



Hawaii Cuts Payments to the Temporarily Disabled

Bad economy results in smaller monthly payments for Hawaii's poor, temporarily disabled people

By MARK NIESSE *Associated Press Writer*

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Right when more people need welfare, they're getting less from Hawaii's government.

Monthly payments to poor, temporarily disabled people fell by one-third this week, from \$450 to \$300, because more people are drawing benefits from the same pool of money.

State lawmakers met at the Hawaii Capitol on Wednesday to try and find more money for the program, and they questioned how government could shortchange these 5,055 people when they may have no other income.

"That money won't cover the rent anymore, so many of them will go homeless," said Sen. Suzanne Chun Oakland, D-Kalihi-Liliha.

This money, called general assistance, goes to people without dependent children who are unable to work because of a temporary disability. To qualify, they must have little or no income and can't get other federal assistance.

"What will happen in our aloha state to those who are most needy?" asked Alex Santiago, executive director of a group of nonprofits called PHOCUSED, which stands for Protecting Hawaii's Ohana, Children, Underserved, Elderly and Disabled. "This is their last hope. There has to be an alternative."

Legislators suggested using money saved in the state's Rainy Day Fund to restore the payments to their previous levels. The latest figures show there's about \$60 million in the fund, which is paid into by tobacco lawsuit settlement money.

But Department of Human Services Director Lillian Koller said the law doesn't allow any additional money to augment the payments.

"This is so micromanaged by the Legislature. We don't have any breathing room," Koller said. "I can't put money into the program from savings elsewhere."

Lawmakers budgeted about \$21 million for general assistance, but that money wouldn't last for the remainder of the fiscal year unless the payments were decreased, Koller said. The numbers of people in the program have risen from 3,955 in 2007 to 4,458 last year and just over 5,000 currently.

"This is the bare necessity for some people to exist. Rather than cut it, the state needs to look at keeping them at the level they used to be at," said Debbie Shimizu, executive director for the National Association of Social Workers Hawaii.

Many people receiving these temporary assistance payments are awaiting appeals for federal disability payments, which can take 18 months.

The three Democratic lawmakers at the hearing also raised questions about whether the state spent too much money on a new contract that evaluates recipients' eligibility for government aid.

Koller said the new contract covers more people and does more to help them get federal assistance.

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