



MWDA Newsletter

February 2007

Maine Welfare Directors

Legislative Update

Preview of Coming Attractions – 123rd Legislature

Kate Dufour

A review of the over 2,300 bill titles submitted by the newly elected members of the 123rd Legislature suggests that the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services will have its fair share of controversial issues to debate. While judging the contents of a bill by its title is just as challenging as judging a book by its cover, it appears that the Legislature will be dealing with several issues of interest to General Assistance administrators.

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What's In Store

Based on title alone, many of the bills that may be of interest to General Assistance administrators are focused on reforming state and local welfare programs. The reform bills run the gamut from establishing residency requirements for program participation; ending fraud in benefit programs; and enacting a 5-point welfare reform process, just to name a few. Several bills to improve access to funding available under LI-HEAP (Low-income Home Emergency Assistance Program) have also been submitted.

As of January 22nd, four of the health and welfare-related bills the Maine Municipal Association (MMA) has identified as having a municipal significance had been printed. What follows is a brief description of those bills.

LD 12, *An Act to Establish a Residency Requirement for MaineCare Recipients* (Sponsored by Rep. Browne of Vassalboro.) This bill requires all applicants to prove to the Department of Health and Human Services that they have been physically present in the State for 30 days or longer prior to qualifying for MaineCare benefits.

LD 28, *An Act to Establish a Statewide Residency Requirement for General Assistance* (Sponsored by Rep. Browne of Vassalboro.) This bill requires a person to have resided in a municipality for at least 30 days before that person can be determined eligible to receive General Assistance.

LD 29, *An Act to Amend the Laws Governing Welfare*. (Sponsored by Rep. Beaudoin of Biddeford.) This "concept draft" bill proposes to require welfare recipients to work with town officials to seek meaningful employment and perform work or provide volunteer services in order to receive welfare benefits

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Legislative Update (continued)

LD 168, An Act to End Fraud in Maine's Welfare Benefit Program. (Sponsored by Rep. Walcott of Lewiston.) This "concept draft" bill proposes to enact measures that would address and mitigate fraud in the state's welfare benefit programs.

MWDA Legislative Agenda

MWDA also got into the legislative act as the Legislative Committee drafted and added three GA-related bills to the mix of issues to be addressed by the 123rd Legislature. Described in detail below, the bills seek to increase the state share of the cost of the GA program; study the impact of the amendments to GA program eligibility have had on homelessness and poverty in Maine; and create a representative payee and disability specialist program. (These bills have not yet been printed or assigned a bill number. Outlined below are ways for you to get more information regarding the bill numbers, public hearings and work sessions.)

Increase State Funding Bill - This bill makes two changes to the General Assistance state reimbursement system. First, the bill amends the calculation used to trigger 90% state reimbursement for GA expenses from .0003% of state valuation to .00025% of state valuation. Under the existing system, 8 municipalities trigger the 90% reimbursement standard. Based on a review of 2005 GA data four additional municipalities would trigger the increased reimbursement system under the proposed bill, including the service center communities of Caribou, Dexter, Dover-Foxcroft, and Lewiston. The bill also requires the state to reimburse municipalities 60% of the total direct GA related expense, rather than 50% as required by current law.

Study Bill - This resolve directs the Commissioner of the Department of Health and Human Services to convene a General Assistance Committee to examine the impact that creating the standard of income eligibility for General Assistance at 110% of HUD Fair Market Rent values has had on homelessness and poverty in Maine. In a nutshell, this bill directs the Commissioner, General Assistance program administrators, advocates of low-income clients, a representative from Maine Municipal Association and a representative from Maine Equal Justice Partners to study the impact cuts made to the GA program in the early 1990s have had on Maine residents. The study committee must submit a report of its findings and recommendations to the Legislature by January 14, 2008.

