

**APRIL 2016**  
**OAK PARK TOWNSHIP ANNUAL REPORT**  
**GENERAL ASSISTANCE**  
**FY16 AT A GLANCE**

**Submitted by: April Dugal, General Assistance Case Manager and Wendy Senger, Management Analyst**

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, Nicor Gas Sharing through the Salvation Army, and the Holiday Food and Gift Basket Program.

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

- 130** Unique Clients received financial assistance towards shelter and personal expenses
- 979** Total grants were disbursed to clients who received an average of **\$340.02** in General Assistance payments each month. There were an average of **82** Active clients per month.

Over the course of the year, **38** new clients were added, **31** previous clients were reinstated, and **66** clients were terminated from receiving GA. **25%** found employment, and the remainder either became eligible to receive other benefits, moved, or did not fulfill the GA requirements.

Out of the total number of clients, an **average of 5 temporary homeless clients** per month received GA throughout the year. The highest number of temporary homeless clients was 8 in January 2016.

- 394** 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. The main reason for residents seeking GA was because their unemployment benefits had run out and they were facing possible eviction or foreclosure.
- 35** **Nicor Gas Sharing** Applications were submitted to the Salvation Army out of **143** inquiries through the OP Township during the 2015-2016 Heating Season to date. Clients received up to \$400 towards their heating bill depending on the balance owed, the clients' age, and disability status. In September 2015, the Salvation Army expanded the Gas Sharing Program to include disabled veterans and customers in specific crisis situations, and the GA staff was trained to process these special cases. In January 2016, the Township GA staff transferred responsibility for the Gas Sharing Program to Prevail. We anticipate a transition period while clients are

referred to Prevail, however, it was agreed that more overall residents throughout the near western suburbs who apply for Gas Sharing will be better served by Prevail since they offer a variety of referral programs and services beyond the geographic boundaries of Oak Park and also have access to Salvation Army Emergency Assistance funds.

**129** OP residents representing **109** households received **Holiday Food & Gift Baskets**; 35 clients picked up their gifts at the OP Township since they couldn't be delivered to their homes.

## **HIGHLIGHTS FOR FY2016**

### **Administrative - General**

#### **General Assistance Payments**

All clients receive GA benefits through electronic payments of either direct deposit or a paycard. Occasionally, checks are issued prior to the electronic system of payment, and the GA Department is in frequent contact with Community Bank where clients can cash their checks. Since February 2015, the Township now processes paycards for clients through Paypartners and Community Bank. The majority of clients receiving GA opt to access their funds through a paycard.

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

### **Administrative – Client**

In August, the Case Manager 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. The clients' GA folders are updated with these new 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. 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 GA Department also required employable clients to volunteer at least 8 hours per month with a local agency as part of the CWP. The total number of clients currently participating in the CWP is 59. GA clients are learning new skills and new responsibilities.

Some of the clients are fulfilling CWP requirements at the Township Senior Services Lunch Program, the Oak Park library, various churches, Housing Forward, the Forest Park, YMCA, various hospitals such as West Suburban Hospital and Stroger Hospital, and the OPRF food pantry. Clients pending Supplemental Security Income, Social Security Disability Insurance, pending VA benefits, or who are full-time students are exempt.

### **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. Meetings are held regularly with several service providers including mental health, police, and housing agencies.

Our continued partnerships with Housing Forward, West Cook YMCA, Prevail, 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 FY16, the GA staff met with NAMI (National Association on Mental Illness) as well as the case managers and CEO of the West Cook YMCA.

The OPT partnered with the Village of Oak Park to publicize all of the Township Services, including General Assistance, as part of a special insert in the January 2016 newsletter. The newsletter is distributed to all Oak Park residences and is posted on the Village website. Eligibility requirements, the May 28th job fair, as well as contact information were included. 12 inquiries were received directly because of the newsletter, and the GA staff will continue to track the referrals generated by this public announcement.

