

News Updates:

Homeless Advocates Stage New Year's Eve Rally Against County's General Assistance Cuts

By Riya Bhattacharjee

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For thousands of Alameda County residents, New Year's eve will be anything but a party. Starting Jan. 1, 2010, the clock will start ticking on a three-month time limit on General Assistance funds received by employable economically disadvantaged people.

The county Board of Supervisors voted 3-2 in June to approve the cut with the hope that it would bridge the county's massive budget deficit.

For the majority of GA recipients, these grants are the only source of sustenance. Some social welfare advocates believe reducing the time limit from 12 to three months would force their clients into homelessness and negatively impact their families and the county.

A group of East Bay social service providers, including Berkeley's Building Opportunities for Self-Sufficiency and East Bay Community Law Center, are scheduled to rally outside the Alameda County Board of Supervisors Plaza in Oakland at 7 p.m. today (Jan. 31) to protest the cuts. The group also plans to ask Supervisors Alice Lai Bitker, Scott Haggerty and Gail Steele—all of whom voted in favor of the time limit—to rescind their decision.

Supervisors Keith Carson and Nate Miley voted against the time limit.

Funded by Alameda County, GA provides a monthly loan to eligible recipients with a \$296 maximum per month. To qualify for GA, an individual cannot have any other kind of support and has to take part in employment services. All GA money is considered a loan, and recipients have to sign a reimbursement agreement as a condition of eligibility. The typical GA recipient is a single adult who doesn't have children under 18.

"One of the reasons why the county is making cuts is because they feel this is a community who are not going to speak up for themselves," said Luan Huynh, an attorney with the East Bay Community Law Center, which has more than 20 clients on General Assistance. "That's why it's really important for GA recipients to make their voices heard—it will cause homelessness, increase visits to the hospital and make people do things that they would otherwise never do to survive."

Huynh said that if the proposed cuts took place, one of her clients would end up pushing a cart on the street for no fault of his own.

"It's a little bit hypocritical—on one hand you see the board asking the state not to cut welfare, and then these are the same people who are cutting GA," she said. "I don't think the budget

woes of the county can be solved by cutting benefits for its poorest residents. We need a fair and balanced solution to the problem. Government does itself a disservice by trying to save dollars just to have to spend many more on the fallout from their policies."

Most of Huynh's clients use their GA dollars to pay rent, buy medicine, shoes and clothes. Food stamps take care of groceries.

"With the proposed cuts, they will still have food stamps, but previous studies have shown that when their grant gets affected, they lose the stamps as well," Huynh said. "There's less of an incentive to keep up with the paperwork. Sometimes when you become homeless, the paperwork may even get lost."

Berkeley Councilmember Kriss Worthington said he worries that the cuts would hurt people who have run out of unemployment.

"With the economy the way it is, you need temporary assistance for more than three months," Worthington said. "These cuts are really drastic. Now is not the time to time-limit GA."

Alameda County's unemployment rate was 11.5 percent in October. More than 65,600 people exhausted their unemployment benefits between October 2008 and 2009.

In a letter to the Alameda County Board of Supervisors, San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom warned that the decision would have a "direct impact" on his city and urged the board to explore more humane options to

reform the General Assistance Program. Newsom said the board's "misguided social and fiscal policy" could affect 70 percent of Alameda County recipients, leaving more than 7,000 people without any kind of income.

Calling GA recipients the "poorest and most vulnerable in our communities," Newsom said they have little chance to find employment in the current economic climate.

"Assessing an individual as 'employable' simply because he or she is able-bodied ignores this fact, does little to move these clients into employment and will simply force the majority of these individuals into utter destitution," Newsom said in his letter.

Frustrated with the lack of response from the county GA department about the state of his grants, East Bay resident Peter Carney recently requested an internal hearing with help from the East Bay Community Law Center.

"I understand the economic situation and all that, but hello! You are kicking me out of my house here," Carney said in a telephone interview Wednesday. "Nobody bothered to sit down with me and figure out what's going on with my life. I need to get the proper information so that they don't cut me to a point where I have to end up on the streets come spring."

Carney, who moved to the Bay Area from Brooklyn in 1976, worked as a plumber until he fell victim to arthritis and Carpal Tunnel Syndrome.

"I'd like to change my situation if I could, but I have all these medical conditions that prevent me from working," Carney, 59, said. "Nobody wants to give me a job at this age."

Huynh said that most of her clients faced similar problems.

"We are not talking about a highly skilled group of individuals here," she said. "Most people don't want to hire old people—you can't teach an old dog new tricks. They want to hire young people who are more savvy."

Worthington said that because victims of domestic abuse also benefited from the grants, he is afraid that limiting it would force them to return to a "battered life." Other GA recipients are trauma cases or have passed through the criminal justice system, often suffering from mental illness, drug or alcohol addictions and bouts of homelessness.

"Where will all these people go? If they end up in hospitals, then the county will eventually end up paying for it," Huynh said. "It's a shortsighted way of fixing the budget."