



February 20, 2017

Sen. Richard Devlin, Co-Chair  
Joint Ways and Means Committee  
900 Court St., NE, S-213  
Salem, OR 97301

Dear Sir:

I am writing to you today, in the hope of gaining your continued support for the State of Oregon's "General Assistance Benefits Program for the Homeless Disabled", currently submitted to the legislature as HB 2959. When introduced during the 2016 Legislative Session (as HB 4042) it was passed unanimously by both the House and Senate. Unfortunately, the program was not included in the Governor's budget for the upcoming biennium.

As you know the General Assistance Benefits Program became operational on July 1, 2016, and provides up to \$695.00 a month for individuals, and up to \$1050.00 a month for couples, who are homeless (or under the threat of homelessness) and who are disabled. The program assists with finding housing for these individuals, with the goal of alleviating their homeless situation, or maintaining their current housing so that they don't become homeless.

As you may be aware the State of Oregon has not had a General Assistance program since 2004. Homelessness is a major problem in our state, and the implementation of this new project has had an impact on this problem in the short amount of time that it has been in existence. The program has had 778 people referred to it since its inception, with 36 people from my county (Jackson) being referred. There are currently 35 people who have found housing thru the program, with another 17 people currently approved for benefits and being assisted with searching for housing. There are currently 390 cases pending. For a program that has been in existence for such a short time, it has begun to have an impact on our state's disabled homeless population.

As you may remember, one of the provisions of the program is that people who are applying for the program must also apply for Social Security Disability Insurance/Supplemental Security Income disability benefits, AND they must sign an Interim Assistance Agreement, allowing the Social Security Administration to reimburse the state, an amount equal to the benefits paid out while waiting for their SSA benefits to be approved.

This unique feature allows the State of Oregon to actually recoup the GA benefits paid to the individual while waiting for their SSA benefits to be approved. While not all of the state's costs are recovered due

to the administrative costs, the majority of the state's monies are. There are not many state monetary assistance programs that have such a huge impact on individuals living arrangements and that have the potential to be essentially "budget neutral" when looked at from the viewpoint of actual monies paid out to individuals!

Our organization provides services to the homeless disabled of Jackson County. As an Advocate for the last 6 years, and a former Social Security Claims Representative for 28 years, I have seen first-hand how the General Assistance program can make a real difference in the lives of the homeless disabled.

While I realize that our state has real budgetary problems, the General Assistance Program is one that directly provides real assistance to some of our most vulnerable citizens, while allowing for a minimal effect on the state's costs. In its short life, it truly has begun to make a real difference in the lives of these individuals!

I request, and strongly urge you to continue your support for the program, and ask that you help pass HB 2959!

Sincerely,

Mark D. Cole  
Director of Operations/Advocate  
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