

Written Testimony Regarding General Assistance-Part S of the Supplemental Budget

Date: January 23, 2025

To the Appropriations & Financial Affairs Committee,

On behalf of all Maine cities/towns/townships, Maine Welfare Directors Association (MWDA) is submitting this written testimony regarding General Assistance (GA)-Part S of the Supplemental Budget. Although MWDA and its members understand the need to reduce the budget, we have grave concerns about the impact of these reductions, particularly to Maine's most vulnerable residents who rely on public assistance to attain or maintain housing, as well as other basic needs.

Concerns Regarding GA-Part S of the Supplemental Budget

The proposed cuts to public assistance programs, specifically those related to rental assistance, will significantly worsen the housing situation for low-income individuals and families, potentially leading to increased homelessness and instability, as they struggle to afford housing without adequate support. MWDA asks the committee to consider the potential negative impacts on vulnerable populations when making this budgetary decision.

Reducing rental assistance duration could force people out of their current homes if they can no longer afford rent, leading to instability and potential homelessness. This impact is likely to be most severe for individuals and families already facing barriers to stable housing, such as those with low incomes, disabilities, or histories of homelessness.

Impact on Vulnerable Populations

Many residents in Maine face significant challenges that make it difficult to sustain housing, including:

- **Lack of work authorization**, which limits the ability of some residents to meet their own housing needs.
- **Housing vouchers are unavailable**, the current freeze on the various housing vouchers such as HCV, STEP, etc. are currently in a limbo of sorts and are often assisted by General Assistance/GA until a more permanent voucher program is made available.
- **Criminal history**, which presents barriers to qualifying for housing programs and securing employment.

- **Waitlists to access to physical and mental healthcare providers**, making it difficult for some residents to prove mental and physical health challenges that may give them additional eligibility under subsection 1B.

Impact on Increased Applications to Other Organizations

If the reductions are implemented, MWDA expects that there will likely be an increase in applications to other organizations, such as:

- **Low Income Legal Assistance:** More individuals may seek legal assistance for eviction defense and housing-related issues, putting added strain on already overburdened legal aid organizations.
- **Housing Authorities:** A reduction in rental assistance will likely lead to increased demand for services from local Housing Authorities, contributing to longer waiting lists.
- **Social Security:** Residents may seek additional support from Social Security, placing further pressure on the system that currently has a 10 month wait for a hearing.

The MWDA board has put together a list of the following questions from many across the state that we hope will be addressed and answered when making decisions regarding the proposed changes.

Questions:

1. What happens when reduction of rental assistance causes an eviction that is beyond the control of the tenant?
2. How will individuals with criminal histories be supported if they cannot meet housing program requirements for secure employment within the 3-month timeframe? How will individuals who now have eviction records be affected, particularly when those records may impact their ability to secure future housing?
3. Will provisions be made for individuals who are working to reintegrate into society but are facing significant housing challenges?
4. What happens to individuals who are not yet work authorized? How will the proposal address the needs of individuals who are in the process of obtaining work authorization, but are currently unable to work to pay for housing?

5. How will individuals who lack access to mental and physical healthcare providers be supported, and how will the proposed changes affect individuals who lack consistent healthcare be supported?
6. The only other explicit funding cut in this act is for programs expanding access to affordable prescription drugs. If GA sees an increase in requests for RX assistance and we can only exceed a budget once in a 30-day period will there be an exception for emergencies or for prescriptions? Will GA no longer be able to assist with prescriptions?
7. Since there is no statewide database or method of tracking who receives assistance, where, and when, how will municipalities know if someone has already received their GA allotment in another municipality for the 12-month period?
8. Is there a plan to further fund and expand programs like McKinney Vento and the EPP/Eviction Prevention program when GA falls short?
9. Can we leave this up to individual communities to adopt an ordinance instead of making this a statewide requirement?
10. Is there a plan to deal with the fallout that such an abrupt change will cause across the state? Will there be additional allocated funding for shelters, housing vouchers, and income-based housing?
11. GA is often spoken of as the program of last resort. However, with the Section 8, BRAP, the Eviction Prevention Program, STEP, and the McKinney Vento programs currently on hold due to lack of funding, we are the only program left standing. Where can people turn to if GA can't help them?
12. What happens to people after 3 months when GA is no longer there for them and there are no other resources to turn to?
13. Does the State have a plan? GA has always been the safety net, if it is not available, where do people go? What other resources will be in place for if someone needs rent assistance beyond month 3, or another unforeseen emergency arises?
14. Our shelter beds are currently full, and far too many people are living in cars and on the streets. Won't LD 209 drive more people toward shelters? Will there be more homeless shelters made available?
15. What happens to people who are disabled and pending disability benefits from Social Security, or those that may be out of work for a long time due to an injury or severe medical issue? GA is their last resort.

