



General Assistance Listening Sessions

Summary Report

September 2023

Maine Department of Health and Human Services

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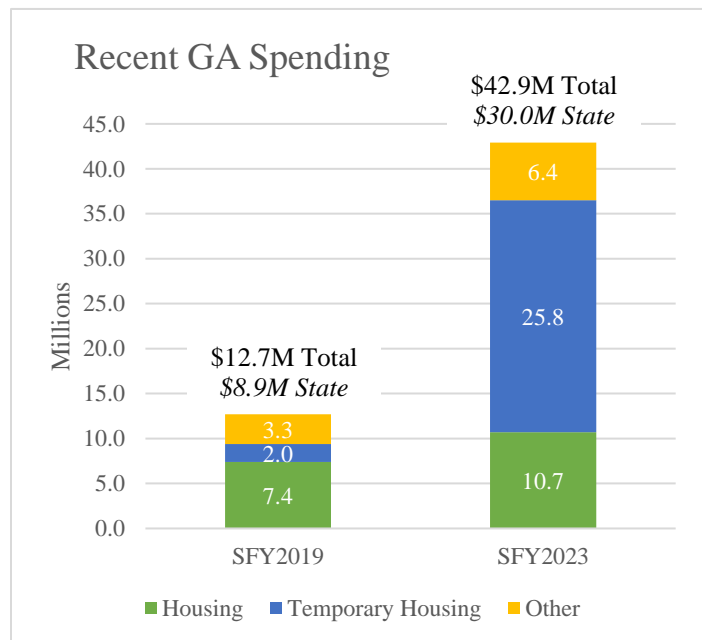
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Purpose and Background

This report summarizes input from a series of listening sessions conducted by the Maine Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) in the spring and summer of 2023 about its General Assistance (GA) program. GA is intended to be the safety net program of last resort. It is administered by municipalities and assistance is provided by voucher. Maine is one of 25 states that operate a GA program and states vary significantly in how they structure this support. There is no federal support for GA, and under current law, municipalities pay out assistance and bill the state for 70 percent of their costs.

Municipalities set maximums (overall and for different categories) for support with assistance from Maine Municipal Association and final approval by the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS). Maximum levels of assistance must be established in accordance with 22 M.R.S. §4305. “Emergency” General Assistance is available in set circumstances and allows municipalities to provide support above the maximum(s) and still be reimbursed for 70 percent of cost. Just prior to the pandemic, PL 2016, Ch. 515 expanded the definition of a qualifying emergency to include homelessness. This was not accompanied with funding to account for additional expenses.

Between this policy change and significantly increased housing insecurity and homelessness, as well as the need for distancing, quarantine, and isolation in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, GA expenditures for municipalities and the state have increased precipitously. During the COVID-19 public health emergency, some of the increase in costs was paid for through federal funds. DHHS sought and received one-time funding for state fiscal year 2024 for GA, but there has not been any permanent increase in the baseline budget for GA approved by the Legislature in more than five years.



The General Assistance program is a critical resource for many, but has expanded beyond its appropriation, staffing, and purpose. The program was not built to solve larger systemic issues such as the lack of affordable housing. In recognition of these challenges, DHHS set out to engage with those with direct interaction with the program.

The Department invited participants from all regions of the state who administer, assist, and receive GA benefits to attend 90-minute listening sessions, held between May 8, 2023, and July 18, 2023. Participants were encouraged to openly share feedback with Department staff about what they felt was working within the current program, and what was not. In total, the

Department hosted 13 listening sessions with the intent to collect ideas to advance long-term program and policy reform. Participants who could not attend, as well as those who could, were encouraged to submit written feedback or additional follow up thoughts to the Department.

This document summarizes the feedback and ideas that emerged from each listening session and outlines next steps.

Participation

The Department invited roughly 20 municipalities, 15 advocacy and community-based organizations, and over 50 GA recipients to attend the listening sessions. People who could not attend one of the 13 listening sessions could also submit written feedback. Over 100 people shared their feedback with the Department by attending one of the listening sessions or submitting written comments.

Summary of Feedback

Each group of participants was encouraged to share feedback about their experience with the GA program. Universally, participants agreed that a program is required to meet short-term, emergency needs of Maine residents. Further, this process revealed a number of common themes and suggestions among and across participant groups. These include, but are not limited to:

- Creating an online database to increase effectiveness, coordination, transparency, and program integrity
- Providing programmatic training, as well as trauma informed, cultural competency training needs to be bolstered and required of those who assist individuals with the GA program
- Addressing housing needs through a separate program or structure, including housing navigation and liaison services
- Providing increased and separate support for the asylum seeker population
- Increasing collaboration between the state, municipalities, and Community Based Organizations (CBOs) to streamline the process for everyone
- Making eligibility guidance more clear
- Considering a regional approach to benefit delivery
- Reevaluating maximums to account for rising costs
- Encouraging more landlords to accept GA
- Increasing reimbursement from the state

Listening Session Notes

These summaries include notes taken live during the meetings and are intended to be as verbatim as possible to accurately capture of the conversation and comments. Edits were made for clarity and brevity, with the caveat that some of the nuance may have been lost in the process.

