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**Foundations**

The Zellerbach  
Family Fund

**General Assistance  
Client Demographics Study  
in  
Contra Costa County**

**Prepared by**

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

### **INTRODUCTION**

In 1995, the Contra Costa County Social Service Department requested that the Research Response Team of the Bay Area Social Services Consortium (BASSC) of the Center for Social Services Research at the School of Social Welfare, University of California, Berkeley assist with conducting a demographic study of the General Assistance (GA) population in the county. The purpose of the research was to document certain demographic information not routinely available so that the Social Service Department may have data necessary for planning and developing programs which would best serve both General Assistance recipients and the larger Contra Costa County population.

The research study focuses upon a subset of 458 persons who applied for General Assistance benefits at the four intake sites in the county over a four-week period during the Summer of 1995. This research presents a snapshot or point in time description of the demographic characteristics of GA applicants and recipients living in Contra Costa County.

### **GENERAL ASSISTANCE IN CONTRA COSTA COUNTY**

Even though General Assistance is mandated under State Welfare Institutions Code 17000, it is funded entirely by the county through General Fund dollars. GA is regarded as a short-term program designed to meet the minimum needs of unemployed/disabled persons and to instill self-sufficiency for those who are employable.

The goal of Contra Costa County's GA program is self-sufficiency. To assist recipients to meet this goal, the Social Service Department:

- provides employable clients with services to assist them with obtaining self sufficiency through employment; and
- provides unemployable clients with services to assist them with obtaining Supplemental Security Income (SSI).

## **RESEARCH FINDINGS - IN THEIR OWN VIEWS**

### **PROFILE OF GENERAL ASSISTANCE APPLICANTS**

Researchers interviewed 458 persons applying for General Assistance during a four week period in the Summer of 1995. The following are the self declared reports of these 458 persons.

### **Demographics of GA Applicants**

- Applicants were interviewed at the Richmond intake site (46.3%), Martinez intake site (25.5%), Antioch intake site (24.2%), and Hercules intake site (3.9%).
- Approximately two-thirds (61.6%) of those applying for General Assistance were male; slightly more than one-third (38.4%) were female.
- While the overall ethnic mix varies by location, the study population included: 41.8% African American, 38.7% Caucasian, 8.8% Hispanic, 6.8% Asian/ Pacific Islander, 1.8% Native American, and 2.2% Other.
- The mean age of the GA applicants interviewed was 33.4 years (standard deviation = 10.7).
- Those who indicated either single, divorced, separated, or widowed totaled 95.4%, and (4.6%) were presently married/coupled.
- Although one-fifth of the respondents (20.7%) did not complete high school, the majority (51.1%) reported receiving their high school diploma or GED. Over one-quarter (28.1%) of the GA applicants interviewed indicated that they had vocational training (4.6%), taken undergraduate courses (18.9%), or completed an undergraduate (4.2%) or graduate degree (.4%).
- Slightly more than one-tenth (13.3%) reported being a U.S. Veteran; the majority of these persons having served in the Army (57.4%), Navy (21.3%), or Marines (14.8%).

### **Residency Status**

- A large majority (93.6%) of respondents reported being U.S. Citizens. All of those who were not citizens (n=27) stated that they were legally documented.
- Over one-third (35.5%) of the total sample of GA applicants reported living in the City of Richmond, 11.9% said they lived in Concord, 10.1% in Antioch, 9% in Pittsburg, 7.9% in Martinez, and 7% in San Pablo.
- Over half (56.9%) of the GA applicants interviewed are long term residents of Contra Costa County, having lived there for 10 years or more. In the past six months, only 9.7% have relocated to the county. Most stated that the reason for their move was to make a “new start” (47.8%).

### **Housing Status**

- One-third (33.7%) of those interviewed self identified as homeless. Slightly less than one-third (29.1%) of the respondents indicated that they lived in an apartment and (28.4%) lived in a house. Ten percent lived in public housing or received Section 8 housing

vouchers. Nearly half (44.9%) reported that they lived alone.

### **Employment History/ Income Sources**

- Over three-quarters (77.1%) of persons applying for GA benefits reported being unemployed and looking for work, 8.2% were unemployed (not looking for work), and 7.8% were disabled/unable to work. Applicants interviewed who were employed (either full time, part time or occasionally) consisted of 5.3% of the sample.
- Of the unemployed, nearly one-quarter (22.1%) indicated being without a job for about six months to one year. Those who had never been employed represented 6.1% of the sample. Slightly less than one-tenth (9.6%) have not been working for more than five years.
- The most frequently reported reasons for unemployment were: 1) employment ended (33.1%), 2) physical/mental health issues (17.8%), and 3) a variety of other reasons (35.9%) [which included “recently released from jail,” “can’t find work/ not enough work,” “going to school,” and “language barriers].”
- When applicants were queried about their sources of income in the past six months, over one-third (37.7%) stated that they received Food Stamps, 37% had full/part time work, and 34.7% reported receiving assistance from relatives. One-fifth (20.8%) of respondents were reapplicants and reported receiving General Assistance benefits within the past six months.
- A small percentage (16.4%) of the General Assistance applicants had applied for Supplemental Security Income (SSI). Of these (n=72), nearly half (47.2%) had an application pending, 34.7% had their application denied and took no further action, and 11.1% had their application on appeal.

