

Alameda County Social Services Agency

**GENERAL ASSISTANCE PROGRAM
FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS:
FINAL REPORT**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Alameda County's General Assistance (GA) program—administered by Alameda County Social Services Agency (SSA)—provides income support to County residents who have no other means of financial support. The County serves approximately 8,000 individuals through this program. In August 2008, SSA engaged the Institute for Social & Environmental Justice Education (ISEJE), a nonprofit research, evaluation and management consulting firm based in Oakland, California, to conduct a series of focus groups with GA clients and staff. The SSA commissioned the study at the behest of the GA Ad Hoc Working Group, a committee of the Alameda County Board of Supervisors. Specifically, the Working Group was interested in gaining a deeper understanding of, first, the circumstances that lead individuals to apply for aid and, secondly, the challenges GA clients face as they try to transition from GA to work. ISEJE conducted four focus groups with clients and staff in September 2008.

Key Findings

- 1) **Clients' and staffs' comments suggest that GA clients apply for General Assistance benefits for a wide range of reasons**, most of which are associated with either traumatic or life transition events, or with deeply-rooted personal circumstances that have inhibited their ability to get and keep a job.
- 2) **GA clients are in high-stress situations characterized by uncertainty about being able to meet their basic necessities of life.** Clients described dependency on GA as "depressing" and said what they most want and need during this difficult phase of their lives is support, encouragement and respect.
- 3) **GA clients said they are challenged on multiple fronts as they attempt to secure employment**, from confronting the immediate personal circumstances that led them to apply for GA in the first place, to navigating and complying with a complicated and under-resourced welfare system, to trying to compete in a downturned economy and labor market.
- 4) **GA clients said that above all else, they need one-on-one, respectful interaction with staff who can help them develop a personalized employability plan.** Specific services clients said they need included vocational assessments, access to job training opportunities, targeted job placement services, and increased transportation assistance.

- 5) **GA clients and staff alike suggested that an under-resourced system and a one-size-fits-all approach to job readiness and job placement undercut possibilities for client success and program effectiveness.** Specific services that clients cited as unhelpful included the Job Search component, community volunteering that was unrelated to their interests or skill areas, and the absence of true case management services, which clients said were virtually non-existent. Additionally, clients said SSA staff who treat clients in a disrespectful manner are not helpful.
- 6) **Staff and clients alike suggest the General Assistance program should focus on ensuring that clients are properly assessed and then assigned to services targeted to their specific needs.** Staff, in particular, emphasized the need to ensure that clients receive mental health assessments by licensed professionals and vocational assessments prior to being placed in Job Club/Job Search services.

Recommendations

Based on the findings from the participant and staff focus groups, ISEJE recommends that SSA managers consider the following actions to improve the service delivery system for General Assistance clients:

- Ensure a greater focus on up-front client assessment.
- Consider segmenting the applicant population by intensity of need and developing service "tracks" or "strands" targeted to meet specific needs.
- Match the hardest-to-place employable clients with "specialty" case workers.
- Develop a process to expedite processing of GA clients with disabilities into SSI.
- Strengthen SSA's relationships with Alameda County's educational, counseling, and employment training service providers so that caseworkers have a strong referral network for their clients.
- Develop mechanisms to include GA clients and line staff in ongoing GA program improvement efforts.

I. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Alameda County's General Assistance Program—administered by Alameda County Social Services Agency (SSA)—provides income support to County residents who have no other means of financial support.² During the past 17 years, the County's GA caseload has fluctuated dramatically, from approximately 11,000 cases in 1991 down to 2,910 cases in 2000, then back up to nearly 8,000 cases in 2008. These trends are no doubt tied to a combination of internal institutional policy changes and external conditions such as the health of the economy.

Faced with a SSA budget shortfall of more than 11 million dollars for the 2008-09 fiscal year, Alameda County's Board of Supervisors moved to impose six-month time limits on GA clients beginning in July 2008. To prepare for this policy change, SSA managers pursued two strategies: 1) they geared up to implement an expanded employment program and 2) they took steps to improve the identification of individuals with disabilities, particularly those with mental illness, to ensure they would not be affected by the new time limits. The expanded employment plan included a doubling of employment counselors, expanded Job Club and Job Search capabilities, and access to short-term vocational training aimed at preparing participants for growth industries in the East Bay economy. The expanded services were to be funded in part by Federal Food Stamp employment and training funds.

