

To: Human Services and Housing Committee
From: Alicia Temple, Oregon Law Center
Date: January 29, 2019
Re: General Assistance, HB 2302

Chair Keny-Guyer and members of the committee:

On behalf of the Oregon Law Center (OLC), I am submitting testimony in support of continuing and improving Oregon's General Assistance program.

OLC is a non-profit organization that provides free legal help to people struggling to make ends meet. Our mission is to achieve justice for low-income communities in Oregon by providing a full range of the highest quality civil legal services. We advocate for our clients and for the services and programs that help them to overcome poverty. General Assistance is an important part of the social safety-net that specifically helps vulnerable individuals who are most in need.

The General Assistance program has a long history in Oregon. First start in the 1970's, GA provided assistance to some of our most vulnerable Oregonians. GA, in contrast to TANF, worked with people who do not have dependent children. Often termed the "poorest of the poor," GA served about 2,500 people in Oregon at its peak. To be eligible, a recipient had to have little or no income and personal possessions, including no more than \$50.00 in liquid assets. And they had to be unable to work for a year or more, and be willing to work with a case manager to gain federal benefits. The program existed in one form or another until it was eliminated from the state budget in 2005.

In 2016, after a decade of advocacy, 20 organizations came to together and worked with the legislature to restart the General Assistance program. HB 4042 established a housing first approach to working with 200 very low-income, single and childless couples from the presumptive Medicaid caseload who are also homeless. In addition to the housing first assistance, the key element is the work of connecting eligible participants to federal Social Security disability benefits. This can be a long and arduous process, but the skill and experience of the highly trained DHS workers allows that the majority are ultimately found to be eligible. In those successful instances, the state, through an interim service agreement with the client, gets reimbursed for service expenses (rent, utilities, personal incidental funds) when the client receives a retroactive check.

It is important to note that this was a cost effective program, because the state received reimbursement for the cost of the grant when the applicant was deemed eligible for Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and/or Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI).

HB 4042 funded a capped caseload at 200 clients. By restarting the program, DHS has been able to provide crucial services to clients in need while also providing Oregon an opportunity to review the effectiveness of the new program. This session we hope to find ways to improve upon the foundation created in 2016. OLC looks forward to working with the legislature to continue to help DHS provide timely, quality assistance to its full caseload of individuals.