### **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.

### **Prevail and Salvation Army Emergency Assistance**

The GA Department’s partnership with Prevail helps to provide a critical service to the community. Prevail 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 the Prevail staff.

### **Job Readiness Program**

The GA clients attended the Triton College job fair in River Grove on May 7<sup>th</sup>, 2015. This was a mandatory requirement for job- search clients. There was over 170 vendors that participated at the job fair. Forty nine GA clients attended the fair. The clients were given a one day bus pass to attend the job fair.

The clients’ feedback so far has been positive. The clients liked this format better than the internal one hosted last year because of the large number of vendors and available job postings. Clients were able to explore a wide variety of opportunities, compared to the smaller job fair hosted by the GA department in 2014. 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 Prevail if they needed more assistance with resumes. Also the clients were given bus schedules to get to Triton. General Assistance spent \$280.00 on the transit cards.

General Assistance and Oak Park Library partnered together to have a workshop focusing on job searching online and the library’s resources. Mrs. Swain the Adult and Teen Services Librarian was our presenter. The client’s learned about new employment websites and the library’s online tools such as

Lynda.com and reference USA. The workshop was held in the computer tech lab. The attendance of the all workshops were 56 clients.

There were two scheduled workshops on July 13<sup>th</sup> and July 14<sup>th</sup>, 2015. We offered a third as a make-up class on July 16<sup>th</sup>, 2015. Some of the clients even got library cards and signed up for computer classes. There was positive feedback from the clients such as “very informative” and “the presenter was very helpful.” General Assistance will offer this workshop again next year.

During the past fiscal year **10** GA clients received job search guidance through the Prevail’s Job Readiness Program (JRP), which has been operational since October 2011. As of March 2016, **2** clients completed the program and **1** found employment.

The JRP consists of several stages involving career assessments, computer proficiency, resume preparation, and interviewing techniques with professional staff at the PREVAIL trained in Human Resources. Clients are referred to the Job Readiness Program by the GA case manager 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 Thrive Counseling), Career Passports (through Housing Forward), and CARA, a Chicago-based program for ex-offenders.

Our partnership with Prevail through their Job Readiness Program has been very helpful for our clients in finding employment and also strengthening their self-confidence. As outlined in the GA guidelines, the clients need to submit proof of employment applications such as online confirmation or a business card.

## **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.

### **OPT 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.

### **SSI verification for reimbursement**

The GA staff frequently contacts the Social Security offices in Hinsdale 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 GA payments given to clients while their SSI cases are pending. The total amount reimbursed to OPT for seven GA clients as of March 2016 is **\$13,550.82**.

#### **Client Services - External**

We have partnered with the local social service agencies in the area such as Prevail, Housing Forward, and Thrive, 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 GA office has experienced a significant increase in inquiries for GA since this announcement. 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**

GA staff attended a training for Gas Sharing hosted by the Salvation Army in September 2015 due to changes to the program implemented by the Salvation Army. The GA case manager attended a training for first aid for mental health responders in December 2015. It was a two day training covering how to deal with different situations and clients' needs.

## **GENERAL ASSISTANCE FUTURE PROJECTS**

1. Continued residency verification and other requirements for clients to ensure GA eligibility requirements are met.
2. Community outreach to other organizations to explore partnership opportunities.
3. Job Search and Placement Program with Prevail – evaluation of relationship and budget, and continued monitoring and improvement.
4. Continue to monitor and develop Community Work Program.
5. Township Board review of GA grant levels and evaluating impact of the Affordable Care Act on the Township's obligation to provide financial assistance towards medical costs.
6. Triton College job fair is scheduled for May 2016; all job-seeking GA clients are required to attend.
7. Three job-readiness workshops hosted by the Oak Park Public Library are scheduled for the end of July 2016.
8. Working with the Accounting Department to export data from the Visual GA system to expedite and streamline payments to clients and shelter providers using FundBalance.
9. Go to staff development trainings.
10. Continue efforts to transition landlord/shelter payments from check-based to Direct Deposit accounts.