To identify individuals who might need to be exempted from the time limits due to disabilities, SSA invited all GA clients who would be subject to time limits in July 2008 to screening interviews to determine if they needed a medical and/or psychological exam. A standardized mental health screening tool was used. In addition, SSA contracted with licensed mental health clinicians to conduct on-site interviews of persons the screening tool identified as possibly needed to be exempted. Managers also made plans to provide disability awareness training during the summer of 2008 to all Economic Benefits Department and Employment Services Department staff that had contact with clients.

During the first week of July 2008, four days after the expanded employment program was initiated, the Board of Supervisors instructed the Department to put all new services for GA clients on hold pending recommendations from its GA Ad Hoc Working Group, an ad hoc committee charged with developing recommendations for how best to address the problem of a growing GA population in the face of a shrinking county budget. While the mental health screenings and the training continued, all of the other program changes were put on hold.

² Clients receive a monthly allocation of \$336 per month.

In August 2008, SSA engaged the Institute for Social & Environmental Justice Education (ISEJE), a nonprofit research, evaluation and management consulting firm based in Oakland, California, to conduct a series of focus groups with GA clients and staff. The SSA commissioned the study at the behest of the GA Ad Hoc Working Group. Specifically, the Working Group was interested in gaining a deeper understanding of the circumstances leading individuals to apply for aid and of the challenges GA clients face as they try to transition from GA to work. The Working Group was also interested in knowing more about the types of services participants and staff believed might assist clients in making a successful transition off of aid.

ISEJE staff carried out a series of focus groups in September 2008. This document presents findings from the research, which was guided by the following questions:

- What circumstances lead individuals to apply for General Assistance?
- What do staff designing the General Assistance program need to know about GA clients?
- What challenges do GA clients face in getting and keeping a job?
- What services do GA clients most need?
- What services are not helpful?
- What advice do clients and staff have for improving the program?

About This Report

This report is organized in five sections. Sections I and II provide a brief background on the purpose of the study and on the methods we used to carry it out. Section III provides information about the individuals who participated in the focus groups. Section IV presents the key findings from the focus groups, highlighting themes that were common across the client focus groups and within the staff focus group. Section V offers conclusions and recommendations based on the findings.

II. METHOD

The principal data collection method we used for this study was a series of focus groups with GA clients and staff. SSA managers drafted the guiding questions for the focus groups. These were reviewed by members of the GA Ad Hoc Working Group of the Board of Supervisors and subsequently by General Assistance advocates. No changes to the questions were suggested. ISEJE staff made only minor changes to the questions/prompts used to solicit input from client and staff focus group participants.

Recruitment Process

SSA staff aimed to have 10-12 GA clients sign up for each of the three client focus groups, understanding that there would be some attrition between sign-up and attendance. Due to the tight timeframe for conducting the focus groups, SSA managers agreed to take responsibility for recruiting focus group participants. ISEJE staff developed a script for SSA staff to use to recruit GA clients and staff. The script outlined the purpose of the study and the parameters for how the information would be used, and gave assurances of confidentiality. The script, which was also adapted into a recruitment flyer, informed clients that they would receive a \$20 gift card in appreciation for their time. Staff members were informed that they would receive release time to attend the focus group. SSA managers recruited GA clients and staff from the North Oakland, Hayward and Eastmont Self-Sufficiency Centers.

Focus Group Protocol

On September 3rd, 9th and 10th, 2008, ISEJE staff held three 70-90-minute, audio-recorded focus groups with GA clients and one focus group with staff. ISEJE staff briefed focus group members about the project and reviewed with them a consent form detailing the purpose of the study, the uses of the findings, and the assurance that although their responses might be included in the findings, their identities would not be revealed. Prior to initiating the discussion, ISEJE staff asked focus group members' permission to audio-record the session. Focus group members were also asked to fill out a one-page sheet used to collect demographic information.

Analyses

An ISEJE staff member transcribed the four audio files. Two staff members coded the three client focus group transcripts for themes. The themes were compared across the three GA client focus groups to identify themes common to most clients. In addition to identifying themes common to GA clients or GA staff, ISEJE staff looked for themes that were common to both GA clients and GA staff.

Reporting

Prior to completing this report, ISEJE staff presented preliminary findings to the GA Ad Hoc Working Group of the Board of Supervisors on September 17, 2008. Two of the GA clients who participated in the focus groups accompanied ISEJE staff and provided the Working Group members with first-hand accounts of their experiences.