### **Social Services**

- Although the majority (63%) of GA applicants reported they did not receive any social services, 15.4% indicated receiving food/meal services in the past six months, 13.8% used health services, and 9.2% received employment services.
- A substantial percentage of GA applicants had a recent history of incarceration. Nearly one-third (32%) of the respondents stated that they had been in jail in the past two years. Of these, 39.6% had committed a felony and nearly half (47.1%) were on probation or parole.
- Close to one-fifth (19.5%) of those interviewed reported receiving in-patient or out-patient treatment for substance abuse, while slightly more than one-tenth (11.9%) reported receiving mental health in-patient or out-patient treatment.

- When respondents were asked about the most important services that could help them become more self sufficient, the five top service needs were: 1) employment (such as job training and placement) 55.8%, 2) affordable housing 43.6%, 3) financial assistance 41.4%, 4) health services 32.7%, and 5) food programs 26.4%.

#### **Applicants' General Assistance History**

- While the most common response to a question about the reasons for applying for General Assistance benefits was "no resources available" (47.8%), 28.9% said "job loss," and 19.3% reported "other" reasons than those listed on the survey (including "recently released from jail," "can't find job or lack of work," "income while looking for work," "waiting for SSI," "need money while attending school," and "recently relocated").
- Only 10.2% of the 458 applicants interviewed had ever received GA benefits from another county. Half (51.4%) reported this was their first time applying for GA in Contra Costa County.
- Of the respondents who had received GA in Contra Costa County (n=210), 39% received the benefit for one to three months, 16.7% received the benefit for four to six months, and nearly one-quarter (24.8%) collected GA for one to two years.

### **PROFILE OF PERSONS GRANTED GENERAL ASSISTANCE**

Of the 458 General Assistance applicants interviewed over a four-week period during the Summer 1995, researchers were able to match 132 applicants (using the last four digits of their Social Security Numbers) who were granted the General Assistance benefit.

#### **Demographics of those Granted GA**

- Those granted the GA benefit were applicants at the following locations: Richmond (40.9%), Antioch (31.1%), and Martinez (28%).
- More than half (56.1%) of those granted the benefit were male; 43.9% were female.
- The ethnic mix was as follows: 38.6% African American; 43.9% Caucasian; 8.3% Hispanic; 4.5% Asian/ Pacific Islander; 1.5% Native American; and 3% Other.
- The mean age of recipients interviewed was 33.8 years (standard deviation = 10.4) with a range of 18 to 68.
- Nearly all of the recipients interviewed (96.2%) were reportedly single (which includes single, divorced, separated, or widowed); only 3.2% were married/coupled.

- Less than one-quarter (21.2%) of those receiving GA had less than a high school education. Over half (52.3%) had received a high school diploma and one-quarter (26.5%) had continued schooling after high school.
- Veterans represented 12.9% of this population; over half of whom served in the Army (64.7%).

### **Residency Status**

- Nearly all (98.5%) of the persons granted GA were U.S. Citizens. Of the 1.5%, (n=2), who were not U.S. citizens, all stated that they did have legal documentation to be in the country.
- The largest numbers of persons granted the benefit lived in the cities/towns of Richmond (31.8%), Antioch (13.6%), Concord (12.9%), Martinez (10.6%), and Pittsburg (10.6%).
- Over half (56.1%) reported that they lived in Contra Costa County for over ten years. Twenty-two of the 132 respondents (15.2%) reported living in the county for six months or less. Of these respondents, the largest numbers had recently moved from Alameda County (n=7) or outside California (n=6). The most common reason given for relocating to Contra Costa County was to pursue a “new start” (61.9%).

### **Housing Status**

- More than one-quarter of the recipients interviewed lived in a house (28.8%) or apartment (23.5%). Not quite one-tenth (7.6%) reported that they lived in public housing or Section 8 housing. Over one-third (37.1%) self identified as homeless (defined as living on the street, car, van, etc.). Close to half (45.5%) reported living alone.

