

General Assistance Programs: The State-Based Part of the Safety Net

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The federal welfare reform legislation that became law in the summer of 1996 will return portions of the federal safety net to the states, highlighting the importance of sources of assistance for low-income individuals and families that are administered and funded at the state or local level. Among the most important of these is the group of programs known collectively as General Assistance (GA). GA encompasses a widely varying set of assistance programs that share two defining characteristics. They are funded and administered entirely by the state, county, and/or locality in which the particular program operates. And they provide benefits to low-income persons who are not eligible for federal assistance. As such they are the last resort for government assistance for many in need.

This brief provides an overview of the nation's GA programs as they existed in the summer of 1996 with three purposes in mind: to gauge the extent to which persons no longer eligible for federally funded programs under the new legislation might be assisted through existing state and local programs; to provide a baseline against which to measure changes states may make to their GA programs in light of the new policy environment; and to trace how the GA landscape has already changed

since the last comprehensive survey conducted in 1992.¹

The message is clear. In only 12 states do current GA programs provide assistance to all low-income persons and families that fall through the gaps in the federal safety net. While this could change as states respond to the federal reforms, GA coverage is now more restricted and its benefit levels are almost universally lower in real terms than in 1992.

Federal Safety Net

Since the role of GA in the overall social safety net begins where federal assistance ends, it is useful to start the discussion by reviewing the major components of the federal safety net. All except the Food Stamp Program restrict eligibility to particular groups.

Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC).

AFDC provides cash grants to needy children (and their parents and caretakers) who have been deprived of parental support or care, either because one parent is absent from the home, incapacitated, or deceased, or because the parent who is the principal earner in the family is unemployed. Needy children and families with children who are not eligible for AFDC include primarily two-parent intact fam-

One of the major arguments driving devolution is that it gives states flexibility to design their own social support programs to be more responsive in serving the particular circumstances of their populations. As states develop their responses to this new flexibility, it is important that the funding and coverage of General Assistance programs be taken into account.

ilies that are poor enough to be financially eligible but have a principal wage earner who fails to meet the state’s work history or hours worked requirement.

Supplemental Security Income (SSI). SSI provides cash payments to needy aged, blind, and disabled persons (including children). The disability benefit is restricted to those with disabilities severe enough to prevent “substantial gainful employment” and “permanent,” defined as expected to last at least 12 months or end in death. The program’s lengthy certification process can also delay benefit receipt for up to 12 months.

In-Kind Assistance, principally Medicaid and Food Stamps. Medicaid provides medical assistance to low-income persons, but eligibility is generally tied to eligibility for SSI or AFDC. The Food Stamp Program provides food assistance to low-income persons regardless of their age, health, or household characteristics. It is, thus, the only major component of the federal safety net for which low-income able-bodied persons without children are eligible.

Impact of the New Legislation. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, which President Clinton signed into law in August 1996, will increase the current gaps in the federal safety net in three major ways. First, AFDC will be replaced by Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), a state-run assistance program for low-income children that will be funded by a federal block grant. Under TANF, federal welfare assistance will be limited to a lifetime total of five years, with most able-bodied adults required to work after two years of assistance. Second, most legal immigrants will lose their eligibility for both SSI and food stamps. Illegal immigrants are already barred from these programs. Third, unemployed persons without children will

have their food stamp benefits limited to three months over a three-year period.

Availability of General Assistance

There is no uniform definition of GA, a rubric that covers a wide range of program names, eligibility criteria, and benefits that vary within, as well

programs in at least some localities (see map). In 33 of these states the program operates throughout the state; the remaining 9 states have programs that operate only in some counties.

Of the 33 states with statewide programs, 25 have uniform eligibility rules throughout the state and state administrative control and funding (see table 2, page 4). These 25 also have statewide benefit formulae, with some but not all adjusting for regional cost-of-living differences within the state. The remaining 8 statewide programs have eligibility rules and benefit schedules that vary by county or locality. Although state laws in these states require each county or locality to provide for its needy residents through a GA program, the same laws give the relevant jurisdiction wide latitude to decide on at least one of the following: eligibility rules, benefit levels, administrative control, and funding.

