Washington State
Department of Social
& Health Services

Report to the Legislature

General Assistance Program Outcomes

Chapter 518, Laws of 2005, Section 207

November 2005

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Background

In Washington State, General Assistance (GA) is the largest public assistance program for which the state has direct responsibility. Financed and administered by the state, the program currently provides cash and medical benefits to around 26,700 needy, disabled adults without children who do not qualify for federal Supplemental Security Income (SSI) disability benefits or are awaiting an SSI determination. The program also serves aged or disabled adults (about 2,500 or 9.5 percent of the GA caseload) who are refugees and legal immigrants who have lost eligibility or cannot qualify for Social Security Supplemental Security Income (SSI) because of their non-citizen status.

The Economic Services Administration (ESA) within the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) administers the GA program.

The GA program has experienced significant growth in the last five years, both in people served and dollars spent. The average monthly number of GA individuals rose 53 percent, from 16,663 in state fiscal year (SFY) 2000 to 25,566 in SFY 2005. GA expenditures increased 52.6 percent, from $46.6 million in SFY 2000 to $71.1 million in SFY 2005.

Indications are that program growth is expected to continue. According to the Washington State Caseload Forecast Council, the GA caseload will continue on an upward trend and could reach a record high of 30,942 cases by June 2007.

Under Chapter 518, Laws of 2005, Section 207, the state operating budget for the 2005-2007 biennium approved by the Washington State Legislature assumes a reduction of $18 million for the GA program, and has provisions that require the following:

- Directs the department to refer recipients for help in becoming naturalized citizens.
- Directs the department to screen for and help people receiving GA obtain benefits from the Veterans Administration.

- Gives the department discretion to pay for mental health or chemical dependency treatment and for vocational rehabilitation services provided by agencies not currently funded or authorized to provide those services to department clients when expected to help General Assistance recipients obtain employment.

- Requires the department to report on the outcomes of these actions to the legislature by November first of each year, starting in 2005.

Current Practices

As required under state law, the GA program requires a person to participate in treatment or accept services from other agencies when doing so can be expected to enable the person become employable. Social Workers in the Economic Services Administration's local Community Services Offices (CSOs) document and track which agencies the person is expected to contact in the individual case plans. The referrals described in the budget provisions are among the services that the Social Workers already direct people receiving GA benefits to pursue. However, the budget provisions contain details that require those referrals focus on an expected outcome, while current referrals expect the person to participate in whatever services the other agency makes available.

Discretion to Purchase Treatment and Vocational Rehabilitation Services

CSO Social Workers are responsible for developing a case plan for each GA recipient. Beyond requiring the person to seek medical treatment or apply for other income to reduce the need for GA cash assistance, the case plan may direct a referral for the person to apply to an agency and cooperate with the services they are offered.

The program has no control over whether the other agency is willing and capable of serving the recipient. The budget proviso that gives DSHS the ability to directly obtain specific treatment services increases flexibility. While the department is willing to use this discretion, the reduced budget and a forecast of continued caseload growth would appear to make it impossible to do so and keep expenditures within allotted funds as directed.

Naturalization Services

During SFY 2003-2005, the naturalization referral process for people getting GA benefits was to have the person apply to the Social Security Administration (SSA) for SSI benefits. If SSA rejected the person's application because of their status as a non-citizen, the Social Worker would recommend the person consider naturalization and give them a list of agencies contracted to provide the necessary citizenship preparation and application services. The Social Worker was not required to have the person to report back that they made contact with a naturalization provider.

In the 2005-2006 naturalization services contracts, the Economic Services Administration (ESA) required that the contracting agencies make serving people receiving GA benefits a priority group to assess for and offer naturalization services, and required contractors to report the results of the naturalization assessment to the referring Social Worker. ESA is adding information about these contract requirements to the Social Worker referral procedures. By the end of November 2005, ESA will have the ability to collect outcome data.

Since 2003, ESA has used its data on refugees and their time in the country to conduct outreach efforts. A year prior to the person reaching their seven-year limit on receiving SSI benefits, ESA sends a letter reminding the person about the time limit and recommends the person consider naturalization, with the contact information for ESA's naturalization services contractors. Forty-five days prior to the time that ESA expects the SSI benefits to stop, the person is sent a second letter, again advising the person to seek naturalization services. An Application for Benefits is enclosed with the second letter, and the letter informs the person that ESA-administered cash assistance programs may be available as an alternative to the SSI benefits that will be ending.

In SFY 2004, 184 people became enrolled with a naturalization services contractor as a result of these outreach efforts.

Veterans Administration Referrals

When a person applies for GA benefits, staff at local CSOs ask about the receipt of Veterans Administration (VA) as a possible source of income. When the person receives VA payments and becomes eligible for GA, the VA payments are used to reduce dollar for dollar the amount of the GA payment.

In addition to the Application for Benefits, the person also completes a supplemental education, employment and health history form that includes questions about whether the person was applying for or receiving VA benefits, if the person ever received

services from the VA and the person's work history for the five years prior to application, which could show that the person had served in the armed forces. The person's answers are reviewed during an intake interview with the Social Worker and any reported contacts with the VA, receipt of VA benefits and employment in the armed forces are noted. When the Social Worker develops the case plan, those notes are used to require a person to apply for payments that they are not currently receiving but have the potential to obtain or to participate in receiving whatever treatment services are necessary and are or appear to be available through the VA.

Currently Social Workers track treatment services, but do not record the treatment provider. For example, in August 2005, 3,649 people received mental health treatment but ESA cannot identify how many of these people were treated through the VA. Modifying the tracking to include the service provider and training Social Workers on the changes are expected to be completed by the end of December 2005.

During the summer of 2005, ESA staff met with representatives from the Washington State Department of Veteran's Affairs (WSVA) to discuss a data cross match with VA records to identify individuals on General Assistance who are eligible for VA benefits. WSVA works on a fee-for-service basis ($100 - $150 per person) to provide assistance to individuals to make a transition to VA benefits.

A data share was established and a GA client listing was provided to the WDVA. A complete analysis of the results of the data match and recommendations for further action will be completed by January 2006.

Other Actions

While the department is not planning to use GA grant expenditure funds to purchase treatment and rehabilitation services as allowed, ESA is working with the other parts of the department to ensure eligible GA clients have access to available services, primarily those offered by the Division of Alcohol and Drug Abuse (DASA) and the Mental Health Division (MHD).

ESA is working with DASA on improved or new referral protocols to access chemical dependency treatment.

The Economic Services Administration is also working with the Mental Health Division on implementation of mental health reforms passed during the 2005 legislative session (Senate Bill 5763 and House Bill 1290), including provisions that require expedited medical determinations and timely access to medical assistance by persons with serious mental illness who are being released from confinement in a public institution, including correctional facilities and community psychiatric hospitals.