Limitations of the Focus Groups

The intent of conducting the focus groups was to collect qualitative information from a relatively small group of GA clients and staff recruited from each of Alameda County's three Self-Sufficiency Centers. The findings presented in this report represent the opinions and circumstances of only a small group of GA clients and staff and do not represent the population of GA clients and staff in Alameda County overall.

III. FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT PROFILES

SEJE staff collected demographic information from 15 of the 16 GA clients who participated in the focus groups.³ This information, along with some general observations about the staff who participated in focus groups, is summarized below.

General Assistance Clients

Sixteen GA clients participated in the focus groups. Self-reported demographic information was collected from 15 of the 16 GA clients who participated in the focus groups. The majority of client participants were male, African-American and between the ages of 36 and 54. Eight of the client participants reported they were living with family members, five reported that they were homeless, and two reported they were living alone and renting. Nearly three-fourths of client participants reported having no health insurance.

Twelve client participants reported working within the past two years. Only one client participant reported never having worked. Five client participants reported never having received GA benefits previously. Asked to estimate the total time they had received GA benefits from Alameda County, more than half of the client participants reported the time as being less than one year.

General Assistance Staff

Six SSA staff participated in the staff focus group. The six individuals represented a mix of SSA social workers and employment specialists. All three Self-Sufficiency Centers were represented. Staff comments suggest most of these staff members had long histories of employment with SSA.

³ One client participant left the focus group before handing in the demographic questionnaire.

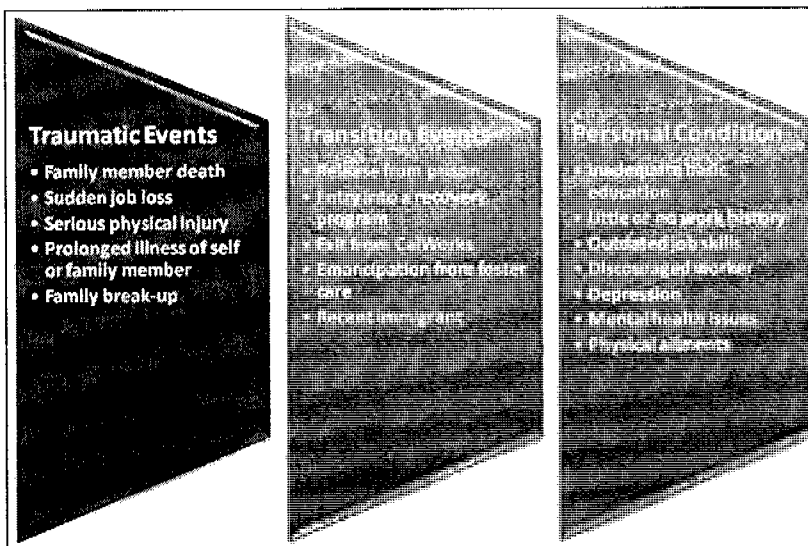
IV. KEY FINDINGS

The findings presented in this section reflect themes that emerged from clients' and staffs' responses to the focus group study's six guiding questions.

1. What circumstances lead individuals to apply for General Assistance benefits?

GA clients apply for General Assistance benefits for a wide range of reasons, most of which are associated with either traumatic or life transition events, or with deeply-rooted personal circumstances that have inhibited them from getting and keeping a job.

GA clients and staff who participated in the focus groups described a wide range of circumstances that lead individuals to apply for General Assistance. GA clients described their own circumstances and staff described the circumstances that they observed through their caseloads. Reasons seemed to fall into three categories:



- 1) circumstances associated with a traumatic event;
- 2) circumstances associated with a life transition; or 3) more deeply-rooted personal circumstances such as a history of welfare dependency; limited education, work experience or skills; or chronic or intermittent mental health, homelessness or substance abuse problems.

Circumstances Associated with Traumatic or Unexpected Events. Traumatic or unexpected events that GA clients described included the long-term illness or death of an immediate family member, the break-up of their family, sudden loss of a job and subsequent termination of unemployment benefits, and serious injuries that left them

unable to work. One GA client who had worked at a hospital, for example, described how he was fired from his job as a cook for taking some food home, despite the fact that this seemed to be a common practice among the hospital's cafeteria staff. He wasn't able to get his unemployment benefits renewed and as he looked for work, his bills kept adding up. He described how he and his family lived on his income tax refund for a short while, but said ultimately he was forced to apply for GA. "I lost my job, and then my unemployment ran out, and I didn't have any money. So that's it, I needed to get some money. I'm stable where I live, but I needed money for day to day, to get retrained."

