

GENERAL ASSISTANCE HISTORY



The “General Assistance” Program”, as it is known today, has progressed a long way from the Elizabethan Poor Laws of England that were re-established in the early colonial days of America and became a part of Maine law when Maine became a State in 1820.

The laws provided that the “Overseers” of a municipality or some person or persons designated by them to act on their behalf shall have the care of all persons within a municipality had the responsibility for all eligible people who were in need. The duties of the “Board of Overseers” included determining who eligible, residency of the family was, amount of assistance to be rendered, and how the assistance was to be provided. The “Board of Overseers” also had the responsibility for administering the “almshouse” or “poor farm” if such was available in the community.

In the early 1920’s, after passage of the “Mothers’ Aid” and “Child Guardian” bills, a separate local board was established for the administration of care for children. In the 1930’s, the responsibility for several other groups in the population was shifted to the Federal Government. The Local Board of the “Overseers of the Poor” was no longer responsible for the blind, aged, veterans and their families, and in some instances, able-bodied unemployed men. Other programs such as Social Security, Workers’ Compensation, Unemployment Compensation, Veterans’ Administration, and some of the Depression work-related programs were developed because General Assistance was unable to manage the tremendous needs that were facing the communities.

The “Overseers of the Poor” continued to be responsible for transients, some intact families, and for individuals who did not meet eligibility criteria of other State and Federal programs. In addition, “General Assistance” supplemented, as it still does today, some of the benefits received from State and Federal programs when the income was not sufficient to meet basic household needs. By this time, assistance was provided to individuals and their families in their own homes as opposed to “poor farms” or “almshouses.”

While the scope of the General Assistance Program has changed significantly over the years, i.e. we no longer have the “poor farms” and “almshouses,” and the laws have changed to place greater responsibility and accountability on the applicant/client, the “Need” for shelter, assistance to prevent a utility shut-off, heating fuel, food, prescriptions, and other **BASIC LIVING EXPENSES** are still there for many people.

The General Assistance Program has undergone numerous swings of the pendulum since 1971 when the whole program was overhauled and codified. In the late 80's costs were skyrocketing due to very permissive language in the statutes. Then in 1991, faced with these costs and trying to balance the budget the elimination of General Assistance was proposed. The legislature was not ready to take this step. The compromises that resulted in saving the program came with additional restrictions. The legislature decided that 110% of the federal fair housing guideline, by number in family, would set the maximum.

This office explains the philosophy of basic living expenses and discusses resources available within the community as well as time spent in explaining the philosophy of Basic Living Expenses, i.e. "Need to have verses Nice to have". The city is focused on Basic Living: residents have a roof over their head with heat, food and appropriate medical resources.

For additional information. please contact us at 767-7617.