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Chief Executive Office
Service Integration Branch



A Qualitative Process Evaluation of Los Angeles County's General Relief Program

Research and Evaluation Services

Linda Shaw,
Professor and Chair,
Department of Sociology.
California State University,
San Marcos

Project Director:
Manuel H. Moreno,
Los Angeles County
Chief Executive Office

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Project Officer: Michael Bono

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Preface

This study is one of three reports the CEO's Research and Evaluation Services unit is submitting to the Board of Supervisors in connection with DPSS' efforts to restructure Los Angeles County's General Relief program. The qualitative information presented here, which is the result of focus group interviews conducted with GR staff, administrators and recipients, sheds light on the program's rules, regulations, and processes, and reveals areas where DPSS can work to make GR more effective in promoting self-sufficiency and efficient in its delivery of services. As of this writing, close to 110,000 adults in the County are on GR, a number that is up roughly 75 percent since 2007, and one that has stark fiscal consequences. The policy recommendations offered at the conclusion to this report therefore focus particular attention on steps DPSS can take, working with the CEO, to link the promotion of self-sufficiency to a reduction of dependency on GR in the County. The other two reports RES is submitting to the Board are a quantitative study that evaluates the GR process through statistical analyses of administrative records for the program, and a supplemental paper that compares the rules and regulations governing GR in LA County with those governing GR-type programs in five other California counties. The three reports together offer a well rounded picture of the County's GR program as it stands today, as well as an evidence-based set of suggestions for programmatic changes and improvements that can be implemented as part of the difficult yet necessary work that will be involved in making GR more effective, efficient and fiscally viable.

Manuel H. Moreno, Ph.D.
Director of Research,
CEO/SIB/RES

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Introduction

As part of LA County's effort to make service provision in the General Relief (GR) program more efficient and effective in promoting self-sufficiency for the program's participants, researchers contracted through the Chief Executive Office's (CEO) Research and Evaluation Services (RES) unit conducted focus groups centered on the experiences of administrators, line staff, and recipients in the GR program. The objective of this qualitative research is to identify the program's best practices that enable participant movement toward self-sufficiency. It also identifies areas in need of enhancement due to programmatic barriers, inefficiencies, ineffective communication and coordination, and other obstacles to effective service delivery. In addition to these process-oriented findings, the report offers a series of policy recommendations based on the evaluation.

In order to understand the practices and processes associated with the GR program, focus group discussions were conducted with General Relief Opportunities for Work (GROW) Program Managers and SSI Managers as well as with GROW Line Staff, SSI Supplemental Security Income and Medi-Cal Advocacy Program (SSI MAP) Advocates, and Housing Subsidy Case Managers. These discussions focused on administrator and staff perspectives concerning the rules and procedures that create bottlenecks and inefficiencies as well as practices that are especially effective in contributing to the flow of participants through these programs. Supervisors and line staff were also asked about topics that included whether or not involving staff in assisting clients to obtain housing assistance would make this process more efficient and about the effect of sanctions on GR participation and participants' efforts to reach self-sufficiency.

To further focus on these issues from the points of view of GR participants, researchers additionally conducted focus group interviews with participants involved in the GROW program and those with SSI applications pending. These interviews emphasized participants' experiences related to enrolling in the GR program, receiving services in a timely manner, communicating with staff, and their experiences with GR programs outside of Los Angeles (LA) County. Participant focus group interviews also emphasized problems that recipients have encountered in fulfilling the requirements of the program as well as the helpfulness of staff in assisting them to progress toward self-sufficiency by finding work, applying for housing, and helping them acquire alternative sources of support and services.

Supervisors and Line Staff Identify Best Practices and Barriers to Effective Program Delivery

GR program supervisors and line staff stand at the interface between County policies and rules for implementing the GR program and the needs of the poor who seek the program's assistance. The job of supervisors is to understand, interpret, and see that the County's complex policies and regulations are correctly implemented by front line staff. Charged with overseeing the various services within the GR program, supervisors have unique insight into the impact of County policies on the ability of line workers to

assist recipients. Line staff must also understand GR program rules and explain and enforce the work and reporting obligations required for GR assistance to recipients who often have multiple barriers to participation; and they must screen recipients, referring and assisting those who are eligible to housing services and others who are unable to work because of physical and mental disabilities to alternative sources of aid such as SSI.

Findings in the following sections of this report are based on data collected from four focus groups with supervisors and line staff from the following programs: GROW line staff, GROW Program Managers, SSI Advocates, and SSI Advocate Program Managers (see Appendix A for a description of focus group participants and methods). Drawing on their experiences and perceptions, this process evaluation focuses on “best practices” as well as aspects of the program where there are bottlenecks and barriers to efficiently and effectively serving some of the County’s neediest citizens—those who are in the GR program.

