

April 7, 2009

RE: April 6, 2009 *Seattle Times* Editorial

Dear Representative:

Earlier this week the *Seattle Times* argued the needs of General Assistance Unemployable (GAU) clients are “less-urgent” and therefore GAU should be eliminated. The organizations signed onto this letter firmly disagree. In fact, GAU clients have the most urgent needs. Needs, that if not met, will cost Washington State, our counties, and cities millions of dollars far into the future.

The *Seattle Times* inaccurately claims “not all states have such a program [like GAU].” In fact, most states do have a program that assists people who are unable to work because of a disability. According to a recent study by the Washington State Budget and Policy Center, **31 states have a statewide program similar to Washington’s GAU program.** Another 9 states have GAU programs that are available in some counties but not others. Only 11 states do not have a GAU program. When it comes to providing the most basic safety net to vulnerable, disabled people, **80% of states have chosen to administer a GAU program like Washington’s.**

In Washington, GAU helps people with basic medical coverage through GAU Medical and with a modest \$339 cash grant. These modest supports are often the only tools GAU clients have available to them while they are temporarily disabled or while they are waiting to transition onto federal Social Security or veterans benefits.

21,000 people each month, depend on GAU’s \$339 for – housing, food, and other basic needs – an amount that has not increased since 1991 and which doesn’t account for the increased cost of living over the last 18 years. Having resources available to deal with urgent health issues is important to most GAU clients. 16,000 people were enrolled in GAU medical as of September 2008. Another 4,700 people received medical services through Washington’s ADATSA program. GAU medical support is urgently important to clients as they stabilize their disabilities and transition back to employment.

Service providers who assist GAU clients testified earlier this session on the importance of the GAU program. People with anxiety disorders went from being homeless because of their condition, to being able to find a home, secure employment, and leave GAU. You can watch real GAU clients tell their stories at www.savegau.com. For these clients, and thousands of other Washingtonians, GAU was the only resource available.

Eliminating or drastically reducing GAU would have a negative impact on clients and the communities in which they live. Hospitals and clinics would bear the brunt of providing service to GAU clients with little or no compensation. Eliminating GAU would mean more homeless people on our street. Eliminating GAU would compound the urgency of the problems faced by GAU clients and strain communities.

The needs of GAU clients are not “less urgent.” If anything, they are extremely urgent. The \$339 clients receive each month is the only resource they have to pay for basic needs. Similarly, the health coverage provided by GAU medical is for many clients a matter of life and death.

We hope you agree.

Sincerely,

- Arc of Washington
- Archdiocesan Housing Authority
- Building Changes
- Catholic Community Services
- Church Council of Greater Seattle
- City of Seattle
- Columbia Legal Services – on behalf of clients
- Committee to End Homelessness
- Community Health Network of Washington
- Community Health Plan
- Disability Rights Washington
- Downtown Emergency Services Center
- Homeless Disability Benefits Advocacy Program
- Interfaith Taskforce on Homelessness
- Jewish Family Service
- Jewish Federation of Greater Seattle
- Jubilee Women’s Center
- King County Democrats
- King County Nurses Association
- Lutheran Public Policy
- Mental Health Action
- Mental Health Ombuds Service of King County
- Mindful Inc.
- Nami Clallam County
- Nami Eastside
- Nami Kitsap County
- Nami Yakima
- National Association of Social Workers
- National Organization of Women
- North Columbia Community Action Council
- Northwest Health Law Advocates
- Okanogon Community Action
- Pierce County Human Services Coalition
- Pioneer Human Services
- Plymouth Housing Group
- Religious Coalition for the Common Good
- SEIU Healthcare 1199NW
- Alexander Joe Shogan Jr., President Spokane City Council
- Solid Ground
- Spokane Valley Partners
- State Wide Poverty Action Network
- United Way of Snohomish County
- Washington Association of Churches
- Washington Association of Community and Migrant Health Centers
- Washington Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers
- Washington Defenders Association
- Washington Low Income Housing Alliance
- Washington State Catholic Conference
- Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence
- Washington State Coalition for the Homeless
- Washington State Coalition of Mental Health Professionals and Consumers
- Washington State Psychiatric Association
- Washington State Psychological Association
- Washington State Society for Clinical Social Work
- Washington State Special Education Coalition