Other GA clients who suffered similar unexpected or traumatic events described their circumstances in the following ways:

"I think my problem was separation from my wife. There were two people in the household, both working, so now it's just cut in half and 'cause of that and paying the child support..."

"I was working full-time. I was in management in the corporate world, and my mom became ill. So I started taking care of her, I became her homecare provider. So with that, I was taking care of her around the clock, but she passed away three months ago. So now I'm unemployed."

"We have people that have lost a spouse or a loved one. That's another reason why they're here. And they just cannot get up from that."

—GA Staff

Numerous staff reflected on the difficulty clients experienced trying to get back on their feet after suffering these kinds of traumatic or unexpected events. As one staff member described, "We have people that have lost a spouse or a loved one. That's another reason why they're in here. And they just cannot get up from that."

Circumstances Associated with Life Transition Events. In addition to traumatic or unexpected events, some of the circumstances that GA clients described were associated with transitions in their lives that left them without a source of financial or institutional support. These "transition events" included such things as release from prison without assistance to secure employment, immigration to the United States by individuals lacking sufficient English skills to secure employment, or a transition from drug addiction to entry into a substance abuse recovery program. Generally these events were associated with a loss of prior financial or institutional support for basic necessities of life. Clients described these circumstances in the following ways:

"What got me here was I started partying and having a good time, and that led to getting an addiction to hard drugs and right now I'm in a program/shelter and I'm in the process of getting and staying clean, and this is a stepping stone for me. It opens up a lot of doors, like the computers, jobs, you got counseling, and plus when I go back to my program I've got the same things there. I'm fighting 35 years of partying, you know, so it's not going to be within a month or two months. It'll probably take a year, you know, longer. But that's what got me here, just partying and now I'm trying to use that energy I had doing all that stuff into this and trying to start new again, and at my age I'm not going to do it quick."

"Okay, well the reason I'm here is because of incarceration and being displaced getting out, being homeless, et cetera, et cetera, living on the couch in someone else's house."

"For me, I think it's a little bit different because I'm so new in the country. I've been here only for one year, and it's just difficult to find a job in a very different country [...]. I worked for 25 years in my country, but now I have to start from scratch. So that's a problem."

Staff suggested several other transition events that lead individuals to apply for aid, including young adults' emancipation from the foster care system or a family's loss of CalWorks benefits when children turn 18. Other individuals, staff also explained, are prompted to apply for General Assistance because their probation or parole officer required them to secure some source of income. As one staff member described, "Instead of trying to push them into working, they [the probation or parole officer] push them into here first before that."

Circumstances Associated with Personal Conditions. Staff also described conditions that, rather than being event- or transition-driven, were more deeply rooted, having to do with chronic and long-term circumstances that inhibit an individual's ability to secure employment. These included chronic mental health issues, chronic physical disabilities, inadequate educational attainment, a lack of job skills or work experience, and a lack of worker role models for individuals raised in families with histories of dependence on welfare.

Numerous staff said they thought many GA clients were suffering from undiagnosed chronic mental health problems. As one staff member explained, "You have a lot of people with mental health problems, you even have people who don't even realize they have mental health problems but you're sitting down, talking with them, assessing them, and it's clearly obvious that there's a big problem."

Describing the number of young people applying for aid, one staff member explained the situation in this way:

"A lot of them pretty much raised themselves. They didn't have the parental guidance at home because mom was either [sic] on drugs and dad was probably in prison or deceased. So, a lot of those young people are just kind of lost. Even though they went to some school, a lot of them didn't even finish and barely know how to read or fill out an application. They never had a job, so it's like... we're trying to get them into the workforce when they don't have a clue. That's what I see most."

Other Circumstances. Staff also suggested that some individuals apply for General Assistance as a type of "cover." As one staff member explained, "You also have the young men that are selling the drugs that are on the street that need the income so if they get stopped they have a reason why they have money."