Large Caseloads: The Major Barrier to Assisting Recipients to Progress Toward Self-Sufficiency

Both supervisors and line staff from all programs talked about the size of their caseloads, which have increased significantly over the past two years, as a major impediment to moving recipients through the GR program toward self-sufficiency. GROW line staff, for example, talked about having caseloads of four, five, and six hundred recipients. And while SSI Advocates’ and Housing Subsidy Case Managers’ numbers were much lower—typically under 100—they report being under pressure “to bring their numbers up.” But in the meantime, the intensity of their work, brought about by recipients’ special needs and barriers, more than made up for the fact that they had fewer cases.

Why Caseloads Have Increased

Supervisors and line staff pointed to multiple reasons why their caseloads had increased. A number of those interviewed believed that the County’s relatively generous benefits, and the fact that GR in neighboring counties is unavailable, less generous, or more difficult to qualify for draw recipients from other counties and states to LA County. Others cited abuses such as violations of residency rules, for example, recipients collecting LA County benefits while living in other states (detected by tracing the location where purchases are made with Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) cards). This SSI Manager talked about the short waiting period—the 15-day rule—for receipt of aid that she believes encourages what she called “county hopping,” the practice of some recipients going back to their home county once they have begun receiving aid:

So many of them, they come in; they say that they’ve been in the county for 15, 20 days, and they – you know, it’s what we call county hopping. They’ll stay, and they get their grant, and then they go back to the

neighboring county, and they're back and forth. They don't comply with our program by following through with the GROW requirements.

Other caseworkers and managers pointed to referrals by other agencies such as probation and parole that mandate participation in GR. And one worker talked about what she referred to as "dark side of it," entrepreneurial landlords seeking to make a profit from the Housing Subsidy Program who recruit GR recipients from poor areas of the city but then often provide substandard and overcrowded housing:

Sometimes the landlords have a bet, and they go to Skid Row to pick up A, B, C, but it's almost like their pimping these people...

That's the dark side of it.

Yet, these reasons for their bulging caseloads notwithstanding, all acknowledged the downturn in the economy as the overriding factor that leads to increased numbers of the poor who are turning to the GR program. This Housing Subsidy Case Manager thought that the poor economy was the driving factor in attracting those who were having difficulty making it to seek a better life to LA County:

But, uh, I would think that the reason why the caseloads is growing is...I would assume that with the economic times that we're having, that people would move here because people would figure that it would be more opportunity for employment once things started to pick up because there's got to be service needs for the number of people who reside here. Also, we're in a land of dreamers, and we're in a country of dreamers. So, that would facilitate people gravitating to, to here. Um, the need for the general, the GR with that, I've seen so many people that thought that they wouldn't need GR tomorrow.

In addition to possible attraction of LA County as the land of opportunity, focus group members identified at least two ways in which the poor economy leads to higher caseloads. First, cutbacks in State and County funding for other services, as well as long-term unemployment, have led to increasing numbers of those without other resources to turn to the GR program as the last resort. This Housing Subsidy Caseworker described how such cutbacks in other services contributed both to increased caseloads, but also more long-term unemployed recipients on the caseloads who are less able to recover.

So it is, it has to be a symptom of something else to have all these new people into the system in areas that weren't large offices in before... And, and with the State economy impacting all of us, including the County, that makes it harder to reduce caseloads because that's affecting other things as far as CalWORKs...it affects the state part of the disability...and unemployment, and all those numbers also increase our numbers if people are not able to get those. And it also, sometimes when these people have dropped to that point, it's much harder for them to reengage

where their life was because they find new problems because of how far they've dropped.

Second, the poor economy also means that more of those on the program become long-term recipients because they cannot get jobs. This caseworker talked about the difficulty he has in assisting recipients to find jobs since those who used to come to job fairs and other events that helped place recipients no longer show up. As one of the GROW Program managers described the problem:

So we don't have these mom and pop, these small businesses come up to our job fair like they used to do before. Most of those at job fair are actually service providers. They're not employers. They may come out, pass out information about some kind of program they have...but they don't say, "I have an opening" like, six, seven years ago.

Six, seven years ago you go there, you receive a lot of company...out there. Now you go there, you might see the Air Force, the Marines, the Navy. Most of them are government services. That is what our challenge is. I mean, you are right to answer the question by economy. It does, I mean, impact the people that we are serving.

