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## **After Lawsuit, San Bernardino County Removes Barriers to Cash Aid for Residents in Extreme Poverty**

*The county has agreed to implement several policy changes to make General Relief easier to access in the settlement of a 2019 lawsuit.*

SAN BERNARDINO – A settlement has been reached in a lawsuit filed against San Bernardino County, resulting in several changes to the county's General Relief program that will help more people in extreme poverty access vital financial assistance. General Relief is the program administered by California counties that provides cash assistance to adults who do not have any other income or resources to meet their basic needs.

The suit was filed on behalf of two county residents in December 2019 by Inland Counties Legal Services, Western Center on Law & Poverty, and Public Interest Law Project. At the time, San Bernardino County had an extremely low number of General Relief recipients. Data from July 2018 through April 2019 shows the County denied 2057 out of 2245 applicants -- nearly 92% of applicants.

The evidence indicated that the numbers were the result of the County's unlawful restrictions on GR eligibility and onerous application process. The County also paid a much lower monthly grant than required by statute—a single individual could only receive a maximum of \$280 per month. Among other restrictions, the County terminated benefits to homeless recipients who could not find housing within the first 30 days of getting benefits.

With the changes made by the County, Inland Counties Legal Services attorney Anthony Kim expects more residents will secure General Relief benefits and have an easier time maintaining them going forward.

"The people who need general assistance are often homeless and disenfranchised to the point where receiving any help is difficult, so these changes to the program are huge. The less hoops residents need to jump through, the easier it will be for them to get the assistance they need and are legally entitled to," Kim said.

One of the biggest changes from the suit is the dollar increase in assistance, including annual increases over the next five years. The County has already increased the grant amount to \$332 per month for an individual, and it will be \$504 beginning in 2026.

The County's Transitional Assistance Department, which administers the program, implemented several other significant changes in response to the lawsuit. They eliminated the requirement for applicants to attend an in-person orientation before applying for General Relief, and they began accepting applications online and via mail or drop box. They also eliminated the former policy of terminating General Relief to homeless recipients who did not secure housing within their first 30 days of receiving assistance.

"The dollar increase is significant for people who rely on this program, as is the increased ease of access," said Richard Rothschild, Director of Litigation at Western Center on Law & Poverty. "\$500 can make a big difference for someone experiencing homelessness. It's a stepping stone for finding housing, getting a job, and becoming an integrated member of the community.

Other changes to the program include: paying full General Relief benefits amount to all eligible recipients regardless of housing status; paying General Relief benefits back to the date the person first applied; reducing the recertification requirements for people who receive General Relief; increasing the resource limits for cars and other vehicles, especially for people who use their vehicles for shelter; providing a pre-termination notice and an opportunity to appeal before ending someone's benefits; and decreasing job search requirements for "employable" recipients from 20 contacts a week to 10.

"This is an incredible victory for people in San Bernardino County," said Melissa A. Morris, Staff Attorney at Public Interest Law Project. "These systemic changes to the County's General Relief program will potentially benefit thousands of low-income people throughout San Bernardino County, and we appreciate the County's willingness to work with us to make these improvements."

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Printed: January 25, 2022

<http://www.inlandlegal.org/node/128/after-lawsuit-san-bernardino-county-removes-barriers-cash-aid-residents-extreme-poverty>

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