

SHELTER PARTNERSHIP, INC. ...WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP TO END
HOMELESSNESS

A REPORT ON THE IMPACTS OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE FIVE
MONTH TIME LIMIT ON GENERAL RELIEF CASH BENEFITS IN LOS ANGELES
COUNTY

Prepared by:

Shelter Partnership, Inc.

523 West Sixth Street, Suite 616

Los Angeles, CA 90014

(213) 688-2188

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

In February 1998, Los Angeles County implemented a new program to limit assistance to "employable" recipients of General Relief (GR) to 5 out of 12 months. The GR program is the program of last resort for the county's indigent and provides cash aid, food stamps, health care, and other services. The decision by the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors to implement the 5 month time limit for the first time in the program's history was prompted by a period of financial strain for the County. The action also occurred amid a complex web of state and local legislative changes and the settlement of a class action lawsuit brought on behalf of GR recipients against the County.

As thousands of individuals began losing their GR cash benefits beginning June 1, 1998, many homeless service agencies reported that GR termines were seeking aid from their agencies. Consequently, in the fall of 1998, Shelter Partnership, Inc., along with the Los Angeles Coalition to End Hunger and Homelessness ("the Coalition") and Dr. Ailee Moon of the University of California Los Angeles Department of Public Policy and Social Research (UCLA), decided to study the impact of the loss of GR cash benefits on the lives of those who were terminated and used homeless services in the County.

Methodology

To the greatest extent possible, research efforts were coordinated with UCLA and the Coalition which were simultaneously conducting a similar monitoring study on the impact of the 5 month time limit. The surveys used by Shelter Partnership were based on a survey designed by UCLA and used in their study. Data collection efforts were also coordinated in order to reduce research costs and to avoid duplication of efforts.

Two surveys were utilized in all participating agencies. A one page, four question eligibility survey administered by homeless service agency staff or, in some cases, staff of Shelter Partnership, was utilized to determine if respondents had lost their GR cash benefits due to the implementation of the 5 month time limit. If the individual qualified based on responses to the eligibility survey, they were given a full-length, 10 page, 45 question self-administered survey. The survey asked questions on how key areas of the lives of respondents had been effected by the loss of GR cash benefits, including: living situation; food; employment; transportation; and reliance on friends, family and community-based organizations (CBOs) for cash and non-cash assistance.

In order to assess the impact of the loss of GR cash benefits due to the 5 month time limit on former GR recipients, surveys were collected in homeless service agencies in two phases of data collection. In the first phase, surveys were conducted in 21 year-round homeless shelters and 3 homeless access centers from October 1, 1998 to December 31, 1998. In the second phase, surveys were collected in 10 cold/wet weather shelters from January 12, 1999 to February 25, 1999. A total of 102 surveys were collected from individuals who lost their GR cash benefits due to the implementation of the time limits.

Findings

The study found a significant increase in the incidences of destitution and despair among the individuals who were surveyed. This is not to say that life was not arduous for these individuals while receiving \$221 a month in cash benefits. It clearly was.

While receiving cash assistance, the majority of the respondents had lived in both homeless (63%) and non-homeless (56%) situations. After the loss of benefits, there was a significant increase (27%) in the percentage of the respondents who lived in homeless situations. While receiving cash benefits, 31% of the respondents reported living in a homeless shelter; this percentage nearly doubled to 61% after the loss of aid. Twenty-eight percent of the respondents reported living on the streets before the cuts, as compared to 37% who reported living on the streets afterwards. Thirty-nine percent of the respondents reported living in an apartment or hotel/motel before the cuts, while only 9% of the respondents reported such living arrangements after the cuts.

Another measurement of the increase in misery resulting from the cuts is the increased incidence of hunger, with 63% of all respondents reporting that they had experienced hunger more often than they did prior to the loss of cash benefits. While 98% of all respondents ate at least two meals a day prior to losing their cash benefits, only 56% of all respondents ate at least two meals a day after losing their cash benefits. While 95% of the respondents received food stamps prior to losing cash benefits, only 48% received them after losing benefits.

Nearly half (45%) of all respondents reported looking for work more often after losing benefits; however, 84% of the respondents did not find a job. Of those who reported working, two-thirds were working part-time. Interestingly, 24% of the individuals surveyed had never held a full or part-time job.

It is well known that access to transportation is extremely important in getting and keeping a job. Yet, 75% of the respondents reported that it was more difficult to "get around" after the loss of GR benefits. In losing their cash benefits, these individuals also lost access to County funded bus tokens.

The respondents' reliance on community-based organizations to help them meet their basic needs increased significantly after their benefits were cut-off. Forty-four percent of the people surveyed indicated an increase in the amount of aid that they had received from these organizations.

Conversely, there was no notable increase in the reliance on family and friends since the cut-off for the surveyed individuals. Approximately 90% of the respondents reported not receiving cash aid from family or friends, both prior to and after losing cash benefits. Both before and after the cut-off, approximately 80% of the respondents reported not receiving "non-cash aid" (e.g., food, clothing, transportation and shelter) from a family member or friend. The lack of support and social isolation is also evidenced by the 38%

of respondents who reported that they did not have a family member or a friend in the Los Angeles area with whom they could talk to about their secrets or problems.

When asked to describe, in their own words, the changes that they had experienced since losing cash benefits, the respondents reported experiencing the following: 1) employment efforts impeded by homelessness, hunger, and mobility difficulty; 2) loss of aid at a critical point in transition to self-sufficiency; 3) loss of hope and increased anxiety; 4) return to self-defeating behavior; and 5) increased reliance on community-based organizations.

Recommendations

We believe that the findings presented in this report raise serious, immediate concerns that the public and decision-makers must address in structuring "welfare reform" efforts to this vulnerable and needy population. We recommend that the County implement the following policy recommendations.

- 1) Avoid all future implementation of time limits on the receipt of General Relief cash benefits.
- 2) Provide comprehensive employment and self-sufficiency services to all GR recipients.
- 3) Increase the amount of monthly cash benefits for GR recipients.
- 4) Improve communications between DPSS and GR recipients about program components and eligibility requirements.