Finally, these managers believe that the lack of enforcement of eligibility rules for receipt of aid contributed to high caseloads. But they also pointed to the irony that the sheer weight of the numbers of the GR program's large caseloads make enforcement of eligibility rules an overwhelming, if not possible, task:

That, why does, I know LA County is much larger than those counties, but why would there only be 800 or 400 GR cases in those four surrounding counties and 96,000, 98,000 [in LA County]? And just like she says, because our rules are very relaxed. Or and it may not be as relaxed, but the caseloads for the eligibility staff are very high and, therefore, it's not as easy to maintain those cases or to keep the controls on the cases because of the high caseload.

Similarly, this caseworker believes that lack of follow up due both to workers being overwhelmed by their number of cases as well as lack of services results in employable recipients remaining on the GR rolls because of medical exemptions:

But many of our participants, we believe that because it's (medical problems) self-declaration, their employability status... They come into the office and we say, "Are you able to work?" You know, the question is asked, and they say, "No. I'm unable to work."

They go to the contracted medical provider, and they are given a cursory employability screening, which basically means when you walk in there, you tell the medical provider what is wrong with you, "I have high blood pressure." Well, your blood pressure is high that day so you're given a

medical disability one month to three months or more. "I have diabetes." Your blood sugar level is up and you're given a disability one, three months, or more. But there's no follow-up.

The individuals, so every time the disability expires, instead of the participant being mandated to seek medical attention to assist them with that disability, they just go back to the contracted medical provider and one month, three months or six months... And so, I believe that this is one of the greatest reasons why our caseload is so high. Because the individuals who are disabled, they do not have any requirements to...go to GROW. They do not have to do job search. They don't, they have no employable requirements. And the employable requirements, anyone who's employable will be time limited. That's the rule. But a person who is unemployable is not time-limited. They receive GR on and on and on.

And I believe that that's really, that's one of the main problems why the caseload remains so high is because we have no way of really determining if these individuals are really unable to work...

The Consequences of Increasing Caseloads on Caseworkers and the Quality of Service Delivery

Whatever the sources, large caseloads have negative consequences for both workers and recipients. GROW Program Managers felt strongly that the growing caseloads are responsible for stress on workers, inefficiencies in caseload management, and diminished quality of service delivery for meeting recipients' needs. This worker described the overall effect of high caseloads on the quality of services that workers can deliver:

So the cases, each worker may have about 600 approved cases. So the quality control is almost non-existent unless the participant comes in the office and says this is what I'm here for. Then it's gonna be hands on because we're there to service a participant. But for the most part, it's almost unrealistic to have a good quality control for 600 cases.

This GROW caseworker attributes the inability to deliver quality services to the lack of time to spend with recipients on their caseloads:

The only problem I would like to mention, since all caseloads have increased three times, unfortunately, GROW case managers, they don't have enough time to spend with participants. You know, last two years, it's almost impossible. They want to spend more time with participants, but if you have to see 20 participants a day, just physically, you are not going to be able to do it, you know?

This problem has intensified with the increase in recipients with special needs:

So, there's a lot of, a lotta, lotta, lotta stuff. Because when people are chronically in need, and even though they're on the list, they kind of get bypassed... And a lot of people who get bypassed are in urgent need...and if you have more in numbers, you're one worker, and your numbers are, you have a higher percentage of these special need people, um, it puts a strain on everything.

This worker talks about how the flow of applicants into the GR program hinders Eligibility Workers from making referrals to the programs designed to assist them:

...we have such important supportive services programs, meaning like if that person is disabled possibly that person can get SSI. But to be able to have access to that service, there has to be communication. Some, that eligibility worker or somebody that is aware of that situation with that participant has to do a referral to the other person who will continue that service... Or, let's say this participant might be having alcohol problems. Okay. If the eligibility worker doesn't communicate that to let's say Department of Public Health who provides the substance abuse services.

If that's not communicated then how's this person gonna receive those services? So that person might continue in that situation or get worse. We might lose contact. I mean, there is a series of things that could happen with the participant.

[But because] they're overwhelmed with everything that they have to keep up with, maybe it's just easier to let it go than actually take time to do a referral. You know, because if you spend a little more time with that participant, then you might have ten people waiting to get processed.

This worker provides insight into not only the number of recipients that Eligibility Workers process every day but also the scope and intensity that results in considerable pressure and stress in their job:

There's a lot of stress, especially I'll tell you on the intake side. There's a lot of stress right now because there's a no wrong door policy. It doesn't matter where they're coming from. They open up the doors to everybody and they keep the door, the door stays open until 5:00, and they take applications up to the last minute. So, basically, you have intake workers who are like working, some of them are doing, you know, working past the time, and, you know, they're just, they're really stressed out, and they're feeling like you know when is it gonna end? When do we get a break? You know, when can I catch up on the work because they also have a 30-day period that they have to approve the case?

