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Testimony of John Mullin, (503) 867-6236  
HB 2959

General Assistance (GA), including Background Information  
House Human Services and Housing Committee  
March 16, 2017

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Madam Chair, members Committee, for the record, my name is John Mullin, and I am a Legislative Advocate for the Oregon Law Center. My oral testimony today will be very brief, but I have also included an updated background piece, and testimony from the 2016 session, for your information.

I simply want to take a couple of minutes today to thank you for your leadership in passing HB 4042 in the 2016 session, and to acknowledge my appreciation for the cooperative work with the Department of Human Services (DHS) and the broad based and inclusive Advisory Committee established in the bill. In addition, I want to thank the 20+ organizations that supported HB 4042.

As you know, the Governor's Recommended 17-19 Budget (GRB) eliminated funding for General Assistance. Our concern as advocates led us to ask for a bill, HB 2959, to be a vehicle for discussion here in the Committee, with the recommendation that when the bill goes to work session, that it be sent on to Ways and Means. Even though GA is part of the Continuing/Current Service Level (CSL) budget, and is not called out in the Ways and Means Co-Chairs' framework, we want to make sure that the commitment of HB 4042 continues.

In the end, we are talking about a group often called the "poorest of the poor." The historic lack of funding has created huge problems for this population, while also having a subsequent impact on other state and local programs and resources. HB 4042 was a change in direction, one that we enthusiastically endorse.

And finally, I can't say enough about the historic support of this committee. Even as we have had change in committee members, we have had strong bipartisan support for action in providing critical services to this population.

Thank you for your consideration.

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**Current Situation, 2017:** The Advisory Committee for General Assistance, as envisioned in HB 4042, began meeting after the 2016 legislative session. I was Co-Chair, and Janet Merrill of the Community Action Partnership of Oregon (CAPO) was the other Co-Chair. We were ably staffed by DHS, and had discussion and input on program design, metrics, and a process for the maintenance of an attorney referral list. Erika Miller of DHS will be speaking briefly today about the current program and results. Phillip Kennedy-Wong, our GA Coalition convener, will speak to our advocacy work, and Mellani Calvin will be speaking from her experience working with the population. Speaking as Co-Chair, I want to acknowledge what we knew all along – implementation of assistance to the “poorest of the poor,” and specifically those who are also experiencing homelessness, is a challenging task. DHS has engaged successfully with a number of community partners, notably the Community Action Agencies, and Aging and Disability Resource Connections. We look forward to continued partnerships and positive results.

**Testimony from the 2016 session:**

Madam Chair, members Committee, for the record, my name is John Mullin and I am a Legislative Advocate for the Oregon Law Center.

I am here today in support of HB 4042, related to the General Assistance (GA) program. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. It is my hope that this committee will hold a work session soon, and send the bill on to Ways and Means with a “do pass” recommendation.

As you know from our testimony in the past, and from the General Assistance study funded in 2014, we are not serving this population adequately since GA was defunded in 2005. This lack of funding has created huge problems for many low income people with significant disabilities, while also having a subsequent impact on other state and local programs and resources.

HB 4042 is virtually identical to HB 2194 from the 2015 session, with the exception of the fact that we have dropped the evaluation and the pilot language from the bill. The new GA project would work as follows:

*Consumers of the Oregon Health Plan who are determined to have a disability by the Department of Human Services (DHS) Presumptive Medicaid Disability Determination Team (PMDDT), and who are identified by the Department of Human Services as homeless would be eligible. DHS staff will contact these consumers, offering housing assistance and personal incidental funds, and assisting consumers to apply for, and secure federal Social Security Administration disability benefits. The caseload will be capped at a maximum monthly average of 200 cases.*

Preliminary fiscal information from DHS anticipates a cost of \$1.7 million GF for this biennium. DHS will present a formal fiscal when the bill goes to work session.

Finally, I would simply add that we have widespread community support for this project, ranging from AARP Oregon to Welcome Home.

Thank you for your consideration, and we look forward to your support.

### **Historical Background (Note: Testimony background, updated each session)**

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 that encourages 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 had been closed since that time. ORS 411.710 to 411.730 are still on the books, and the statutes are very “general” indeed. Advocates have worked every session since, in attempts to restore GA funding, and we finally had a breakthrough in 2016 with the passage of HB 4042.