16. What happens to able-bodied individuals that may have barriers to obtaining employment, or new Mainers who have difficulty obtaining employment due to language barriers?
17. Re: prohibiting exceeding maximums: will there be an exception for RX assistance? Will we/GA administrators be provided with current price lists so that we can be sure that we are not granting RX assistance for an RX that's cost exceeds the maximums/remaining eligibility? Guidance needs to be stated clearly.
18. How do the proposed changes affect all existing statutes and guidance: for example, Municipality of Responsibility (if we are only able to assist for three months with housing), and LD 459 outlining Homelessness as an Emergency?
19. Some of our GA communities are home to Sober Living Residences (SLR). Some of the service center communities have many. A large percentage of these SLR residents come directly from the corrections system. In many cases, it is a requirement of Drug Court. Most SLRs have restrictions on work during a resident's early months as they are to be focusing on their recovery. For some, Drug Court prohibits them from working. Even when they are cleared to work, a history of felony convictions makes finding employment a challenge. How will these individuals maintain their hard-earned sobriety if they are forced onto the streets in three months because they are not yet working and can't pay their rent? Will there be further support and funding for programs working to prevent recidivism and relapse?
20. There is an astonishing lack of family shelter beds around the state. Some of our long-term clients who are seeking work are struggling because they can't find childcare or they can't find work that will enable them to get by without assistance from GA. How will the State take care of families displaced by eviction?
21. What is the rationale for continuing to pay for people to stay in costly hotels while limiting GA housing assistance to those who currently have stable housing for themselves and their families?
22. If a household receives more than 3 months of assistance with emergency shelter and then locates permanent housing, will they be able to get additional General Assistance to secure the permanent housing or will they need to seek alternative resources since 3-month limit on GA is already spent?

Conclusion

Many GA cases take much longer than 3 months to secure permanent housing, especially due to the lack of affordable housing and/or available housing. With the hold on housing vouchers, GA is the last resort for assistance to secure housing. Limiting assistance to 3 months may limit landlords from desiring to work with the program and its participants, possibly further complicating our state's housing crisis.

There are populations with barriers to work:

- New Mainers who are within the waiting period for work authorization and have no means to pay their own rent.
- Those who have criminal histories or histories of substance use disorder which can be a factor to having a criminal history that cause a longer than average delay in finding employment.
- Persons with limited access to Mental and Physical healthcare providers to prove need for SSI or SSDI.
- Parents struggling to secure childcare (especially with State subsidies being removed at same time).

Unintended consequences:

- Applicants who are evicted due to their inability to pay rent will then have an eviction on record which could impact ability to secure future housing.
- Increase in evictions causing court backlog.
- Landlords going without rent while waiting on eviction court.
- Increase in Social Security claims when backlog is currently 10 months.
- By limiting rent assistance but not emergency shelter assistance/emergency temporary housing assistance, we will be making it more likely people will enter homelessness.
- These proposed changes, if implemented, directly interfere with adherence to existing law/statute MRSS Title 22, Chapter 1161 and its Rules and Procedures.

Retroactive cuts could create unnecessary disruptions for individuals and families who have made important decisions based on the support they currently receive, leading to potential eviction and housing instability.

MWDA fears that there will be many more individuals and families finding themselves homeless if these limitations are approved. By limiting rent assistance, but not emergency shelter assistance/emergency temporary housing assistance, it is likely more people will enter into homelessness

People experiencing homelessness are less likely to be self-sufficient; people in stable housing are more likely to be self-sufficient. People will likely need more months of assistance when they are homeless than when they are stably housed. We should be prioritizing providing assistance to keep people in their stable housing.

MWDA recognizes the importance of addressing the state's budget challenges. However, we ask that the potential impacts of these reductions on vulnerable residents be thoughtfully considered. We would encourage decision-makers to apply any changes prospectively and address the critical questions regarding housing, access to support services, and the long-term consequences of these proposed cuts and caps.

The MWDA board would welcome being a part of the solution to revising the current GA/General Assistance program, and appreciate your attention and consideration.

Sincerely,
Maine Welfare Directors Association

Ryan Gorneau
Maine Welfare Directors Association
LD 209

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