### **Employment History/ Incomes Sources**

- More than three-quarters of the recipients (76.5%) stated that they were unemployed and looking for work; 5.3% indicated that they were unemployed, but not looking for work. Over one-tenth (13.6%) stated that they were disabled and could not work. A small number (1.5%) stated that they were employed part-time or had “other” as their employment status.
- Of those who were unemployed, more than half (59.3%) had been out of work for six months or longer, and one-quarter were out of work from zero to three months. A small percentage (5.5%) stated that they had never been employed.
- The most common reason for unemployment was reported to be “other” reasons as chosen by 28.9%. These reasons included recent incarceration, not finding work or not enough work, and being homeless. Nearly one-quarter of the respondents (23.4%), were unemployed due to termination of their previous job.

- Less than one-fifth (18.9%) of those granted GA reported that they had applied for SSI benefits. Of those who did apply, 52% were still pending a formal decision, another 24% were denied SSI and did not take further action, and 16% had an application on appeal.
- The most common source of income in the last six months was “assistance from relatives/friends,” which was chosen by 38.6%. Food Stamps and work were the second most common sources of income, each chosen by 37.1%. Over one-tenth (12.1%) reported that GA was a source of income that they had received.

### **Social Services**

- Almost two-thirds (63.8%) of those granted GA stated that they had not received any social services in the last six months. Of those who indicated that they did receive some type of social service, 16.9% said they received some health services and 13.1% noted food/meal programs. About 6.9% of those interviewed reported getting employment services. [All GA recipients who are “employable” receive employment services.]
- About one-third (38.2%) of GA recipients reported that they spent time in jail within the past two years. Of those who were previously incarcerated, 34% stated that the crime they committed was a felony and 36% were still on parole/probation at the time of the interview.
- Regarding substance abuse treatment, 22.7% noted that they had received some form of treatment. About one-tenth (10.6%) indicated that they had received in-patient or out-patient mental health treatment in the past.
- More than half (59.1%) of those granted GA felt that employment services (job training and placement) was one of the most important services that could help them become more self-sufficient. Almost half (47%) also chose affordable housing as a service that would assist them; 43.9% chose financial assistance as another helpful resource. For 37.1%, having health services was an important service that would help them become more self-sufficient. About one-fifth of recipients each chose educational services (20.5%) and food programs (22%) as other services that would be beneficial.

### **Recipients’ GA History**

- The number one reason that was chosen to explain why they were applying for GA was the fact that they had “no other resources available,” with 51.1% citing this choice. Over one-quarter (26.5%) stated that a job loss caused them to apply for GA and 18.9% chose “other” as the reason they were applying.
- About 9.9% of recipients reported that they had received GA benefits from another county. Of those who did receive GA somewhere else, 33.3% had received GA from Alameda County, 25% received GA from Solano County, and 8.3% received GA from various other counties (including San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Sonoma).



- More than half (60.6%) of the recipients were first time applicants to the GA program in Contra Costa County. About one-quarter (24.2%) had applied one time previously and 8.3% had applied twice before for GA benefits. For those who had previously received benefits in the county (n=51), 56.9% reported that the total length of time that they were on the program was one to three months.

## DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The GA population in Contra Costa County is not a homogeneous group but one that is quite diverse. Even though the overwhelming majority are single persons, the population varies in terms of gender, ethnicity, age, work experience, and many other characteristics. The study shows that while men made up a large percentage of the GA caseload, the number of women was substantial. In this study, the percentage of males interviewed and granted the benefit was 56% and the percentage of females was 44%. Persons of all ethnic and racial backgrounds are recipients of GA. The majority of grantees interviewed in this study were Caucasian (43.9%) and African American (38.6%). GA recipients in Contra Costa County are dispersed among different age groups. The largest number fall within the age range of 26 to 35. The mean age of those interviewed and granted the benefit was 33.8 years.

This study found the majority of GA recipients interviewed in Contra Costa County were males (56%), Caucasians (44%), 35 years old and younger (59%), single (96%), educated (79% have a high school degree or above), and are applying for GA for the first time (61%). Furthermore, most have lived in the county for over 10 years (56%), have been unemployed for less than one year (57%), were looking for work (77%), and had not received any social services in the past six months (64%).

This study found that the large majority of the recipients (76.5%) were unemployed and looking for work and that 14% of those interviewed and granted GA self-identified as disabled/ unable to work.

Most of those interviewed and subsequently granted the benefit indicated that in order to become more self-sufficient, the most important service they need is employment services (including job training and placement). In addition, these GA recipients indicated the need for affordable housing, financial assistance (including rental assistance), health services, and food programs.

The most often cited reason for applying for GA was economic in nature, including "no other resources available" and job loss.

## RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The intent of this study is to provide the Contra Costa County Social Service Department with demographic and other data about the General Assistance population to assist with program management and policy decision-making that will best serve the GA population and the larger Contra Costa County community. The following recommendations are based on reports from the GA applicants/recipients interviewed in the Summer 1995 in addition to some of the existing literature on public assistance programs.

### **Recommendation 1: Policy and program development decisions should reflect the diversity of the General Assistance population.**

The General Assistance recipient population in Contra Costa County is diverse in terms of gender, ethnicity, age, education, work experience, and other background characteristics. It includes single adults, individuals waiting to receive SSI, mentally ill persons, substance abusers, veterans, parolees, and homeless persons, as reflected across the four intake sites in the county.

### **Recommendation 2: Enhanced employment services are critical to training and building economic self-sufficiency in the GA population.**

One of the most important goals of the Contra Costa County GA program is "providing employable clients with services to assist them with obtaining self sufficiency through employment." Of those applicants granted the GA benefit, the majority (77%) indicated that they were unemployed and looking for work. Much assistance is needed to help GA recipients overcome serious barriers to employment.

More than half (59%) of those granted the benefit had been unemployed for at least six months. Many explained that their employment had recently ended due to not enough work, or inadequate job skills and experience. Yet, only a small number (7%) reported using employment services over the last six months. [All GA recipients who are "employable" receive employment services.] Most (59%) of those interviewed and subsequently granted GA indicated that, in order to become more self-sufficient, they needed employment services (job training/placement services). Assistance is needed in expanding employment preparation or job skill training and placement services in addition to health care coverage, transportation, and other support services (e.g., substance abuse treatment) that will enable those on GA to get and retain jobs (Nichols and Porter, 1995). Rank (1994) makes the case that "jobs (that pay a living wage and provide reasonable benefits) are the most needed and most permanent solution to the poverty problem" (p. 188).

The employment component of the GA program must continue to be developed with the assistance of the larger community. Enterprise development and job creation through new collaborative ventures could be expanded between the public, nonprofit, and private sectors. Community resources to assist the GA population in becoming more self-sufficient include: JTPA

(Job Training and Partnership Act), EDD (Employment Development Department), other vocational programs, drug and alcohol services, counseling services, health assessment and health access services, and shelter care.

**Recommendation 3: Collaboration is needed between programs in the county in order to more adequately support the GA program.**

Many applicants to GA have been involved with other components of the human services and criminal justice systems. A percentage have recently spent time in jail (32%) and are currently on probation and parole (47%), others are waiting for SSI approval (47% of those who applied), others have participated in mental health (12%) and/or substance abuse treatment (20%), and still others have recently had their AFDC benefits canceled (5%).

Since the 1980's, the increased caseload and costs for GA have placed enormous burdens on other county funded services (Hofmann, 1995). The various programs/departments involved in the lives of many GA recipients need to collaborate and communicate to create a better system within existing fiscal constraints. There could be some restructuring on the county and other levels to promote a seamless service system with shared responsibility across programs/departments.

**Recommendation 4: Collaboration is needed among the local, regional, State and Federal governmental levels in order to more adequately support the GA program.**

The GA program is the "safety net" for persons displaced from one program or service system to another (e.g., SSI, AFDC, Refugee Assistance, corrections, and mental health programs) and for shifting costs from one level of government to another (namely from Federal and State to local government) (Moon and Schneiderman, 1995).

Even though State and Federal policies and programs affect the local level, GA is a 100% local responsibility (Lum, 1995b). GA remains an unfunded mandate. A disproportionate burden is placed on counties for the administration and financing of GA and for creating new solutions to address the myriad of complex issues facing this population. Regional approaches are being considered to address some of the inequities in neighboring counties (namely Alameda and San Francisco). However, the responsibilities for funding this program must go beyond the county level to include State and Federal support. A fundamental restructuring of the governmental partnership of the program is needed.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

There exist substantial concerns that prospective cuts in State/Federal assistance programs will further overburden Contra Costa County's GA program (Hofmann, 1995). Welfare reform at the State/Federal levels will potentially impact local GA programs. In addition to an increase in the number of people applying for GA, the new caseload will exhibit a changed demographic profile (e.g., more low income families). Counties will need to keep abreast of the projected changes on the Federal/State levels and continue to reevaluate their GA programs and the services provided.

Counties like Contra Costa may likely be forced to create more stringent eligibility conditions, restrict benefits for specific groups, and reduce benefits levels. If retrenchment continues, it is important to realize that reductions in GA may result in increased costs in other areas (namely community-based services including shelters, mental health programs, law enforcement). It will take the collective efforts of political leaders; public, nonprofit, and private sector organizations; advocacy organizations; and the GA population to create more effective and affordable long-term solutions which address the multiple problems and complex needs of the diverse population that benefits from this assistance program of last resort.