2. What do the people designing the GA program need to know about GA clients?

GA clients are in high-stress situations characterized by uncertainty about being able to meet their basic necessities of life. Clients described dependency on GA as "depressing" and said what they most want staff to know is that they want to work and that during this difficult phase of their lives, they need support, encouragement and respect.

Almost every participant in the client focus groups described a persistent state of stress associated with the difficulty of trying to meet their basic necessities of life. Some participants described the break-up of their families as a consequence of living on the "financial edge." One client said because he and his partner of 18 years did not have money for rent, they had been forced to move out and live (at least temporarily) in separate housing situations. Another client, who said he had been fired, described how the financial stress associated with his job loss and lack of financial resources had caused his wife to kick him out of the house three times.

Clients were all in agreement that during this high-stress period of their lives, it is important for them to feel supported, encouraged and respected by SSA staff. A number of GA focus group members suggested some SSA caseworkers need to be reminded that their job is to help clients, not to treat them with disrespect.

Clients expressed a desire to work but were frustrated by the current job market.

Clients also suggested program staff should know that most GA clients want to work but that they need more help gaining access to employment opportunities. During one of the focus group sessions, participants engaged in a spirited conversation about “the good old days” when publicly-funded employment programs operated “hiring halls” where they could go and be handed slips for jobs that they could get that same day. Most of the men said they had worked in warehouse jobs or construction and lamented the fact that most of the jobs they had done previously were in short supply these days.

WHAT SSA STAFF DESIGNING GA PROGRAMS SHOULD KNOW ABOUT GA CLIENTS

(According to Clients)

- That GA clients lead stressful lives
- That some clients need money management skills
- That GA clients want to work
- That many clients need retraining skills
- That dependence on GA is depressing and not a desirable long-term situation
- That GA clients need encouragement from SSA staff
- That \$336 per month of cash aid is not enough to meet basic necessities of life

(According to Staff)

- That a segment of GA clients are falling through the cracks because no one really has the time to follow up with them
- That some clients don't want to work
- That some GA clients are discouraged
- That some GA clients are unable to comply with GA requirements for mental health or medical reasons

Frustration about the labor market, and the perception that they needed retraining, were common sentiments among focus group participants, as illustrated by the following quotes:

“I remember, back in the day, you'd come into the employment office, talk to your counselor, and he'd give you a slip for a job and you'd go to it, and 80 percent, 90 percent of the time, you'd get hired.”

“I'd rather do that [get retrained or use a hiring hall] than come in here and ask for \$336 a month, food stamps. Come in here and get me a job—I don't care what it is. Because once I get that job I can save my money, get me a vehicle and then step up to another job while I'm still working. But I think that the \$300 and the food stamps slows people down. You gotta come back again, and for what?”

There's no jobs. After we come here, we're not gonna get a job—we do the three weeks thing [Job Club and Job Search], we're not gonna get a job. They used to just give you a job, boom."

Some GA Clients are "falling through the cracks." A few staff also suggested that a segment of the population is falling through the cracks as they are sent from one SSA staff person to another. Explaining why, one staff person explained,

"[...] it's set up where they go to their social workers if they have medical or mental problems, and if they're employable they come to us. Well, we're finding out a lot of them that were assigned to a doctor, they don't show for their appointments; they're falling through that crack, then they don't come back to them or to us."

3. What challenges do GA clients face in their efforts to get and keep a job?

GA clients said they are challenged on multiple fronts as they attempt to secure employment, from confronting the immediate personal circumstances that led them to apply for GA in the first place, to navigating and complying with a complicated and under-resourced welfare system, to trying to compete in a downturned economy and labor market.

GA clients' comments suggest that one of the most difficult aspects of trying to secure a job is dealing with the personal challenges that compelled them to apply for cash assistance in the first place. The most common personal challenges cited were the stigma of having a criminal record, the effects of grief and depression after losing a loved one, insufficient financial resources to obtain work attire and transportation, a history of homelessness, or chronic underemployment or unemployment due to outdated or inadequate job skills.

"I remember, back in the day, you'd come into the employment office, talk to your counselor, and he'd give you a slip for a job and you'd go to it, and 80 percent, 90 percent of the time, you'd get hired."

—GA Client

The full list of challenges cited by clients and by staff working with them are shown in the graphic below.

