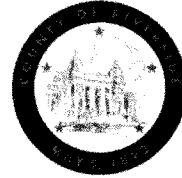


**SUBMITTAL TO THE BOARD OF SUPERVISORS
COUNTY OF RIVERSIDE, STATE OF CALIFORNIA**



ITEM
3.31
(ID # 6876)

MEETING DATE:

Tuesday, April 24, 2018

FROM : PUBLIC SOCIAL SERVICES:

SUBJECT: DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC SOCIAL SERVICES: Recommended changes to the General Relief program. [District: All]; [FY 17/08 Estimated Cost Increase: \$8,000, Total FY 17/18 cost \$1,185,000 - 100% Previously budgeted General Fund]

RECOMMENDED MOTION: That the Board of Supervisors:

1. Adopt and make effective no later than July 1, 2018, the following changes to the General Relief program:
 - a. Increase the maximum monthly benefit amount from \$291 to \$326;
 - b. Increase the resource/property exemption limit from \$250 to \$500;
 - c. Increase the vehicle exemption value from \$500 to \$4,650;
 - d. Modify the treatment of lump sum income and eliminate the period of ineligibility;
 - e. Change the primary method of issuance from voucher to cash;
 - f. Impose a three (3) month benefit cap in a 12-month period for individuals who are employable to receive General Relief benefits;
2. Authorize the Riverside County Department of Public Social Services (DPSS) to make necessary changes to align the General Relief policies with the above changes.

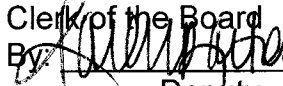
ACTION: (4/5 Vote Required) Policy


Susan Von Zabern, Director of Public Social Services 4/17/2018

MINUTES OF THE BOARD OF SUPERVISORS

On motion of Supervisor Jeffries, seconded by Supervisor Perez and duly carried by unanimous vote, IT WAS ORDERED that the above matter is approved as recommended.

Ayes: Jeffries, Tavaglione, Washington, Perez and Ashley
Nays: None
Absent: None
Date: April 24, 2018
xc: DPSS

Kecia Harper-Ihem
Clerk of the Board
By 
Deputy

**SUBMITTAL TO THE BOARD OF SUPERVISORS COUNTY OF RIVERSIDE,
STATE OF CALIFORNIA**

FINANCIAL DATA	Current Fiscal Year:	Next Fiscal Year:	Total Cost:	Ongoing Cost
COST	\$ 1,185,196	\$ 2,407,017	\$ 3,592,213	\$ 3,003,923
NET COUNTY COST	\$ 1,185,196	\$ 2,407,017	\$ 3,592,213	\$ 3,003,923
SOURCE OF FUNDS: 100% Previously budgeted General Fund			Budget Adjustment: \$0	
			For Fiscal Year: 2017/18	

C.E.O. RECOMMENDATION: Approve.

BACKGROUND:

Summary

Riverside County's General Relief program (GR program) is designed to provide financial support to indigent adults who have no other means of support, such as social security income, disability assistance, unemployment insurance benefits, or other public assistance programs.

Welfare and Institutions Code sections 17000, et seq., sets out basic standards requiring each county to establish, fund, regulate and maintain its own GR program. Pursuant to Welfare and Institutions Code section 17000 and supporting case law, the GR program is a county obligation and shall be funded by county general fund dollars. Riverside County's GR program was last updated in 1992 and the last known Board action occurred in 1994 (budget adjustments for cost increases to administer the program). Since that time, statutory and case law updates now require updating the County's GR program to ensure the county is in compliance with these changes.

On December 19, 2017, DPSS received a letter from three advocacy groups: Inland Counties Legal Services, Public Interest Law Project and Western Center on Law and Poverty, on behalf of the county's indigent population. The letter cited deficiencies in the GR program policies and requested the county bring the GR program into compliance. In response to that letter, DPSS and County Counsel reviewed existing policies to determine the existence of deficiencies. As part of the process of updating the GR program, attorneys from County Counsel met with representatives from the advocacy groups over the past several months.

One of the foremost concerns of the advocacy groups was the amount of the General Relief benefit provided to eligible recipients. Currently, in Riverside County, eligible adults receive support in the form of vouchers, not to exceed \$291 a month, which are paid to vendors for housing, utilities, incidentals and food. This amount is below the statutory minimum established in 1992, set at 62 percent of the 1991 federal poverty limit, with a 3 percent reduction based on the cost-of-living in Riverside County. As such, the benefit amount should be increased to \$326 per month.

