

# General Assistance (GA) 2023 Listening Sessions

September 20, 2023



# Agenda

- 1. History & Context**
- 2. Costs**
- 3. Listening Sessions & Feedback**
- 4. Policy Suggestions from Participants**
- 5. Discussion & Next Steps**

# History & Context

## Established over 40 years ago to:

- Provide “for the immediate aid of persons who are unable to provide the basic necessities essential to maintain themselves or their families.”
- Designed to be time-limited and a fall-back: “Provides a specific amount and type of aid for defined needs during a limited period of time and is not intended to be a continuing ‘grant-in-aid’ or ‘categorical’ welfare program.”

*22 MRS Ch. 1161, §4301*

## Context:

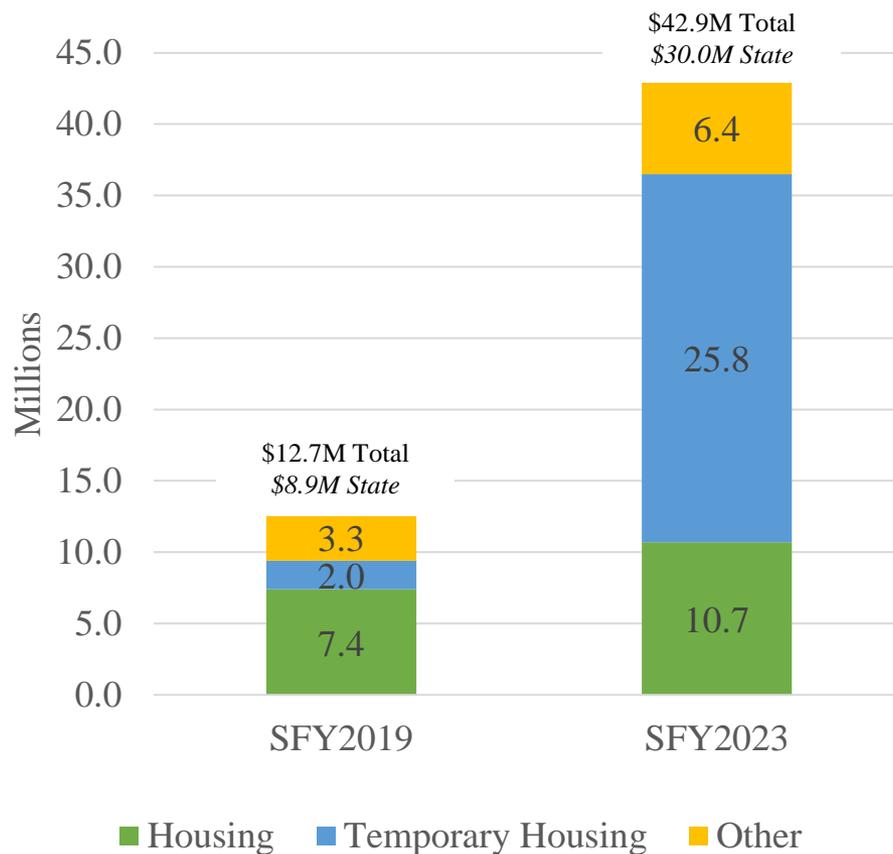
- Maine is one of 25 states that operate a GA-like program, which is down from 38 in 1989.
- States vary significantly in how they structure this support. There is no federal support for GA.
- Most other states fund GA with either state *or* local dollars. Maine's cost-sharing funding structure (70-30) is unique.

# History & Context

## Pre-pandemic Expansions

- Fully implemented [PL 2015, Ch. 324](#) regarding certain non-citizens' eligibility.
- Implemented [PL 2019, Ch. 515](#) that broadened the GA definition of “emergency” to include homelessness; no additional General Funds (GF) was provided.