Personal Circumstances	System Interface	Labor Market
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Criminal records •Homelessness •Inadequate job attire •Discouragement •Inadequate transportation •Family disruption •Prolonged illness of self or family member •Unfamiliarity with work expectations •Insufficient work history or education •Lack of marketable job skills •Mental health issues and medical conditions •Lack of worker role models for individuals with history of welfare dependency •Depression 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Threat of sanctions •Difficulty connecting with case workers •Staff turnover •Complex compliance requirements •Some staff who treat clients with disrespect •Limits on transportation assistance •Restrictions on time that can be spent on education, despite the fact that a lack of education is a barrier to employment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Employer discrimination •A downturned economy •New job search methods demand a level of computer literacy that some clients find difficult and intimidating

In numerous cases, as illustrated by the following quote, clients are dealing with multiple personal challenges:

“Here I come out of my shell four years later finally off the street for help from GA, and the little things that I needed like the little money that could help me a little bit, clothes maybe, I always have a problem because I might just have a bag, and I can’t go to an interview looking like I’m looking. So just those small things that I came here for assistance I haven’t been able to really get anything either besides the GA. And I don’t want it—I’d rather be out there working. But I need some little assistance so far as clothes—they have programs, but no one’s really talking to you.”

Complying with welfare system requirements. In great detail, GA focus group participants also described how they had to learn to maneuver through a complicated welfare program that has a strict set of eligibility rules, compliance requirements and operating procedures with which the client must comply. In Alameda County, because

the GA program is enormously under-resourced, clients described having the added difficulty of trying to navigate the system with only minimal direction from staff.

Several clients described the difficulty of trying to carry out job search activities while trying to meet other requirements imposed by the GA program. The following quote illustrates this sentiment:

“They have you go to all of these job searches and doing volunteer work. Where is the time for you to go find yourself a job, because this whole list of jobs that you have to search for, out of 12 you may not even get one interview. So you’d have wasted your whole day trying to find work, and you have to do those things to keep your GA going, and then plus going to volunteer places and volunteering and working for seven, 20 hours a week, or whatever, in order to keep it going just for food stamps. It’s hard. It’s hard.”

Trying to compete in a downturned, highly competitive job market. Finally, clients—many of whom described themselves as having little in the way of marketable job skills or knowledge about how to find a job—said it was hard to compete for jobs given the state of the economy. Many of those who were older or who had worked primarily in the trades or warehousing said their lack of familiarity with the internet and computer applications posed a big barrier given the trend toward on-line job searching and submission of applications. Others pointed to employer discrimination—based on race or on their status as a formerly-incarcerated person or GA client—as a major challenge to securing a job. As one client described:

“Some of the jobs that I have applied for, they’ve [employers have] been interested, but once they find out that I’m on general assistance, it’s like, you know, they judge you right when they see that. They don’t think that there was a circumstance that got us here, or whatever. They just think we’re just trying to collect charity.”

Clients’ comments suggest it is the stressful task of managing these challenges concurrently that is most difficult as they attempt to secure employment.

4. What services do GA clients want and need?

GA clients said that above all else, they need one-on-one, respectful interaction with staff who can help them develop a personalized employability plan. Specific services clients said they need included vocational assessments, access to job training opportunities, targeted job placement services, and increased transportation assistance. Staff said they thought clients need more mental health screening and assessments, education services, specialized services for particularly "hard-to-employ" populations such as formerly-incarcerated individuals, and an automated system to remind them of upcoming appointments.

A strong theme emerging from all three focus groups with clients was their desire to have one-on-one, respectful interaction with SSA staff. Numerous participants spoke about their need for encouragement during the tough times they were going through and many said it was frustrating to have so little contact with their case workers. Staff seemed equally frustrated by the fact that they were handling such large caseloads and said they knew that what clients needed was more personalized attention, as reflected in the following quote:

"We have these people come here, but you don't see signs on the wall of encouragement or motivation — 'Yeah, you can do it!' 'Have belief in yourself!' 'Have confidence!' — something that's uplifting for them, to make them want to come in here and have them say, 'Yeah, I like coming in this place, it's motivating, it makes me feel good.' 'Cause when I deal with clients, I'm always motivating them and encouraging them and it makes them feel good. I know I have an effect on them. I just wish I [could] see them often, regularly, because if I could I know I could make a more positive change."

Staff also suggested that SSA needs to use a more customized approach, targeting services to clients' specific needs. Some staff suggested that SSA should start with an assessment of an individual's readiness to enter the world of work. If a client needs a drug treatment program, said one staff person, then they might not be ready for work. "So they might not be on the same level with somebody who has gone through treatment [and who is] ready to work now."