Representative Payee & Disability Specialist Program - This bill directs the Commissioner of the Department of Health and Human Services to create and implement by July 1, 2008 a Representative Payee Program. The purpose of the program is to provide assistance to recipients of Social Security or Social Security Income benefits who cannot manage or direct the management of their funds.

The bill also directs the Commissioner of the Department of Health and Human Services to create and implement by July 1, 2008 the Disability Specialist Program. The purpose of the program is to provide assistance to homeless individuals so they can apply for Social Security Income or Social Security Disability Income benefits and to guide the applicant throughout with the process.

Legislative Update (continued)



Legislative Resources

As indicated above, many of the bills that may be of interest to municipal officials have not yet been printed. However, there are a few ways for you to stay up-to-date on legislative issues. On the Maine State Legislature's website you can find public hearing schedules, work session information and even download a copy of any bill. Just go to the link below and type in the LD (bill) number in the space provided in the upper right-hand corner of the webpage. <http://janus.state.me.us/legis/>



The Maine Municipal Association also has two avenues for keeping you up-to-date on the issues of municipal interest. One resource is the Legislative Bulletin, which is published every Friday during the legislative session. In this newspaper, you will find articles about the issues addressed by Legislature during the week, as well as information on the public hearings being held in the upcoming week. In addition, MMA also publishes the LD List 2007, which is a description of all the bills MMA will be tracking during the session. The Legislative Bulletin and LD List 2007 are available on MMA's website.

<http://www.memun.org/public/MMA/svc/SFR/legislative.htm>

If you are interested in getting weekly notices and links to the latest editions of the Legislative Bulletin and LD List e-mailed to you each Friday, please contact MMA's Laura Veilleux (lveilleux@memun.org) and ask to be added to the distribution list.

Upcoming Events

Date	Course	Trainers	Where
February 8, 2007 9:30—3:30	GA Basics	Sue Charron Vicky Edgerly Judy Hardy-Goddard Cindy Boyd, DHHS	Augusta City Hall
February 21, 2007 9:30—3:00	General Assistance Certification Training	Darryl McKenney Cindy Boyd Patty Littlefield	Farmington Town Office
February 22, 2007 9:30 to 3:00	General Assistance Certification Training	Stacey Parra Judy Hardy-Goddard Cindy Boyd Hazel Beers	Belfast City Hall
March 15, 2007 10:30 to 3:00	MWDA Training (housing issues)	Mary Bouvier Heather Rhoda Nicole Ingalls	Westbrook Housing



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2007 Spring Seminar

The dates have been set for the Maine Welfare Directors Annual Spring Seminar in what is shaping up to be a dynamic symposium. The conference will take place May 21-22, 2007, at the Spruce Point Inn, Boothbay Harbor, Maine. Please mark your calendars, plan your travel, adjust your budgets and register for this conference! The MWDA 2007 Spring Seminar will span a Monday through Tuesday time frame, with early arrivals welcome on Sunday.

We will send you updates when more details are available.

Unemployment News

Beginning January 1, 2007 laid-off workers have new options for receiving unemployment and accessing information about their unemployment claims.

Workers who are eligible to receive unemployment benefits can now choose to have payments sent directly to their bank account rather than issued in the form of a check. Individuals using direct deposit will receive faster payment as they will no longer need to wait for the mail to deliver checks.

"Direct deposit benefits both the worker and the Maine taxpayer," said Maine Labor Commissioner Laura Fortman. "The worker receives the payment in a quick and confidential electronic transaction, and the process costs less because it doesn't involve printing and mailing of paper checks and it cuts down on the number of lost and stolen payments."

For the first time this year, workers will also have the ability to access information online about their recent unemployment claim activity, tax withholding information, and account balances. The information was previously only available by calling an Unemployment Claims Center.

The online access to claims information is available to customers 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The service follows last year's launch of online filing for new and weekly unemployment claims. The site can be securely accessed by any computer connected to the internet at www.file4ui.com.

