

APRIL 2018
OAK PARK TOWNSHIP ANNUAL REPORT
GENERAL ASSISTANCE AT A GLANCE

Submitted by: April Dugal, General Assistance Administrator

General Assistance is a locally administered welfare program that provides financial assistance to unemployed or disabled Oak Park residents in accordance with the Illinois Department of Human Services guidelines. It also offers referrals and information regarding eligibility for other programs providing assistance with finances, housing, career planning and placement, and mental health counseling. Oak Park Township adheres to the guidelines provided by the Township Officials of Illinois in the General Assistance Handbook. Qualified clients receive financial assistance towards food and shelter expenses. In addition, clients receive services including case management, job search guidance, help with Social Security Disability eligibility, social service agency referrals, and application assistance for the Holiday Food and Gift Basket Program.

In the past year, General Assistance provided a variety of services:

- 85 Unique Clients received financial assistance towards shelter and personal expenses
- 659 Total grants were disbursed to clients who received an average of **\$387.75** in General Assistance payments each month. There was an average of 55 Active clients per month. This was a 14% decline from FY17.

Over the course of the year, 35 clients were added, and **47** clients were terminated from receiving GA. 12 found employment, and the remainder became eligible to receive other benefits, moved, or did not fulfill the GA requirements.

Out of the total number of clients, an **average of 6 temporary homeless clients** per month received GA throughout the year. The highest number of temporary homeless clients was 12 in April 17 and May 2017

- 222 **Inquiries were received through the GA office requesting assistance or referrals to other** social services. Most requests were for housing assistance and payments towards rent and security deposit. The main reason for residents seeking GA was because they don't qualify for unemployment benefits and they were facing possible eviction or foreclosure.

- 95 OP residents representing **73** households received **Holiday Food & Gift Baskets**; 17 clients picked up their gifts at the Township offices since they couldn't be delivered to their homes or they stay in the Housing Forward Shelter.

HIGHLIGHTS FOR FY 2018

Administrative - General

General Assistance Payments

All clients receive GA benefits through electronic payments of either direct deposit or a pay card. Occasionally, checks are issued, and the GA Department is in frequent contact with Community Bank where clients can cash their checks. Since February 2015, the Township has processed pay cards for clients through Pay partners and Community Bank. The majority of clients receiving GA opt to access their funds through a pay card. In April 2017, the Township is now using US Bank Relia Card Program.

In March 2017, the Township Trustees approved an increase to the amount allocated towards GA clients' shelter payments. The last previous increase was in 2011. The Township Manager presented an analysis on local housing costs, a comparison to other townships, and client needs, and recommended an increase in the shelter grants from \$250 to \$300 for clients who share housing with a family member and to \$400 for clients living alone. This will be effective for April 1st, 2017.

The OPT Accounting staff and GA staff have continued to collaborate in exporting data from the Visual GA software to Fund Balance, our accounting software. As a result, the client and shelter payment process has been significantly streamlined.

Administrative – Client

In September, the GA Administrator conducted an annual redetermination of all clients to assess their continued eligibility for General Assistance. The process included verification of residency, assets, and personal IDs and medical cards. The clients' GA folders are updated with these current documents.

Community Work Program

The Community Work Program (CWP) was implemented for General Assistance clients beginning November 2013. Clients who are currently unemployed are required to find a volunteer site of their choice where they can work at least 8 hours per month. The clients submit a letter from the CWP site stating what the client's tasks are and the agency's expectations (i.e. training, orientation, etc.). The total number of clients currently participating in the CWP is 36. GA clients are learning new skills and new responsibilities through this program.

Some of the clients are fulfilling CWP requirements at the Township Senior Services Lunch Program, the Oak Park library, various churches, Animal Care League, Stroger Hospital, the OPRF food pantry and various businesses. Clients pending Supplemental Security Income, Social Security Disability Insurance, pending VA benefits, are exempt from the CWP requirements.

Community Outreach

The GA Department is an active member of the Homeless Coalition sponsored by the CMHB, and is listed in their Guide of Services as a resource. Coalition meetings are held with several service providers including mental health, police, and housing agencies.

Our continued partnerships with Housing Forward, West Cook YMCA, the Oak Park Housing Authority, and the Social Security Office are instrumental to the GA staff for verifying residency and GA eligibility for applicants and clients. During FY18, the GA staff met with the Housing Forward Outreach manager and the Rapid re-housing case manager.

Illinois Township Outreach

In order to have an operational and defensible standard to document “physical presence” and “absence of intent to leave”, the Township submitted a request for consideration by the Township Supervisors of Illinois to update the GA manual regarding residency for General Assistance clients experiencing homelessness. The Township Supervisors of Illinois have received the request and have not notified us of any impending changes.

Housing Forward and Salvation Army Emergency Assistance

The GA Department’s partnership with Housing Forward helps to provide a critical service to the community. HF now processes all emergency financial assistance requests received through the Township, and the Salvation Army is the funding source for emergency assistance. Clients who are experiencing financial difficulty or requiring specific services, but not eligible for GA, are often referred to HF programs.