Session 1: Bangor, Lewiston, and Calais

Municipal representatives from Skowhegan, Auburn, and Machias were invited but not in attendance

Summary of Participant Comments and Feedback:

- Policy changes developed at the beginning of the pandemic have had unintended consequences and left many without an off-ramp
- Greater consistency and engagement are needed from the DHHS GA office
 - GA administrators often receive a "cut and paste" response for questions relating to the statute and would like clearer feedback and more engagement
- Housing navigators and housing liaisons play a crucial role in securing housing opportunities for GA consumers, and more should be available
- Portland expenditures are the driving force behind the increase in GA throughout the state, and they should be looked at separately
- Current maximums should be reevaluated

Session 2: Portland, South Portland, Scarborough, and Brunswick

Summary of Participant Comments and Feedback:

- Reimbursement to municipalities should be increased to 90%
 - The current situation shows that GA is a state problem, not only a Portland and/or South Portland problem
- DHHS should support a statewide database
- A more consistent and uniform approach to GA would decrease the debating and discrepancies among municipalities
- GA should be administered statewide or regionally
- Asylum seekers should be served through a different program

Session 3: Augusta, Waterville, and Presque Isle

Municipal representatives from Belfast were invited but not in attendance

Summary of Participant Comments and Feedback:

- Clarity is needed around eligibility and the population(s) intended to be served
 - Confusion exists surrounding who GA serves. It should include:
 - Individuals who are down on their luck
 - Individuals who experience a substance use disorder and or mental health challenges. They are currently not adequately served by GA
 - There should be some type of residency requirement
- There should be a prioritization of those who are experiencing homelessness
 - Our work has become much harder with the increase in homelessness, and we are often asked why we are not assisting the unsheltered homeless more
 - Assistance with finding housing and identifying landlords who will rent to the homeless population should be prioritized
- Case management and housing navigators are crucial resources that should be increased

- The way to success is case management; however, this would require municipalities to hire more case management staff and to be reimbursed by the state
- State reimbursement to municipalities should be increased
 - The state should pay 100% reimbursement over the maximums
- GA maximums have not kept pace with the increase in housing and other expenses
 - Landlords won't accept GA for housing because the maximums are too low. Providing an incentive could help

Session 4: Sanford, Standish, Biddeford, and Caribou

Municipal representatives from Saco were invited but not in attendance

Summary of Participant Comments and Feedback:

- State reimbursement to municipalities should be increased from 70% to 90%
- A separate system and funding source should be developed for asylum seekers
 - Recommend a new program be developed by the state that separately coordinates the work with asylum seekers. This would help municipalities that face unsustainable situations. This will also provide asylum seekers with the long-term support they need
 - The core GA program should be separate from assisting new Mainers
- Municipalities with housing resources face different challenges than those where housing is not available to GA recipients
 - Communities who do not have housing resources face a disproportionate impact
 - Work with asylum seekers pits municipalities against each other and discourages them from working together
 - Recommend programs like Housing First and a regional effort
- A statewide GA Database is needed to increase effectiveness, transparency, and will help with preventing fraud
- GA needs to go back to the short-term program it was intended to be
 - The change in the statute to include homelessness as an emergency has increased costs because of the need to exceed maximums for at least the first 30 days

Session 5: Maine Equal Justice and Preble Street

Summary of Participant Comments and Feedback:

- State reimbursement to municipalities should increase from 70% to 90%
 - The state should apply overall maximums to all municipalities
- GA has become a housing program
 - More efficient and broader housing support is needed
 - The GA program could be operated differently if housing was dealt with separately
 - The Emergency Rental Assistance (ERA) program led to an over-reliance on GA
 - Due to the increase in homelessness and shortage of housing, the presumptive eligibility should be looked at again
 - The housing component of GA should be transitioned to a subsidy program
- The state should take control of GA administration and support a “No Wrong Door” approach, while also keeping municipalities connected to the program

- There should still be a municipal match if the state were to operate GA

Session 6: Maine Municipal Association, Maine State Housing, and the Maine Welfare Director Association

This session also included municipal representatives from Westbrook, who were unable to make a previous session.