So now they're stressed that they have to approve the cases. They gotta see these people. They gotta get people in. The people are coming in

constantly even for bringing back materials or missing their appointment, missing mandatory substance abuse screening, missing their mental health appointment, missing even, some of them even miss their walk out and don't get fingerprints. So, then you have them coming back and returning and starting all over again. So they're like, they're stretched.

And because they are trained as intake workers to decide eligibility, not as social workers, dealing with recipients who become difficult because of their own stress and special needs also makes their Eligibility Workers' jobs more difficult:

Worker A: One of the biggest problems is that people are excitable. I mean, you know, they're in there, like especially now. They're waiting hours to be seen, especially at intake. And they're grumpy, really grumpy by the time they come back there and start interviewing with people. And then you start asking them questions or wondering why they haven't filled out the application all the way or start working with them and asking them even more questions. And then asking them to go to appointments or seeing the mental health or doing substance abuse, you know, screening. It can become a problem for you. And right now, it's more so. Like I said, it's a big strain. I see the strain on the workers, the intake workers, now. It's a big strain.

Worker B:...the training is enough as far as giving the basics. But, when you're sitting there with a participant, there that's, you know, can go from any range of emotions in front of you, it's very difficult to do. And, if you're not trained in dealing with people, I think that's the biggest thing right there is having to know how to handle certain type of people or how to get a person to calm down or to try to not to put too much interest into them being upset and try to work with them where they will calm down.

Could Workers Enhance Efficiencies by Helping with Housing Paperwork for GROW Participants?

GROW staff recognize the importance of housing as fundamental in enabling GR recipients to seek employment and progress toward self-sufficiency. As this Line Staff Worker emphasized:

...we've discovered when we get people into housing, our placements of people getting jobs went up. And people coming to Job Club went up too because they had a place they could clean up, get dressed, go for interviews. When they were on the street, you send them to an interview wearing old clothes and smelling, no one's going to hire them. So, it did increase the number of placements for jobs...

Yet, despite the importance of housing, the question of whether workers and managers thought they could assist with paperwork evoked mixed replies. Several such as the workers below, thought that to assist with housing paperwork would be "challenging" because of the heavy caseloads that workers already carry:

Worker A: It will be very challenging.

Worker B: We'd be working 12-hour days.

Facilitator: What is your caseload?

Worker C: Well, my caseload's at 600. I just went into the GROW program a year-and-a-half ago. When I started the program, I was at 120 cases. Right now, I'm over 600 cases. We only have four GROW case managers in my office, and it's very difficult.

I mean, we're seeing 20 people a day, 22, 24 people. I mean, before, we were able to assist and try to look on the Internet to help them find job leads. Now, it's just, "Next. Next." You know, you just try and rush the interview real quick. Rush the participant to see the next person. Just, you don't find any time anymore.

This SSI Manager agreed, saying that workloads are so high, and the GR applications already so long and tedious, that she does not see any way that workers could take on the additional task of assisting with the housing applications:

I could tell you, based on your question and you talking about our existing case load, there's just no way that the workers in my office, or I could see in any other part of the County, would be able to assist the participants with completing those applications. You would need a special worker just to handle the housing applications, but definitely not the workers, based on their current workload. It's just too much.

Well, with their, just the General Relief application process itself, it's rather tedious. It's a lot of forms that the workers have to complete. They also have to update our LEADER system. There's just a lot of information. And for them to have to complete a form as well, we have participants who are in our office in (name of office), they might come in, and they're waiting on line at 7:30 in the morning.... But, when they come inside our office, they still need to meet with the worker and complete their intake packet. And they're completing forms all day, and, you know, it's just a long process... And if they have to stay there to complete it, a housing application, well, I could imagine our workers working until maybe 8:00, 9:00 at night.

Another SSI Manager agreed, saying that the workload problem is compounded by the fact that her office is significantly understaffed:

I was gonna agree with her. Not just the intake [process], because, right now, in our district, we're like 50 employees down. So the GR approved caseloads...my workers are carrying 600 cases apiece. They can't even deal with the cases they have now just trying to do their redeterminations and research. So to add something, to add a housing application, that would

make them take even longer with a participant. There's no way you could do it 'cause we finish 6:00, 6:30 at night on an average day anyway.

While feeling that assistance with housing applications would make a positive difference, it would come at a high cost to both workers and to the recipients they serve:

But I think it would be a great service that we could provide to an individual because you're looking at some individuals who are uneducated and who are unable to complete.