Of the 18 states that do not mandate a GA program at either the state or local level, 9 include towns or counties that have chosen to operate their own GA program. These localities tend to be located in the larger, more urban areas of the state, with programs varying widely from one county to the next.² The remaining 9 states have no state or local GA program. These are almost all southern states, most of them in the southeast.

Table 1
General Assistance Programs at a Glance

Availability of GA Programs^a	
States with GA programs	42
Program throughout entire state	33
Program in only portion of the state	9
States with no GA program	9
Populations Served by GA Programs^a	
Disabled, elderly, and/or unemployable individuals	42
Children and/or families with children	31
Employable individuals without children	16
Form of GA Benefits^a	
Cash	28
Vendor payments/vouchers	11
Mix of cash and vendor payments/vouchers	3
Duration of GA Benefits^a	
No time limits	18
Time limits for a portion of beneficiaries	15
Time limits for all beneficiaries	9
Maximum Cash Benefits as a Percentage of Poverty (individual recipients)	
Average	39%
Low (Missouri)	12%
High (Nebraska)	100%

Source: Urban Institute 1996.
a. Number of programs.

as across, states. We focus here on programs that provide more than sporadic assistance. Thus, we include interim assistance programs available for persons awaiting eligibility determination for SSI but exclude emergency assistance programs that typically consist of one-time grants. The major dimensions of GA variation are shown in table 1.

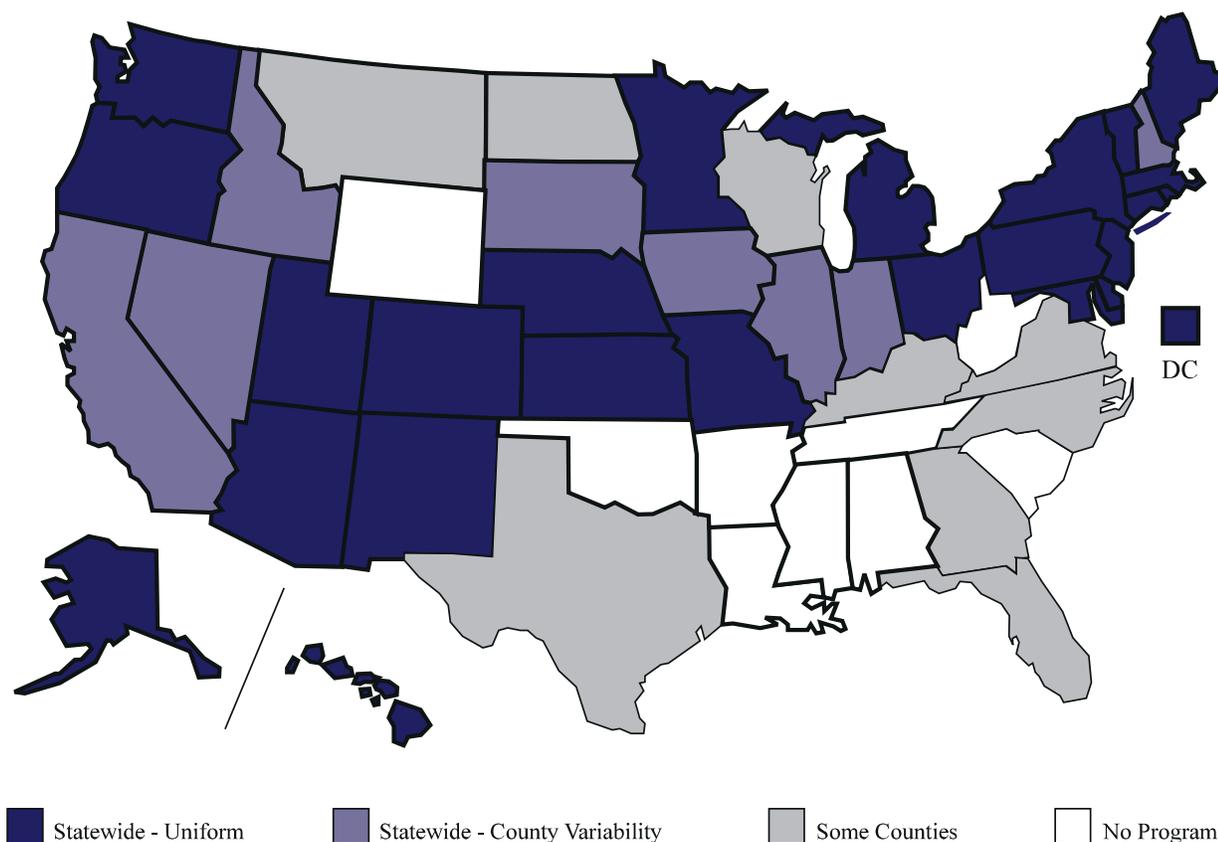
Where Are General Assistance Programs Available?

