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local news

Shaving a thin line

In August, the state implements cuts in General Assistance
that will hit the most needy—including those with AIDS

by Inga Sorensen

The executive director of Oregon's largest AIDS nonmedical service provider says she fears a cut in monthly general assistance benefits from \$286 to \$250 could have an adverse impact on many of her agency's 1,600 clients.

"Many people living with AIDS rely on benefits to get by," says Cascade AIDS Project's Susan Stoltenberg. "Even the smallest cut can push someone over the edge in terms of not being able to pay their rent. It's terrible."

General Assistance, a program of the Oregon Department of Human Resources, is for mentally or physically disabled people who are unemployable for more than a year and have no financial resources. Under the budget approved by state lawmakers in June, the monthly benefits were to be reduced to \$210 and take effect July 1. Funding was partially restored—bringing the monthly allotment to \$250—and took effect Aug. 1.

"We don't know exactly how many of our clients receive [GA funding] specifically, but what we do know is that 25 percent of our caseload receives some type of housing subsidy," says Stoltenberg. "It's logical that GA funding is going to be a part of that."

"I am alarmed at the potential consequences of this reduction. The least expensive housing in the area is found in downtown hotels; many GA recipients currently live in these hotels. The rent for even this modest housing will be out of reach for many GA recipients once their monthly benefits are reduced," says Bobby Weinstock, housing program manager for Northwest Pilot Project, a nonprofit organization that serves people facing economic hardship.

According to Dana Brown of Multnomah County Community Action, which assists a similar constituency, there are approximately 900 GA recipients in Multnomah County. Her group estimates as many as 200 people will lose their housing in August and September and need emergency shelter due to this cut.

"These cuts may seem small to some people, but we're talking about taking away from those who don't have anything," she says.

In a June 30 letter to Gov. John Kitzhaber, state Rep. Gail Shibley (D-Portland) urged for funding to be maintained at the \$286 level, citing the estimated costs needed to provide emergency shelter for those directly affected by the cuts.

She writes: "To provide emergency shelter for any one person in Multnomah County costs from \$250 to \$300 a month. Total cost must also figure the social work costs borne by local governments and nonprofit agencies to help these people move back from homelessness to housing."

"Because many are frail or ill, increased medical and hospitalization costs due to difficulties of living on the streets must also be added. Thus, if even one-third of the GA clients in Multnomah County become homeless, emergency shelter for them will cost from \$1.8 to \$2.2 million in operating costs."

According to Shibley, most GA recipients are in the process of applying for Social Security Insurance benefits, which she calls a "frustratingly lengthy process."

In her letter, she says, "[Upon] the approval of the SSI applications, the federal government reimburses [Oregon] for all monthly GA payments made to that person. Approximately 80 percent of

all GA recipients ultimately receive SSI. It seems a short-sighted solution for the State to put hundreds of people at risk of homelessness and push the resulting cost onto local governments and nonprofit social service agencies, when continuing the current level of GA funding could prevent this impending crisis."

Stoltenberg says the cuts will indeed lead to added strain on her agency. "Housing issues have always been a top priority for people with HIV/AIDS," she

says. "We're talking about people who are struggling to get by, who often can't work and rely on their benefits. [CAP] has worked to offer assistance, but it's never easy."

Stoltenberg says that even though CAP recently received \$327,000 in federal funds to provide housing assistance to people with HIV and AIDS, the money had been allotted for particular purposes before the cut was announced. "The reduction in GA benefits took us totally by surprise," she says.

State officials reportedly say the payments will continue at the \$250 level until December, with the hope that enough money can be secured at a November meeting of the Legislative Emergency Board to restore the payments to \$286 through June 1997. They say in order to restore the funding and stay within the budget, however, they're depending on receiving federal funds.



Susan Stoltenberg

PHOTO BY LINDA KLEVER

Deschutes human rights group gains new member

The Hispanic Advocacy Council board of directors says it will join under the nonprofit umbrella of the Deschutes County Coalition for Human Dignity.

Carmen Bauer, a HAC board member, says, "The vision of the coalition is to become a true coalition of like-minded people and groups. We share that vision."

Coalition members, meanwhile, say they look forward to working with HAC on justice and equality issues.

In related news, citizens living in Central Oregon have a place to turn to in order to report

acts of bias, intolerance or discrimination. It's called the Deschutes Discrimination Reporting Line, a 24-hour reporting and referral line sponsored by the Deschutes County Coalition for Human Dignity. The line was established a year and a half ago and is designed to provide support and referrals to individuals and groups who wish to report an act of intolerance or a bias-related incident.

The Discrimination Reporting Line needs volunteers to staff the hotline and funds to continue the service. The hotline's number is 383-4113. Those interested in volunteering can call the Bend-based Deschutes County Coalition for Human Dignity at 385-3320.

Inga Sorensen