But it would make a difference at the, well, at the expense of the eligibility worker, and even at the expense of the participant, because the more that the eligibility worker has to do, then it's less they're gonna be paying attention to the participant. It's just something else that I have to do.

And we've already explained that to get through the application process, they are just rushing through, not really paying attention to the, giving proper attention, we'll just say proper attention to that participant. And so it's just, say, it's just like cattle. Getting them, you know, you hate to use that analogy. But it's just like hurry up. Hurry up.

Conversation among these GROW Managers highlights deeper concerns about the housing program that cannot readily be solved by streamlining the application process—most importantly, that the number of recipients needing housing far outstrips the housing that the program has available:

Basically, I wanted to say this, that the challenge is more to finding apartments or finding suitable housing for these people. I think if we're all mandated by our directors to set a person on staff aside to do that (assist with filling out housing applications), they will have to do it, and we have no choice about it, whether we like it or not. But, the reality is...we have more people on the waiting list than there is apartments... so, unless you resolve that on the front end, then you can't really set the expectation for the client that there's gonna be something on that other end. So it gives them false hope. And it also stresses out or makes our workers kind of feel like they're holding the barriers, and, then, with no other option but to say, "Hey, here's Housing Authority again" which has years of waiting...

It's five years, I think, at this point.

So, we have to find something viable for the participants but, on the other hand, also have solid referrals.

Program Rules and Operational Procedures Create Inefficiencies and Limits on Workers' Ability to Meet Recipients' Needs: The Case of the Subsidized Housing Program

Finding appropriate housing placements is also a problem for participants with special needs. The difficulty for workers is that while these recipients' disabilities are not severe enough to qualify them for SSI, in many cases, they present significant barriers to program participation and to fulfilling program requirements. Serving these participants requires flexibility and ability to intervene on their behalf; yet, bottlenecks are often created by services and requirements that are not appropriate to recipients' needs and by systemic rules that limit caseworkers' ability to appropriately assist them. Caseworkers and managers from several programs noted this problem, but nowhere was it more apparent than in the Subsidized Housing Program where both the available housing stock, and rules under which caseworkers deliver services, appear to be designed for recipients who have fewer special needs and require less intervention by caseworkers than many who are currently in the program.

A major problem for Housing Subsidy Program Caseworkers is a shortage of housing that meets recipients' special needs. The kinds of housing available to recipients is limited by the fact that the \$500 housing subsidy is inadequate for the rental market in LA County. The shortage of affordable housing leads to reliance on program referrals that increasingly consist of less expensive sober living and transitional housing facilities. This caseworker described how the lack of housing at a price that participants can afford often makes sober living and transitional facilities the only option:

Worker A: When they get a studio, if they find one for \$500, they have problems keeping up with the utilities, basic utilities like electricity water, gas. And, you know, with some, they'll have the \$121 left, and some have less, maybe they have \$85, and they got no food stamps. So making that \$85-\$100 stretch for a whole month is not quite reasonable for them to get their personal hygiene and clothing and food if they don't have any food banks. And some of them are, you know, quite picky on trying to get help.

Worker B: So, we don't have the luxury of getting into the regular rental market. Because once they check that [credit history], that is it. So, it's hard. That's why we have the transitional houses.

But while affordable and accessible, some recipients, especially those with disabilities, often have housing needs that are not readily accommodated by the majority of such placements:

But we're doing all of that within the constraints of, I know I get more referrals for people with disabilities that have mental health issues, and they're also a population that is very difficult to place because they can't live everywhere.

But it is not only the housing shortage that makes placing participants so difficult; program rules that require participants find housing on their own also limit caseworkers' ability to assist participants in finding housing that most appropriately meets their needs. As one Housing Subsidy Caseworker described the problem:

[The problem is] because we don't go find housing for ourselves. We were given, uh, an inventory of housing possibilities based on sober living houses, based on transitional homes to provide services for our people who may not have those issues but have many issues. And, you know, when you put people who have multiple problems together in the same house and in the same room, it can be a challenge...

And, participants without special needs often have the opposite problem in that they find sober living and transitional facilities too structured and restrictive. These facilities have rules designed for specific populations, for example, drug testing and curfews in substance abuse housing, that recipients without these problems do not feel they should have to follow:

Most of the homeless people that we have don't have that kind of relationship. Even if they are from here, they still have a hard time. So, you know, they end up getting the transitional houses and what they don't like with transitional houses because they have some rules also to follow. They don't want to follow some rules. Sometimes they have drug testing; sometimes they have hours, so they don't want that. So that is one barrier for transitional houses. Because we have a lot of transitional houses that have openings.