Of the 51 states (including the District of Columbia), 42 have GA

Eligible Groups

Of the 42 states with GA programs, only 12 provide assistance to all financially needy persons who do not qualify for federally funded cash assistance programs. The other 30 restrict assistance to certain categories of persons. All of these provide assistance to at least one subcategory of persons who are disabled, elderly, or otherwise unemployable; 19 provide assistance to low-income children or families with children, including women pregnant with their first child; only 4 provide assistance to

The Geography of General Assistance



Source: Urban Institute 1996.

able-bodied employable adults or able-bodied adults with barriers to employment.

All GA programs restrict eligibility to the financially needy, usually exempting certain types of income and assets from the eligibility determination. GA income limits range from zero in Florida, Kentucky, and New Hampshire to \$2,109 per month for a family of three in Hawaii. Asset limits vary, with the majority of state limits being between \$1,000 and \$2,000. Most (36 states) limit eligibility to citizens and legal aliens. Seven have a durational residency requirement ranging from 15 days to 9 months. Seven require drug and alcohol abuse treatment if warranted. And 21 require employable adults to enter work or training programs to maintain benefit eligibility.

Types and Levels of Assistance

Twenty-eight states provide cash benefits to all recipients. Eleven states provide in-kind benefits for all recipients, either through vendor payments or vouchers.³ In the remaining three states with programs, disabled recipients receive cash payments and all other recipients receive vendor payments or vouchers.

Benefit maximums differ among recipients according to their family size, eligibility category, and/or living arrangement. Among the states that provide cash benefits, benefit maximums as a percentage of the federal poverty threshold average about 40 percent for individuals. Except for Hawaii and Nebraska, whose maximum benefits for individuals are 71

and 100 percent of poverty, respectively, all states have benefit maximums for individuals at 55 percent of poverty or below. Missouri has the lowest cash benefit maximum for individual recipients, at 12 percent of poverty.

The duration of benefits also varies. Of the 42 states with GA programs, 18 impose no time limit, 15 impose time limits on particular subgroups of recipients, and 9 impose time limits across the board.

In addition to financial assistance, many GA recipients receive state-funded medical assistance through a variety of avenues. In 4 states (Delaware, the District of Columbia, Hawaii, and Oregon), all GA recipients are eligible for medical assistance under that state's Medicaid or Medicaid waiver program, which

