

**APRIL 2017**  
**OAK PARK TOWNSHIP ANNUAL REPORT**  
**GENERAL ASSISTANCE AT A GLANCE**

**Submitted by: April Dugal, General Assistance Administrator 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, and application assistance for the Holiday Food and Gift Basket Program.

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

- 108** Unique Clients received financial assistance towards shelter and personal expenses
- 826** Total grants were disbursed to clients who received an average of **\$326.95** in General Assistance payments each month. There were an average of **69** Active clients per month. This was a 16% decline from FY16.  
  
Over the course of the year, **23** new clients were added, **15** previous clients were reinstated, and **59** clients were terminated from receiving GA. **22%** 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 11 in April 2016 and March 2017.
- 204** 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.
- 16** **Nicor Gas Sharing** inquiries were received and referred to Prevail for screening and processing. 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.
- 106** OP residents representing **86** 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.

## **HIGHLIGHTS FOR FY 2017**

### **Administrative - General**

#### **General Assistance Payments**

All clients receive GA benefits through electronic payments of either direct deposit or a paycard. 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 paycards for clients through Paypartners and Community Bank. The majority of clients receiving GA opt to access their funds through a paycard. In January 2017, the Township was notified that Paypartners would discontinue their paycard program; the GA Department together with the Finance Department and Township Manager chose US Bank's ReliaCard program as a replacement, beginning with the April 1st 2017 payment.

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 1<sup>st</sup>, 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 August, 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. 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 35. 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, YMCA, various hospitals such as West Suburban and Stroger, 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 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, 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 FY17, the GA staff met with NAMI (National Association on Mental Illness) as well as the case managers and CEO of the West Cook YMCA.

Oak Park Township 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.

The GA Administrator presented an overview of the General Assistance program to the Senior Services clients attending congregating dining on January 31st, 2017. Two residents followed up to get more information on eligibility requirements.

## **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 Prevail programs.

## **Job Readiness Program**

The General Assistance program provided thirty-eight clients with Ventra bus passes and schedules to attend the Second Annual Triton Job Fair in October 2016. Sixty-three companies were in attendance. 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. General Assistance spent \$612.00 on the transit cards. The General

Assistance Administrator also made a connection with CrossMark, a company that specializes in doing demos at Sam's Club and they were hiring for the Holidays.

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 July 19<sup>th</sup>, July 25<sup>th</sup>, and July 27<sup>th</sup> 2016 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 thirty-three clients attend. Three clients were exempt due to a medical reason and working. Four 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 no GA clients completed job search guidance through the Prevail's Job Readiness Program (JRP), which has been operational since October 2011. Two clients are currently participating in the program.

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 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 Thrive Counseling), 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. In January 2017, the Township participated in a survey conducted by Palatine Township; Oak Park is one of 12 other Townships that utilize the VGA software.

## **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 budget decisions from Congress. Due to office closures, inadequate staffing and an increase in case backlogs, we anticipate that clients may receive GA for a longer average time, and the approval and reimbursement processing time may also be lengthened.

Total amount reimbursed to OPT for 14 GA clients during FY17 = **\$33,043**

## **Client Services - External**

We have partnered with local social service agencies in the area such as Prevail, Housing Forward, Thrive, 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 a training for working with families and individuals who have an Individual Education Plan (IEP) to help with grandparents who are on our caseload and raising grandkids.

## **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 Prevail, 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. Triton College job fair is scheduled for Fall 2017; 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 Fall 2017.
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.