Thus, the growing numbers of GR participants, including some with special needs, combined with an inadequate supplies of adequate housing, leads to more time consuming, labor intensive casework and to inefficiencies in placing recipients. The solution, according to this caseworker, would be for workers to match housing referrals to the needs of participants:

A lot of the houses aren't equipped, there's no counselors on site, there's not anyone who is giving us a possibility of referring them in a place that has the resources that can handle people who have those issues because at least if I can send a half a dozen at a time to one of those houses that can handle that, then that means that I can stop handling the drama as a case manager while you're still trying to increase your numbers. While you're trying to facilitate others' needs...

Yet, the ability to actively intervene in placing recipients is not possible, according to one caseworker, due to a systemic problem—the lack of a contractual relationship between the County and landlords.

Because, actually, the County is not a party to the agreement. We are in between the landlord and the participant. So we have to walk a fine line.

Another caseworker described the effort required to advise participants about what to look for in housing only to find that participants agree to arrangements caseworkers feel take advantage of them:

Yeah, we leave it up to the clients to go out and look at the place. I'll tell the client to make sure that it's livable for you. And make sure that you know about the rules of the house so that you know what's expected of you... But, some of them will call you every month and tell you that the landlord is doing this the landlord is doing that when they agreed to this to begin with. So we do leave it up to the client to decide if that place will work for them. And most of the time they do, most of the time they agree to certain things that we wouldn't agree to like paying extra for cable, or giving them one of your EZ cards to have privileges. So...

As another caseworker suggests, often efforts to assist participants are not enough, and vulnerable recipients are taken advantage of by landlords whose involvement in the housing program, according to another caseworker, is "about self gain":

There are some that would make you cringe who come in who wanna facilitate their group of people to get services... So these people will, the landlords are about self gain, and the client may be about needs being met... And, um, you have those who come in (brought in by the landlords) and say, "I want this place," and they don't realize that they have a choice of others.

According to the descriptions of several caseworkers, it is common for participants to be placed in overcrowded conditions by the landlords looking to maximize their profits. And caseworkers were frustrated by the fact that there is nothing that caseworkers can do to directly prevent or intervene in these situations:

Worker A: We have people who are sometimes two or three in a room.

Worker B: Sometimes more than that. Sometimes there's probably, I've heard of six people being in a room, and there are bed bugs, and they are dealing with other people, and if you're out of prison, then they can't. I have one guy who says, "I can't stay in the room with other people, I can't do it." So, I think I placed him. I think he was placed, fortunately, but he found probably a family or a friend who he lived with, but he couldn't stay at a transitional, that's too much.

Worker C: We're not allowed to go up there and check. We're left at the mercy what they tell us.

Not only does the limited oversight that Housing Subsidy Caseworkers have over housing sometimes result in poor living conditions for recipients but also in additional work when these living arrangement prove to be untenable:

Um, so and we're dealing with the clients. We do talk to the landlord, but we don't go out and interview the sites. The most that we do is call property units... I also had one of the properties that we dealt with... the structure they were renting to our clients was not dwellable... So I can't have my client homeless during the interim so I still have to transition this. So there's a lot of things that we navigate throughout.

As this caseworker also recounts, the wrong placements can lead to multiple efforts to find appropriate housing:

...When people have problems with houses, we're relocating people on the all-the-time basis. Um, sometimes every other month, sometimes every six months because sometimes, people have gone from house to house to house. We placed one guy about seven times, you know, 'cause every time, something went wrong. Every time. So you knew something extra was going on there.

Yet, despite the drawbacks that result from restrictions on Housing Subsidy Caseworkers' involvement in placing recipients, one caseworker noted the potential liabilities that might accompany greater involvement. While she thought that screening the housing placement is important, this caseworker suggested that an outside agency, not the caseworkers themselves, recommend appropriate housing placements for participants in the program:

No, I think that (caseworker finding housing for participants) would open another can of worms. I think if there was someone who was independent like Weingart was before, that would be my thing if that's what you did only. But to go out and inspect and to kind of, basically, you would be telling the client, "It's okay for you to stay here." Then, if it becomes a problem, then it's, "You told me to stay here," and "It's your fault that this person slapped me because you told me it's okay."

