

LATE
testimony

**Testimony on HB1098: General Assistance
House Committee on Human Services
Conference Room 329, 2/12/09, 8 a.m..**

Testimony in opposition to HB1098
By Kathleen Hasegawa

Members of the House Committee on Human Services, my opposition to this bill is both personal and professional. A member of my family was on General Assistance for several years and I know from watching his struggle with mental illness and with alcoholism that General Assistance was a life saver for him. His life has been a great struggle and when he was too ill to work GA provided a way to live. When he was in residential treatment it provided for his room and board. When he moved out of residential treatment it helped him live in a clean and sober environment. When he failed in his efforts and then was ready to pick himself up and try again GA helped him pay for his clean and sober housing until he was able to work enough to meet his expenses.

With the help of many programs, his therapist, his family and most importantly his own firm resolve he has been able for the last year to work and thrive. But you have to understand that there were times when he couldn't make it, times when he despaired and contemplated suicide, times when he was homeless.

For people who are, like he was, ill and in treatment, and unable to make it without a hand from all of us, General Assistance is a life line. It's a very small sum but it is often the only thing that stands between life and death.

Professionally, I do not understand the argument in this bill. It sounds as if the state would be doing people a favor by cutting them off in 1 year because then they could return to work or be qualified for federal Social Security benefits. Here is what I don't understand, while some people on GA do get on Social Security after a couple of years of effort, GA is specifically for people who "have first been determined ineligible for a comparable federally funded federal assistance program." The law clearly states that a person with a disability shall be eligible if the person is determined to be needy...is unable to meet the disability requirements established by the federal Supplemental Security Income Program and is unable to engage in any substantial gainful employment because of a determined and certified physical, mental or combination of physical and mental disability."

That person also has to have a determination and certification made by a board of licensed physicians or a board of licensed psychologists. And the person has to accept and pursue appropriate treatment.

These are clearly people who are very vulnerable and for whom General Assistance is a life line. How can we then believe that in one year they will either be on Social Security or will be able to go back to work. That may be true for some and our prayers should go with them. But unfortunately it will not be true for the majority, who will after a year, face homelessness with little or no hope of ever being able to regain stability, treatment and housing. These are the people we will pass on the street and wonder why they became or chose to become homeless vagrants to be roused from parks and beaches and libraries and rooftops and doorways just as my family member was until he was able to make it because General Assistance gave him a lifeline.

Please do not allow the Department of Human Services to cut this program. When the times are hardest is when we must rally together to support those most in need.