Individuals can also file their weekly claims using an automated telephone process 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The automated Teleclaim system is available in English, French and Spanish. Both the online and telephone weekly claim systems are particularly helpful at this time of year when claim lines may be busy during usual business hours during the week. Workers can file their claims for the prior week in the evening or as early as Sunday so that their benefits are available as quickly as possible. The Unemployment Claims Center can be reached by calling 1-800-593-7660 or TTY: 1-888-457-8884.

Maine's CareerCenters offer a number of free services for job seekers, including job referrals, career counseling, job hunting workshops, labor market information, information on training and skills assessment. Information can be found on-line at <http://www.mainecareercenter.com> or by calling 1-888-457-8883.

General Assistance and the Statewide Homeless Council

Cindy Boyd

During the last year, representatives from the Department of Health and Human Services, the Maine Welfare Directors Association, and Maine Municipal Association have been part of the Statewide Homeless Council. One of the focus areas of the council was to strengthen the General Assistance system in Maine so that it is a better resource to prevent homelessness of individuals and families.

The council presented the following strategies in their state plan:

Maine Municipal Association and DHHS adopt a General Assistance protocol for addressing complaints.

A memorandum of understanding (MOU) was drawn up that establishes a 3 member team that will look at the calls that come into the DHHS hotline. The team will identify the issues that appear most often and develop a response. The same response to the issue will be shared with both welfare directors and advocates for the homeless.

The MOU is for DHHS, MMA (representing the municipalities), and the Statewide Homeless Council. Once all parties sign the MOU, the three members will be selected and they will start meeting. The 3 member team will meet at least once quarterly.

Amend the GA statute to require each municipality to post two new posters outside municipal offices.

The council agreed not to present a bill to the Legislature asking to change 22MRSAS4304. DHHS agreed to have the two notices which were developed by the council printed and to ask municipalities to voluntarily display them.

The notices are being printed and will be mailed to each municipality. The notices state that a person can call the DHHS hotline if they have been denied the right to apply for GA. Because of the wording on the notice, DHHS will have an answering machine that will record GA messages after 5:00 PM. The person on the hotline will return calls left on the answering machine on the next business day.

Require the General Assistance office within DHHS to develop a proposal for creating a GA data base that would provide municipalities with the tools for uniform collection of data across the state.

DHHS recently mail each municipality asking if the GA program has access to a computer and which program is used. The response has been very good. More than half have responded.

DHHS will be convening a group to look at what data needs to be collected and what is the best way to gather that data.

Add two additional staff to the state GA office.

Originally we were told this would be in the Governor's budget. The estimated cost was \$125,000 for salaries and benefits. We have been told that the two positions have been removed from the budget.

There were other strategies discussed at the Statewide Homeless Council that have lead to proposed legislation this year. If you want information on these LDs contact the MWDA Legislative Committee.

Character cannot be developed in ease and quiet. Only through experience of trial and suffering can the soul be strengthened, ambition inspired, and success achieved.

Helen Keller

Kudos

MWDA's Legislative Committee, MMA's Kate Dufour and DHHS' Cindy Boyd met several times to prepare for the upcoming legislative session. We ranted and raved passionately about the various proposals and asked Kate (our legislative expert) to go back to the drawing table over and over again. She nodded politely and agreed, all the while wanting to shake us into oblivion. Cindy listened intently, gave us insight as she weighed the pros and cons, all the while wondering about the fiscal note. We were finally able to calmly debate the issues and reach consensus once we restrained some members of the legislative committee (you know who you are) with duct tape.

MWDA's Legislative Committee is convinced that the legislature will recognize that our proposals will not only have a huge impact in assisting our neediest populations with attaining self sufficiency, but will also save money over the long term for the municipalities and the state.

We would like to thank Cindy and Kate for their numerous hours of collaboration. Kate, thank you for the never ending drafts and for cracking the whip to ensure that we met the deadline and obtained sponsors. We look forward to our continued partnership and collaborating with others interested in supporting our proposals.

