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SUBJECT: Guidance regarding phones and General Assistance
TO: Municipalities providing General Assistance
DATE: May 1, 2019

Dear Municipal Officer:

This memorandum is intended to provide guidance regarding the policy for phones when determining eligibility for General Assistance.

Questions have arisen around client phones and whether this cost can be allowed as a basic necessity when determining eligibility for able-bodied General Assistance applicants. Some GA applicants have encountered difficulty being accessible for employment within positions that would require “last minute” notice of work available, such as flagging or staffing agencies who provide temporary work, often with last minute notice, or employers who need to contact an employee for additional shifts to be covered.

GA Administrators must balance the need to provide aid to eligible applicants, while also ensuring that the applicant is doing their due diligence to prevent their need for future assistance. It would be counterproductive to require an applicant be accessible and available for work at all times, and yet not allow a method for the client to be contacted for potential work. General Assistance law defines basic necessities to include of the cost of a “telephone where it is necessary for medical reasons and any other commodity or service determined essential by the overseer” (M.R.S. 22, Ch.1161, §4301, Section 1).

Administrators should advise applicants of potential resources when applicable. Applicants can apply for “free phones” available through the Lifeline program (which many clients may refer to as the “Obama phone”). Eligibility for the Lifeline program is determined by income and is limited to one phone per household address. Due to the financial limitations of the GA client population, many GA applicants live in housing units that experience a high turn-over rate. This may cause difficulty in securing Lifeline program approval due to issues with the Lifeline eligibility verification system.

To eliminate roadblocks on the pathway to employment for able-bodied applicants, the overseer may determine one phone line with basic services per household to be essential when:

1. The client has been unable to acquire a Lifeline phone; and
2. The client is working, or searching for work

For the purposes of calculating eligibility within a client’s budget, the municipality will not make payment for a phone bill on behalf of a client, however if the client has income from working, or

has income-in kind to pay phone costs, the municipality will not count that income as misspent when "special equipment costs" are considered reasonable and the service is considered necessary for an able-bodied applicant to gain or maintain employment (M.R.S. 22, Ch.1161, §4301, Section 7b).

If you have questions concerning the use and budgeting of basic necessities, please do not hesitate to contact the General Assistance Hotline at 1-800-442-6003.

Thank you,

 5/1/19

Sara Russell, General Assistance Program Manager
Maine Department of Health and Human Services