To participate in the program, certain eligibility criteria must be met, including, but not limited to: proof of residence, identity, citizenship, property and income. Upon approval, customers are

**SUBMITTAL TO THE BOARD OF SUPERVISORS COUNTY OF RIVERSIDE,
STATE OF CALIFORNIA**

categorized into two categories: employable (able to work) or unemployable (disabled). For recipients who are able to work, monthly reapplication is required for ongoing eligibility, which is dependent upon fulfilling specific GR program and work participation requirements. Unemployable recipients are required to reapply for ongoing eligibility every six months or the length of the disability up to six (6) months, whichever is shorter, or until the recipient is deemed eligible for federal disability assistance benefits.

The advocacy groups have stated concerns with other aspects of the program, as well, including, but not limited to: the form of payment of the benefit amount, the property exemption limits disqualifying people from the program, treatment of lump-sum distributions to recipients, the application process for aid and recertification process for continuation of benefits and the lack of a sanction policy approved by the Board of Supervisors. In response, DPSS completely overhauled the program to address these concerns and to ensure the GR program is in compliance with state law.

DPSS recommends the following changes to the GR program policies. In addition, Board approval to adopt these changes is being sought due to the fiscal effect these changes will have on the county's General Fund, through an increased benefit amount and a projected increase in the number of applicants that will be eligible to receive the benefit. As indicated below, other policy changes are also being made; however, these changes are administrative in nature and are not expected to result in a direct fiscal impact on the county; they are described below to provide a complete picture of the program changes.

Recommended Changes:

- Increase the current maximum monthly benefit amount for one (1) person from \$291 to \$326.
- Increase the property limit from \$250 to \$500. The property limit is the total value of resources/property an applicant or recipient may possess while continuing to be eligible for General Relief. Should applicant own property in excess of \$500, s/he would be ineligible for the month(s) in which the property exceeds the limit of \$500. Items that do not count against this property limit include, among other items, cellphones and other personal computing devices necessary to seek employment. In addition, the General Relief cash benefits issued in the month prior to the date of application is not considered property for purposes of determining the property limit.
- Use the vehicle encumbrance as a deduction from the Fair Market Value (FMV) when determining the equity of the vehicle. Increase the separate vehicle exemption limit from the current \$500 to \$4,650 to determine the excess equity. This exemption will enable an applicant owning a vehicle, with equity less than \$4,650, to retain the vehicle for job search requirements, doctors' appointments and general transportation, while remaining eligible for the monthly General Relief benefit.
- If an applicant or current recipient receives lump-sum income, such as a settlement from a lawsuit, back payment of governmental benefits, etc., the money will be counted as income in the month received and property in the months thereafter, and will be subject to the \$500 property limit outlined above in the reporting month. This change replaces the prior policy

**SUBMITTAL TO THE BOARD OF SUPERVISORS COUNTY OF RIVERSIDE,
STATE OF CALIFORNIA**

that applied a formula to the lump-sum income in order to determine the ineligible time frame (in months), whether or not the applicant retained the lump-sum income for the calculated time period.

- Eligible applicants will receive benefits via an Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) card. This will, essentially, result in a monthly “cash” grant and will replace the prior issuance of vouchers to an approved applicant. The EBT card will act like a pre-paid debit card that can be used at qualifying locations. In the event EBT services are not available, warrants can be issued to customers.
- DPSS will conduct a biennial review of the General Relief program to ensure the General Relief policy remains consistent with statutory and case law updates.
- Impose a three (3) month benefit cap within a 12-month period for employable recipients to receive General Relief benefits. Aid received from other counties with time limits is counted in the three (3) month benefit cap. This is consistent with the standard Able Bodied Adults Without Dependents (ABAWD) rules going into effect in September 2018.

DPSS requests the Board approve these changes and authorize the department to make the necessary policy changes to the GR program.

In addition to the above stated policy changes having a direct fiscal impact on the county and requiring the Board’s approval, DPSS also requests the following policy changes to ensure the program remains compliant:

1. Modify and shorten the General Relief application used when the customer applies only for General Relief. Modify the General Relief application process by using the SAWS 2 Plus, and a supplemental General Relief form when the customer applies for General Relief and another public assistance program. The SAWS 2 Plus is a multi-program application used to apply for public assistance programs, such as: cash aid, CalFresh and Medi-Cal.
2. Maintain the policy requiring applicants apply for all potential available unconditional income, such as Unemployment Insurance Benefits or Veteran’s Benefits, but no longer require proof of application prior to the approval and issuance of General Relief benefits. To maintain eligibility, the customer must provide proof of application for potential available unconditional income within 30 days of the date of request for proof. Update the policy to no longer require customers apply for CalFresh. Change the policy, regarding unemployable applicants, to state proof of disability is not required prior to approval or issuance of General Relief benefits. This will allow those applicants who are self-reporting that they are unemployable, who meet all other eligibility requirements, to obtain the first month’s benefit as close to the application date as possible. Proof of disability would still be required within 30 days of the request, as a condition of continuing eligibility under the unemployable category.
3. Update the policy on residency to align with other public assistance programs, which include allowing homeless individuals to self-certify residency on the General Relief application.
4. Maintain existing policies regarding identification, but update the policy to clearly identify the form(s) of ID that will be accepted.