Clients requested more training and job placement services. Many of the clients who participated in the focus groups said they felt they needed more skills training and more assistance in actually finding a job. Men who previously worked in manufacturing jobs said those kinds of jobs had dried up, rendering their skills outdated or unneeded. Many of these men said they thought they needed retraining services. Quite a few clients said

they would be willing to work in low-paying jobs, but said they needed help with securing those jobs.

Staff said mental health screening and assessment is a must. One of the most dominant themes to emerge from the staff focus group was the view that many GA clients need professional mental health screening and assessment services. Staff members were mixed in their assessment of the computer-based mental health assessments that SSA is currently using. Most staff seemed to agree that SSA needed to contract with greater numbers of external providers who could conduct mental health assessments. They also suggested that SSA needs licensed mental health professionals on site. The strong sentiment for increased mental health services is illustrated by this staff member's quote:

"From the door, when they come in to see the social worker, I think they need to have—we're giving them these forms to go see a medical doctor—they're not seeing mental health or psychologists or psychiatrists that they need to see. They're seeing a medical doctor when they go to these clinics. They need to make sure they get a facility so we can send the mental health patients to a psychiatrist for that evaluation."

Staff said SSA should put greater emphasis on linking clients with educational services. Numerous staff said one of the difficulties they face in trying to help clients through Job Club and Job Search is the fact that many clients don't have an adequate level of education to secure employment. One staff said she thought every young person receiving General Assistance should be required to get a GED before being referred to Job Club.

5. What services are not helpful as GA clients seek to reduce dependency on GA?

GA clients and staff alike suggested that an under-resourced system and a one-size-fits-all approach to job readiness and job placement undercut possibilities for client success and program effectiveness. Specific services that clients cited as unhelpful included the Job Search component, community volunteering that was unrelated to their interests or skill areas, and the lack of true case management services, which clients described as virtually non-existent. Additionally, clients said staff members who treat clients in a disrespectful manner are not helpful.

Clients suggest job search process is not effective. Many clients said the current job search process is not effective because the job leads are often old and SSA's requirements for proving that a client has been seeking work is not in sync with employer recruitment practices. Clients also said the Job Club workshops are not tailored to address the needs of populations with specific barriers, e.g. individuals with criminal records, rendering the workshops useless for some populations. Most staff in the focus group seemed to agree that the job readiness program around which the Job Club and Job Search services components were designed was not effective because it was not designed for the populations SSA serves. As one staff member described:

"As far as the Job Club thing goes, when you're actually in Job Club, they need a program that deals with our type of clientele. Don't come in here and spend all this money for [inaudible] stuff and half of that crap doesn't even deal with the population of people that we deal with. That can be all right for like the Midwest or something where, you know, everybody's going around—'Okay, yes ma'am'—that doesn't work in a culture where you're dealing with a majority of people who have had hardships or who are dealing with life and trying to hide because gun shots are going off. [...] The Job Club I feel they have in place now does not deal with our type of clientele."

Clients need time with case managers. Clients also suggested the case management system is not effective because clients have almost no contact with case workers. Staff suggested that personalized attention for clients is nearly impossible with the level of caseloads they are currently carrying. Staff suggested it is not uncommon for a case worker to carry a caseload of 400 GA clients.

6. What advice do GA clients and staff have for improving the GA program?

Staff and clients alike suggested the General Assistance program should focus on ensuring that clients are properly assessed and then assign clients to services targeted to their specific needs. Staff, in particular, emphasized the need to ensure that clients receive mental health assessments by licensed professionals and other vocational assessments prior to being placed in Job Club/Job Search services.

Advice from Clients

Addressing what they saw as missing or inadequate aspects of the current GA program, clients said they thought program managers should implement the following changes to improve the program:

- Provide personalized case management services.
- Increase job placement and (re)training services.
- Create an on-line job site like monster.com to connect GA clients with county agencies and other employers who would be receptive to GA client employees.
- Create GA "tracks" to target specific services to specific populations.
- Provide incentives to employers to hire GA clients.
- Align community service work with clients' career interests and experience.
- Increase the amount of transportation assistance.
- Engage GA clients in a process to revamp and strengthen the GA program.

