

Aging and People with Disabilities: General Assistance

Background – General Assistance and House Bill 4042

General Assistance (GA) programs have roots in Depression-era General Relief programs. Oregon's current General Assistance (GA) program was funded through HB 4042 in the 2016 Legislative Session. Sponsored by the House Committee on Human Services and Housing, the bill passed unanimously with the intention of serving a portion of Oregon's most vulnerable individuals. The program was funded to serve a maximum of 200 homeless individuals who meet Presumptive Medicaid disability criteria. HB 4042 also required DHS to convene an advisory group by July 1, 2016, tasked with compiling a list of attorneys to assist individuals in appealing adverse Social Security disability determinations and developing program metrics.

The current GA program

The GA program was implemented on July 1, 2016. As recommended by the 2014 Portland State University General Assistance study, recipients are provided up to \$545 per month for housing, \$90 per month for utilities, and a \$60 per month personal incidental fund (PIF). This benefits structure was supported by research from Utah, Washington and New York, which documented that providing housing to individuals with disabilities resulted in overall cost avoidance by decreasing shelter use, medical expenditures, and incarcerations. In addition to monetary support, recipients are offered free assistance with the Social Security Administration application and appeals process. Upon entering the GA program, individuals sign an Interim Assistance Reimbursement Agreement, which allows the department to recover housing and utility payments, and PIF expenditures when individuals are awarded Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits.

As of March 13, 2017, 390 individuals are engaged in the GA application process, and the department is serving 56 GA recipients, 68% of whom have been housed. The most common barrier to housing is the lack of available, affordable housing. This barrier exists statewide. Nineteen GA individuals have been awarded SSI benefits, and the department has recouped approximately \$19,000 thus far. As individuals become eligible for SSI benefits, they transition to other programs, and it opens up slots for more individuals to be served by the GA program.

The launch of the GA program has been a community effort. Collaboration with local Community Action Agencies makes it possible to leverage GA funding while also accessing Community Action Agency supports, such as assistance with application fees, move-in fees, and deposits. This partnership has led to favorable outcomes for a portion of Oregon's most difficult-to-serve consumers. In addition, the General Assistance Advisory Group creates a venue for collaborative discussion about issues related to the program and the population served.

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