Lack of Communication with Recipients: A Major Impediment to Recipients' Progress Through the Program

GROW Line Workers and Managers emphasized the numerous resources offered by the GR program to help recipients progress toward self-sufficiency. But these programs—for example, the Housing Subsidy Program or the SSI pending program—require frequent contact with recipients, and difficulties keeping in contact with recipients present a major roadblock to providing these services. This SSI Advocate, for example, explained the intense effort and

ongoing communication required to shepherd recipients through the SSI application process:

[Communication is the] most important thing for the people that are disabled because it allows me a way to follow, to make sure that they are following up on their medical appointments in order to have the right medical records to give the SSI proof. It helps facilitate me to be able to ensure that they're, they're actually getting treatment for a change. And if there is a problem, then I can head off a problem before the problem gets to an explosive level.

Not every client does this, but the ones who do it, do it well, and they know how, you know, I could almost tell you when he visited his mother, when he went to the doctor, when he has his reevaluation, when he had his hearing for SSI... And, I actually talk to them once a month... So it keeps us familiar with one another, and it keeps us at a point where it's not like we're a stranger...

Yet, as this SSI Advocate explained, such frequent and ongoing communication is often difficult to maintain:

But in terms of what is one of the main things that is stopping these clients on the program, it's mostly keeping in contact with the client and knowing where they are and being able for them to be in contact to move them through the stages. They get lost. They get lost from one stage to the next, and you've got to be able to find them, keep them, and pull them through each stage. So until we can keep up with the clients, or the clients keep up with us, it's not going to work.

These SSI Advocates talked about the consequences when the communication that is so vital to gathering medical documentation for SSI applications cannot be maintained:

We need the participant to comply. Say, for example, they didn't go to the hearing. You know, we're working with the (firm that represents recipients at appeal hearings), and if the participant doesn't show for the appointment, well, you're running out of time, people, so we need to get the person in the office.

As this Advocate said, with Eligibility Workers overworked, she and her coworkers are left on their own to find ways to maintain vital communication with recipients:

Facilitator: But didn't you say earlier that you could ask the Eligibility Worker to do that (maintain contact with recipients)?

Advocate A: Yeah.

Facilitator: You want it more directly?

Advocate B: They're overworked.

Advocate A: Right, oh my God, I feel so bad for 'em. It's like, please, I have to get on my knees, I beg you, do some soft begging, help me... (Firm that represents recipients on SSI appeals), they dismiss the case if they don't have enough medical documentation. They send them back... I need to start all over again. And I don't want to do that. Oftentimes, that's painstaking, and you had mentioned that, about having to re-file again, somebody did. The medical support, the medical documentation is what's paramount.

Unable to draw upon overworked Eligibility Workers, SSI Advocates employ a number of other means to encourage regular contact. This caseworker uses a dual approach to maintain communication: "reading the person" to determine how "savvy" they are about the program and making herself always available to participants whenever they want to contact her:

What I was going to say is that communication is important. You know, they have a lot of resources, at hand, and, you know, I'm always, they have my cell [phone number] they can call me at anytime. But, you have to read the person, how, how understanding they are or how savvy they are about the program because a lot of them have been on GR forever, and some just got on last week...

Other caseworkers employ their authority to informally require that recipients remain in contact. This Housing Subsidy Case Manager tells recipients that they must check in with her twice a month:

Some clients, no matter how much you talk about the communication, they will not keep up their end of the communication. But, some people do check in. I tell them that they're required to, and we do two check-ins a month. They check in once on a detailed message on the voice mail, and then they actually have a conversation. That is most important for the people that are disabled because it allows me a way to make sure that they are following up on their medical appointments...

As a last resort when other persuasive measures do not work, some workers resort to their ability to temporarily suppress benefits as a way to send a "wake up call" that encourages recipients to maintain contact and keep appointments. This SSI Advocate described how it works:

We will at times ask the worker saying, "Okay, this client, we're trying to bring them in." Because most of our clients are homeless, getting in contact with them is extremely difficult. They don't comply. The only thing that brings our clients in is money. You stall their money, that's the only

thing that brings them in. As long as they get their check, you will not see them at all. But we will ask the worker to say, "Okay, send this client an appointment." If the client doesn't keep that appointment, then it automatically stops their money and brings them in. But it will stop their money for that month until they come in and see us. Then the worker puts it back on almost immediately the same day.

And, several workers talked about using sanctions, a more formal means to deny aid for mandatory periods of 0, 30, and 60 days, as a measure to get recipients to keep appointments and maintain contact with their workers.

Workers Disagree about the Impact of Sanctions

The mention of sanctions provoked lively discussion about their effectiveness as a means to achieve compliance with program requirements. Views ranged from some who believed that sanctions are so essential that without them, the "whole thing would fall apart" to those who held that sanctions either are not effective or that they are even detrimental to encouraging compliance with program requirements. When asked whether or not he thought sanctions are effective, this GROW Program Manager talked about the central role they play in achieving compliance with the program:

I think having sanctions as an option to us, it's absolutely essential because without sanctions, I think the whole thing would fall apart. I think a lot of participants would simply drag their feet and not take anything seriously, so we absolutely need it as an option.