Table 2
General Assistance Programs, by State

State (County/Locality) ^a	Where GA Programs Operate within State	Categorical Eligibility ^b			Individual Cash Benefit as a Percent of Poverty ^c	Medical Benefits
		“Disabled,” “Elderly,” and/or “Other” Unemployable	Children/Families with Children	Employable Adults without Children		
Alabama	No Program					
Alaska	Uniform Statewide	✓	✓	✓	43	✓
Arizona	Uniform Statewide	✓	—	—	27	—
Arkansas	No Program					
California (Los Angeles County)	Statewide/County Variability	✓	✓	✓	34	✓
Colorado (City and County of Denver) ^d	Uniform Statewide	✓	✓	✓	36	—
Connecticut	Uniform Statewide	✓	✓	✓	54	✓
Delaware	Uniform Statewide	✓	✓	—	19	✓ ^e
District of Columbia	Uniform Statewide	✓	✓	—	41	✓ ^e
Florida (Dade County)	Some Counties	✓	—	—	34	—
Georgia (Fulton County)	Some Counties	✓	—	—	35	—
Hawaii	Uniform Statewide	✓	✓	—	71	✓ ^e
Idaho (Ada County)	Statewide/County Variability	✓	✓	✓	na	✓
Illinois (City of Chicago)	Statewide/County Variability	✓	✓	—	33	✓
Indiana (Center Township of Marion County)	Statewide/County Variability	✓	✓	✓	na	✓
Iowa (Polk County)	Statewide/County Variability	✓	✓	✓	na	—
Kansas	Uniform Statewide	✓	✓	—	30	✓
Kentucky (Jefferson County)	Some Counties	✓	✓	—	na	—
Louisiana	No Program					
Maine	Uniform Statewide	✓	✓	✓	na	✓
Maryland	Uniform Statewide	✓	✓	—	19	✓
Massachusetts	Uniform Statewide	✓	✓	—	53	✓
Michigan	Uniform Statewide	✓	✓	—	38	✓
Minnesota	Uniform Statewide	✓	✓	—	31	✓
Mississippi	No Program					
Missouri	Uniform Statewide	✓	✓	—	12	✓
Montana (Yellowstone County)	Some Counties	✓	—	—	na	✓
Nebraska ^f	Uniform Statewide	✓	✓	✓	100	✓
Nevada (Clark County)	Statewide/County Variability	✓	✓	✓	43	✓
New Hampshire (City of Manchester)	Statewide/County Variability	✓	✓	✓	na	✓
New Jersey	Uniform Statewide	✓	✓	✓	33	✓
New Mexico	Uniform Statewide	✓	✓	—	36	—
New York	Uniform Statewide	✓	✓	✓	55	✓
North Carolina (Durham County)	Some Counties	✓	—	—	na	✓
North Dakota (Cass County)	Some Counties	✓	—	—	na	—
Ohio	Uniform Statewide	✓	✓	—	18	✓
Oklahoma	No Program					
Oregon	Uniform Statewide	✓	—	—	44	✓ ^e
Pennsylvania	Uniform Statewide	✓	—	—	33	✓
Rhode Island	Uniform Statewide	✓	✓	—	51	✓
South Carolina	No Program					
South Dakota (Minnehaha County)	Statewide/County Variability	✓	✓	✓	na	✓
Tennessee	No Program					
Texas (Harris County)	Some Counties	✓	—	—	17	—
Utah	Uniform Statewide	✓	—	✓	45	✓
Vermont	Uniform Statewide	✓	✓	✓	na	✓
Virginia (Fairfax County)	Some Counties	✓	✓	—	34	✓
Washington	Uniform Statewide	✓	✓	—	54	✓
West Virginia	No Program					
Wisconsin (Dane County)	Some Counties	✓	—	—	38	✓
Wyoming	No Program					

(Brief no. A-4)

Source: Urban Institute 1996.

- a. For the 8 states where eligibility rules and benefit levels vary by county and the 9 states in which GA programs operate only in some counties, the information in the table reflects the GA program in the specific county indicated.
- b. States indicated as covering persons in a specific category may cover one or more of its subcategories. Category of children/families with children includes women pregnant with their first child. Category of employable adults without children includes able-bodied adults with some barriers to employment.
- c. Figures were determined by using the federal poverty threshold for 1995 published by the Bureau of the Census (\$7,763 for one person).
- d. Colorado has a statewide GA program for disabled persons; all other GA program decisions are left to local discretion, including whether to have a program.
- e. Medical Assistance is provided through the state's Medicaid or Medicaid waiver program.
- f. Nebraska has a statewide GA program for disabled persons; GA programs for other persons may vary by county. Information in table reflects Nebraska state model guidelines.
- na = not applicable because most benefits are in the form of vendor payments or vouchers.

is funded in part with federal dollars. Of the remaining 38 states with GA programs, 29 provide medical benefits outside Medicaid to some or all GA recipients, either through a formal state or county GA medical program or by including certain medical expenses under the regular GA program. These benefits vary widely but are typically more limited than those provided by Medicaid. In addition, some states without GA cash assistance programs provide alternative medical care programs for some or all of their needy residents who do not qualify for Medicaid.