Job Readiness Program

The General Assistance program partnered with AACF located in Oak Park. They hosted the job fair at the 19th Century Club on October 19th, 2017 10 am to 2 pm. There were 150 attendees that day including 25 General Assistance clients. Sixteen vendors were also accepting applications and setting up interviews for job seekers. Clients were required to bring resumes and received a list of vendors to research before the fair. The GA Administrator made copies of resumes for the clients and also made referrals to the JRP at Housing Forward if they needed more assistance with resumes. There was positive feedback from attendees and vendors

Oak Park Township and the Oak Park Public Library partnered together for a second year on a workshop for the General Assistance clients to learn about new job searching websites and online tools provided by the library. The workshop was presented by Mrs. Swain. The workshops were held on September 27th and September 28th in the computer tech lab.

The clients learned how to use *TagCrowd* for keywords on their resume to match the job description they are applying for. They also saw new templates for creating resumes, and explored the *Glass Door* web site to compare job salaries. They were also taught to research companies and who the hiring managers are, and learned about other job search programs that the library subscribes to.

We had twenty-three clients attend. Three clients were exempt due to a medical reason and working. Five clients did not attend but will attend a later make-up session at the library. The GA Administrator is in the process of planning future workshops.

During the past fiscal year two GA clients completed job search guidance through the Housing Forward Job Readiness Program (JRP), which has been operational since October 2011. One client is currently participating in the program. And one did not complete due to finding a seasonal job but will go back to finish the program.

The JRP consists of several stages involving career assessments, computer proficiency, resume preparation, and interviewing techniques with professional staff at Housing Forward trained in Human Resources. Clients are referred to the Job Readiness Program by the GA Administrator for three key reasons:

1. The client has asked to be referred to a job search program
2. The client has stated frustration with his/her job search and may be experiencing chronic unemployment.
3. The case manager has reviewed the client's resume and recommends professional assistance to improve the client's job search efforts.

For other clients, select referrals are made to other job search programs including DORS (through Department of Rehab Services), Career Passports (through Housing Forward), and CARA, a Chicago-based program for ex-offenders.

OTHER HIGHLIGHTS

Software

The GA staff continues to utilize more features of the in-house Visual GA program to improve client profile data and appointment notes. Reports that are run on a regular basis include: SSI pending clients, missed appointments, and other reports for monthly and quarterly data. Information on the status of SSI claims is added to ensure that clients are still qualified to receive GA as well as to track reimbursements to the Township. Integrating Visual GA with the Township's accounting system is an ongoing project.

Township Website

The GA staff continues to refer both clients and the general public to the list of resources including agencies and programs for low-income individuals, the homeless, and unemployed individuals on the GA website page. Information will be updated as needed.

Social Security verification for reimbursement

GA staff frequently contacts the Social Security offices in Hillside and Springfield to verify Supplemental Security Income benefits awarded to qualified GA clients and begin the process of obtaining reimbursements. The Township is eligible to receive reimbursement of Interim GA payments given to clients while their SSI cases are pending.

Local SSI offices are being negatively impacted by the State. But the approval and reimbursement processing time has been shortened.

Total amount reimbursed to OPT for 14 GA clients during FY18 = **\$22,305.26**

Client Services - External

We have partnered with local social service agencies in the area such as Housing Forward, Oak Park food pantry, etc. and they have been referring clients to our GA program.

Governmental Impacts

In December 2013, legislators allowed the unemployment benefits program to expire affecting approximately 2.2 million Americans. The passage of the Affordable Care Act has resulted in many clients becoming eligible to receive health insurance. Clients were encouraged to apply for coverage before the deadline. The GA program is also getting referrals from DHS because the clients are not eligible to receive TANF (Temporary Aid to needy families).

Staff Development

The GA Administrator has taken on a leadership role in the Social Worker's group of Township Officials of Cook County (TOCC), and has attended their meetings and trainings. GA staff also attended trainings for Township Officials of Illinois (TOI) for caseworkers. The GA Administrator also attended the VGA software training.

GENERAL ASSISTANCE FUTURE PROJECTS

1. Continue residency verification and other requirements for clients to ensure GA eligibility requirements are met.
2. Outreach to other community organizations to explore partnership opportunities.
3. Evaluate relationship and budget for the Job Readiness Program with Housing Forward, and continue monitoring and improvement.
4. Continue to monitor and develop the Community Work Program.
5. Review GA grant levels and evaluate the impact of the Affordable Care Act on the Township's obligation to provide financial assistance towards medical costs.
6. The job fair is scheduled for April 2018; all job-seeking GA clients are required to attend.
7. One job-readiness workshops hosted by the Oak Park Public Library are scheduled for the end of Fall 2018
8. Monitor the transition with the new pay card and the client satisfaction with the new card.
9. Attend staff development opportunities.
10. Continue efforts to transition all landlord/shelter payments from check-based to Direct Deposit accounts.