you will pass HB 2712 and send it to Ways and Means with a "do pass" recommendation. Thank you for your consideration.



Protecting Oregonians with Disabilities: HB2712 An Advisory Committee to Reconsider General Assistance

We believe in an Oregon that protects our most vulnerable who have disabling conditions. We believe all Oregonians deserve safety, stability, and dignity.

Today too many Oregonians with disabilities struggle to survive and can't meet their basic needs. People with disabilities wait an average of 1 to 2 years for federal benefits. When savings are exhausted and family supports unavailable, Oregonians with disabilities risk homelessness, experience health crises and face desperate circumstances.

We can protect our most vulnerable Oregonians: Temporary disability benefits (formerly known as General Assistance) provide medical care and minimal cash assistance to help people afford rent, bus fare, prescriptions and necessary incidentals. This public system can prevent homelessness and health crises while strengthening our communities.

A smart investment for Oregon: States get federal reimbursement when they provide temporary assistance to people waiting for disability benefits. Oregon is leaving money on the table. Meanwhile, expensive and inefficient emergency services such as shelters, emergency rooms and even county jails, are left to respond to vulnerable Oregonians in crisis. These rising costs drain Oregon's resources. But with General Assistance we can save Oregon dollars and strengthen our local economies.

What is General Assistance?

A temporary state benefit for persons with disabilities while they wait for permanent federal benefits. It provides medical care and a minimal monthly stipend to afford essentials such as, rent and medications. The program also provides help so individuals can secure their federal disability benefits quickly. This simple program that gets reimbursed with federal funding is a lifeline for many Oregonians with disabilities.

It's time for a Solution: Since 2005, Oregonians with disabling conditions have been suffering without our protection. Its time to reconsider the General Assistance Program and determine how Oregon will protect our most vulnerable citizens.

Please contact the General Assistance Coalition to list your organization's support for HB2712.

AARP — AAUW-Oregon — Advocacy Coalition of Seniors and People with Disabilities — A.S.S.I.S.T.— Campaign for Seniors and People with Disabilities — Central City Concern — Community Action Partnership of Oregon — Disability Rights Oregon — Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon — Elders in Action Housing Alliance — Impact NW—Northwest Pilot Project — Oregon Association of Area Agencies on Aging and Disabilities — Oregon Food Bank — Oregon Housing Authorities — Oregon Hunger Task Force — Oregon Law Center — Partnership for Safety and Justice — Street Roots — and individual advocates and businesses

For more information: Phillip Kennedy-Wong
Oregon Food Bank
971-645-2601

John Mullin
Oregon Law Center
503-867-6236

Patti Whitney-Wise
Oregon Hunger Task Force
503-757-8027