Proportions of the Population Helped

Most state GA programs are relatively small in relation to the total population of the state. Among the 25 states with uniform statewide GA programs, the number of recipients assisted each month ranges from less than 0.1 percent of all persons (Oregon and Utah) to just over 1.8 percent of all persons (New York). Comparing the number of recipients to the number of persons in poverty provides a better measure of GA assistance in relation to need. In the New York state GA program, the largest in the country relative to need, the recipients represent only about 11 percent of those living in poverty.

GA Changes over the Last Four Years

Since the last GA survey in 1992, in most states GA benefit levels have fallen and eligibility criteria have become more stringent.

Benefit Levels. Eight states have enacted nominal benefit increases since 1992, but none of these have exceeded the rate of inflation. Thus, real benefit levels have remained stagnant or fallen. Six states have actually reduced nominal benefits. The most extreme of these, California, gave counties the right to seek fiscal relief from the state mandate by reducing GA benefit levels. The California county we surveyed,

Los Angeles County, responded by lowering benefits for individuals by 25 percent in 1996. The remaining states—two-thirds of all those with GA programs—have held benefit levels set during or prior to 1992 constant in nominal terms, leading to reductions in real benefit levels.

Eligibility Criteria. Several states have recently eliminated assistance for certain categories of individuals they had previously included in their GA pro-

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grams. Five states (Connecticut, Hawaii, Minnesota, Ohio, and Pennsylvania) eliminated benefits for able-bodied employable individuals without children. Pennsylvania eliminated benefits for families as well. In each of these states except Ohio, a portion of persons losing eligibility for cash assistance may continue to be eligible for medical assistance. Arizona and Rhode Island eliminated benefits for pregnant women. Four states (Arizona, Florida, Oregon, and Rhode Island) tightened the eligibility criteria for persons with disabilities, and three states (Arizona, Hawaii, and New Mexico) decreased the duration for which benefits are available to disabled recipients. Vermont, though not eliminating able-bodied employable individuals without children altogether, tightened the criteria for GA eligibility for that population.

Other Evidence. Other trends reinforce the conclusion that GA is contracting. Wisconsin, for example, has replaced its state-required county-based GA program with a program of optional block grants. Several Wisconsin counties have chosen not to

provide GA, some have narrowed the populations eligible for assistance, and some have restricted GA assistance to medical expenses. Montana has eliminated the state-run GA program that was administered in 12 of its 56 counties, although some counties continue to administer their own programs with their own funds.

* * * *

The shrinking of the federal safety net heightens the importance of state and local programs to help those in need. One of the major arguments driving such devolution is that it gives states flexibility to design their own social support programs to be more responsive in serving the particular circumstances of their populations. General Assistance programs are an important part of this equation in the majority of states. As states develop their responses to this new flexibility, it is important that the funding and coverage of any General

Assistance programs be taken into account.

Notes

1. The information in this report was collected through a telephone survey of each state and the District of Columbia between June and August 1996. For the 1992 data see "National General Assistance Survey, 1992," by Marion Nichols, Jon Dunlap, and Scott Barkan, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities and National Conference of State Legislatures, December 1992.

2. For uniform statewide programs our information was collected from the state authority. For states with local discretion, our information comes from the particular county listed in table 2.

3. Vendor payments are made by the GA agency to a person or business (such as a landlord or utility company) in exchange for services provided to the GA recipient. Vouchers can be used by recipients as payment for specific items only, such as food or transportation.



For additional information on the issues covered here, see Cori E. Uccello, Heather R. McCallum, and L. Jerome Gallagher, *State General Assistance Programs 1996*, Urban Institute, no. 6719, 1996.

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