Summary of Participant Comments and Feedback:

- Housing support should be removed from the GA program and moved to MaineHousing
 - It would be best if the state operated the homeless shelters. Shelters would benefit from additional GA funds for operating costs
- Many seeking assistance after-hours or on weekends are not able to get answers. This is very difficult for smaller municipalities
- Current maximums are not enough to meet the cost of housing, electricity, and other basic needs
 - GA has become the program of first resort instead of last resort and should be funded appropriately
- The idea of the state running the GA program is unrealistic; it should be locally operated
 - There is lack of consistency across municipalities
 - The state should increase in the number of staff who are working in the GA office. This would allow for more access and support to municipalities seeking guidance
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- The role of GA in shelters should be reviewed
 - The town the individual came from should pay for the shelter bed nights
 - GA is not the most effective way of funding shelters

Session 7: Statewide Homeless Council

Summary of Participant Comments and Feedback:

- Greater consistency and uniformity through training and education is needed
 - GA is not administered equitably across the state
- GA should be a statewide program
 - GA should be available to any individual no matter where they live
 - GA should be a transition program and not a long-term program
- A separate system and funding source should be developed for asylum seekers

Session 8: Maine Immigrants' Rights Coalition (MIRC), Catholic Charities, and The Opportunity Alliance

The Jewish Community Alliance was invited but not in attendance

Summary of Participant Comments and Feedback:

- A statewide GA database is needed to increase effectiveness, transparency, and would help prevent fraud
 - A resettlement database geared toward New Mainers is needed

- The state should better leverage existing refugee resources with GA
- Discussions of GA reform should include a discussion of landlords and housing navigators, since people are regularly denied housing when receiving GA. Ideas for improvement include:
 - Incentives for landlords to accept GA
 - Clarity on whether landlords can legally reject GA
 - Increased oversight of landlords (with non-punitive follow-up)
- Delays in payments are a major (and valid) reason for landlords' hesitancy to work with GA offices
- The administration of GA could be improved:
 - GA is using the wrong resource for the wrong people
 - There needs to be more accurate guidance and information available to municipalities from the state
 - Providing a GA stipend to a person working to secure employment would help with a transition period until they can manage on their own
 - Refugee stipend assistance should not be counted when determining eligibility for GA
 - More oversight by the state is needed
 - The application period should be increased from every 30 days to something longer

Session 9: Maine Immigrant and Refugee Services (MEIRS), United Somali Women of Maine, Prosperity Maine, and Pine Tree Legal

Summary of Participant Comments and Feedback:

- Many new Mainers are being denied GA. We need to continue to think about how to support new populations
- State reimbursement to municipalities should increase from 70% to 90%
 - An increase in reimbursement will help small municipalities to administer GA
- Improvements should be made to GA administration
 - GA offices are significantly understaffed
 - There is not a meaningful working relationship between GA offices and community-based organizations (CBOs)
 - The state needs to address the imbalance in the GA program that does not acknowledge the importance of CBOs
 - Minority led organizations do the work 24/7 when others do not
 - The lack of meaningful relationships in rural areas is clear as there are few organizations that can help
- Improvements should be made to education and training
 - Education, training, and specifically cultural competency training would be helpful for GA and CBO staff. An equitable collaboration/partnership is not easy, but the state, municipalities, and CBOs should be intentional with community building
 - New Mainers are at a disadvantage because they don't speak English and translation services are lacking
 - All people need to be treated with dignity and respect when applying for GA

- The maximum amounts allowed in GA for housing should be increased
 - Rent increases are forcing people to stay with families because they can't afford housing. GA does not cover the entire cost
 - The cost-of-living post-pandemic is considerably higher and the maximums are not aligned to meet the rent increases

Session 10: General Assistance Recipients

GA consumers were invited to participate from Cumberland County. Note: the majority of participants who attended this particular session were asylum-seekers though other GA consumers were invited, but not in attendance.

Summary of Participant Comments and Feedback:

- Generally, there should be more money for benefits when provided, less waiting, less of an application burden, more consistency in the process, and better coordination with other assistance programs
- GA should improve interpretation services with culturally specific translators
- GA should increase case management services
- GA should create a streamlined path for housing (e.g., avoiding co-signers, first/last/security issues)
- Landlords do not want to accept GA because 1) late payments 2) maximums 3) other administrative requirements
- The GA process is dehumanizing and lacks respect and trust of those being served in the program
- GA program eligibility is not clear
- There needs to be more GA staff available. It's very difficult to contact GA offices by phone
- More support is needed for those with disabilities
- GA is lacking a culturally competent, trauma-informed approach
- A GA database would be helpful in ensuring that no funds are wasted

Session 11: General Assistance Recipients

GA consumers were invited to participate from the following counties: Somerset, Penobscot, Androscoggin, Washington, York, Oxford, and Cumberland

Summary of Participant Comments and Feedback:

- The amount of information and time required in the application process is significant and burdensome for those already in crisis
- GA needs to be accessed because other public systems and benefits have limitations
- The GA application should be available online and be more user friendly
- There is a fraud as not everyone is putting in accurate information when applying
- GA guidelines should be more clear
- Explanations are not provided when eligibility has been denied
- GA is not meeting the needs of larger families
- More respect needs to be shown toward individuals applying and to those whose eligibility is denied by the GA program