General Assistance Spending Comparison



# History & Context

## **SFY Supplemental Budget (April '22):**

- \$10 million in one-time GF for municipalities to support GA.
- \$750,000 in one-time GF for case management services.
- \$22 million in one-time GF emergency housing, including legal support

## **Emergency SFY Supplemental Budget (Feb '23):**

- \$21 million in one-time GF for emergency housing
- \$5 million in one-time GF for state GA

## **Biennial Budget (July '23):**

- \$7.5 million in one-time GF for state for GA.
- Administration's budget proposed cap on hotel per diems and requiring connection to case management, rejected by Legislature
- Proposed \$3 million was increased to \$8.5 million in one-time GF for municipalities.
- \$70 million in one-time rental assistance from the cascade.

# Listening Sessions

## 13 Sessions through May, June, and July 2023

### Municipalities:

- Bangor
- Lewiston
- Calais
- Portland
- South Portland
- Brunswick
- Scarborough
- Augusta
- Waterville
- Presque Isle
- Sanford
- Standish
- Biddeford
- Caribou
- Westbrook

### Advocates and Providers:

- Maine Equal Justice
- Preble Street
- Maine Municipal Association
- Maine State Housing
- Maine Welfare Director's Association
- Statewide Homelessness Council
- Maine Immigrants' Rights Coalition
- Catholic Charities
- The Opportunity Alliance
- Maine Immigrant and Refugee Services
- United Somali Women of Maine
- Prosperity Maine
- Pine Tree Legal

### Constituents Residing in:

- Cumberland County
- Somerset County
- Penobscot County
- Androscoggin County
- Washington County
- York County
- Oxford County
- Lincoln County
- Kennebec County
- Passamaquoddy Tribe – Sipayik/Pleasant Point

# Listening Sessions

## Format of Listening Sessions & Questions

- DHHS provided a brief background on the program and outlined the purpose of listening sessions
- Focused on participant feedback on a number areas:
  - What parts of the program is working?
  - What parts of the program need improvement?
  - How should we approach improvements?
  - Asked for feedback about specific aspects/benefits

# Topline Feedback

*The listening sessions revealed a number of common themes and suggestions among and across participants groups. Universally, participants agreed that a program is required to meet short-term, emergency needs of Maine residents.*

## Administration

- Minimal support and consistency from DHHS
- Costly for municipalities to administer
- Few centralized resources for administrators
- Lack of support beyond vouchers (e.g. housing navigation, case management)

## Consumer Experience

- Cumbersome applications
- Potentially too frequent submission: every 30 days
- No training for administrators on cultural competency and trauma-informed service
- Varying experience by municipality

## Benefits

- Maximums have not kept pace with cost of living; are confusing
- Housing needs exceed program's abilities
- Landlords sometimes won't accept GA

# Policy Suggestions – Administration

- Establish an online database to ensure the program is being administered uniformly, efficiently, with program integrity and equitably
- Increase collaboration between the state, municipalities, and Community Based Organizations (CBOs) to streamline the process for everyone
- Make eligibility guidance more clear
- Consider a regional approach to benefit delivery
- Increase reimbursement from the state
- Establish a short-application to be submitted every 30 days while still requiring the full application to be submitted periodically.

*Note: policy suggestions are collected from listening session participants. These are not recommendations of Maine DHHS.*

# Policy Suggestions – Consumer Experience

- Provide programmatic training
- Provide training on cultural competency and providing trauma-informed services for those who assist individuals with the GA program
- Provide increased and separate support for the asylum seeker population
- Reassess and simplify the GA application, including making it available online
- Increase access to translator services

*Note: policy suggestions are collected from listening session participants. These are not recommendations of Maine DHHS.*

# Policy Suggestions – Benefits

- Establish a housing voucher program to reduce the financial, expertise, and staffing strain on the GA program while leveraging federal dollars
- Increase housing navigation and liaison services
- Reevaluate and potentially overhaul the current maximums that have not kept pace with the cost of basic needs
- Adopt statutory language to prevent landlords discriminating against voucher holders

*Note: policy suggestions are collected from listening session participants. These are not recommendations of Maine DHHS.*

# Discussion & Next Steps