Advice from Staff

Staff made the following recommendations aimed at strengthening the GA program:

- Revamp the GA program to ensure adequate assessment of clients' psycho-social condition and of their baseline educational and vocational skills.
- Assure greater parity between the General Assistance and CalWorks programs so that clients have more similar access to resources.
- Develop more relationships with employers that will hire individuals with criminal records.

V. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Ad Hoc Working Group of Alameda County's Board of Supervisors sought the input of GA clients and staff as they considered how to address the problem of a growing GA population in the face of a shrinking county budget. Even within the two-month period within which this study was conducted, the urgency of the problem intensified with the increasing downward trends of the economy. The financial crisis that California (and the greater United States) is now experiencing suggests that into the foreseeable future, Alameda County's GA caseload will likely grow as an increasing number of residents—confronted with serious financial hardships—seek income assistance to meet their basic necessities of life. This is a sobering prospect given that the County's GA program is already seriously under-resourced and overtaxed.

Findings from the focus groups indicate that while GA caseworkers struggle under the weight of enormous, unmanageable caseloads, GA clients are struggling to get the help they need. GA staff and clients both suggest a more targeted service delivery approach. Given the absence of any new resources, we think it will be critical for the Ad Hoc Working Group of the Board of Supervisors and GA program managers to adopt a methodical approach, and perhaps think about how to using existing resources in different ways. Several recommendations for moving in this direction are offered below.

Recommendations

Based on the findings from the participant and staff focus groups, ISEJE recommends that the Ad Hoc Working Group of the Alameda County Board of Supervisors consider taking the following actions to improve the service delivery system for General Assistance clients:

1. **Ensure a greater focus on up-front client assessment.** While intuitively it would seem that an under-resourced program may not be able to put greater attention on up-front assessment, we suggest a more deliberate focus on diagnosing individuals' barriers to employment could yield better results and ultimately conserve resources. If staff can direct GA clients to the specific services they need after conducting a more thorough assessment of their psycho-social, educational and vocational situation, clients' paths toward self-sufficiency or toward coverage by a federally-funded program such as SSI may be shorter, reducing the length of time that a GA client would remain part of the GA caseload.
2. **Consider the feasibility of segmenting the applicant population by intensity of need and developing service "tracks" or "strands" targeted to meet specific needs.** Rather than funnel every GA client into Job Club and Job Search services, we recommend segmenting the applicant population by the severity of the

barriers they are facing, and then case-managing them through a prescribed set of services to meet their specific needs. Individuals who are largely unemployable due to histories of homelessness might need housing stabilization, acculturation and counseling services. Individuals who have low basic skills, little work experience and few marketable job skills may need a service strand focused on education and skills attainment.

3. **Match the hardest-to-place employable clients with "specialty" case workers.** We recommend that GA clients who are particularly hard to place, e.g. individuals with criminal histories, be case-managed by staff who specialize in serving that population. These staff would develop expertise in helping their particular category of clients. A case manager specializing in service to GA clients with criminal histories, for example, would develop a network of connections with community service providers and employers that are supportive of this population. This targeting of support services should allow participants and staff alike to experience a faster and greater level of success in meeting self-sufficiency outcomes.
4. **Develop a process to expedite processing of GA clients with disabilities into SSI.** The study's findings suggest that those GA clients with diagnosed mental health or physical disabilities—a fairly large percentage of the total GA constituency—may be more appropriately served through the SSI program, where they would receive a significantly higher level of benefits. Our understanding is that some SSA staff currently work as "SSI advocates" to help participants move onto SSI aid but that the process can take several years. We recommend the formation of an inter-program (GA and SSI) ad hoc committee of managers and case workers to explore how processing of GA clients with disabilities into SSI could be expedited.
5. **Strengthen SSA's relationships with Alameda County's educational, counseling, and employment training service providers so that caseworkers have a strong referral network for their clients.** SSA can increase its impact with GA clients by drawing on existing resources available through other county-funded education, counseling and employment training service providers. This will require SSA managers and staff to strengthen and expand their existing networks.
6. **Develop mechanisms to include GA clients and line staff in ongoing GA program improvement efforts.** GA clients and staff who participated in the focus groups were genuinely interested in helping to improve the GA program. We recommend that SSA managers capitalize on this enthusiasm and develop mechanisms to involve program participants and line staff in ongoing

discussions about how to address weaknesses in service delivery and improve the day to day experience for both participants and staff.



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