Session 12: General Assistance Recipients

GA consumers were invited to participate from the following counties: York, Lincoln, Cumberland, Oxford, Kennebec, and Penobscot

Summary of Participant Comments and Feedback:

- GA program eligibility is not fairly administered or uniformly administered across towns in Maine
- Municipal GA staff are not knowledgeable about the GA program requirements
- GA staff are very disrespectful
- Some applicants would rather not accept assistance than participate in an intrusive process that requires information that is not necessary to meet eligibility requirements
- The wait time on the phone when calling GA is excessive
- The program requirement to provide receipts for everything is burdensome and a barrier to accessing GA

Session 13: Tribal Delegation: Passamaquoddy – Pleasant Point

Tribal leadership from each Maine Tribe was invited to participate

Summary of Participant Comments and Feedback:

- Many GA recipients do not have a vehicle on the reservation. The work requirement can be hard to meet because often maintaining a job requires travel.
- The re-application form is a barrier since the Tribes previously had access to an abbreviated re-application form. This was important as many individuals have limited literacy skills
- An abbreviated re-application form should be used every 30 days, with individuals completing the full application every 6 months
- The maximums have not kept pace with the rising costs of housing and food

Discussion of Participant Policy Recommendations

As can be seen in the summaries above, in addition to seeking general feedback about the current GA program, the Department asked participants for specific policy recommendations to consider. Note that, while this report conveys policy recommendations from participants in the stakeholder sessions, DHHS does not endorse any recommendations at this time.

The issue of housing was one of the most frequently raised concerns. This included concerns around the cost of rent, affordable housing stock, and landlords refusing to accept GA vouchers.

Some suggested that the state establish a housing voucher program to supplement the existing federal programs and supplant the function that GA currently serves as a long-term transitional housing program. The aim of such an approach would be to reduce the financial, expertise, and staffing strain on the GA program, allowing it to better function as it was intended: to assist with emergencies and basic needs. It was also recommended that the state have statutory protections

to prevent landlords discriminating against voucher holders, a concern that was expressed repeatedly by advocacy organizations and consumers.

In addition, many participants advocated for an increase in housing navigators. Municipalities, especially, spoke to the importance of these positions as they help individuals to navigate the complexity of the current rental market and to find rental properties that accept GA vouchers.

Nearly all groups expressed the need to reevaluate and potentially overhaul the current maximums. Many said that maximums have not kept pace with the cost of living. Outside of rising rent prices, participants noted that the increased costs of food and energy are also contributing to the difficulty of meeting basic needs.

Generally, participants agreed that the application process should be reevaluated, simplified, and brought online. Almost all of the GA consumers participating in the process spoke to the difficulty of leaving work or their families, finding childcare and/or transportation, and other obstacles, such as meeting with GA administrators within the confines of often limited business hours. Participants emphasized the negative impact these obstacles can have on individuals that are already experiencing strain or a crisis.

Another application-related recommendation included establishing a simplified reapplication form to be used every 30 days, while still requiring a full application to be submitted periodically. The reapplication could also be made available online. This approach would not require individuals to track, collect, and provide the same level of information as the full application, but still prove in an abbreviated manner the information for GA to meet their basic needs.

Consumers in particular felt there was a need for those at the municipal level to complete a trauma informed, cultural competency training. DHHS heard this recommendation from consumers residing in both urban and rural parts of the state. While some reported positive interactions, many shared experiences of being disrespected, misunderstood, and judged for their situation.

This feedback ties in closely with a call for greater uniformity across municipalities. Stemming from this concern, one of the resounding recommendations was for the Department to bolster training requirements, a common and simplified application, and guidance so that all municipalities were administering the program equitably.

Another common recommendation was to establish an online database for reporting as well as for review to ensure that the GA program is being administered uniformly, efficiently, and equitably across the state and to prevent any instances of fraudulent activity. Currently, municipalities cannot see if an applicant has already received assistance from another municipality.

Further, among the asylum seeker population, access to translator services surfaced as a significant barrier to effectively accessing assistance. Among those who administer GA, increased engagement and guidance was requested of the Department, and among the advocacy

organizations, a desire for greater collaboration between all entities that interact with the program and participants was expressed by many.

Conclusion

It is clear from the discussions that participants view General Assistance as a much-needed resource, but that its current framework does not enable it to meet its mission effectively and efficiently.

Individuals who participated in the listening sessions were engaged, thoughtful, and committed to collaborating with DHHS, the Legislature, and other stakeholders to improve the program. We look forward to continuing this engagement to develop concrete policy recommendations working in partnership with the Governor and the Legislature.