



NEWS RELEASE

April 1, 2014

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San Benito County Board of Supervisors To Implement State Mandate To Provide Last Resort Minimal Aid To County's Neediest Residents

The Board of Supervisors adopted General Assistance regulations for the first time in at least three decades on April 1, 2014. This historic event moved the County toward compliance with its legal obligation to provide the County's neediest residents with the last resort assistance to which they are entitled. The County's old regulations were out of date, illegal in many respects, and not being used. Instead, almost no extremely low income county residents, despite very high poverty and unemployment rates, have been provided with aid.

General Assistance (GA) is a program mandated by state law. It requires counties to provide about \$330 dollars per month to severely impoverished lawful residents who have nowhere else to turn. Recipients often are homeless, most are unemployed and unemployable. Many recipients have disabilities or veterans or both. A significant number are survivors of domestic violence, fleeing their abusers. GA allows these individuals to find modest shelter, such as a shared room, and to begin to become self-sufficient.

San Benito County's program, however, has been largely non-existent. People who asked for help were told that this county had no such program, and turned away. "The GA benefit is no Cadillac of benefits" said California Rural Legal Assistance (CRLA) attorney Gretchen Regenhardt, one of the public interest attorneys who first became aware of the problem. "But even this small amount, only about \$11 dollars a day, can be lifesaving." Last year, she said, desperate clients began to appear at CRLA's offices. They told her that they had asked the

County for help, but had been told that there was no GA program, or that they didn't qualify for any help because they were homeless, or because they had no children, or for some other reason. Phyllis Katz, also an attorney with CRLA, also saw many such clients. "I didn't think that our county was deliberately abandoning such needy persons to destitution and homelessness," she said. "I felt certain that our Board and social services agency were simply unaware of the County's legal obligations to these needy citizens, and may have mistakenly believed that help was available from the state or federal government." However, there was no other help available because by definition, GA is the last resort benefit.

"The problem is not confined to San Benito County," said Lauren Hansen, a staff attorney at the Public Interest Law Project (PILP). "Our ongoing Rural General Assistance Project, (Rural GAP) is designed to remedy the fact that so many rural counties have tiny or nonexistent GA programs, probably due to simple unawareness of the law."

"We're pleased that the County has been willing to listen to us in a spirit of good will," said Gretchen Regenhardt. Lauren Hansen agreed, "but we are disappointed that the County included in its regulations a time limit of only three months of aid per year for recipients who are deemed 'employable,' but who haven't actually been able to get jobs, despite trying to get them."

"A three month time limit means that an 'employable' person only gets about \$2.75 per day on an annual basis, and that's not enough to help a person begin to get back on his feet," said Lauren Hansen. "PILP believes the Board should *not* have adopted the time limit, because it is fiscally unwise as well as inhumane," said staff attorney Judith Gold of PILP. "Employable" recipients whose GA lifelines are cut off will end up on the streets, or in the County's emergency rooms, at enormous County cost.

Great progress has been made, thanks to County employees listening with an open mind. Even while informal discussions have been ongoing, the number of persons receiving help has grown from zero to about thirty-five. "The new regulations are a vast, vast improvement," said Lauren Hansen.

About CRLA and the Public Interest Law Project

The Public Interest Law Project (<http://www.pilpca.org>) is a non-profit public interest law firm focusing on advocacy on behalf of low-income Californians and providing support to legal services programs like CRLA. California Rural Legal Assistance (www.crla.org), founded in 1966, CRLA's mission is to fight for justice and individual rights alongside the most exploited communities of our society. Through a network of regional offices and cross-cutting programs, CRLA provides legal services to over 32,000 low-income people annually. Our work impacts farmworkers, individuals with disabilities, immigrant populations, LGBT communities, women, children and families in rural areas.