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Human Services Department Announces Program Saving Changes for General Assistance Clients

Public Input Instrumental in Making Rule Changes That Keep Program Available

Santa Fe, New Mexico - The New Mexico Human Services Department is announcing changes to the General Assistance Program that will keep the state-only funded program available for thousands of New Mexicans who rely on the cash assistance program each month.

“This program is always a last resort program for thousands of New Mexicans, and now during difficult economic times it has become even more necessary for so many,” said Pamela Hyde, Human Services Department Secretary. “Because of increased need for services at the same time as a budget shortfall, we relied on the public to guide us with rule changes that allow the Department to manage within the program budget and still serve our clients the best way we can.”

The General Assistance Program serves an average of 2,100 disabled individuals each month who cannot work and who are not otherwise eligible for the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program because they do not have a child or children in their home, are not eligible or are awaiting approval for the federal Supplemental Security Income, and may not be eligible for Medicaid.

The average monthly benefit for this program is currently \$266, which is used primarily for pharmacy costs, shelter and other basic needs. The rule changes that take effect July 1, 2009 will lower the average monthly benefit to \$170.

Last month during the public comment period and at the public hearing on the proposed rule changes to the General Assistance program, the Department received many comments expressing the urgency to not terminate or suspend benefits and that an across-the-board cut is preferable and would provide increased fairness, stability and predictability for the population served by the program.

During the 2009 Legislative Session, the Department requested \$8.4 million to appropriately serve the General Assistance clients for the next budget year, and also requested a \$600,000 supplemental to help cover the increase in participation for the current budget. However, the Department was appropriated \$7.8 million for Fiscal Year 2010 and did not receive the supplemental to cover this year’s increase.

In an effort to address budget issues, the 2009 Legislature granted unprecedented authority to state agencies for the current budget year that ends June 30, 2009. This authority allowed the Department to prioritize its budget needs and gather sufficient funding that keeps the June 2009 General Assistance benefit at its current rate.

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