Food Stamp Increase

A report showing food stamp usage has increased 49 percent in the state from 2002 to 2005 and has jumped more than 60 percent in two of the state's more affluent coastal counties – Knox and Hancock – created gloom last week about the state's seemingly intractable poverty problem. As it turns out, the state is just doing a much better job at reaching people who already were eligible for the program, but not taking advantage of it. Such a good job, in fact, that Maine this year received a \$440,000 bonus from the federal government for signing more people up and is in the top three nationally in terms of getting benefits to eligible people. That high performance bonus award will be used to keep improving outreach for the program, which is funded 100 percent with federal dollars.

"It's not that more are eligible, but more of the potential (recipients) are being reached," said Barbara VanBurgel, director of the Office of Integration and Support for the Department of Health and Human Services, which oversees food stamp eligibility.



Participation in the program has grown, however, to 15.7 percent of households statewide and 9.7 percent in places like Hancock County. Still, Hancock County has the lowest percentage of households using food stamps in the entire state. The food stamp usage by county, with the poorest counties listed first, is: 24.5 percent for Washington; 21.4 percent for Aroostook; 23.9 percent for Somerset; 18.3 percent for Piscataquis; 17.5 percent for Franklin; 18 percent for Penobscot; 18.4 percent for Waldo; 20.1 percent for Oxford; 20.8 percent for Androscoggin; 17.3 percent for Kennebec; 13 percent for Knox; 9.7 percent for Hancock; 10.5 percent for Lincoln; 12 percent for Cumberland; 10.2 percent for Sagadahoc; and 10.9 percent for York. The program in 2005 distributed more than \$164 million in benefits in Maine as compared to \$103 million in 2002. Looking back, the program distributed around \$50 million in benefits in 1979, \$51 million in 1989 and jumped to \$87 million in 1999.

Hazel Beers Retiring

Cindy Boyd

On February 28, 2007, Hazel Beers will be retiring from her job with the State of Maine. Hazel has worked for the Department of Health and Human Services for 20 years as a Field Examiner II for the General Assistance Program. Prior to working for the State Hazel served as the Town Manager in three different municipalities: Smyrna, Merrill, and Dyer Brook.

Hazel plans to take some time to relax and travel. She spent some time in Ireland this past spring and wants to return. She also wants to visit Scotland. Hazel has children and grandchildren in other parts of the USA and she loves to visit them.

Hazel recently told me she has been watching some of the home make-over shows and has ideas for different things she wants to do to her home. I don't image that Hazel will just lay around and relax. She loves to be busy and to be with people. She even mentioned that she will probably look for part time work after a while.

I have been Hazel's supervisor since 1998. I will miss her and I know that a lot of you will also. Because Hazel had administered General Assistance when she was a Town Manager she had a real understanding of the job. She was able to explain the program in every day language and help people through the process.

I know that you all join me in wishing Hazel a HAPPY RETIREMENT and HAPPY TRAVELING



The smallest act
of kindness is
worth more
than the
grandest
intentions.

Oscar Wilde

MWDA Instructor Policy

Any active member interested in being considered by the Certification Committee to serve as an instructor of a MWDA sponsored workshop must meet the following criteria and procedures:

- Be a member of MWDA
- Be certified under the MWDA G.A. Regulation Program
- Serve as a student instructor under an experienced instructor for a minimum of 2 workshops for course he/she would like to instruct.
- Receive a recommendation from the experienced instructor whom he/she has taught with stating that the student instructor is ready to instruct a workshop on his/her own. (This will include a review of evaluation forms.)
- Receive final approval from the MWDA Executive Committee to instruct a workshop on their own.



MWDA is currently seeking members interested in becoming instructors.



MWDA NEWSLETTER



2007 Spring Seminar will be held at the
Spruce Point Inn in Boothbay Harbor

May 21 and 22

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60 Community Drive
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