**SUBMITTAL TO THE BOARD OF SUPERVISORS COUNTY OF RIVERSIDE,
STATE OF CALIFORNIA**

5. Maintain monthly reapplication policies for employable recipients. However, the General Relief Reapplication form will be a shortened version of the initial General Relief application. Employable customers will continue to be required to comply with the General Relief program and work participation requirements, including providing proof of monthly compliance with at least one of the following: (1) register and conduct job search with the Employment Development Department; (2) participate in the General Relief job search program; (3) participate in the Work Relief Program; or (4) participate in CalFresh Employment and Training program.
6. Update policies related to exemptions from work participation requirements for applicants or recipients suffering from drug or alcohol dependence to allow the exemption for the length of time they participate in a substance or alcohol abuse treatment program. Verification of participation in a treatment program will be required prior to receiving the exemption.
7. Update policies to indicate drug felons are not excluded from the GR program.
8. Update the policies to provide that eligibility for benefits begins on either the date the application is received, if the applicant can provide documentation they are, or would have been eligible on that date, or on the date the applicant actually becomes eligible, whichever is later.
9. Update policy to issue the full cash benefit for the housing need portion of the grant, unless the housing expense is less or the need is otherwise met, with the following conditions: employable recipients may receive housing benefits for three (3) full months, not necessarily consecutive, in a 12-month period; unemployable recipients may receive up to six (6) full months of housing benefits in a 12-month period. Documentation of housing cost is required to continue receiving the housing portion after receiving benefits for the allowable number of months. No individual may receive more than six (6) full months of the housing need in a 12-month period, unless documentation of housing costs is provided or in-kind services are not available. The policy will allow unemployable recipients a "good cause" exception for failing to provide documentation of continued need, on a case-by-case basis. At the time of application, in-kind services will be offered through the Riverside County Homeless Unit for those persons who are homeless. Persons receiving in-kind services will no longer receive the housing portion of the grant, as housing needs are now met. When eligible to in-kind services and the services are not available, the full housing benefit will be issued. Persons who refuse in-kind services are subject to the documentation of housing costs, as stated above.
10. Update the policy related to potential recoupment of General Relief benefits. General Relief benefits are considered a loan the county could seek to recover from a prior recipient. However, the policy authorizing recovery must be updated to ensure recovery is sought only in limited circumstances, as allowed under *San Diego v. Muniz* (1978) 22 Cal. 3d 29. The policy will allow the county to recoup money from a person's wages only after that person has met the support needs of him/herself and his/her family.
11. Update policies to remove all references to the use of vouchers.
12. Rescind the sanctions policy. The sanction policy, as it currently exists, would be unnecessary with the proposed changes stated above.
13. Ensure the General Relief program and policies are compliant with the county's Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) to ensure applicants and recipients with disabilities

**SUBMITTAL TO THE BOARD OF SUPERVISORS COUNTY OF RIVERSIDE,
STATE OF CALIFORNIA**

are able to apply for, receive and maintain benefit amounts in the same manner as individuals not impacted by the ADA.

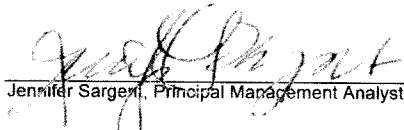
DPSS is in the process of making the above, proposed revisions to the policies and they will be implemented no later than July 1, 2018. DPSS intends to provide immediate training for staff administering the General Relief program, as well as ongoing training as updates to the policies and programs occur. This will ensure any statutory and case law changes affecting the program can be implemented as soon as possible to maintain program compliance.

Impact on Residents and Businesses

The overall impact of enacting the proposed changes will result in more individuals being eligible for the General Relief program and will provide additional flexibility to individuals using the benefits.

Additional Fiscal Information

The FY 18/19 submitted budget includes adjustments necessary to account for this level of expenditure.



Jennifer Sargent, Principal Management Analyst 4/19/2018