Sometimes it does whip some of our clients into shape. Once they've been sanctioned, they never forget it, and you see someone visibly coming back...and they will be, they try a little bit harder. So, if we did away with sanctions, I don't know what would happen. It would be a disaster.

And another GROW Program Manager who was ambivalent about sanctions agreed about their necessity given the lack of other alternatives for achieving compliance and maintaining contact with recipients:

You know, it's interesting that whenever we want participants to comply, we need some document or whatever. Normally, unless you call them three times, then you get the information. But if you sanction that person, that person comes back to the district in no time because they want their benefits. So that pushed them to comply or to come to the district.

So, although I don't quite agree with the sanctions, but I think that there has to be some type of consequence for not using what we're offering you. So if we don't impose any type of punishment for not complying, then that's another problem too. I mean they, I think that like anybody, not just

participants, they have to know that by not doing, let's say, something to better yourself or to accomplish the goal that you need to accomplish, whether it's employment or SSI or whatever it is, if you don't put that there for to do it, although we're providing you with a service, there has to be a consequence.

By contrast, this GROW Program Manager stressed that not only are sanctions not effective in achieving compliance, but they do little to save the County money:

No. The answer is no. Sanctions really do not help. I mean, it's just another way for LA County to save money. And does it save it? Does it save LA County in the long run? No.

This manager concluded that sanctions sometimes do more harm than good, particularly when they are applied to vulnerable populations such as the homeless:

But for those people that are truly homeless, it's not helping them. I mean, this is, they're never gonna get to a place where they can actually have a roof over their head. They're never gonna get to that place.

And her concern about the potential harm that come from sanctions extended to other populations as well given that rising caseloads make it impossible for workers to adequately assess participants needs and the reasons that they might not be able to comply with program requirements:

And you're thinking about it, but if we have not properly conducted a good interview and assessment, then how do we know that those persons that we are, that these sanctions are being applied to is helping them. Because if they haven't been properly assessed in the beginning, 'cause this individual could be a person who has mental health issues. So, now we're sanctioning this person for failing to do something. And this person really is ill but really wants to work but for whatever reason, they weren't able to.

...People fall through the cracks. Somebody gets a termination letter, and they really don't know how to read it, they don't understand. They don't know that they have the right to come back and for that hearing, to speak to that hearing officer or whatever.

I agree that everybody needs consequences...but we need to make sure that when we do these sanctions, it's applied to the correct person and not a person who has mental issues. Not a person who's really disabled.

This GROW Program Manager agreed that systemic issues—rising caseloads combined with worker shortages—lead to both the inappropriate and ineffective use of sanctions:

And that goes back, again to the people. If the staff has the time to do the right assessment, everything will fall in the right place. So it keeps going back to.... If we had the manpower, if we had the person that can, without worries, dedicate that time to really assess the needs of that person, then it will prevent from applying the wrong sanctions or the wrong rules. And that person will end up at the right place at the right time for the right services.

But, as in the current context in which they are applied, this SSI Manager believes that sanctions are not simply ineffective but also counterproductive in gaining compliance:

...what I see is basically, it agitates the client. It causes animosity towards the workers. It, they take it personally as if it's punitive towards them. Obviously, that's the way it was set up. But, they obviously, it doesn't motivate them to do the right thing. It really is just another punitive thing that society has put on them again. ...all we have to do is we have to show them policy and procedures that we're following, and it doesn't really resolve anything... And, you know, a six-month penalty is pretty stiff on some of these guys.

GROW Line Staff and Managers Talk About the Impacts of One-Size-Fits All Requirements: Inefficiencies and Failure to Meet Recipients' Needs

As discussed earlier in this report, the economic downturn has resulted in a more diverse GR population—some with significant disabilities but also some recently laid off recipients with skills and work experience that make them immediately employable and ready to go out and look for another job. Yet, some requirements of the GROW program appear to be based on assumptions about the need among all recipients for the basic skills and knowledge needed to successfully pursue employment. While these assumptions are no doubt true for many, when applied to everyone, these requirements do not adequately meet the needs of many in today's more diverse GR population. GROW Line Workers and Managers, for example, felt particular concern about the impact of requiring every new applicant to attend Job Club, a requirement that they think impedes those who have recently lost their jobs and are job ready from reentering the job market. This GROW Line Staff worker feels that because what is taught in Job Club is standardized and basic, those with work histories and recent work experience feel discouraged about losing time spent in Job Club that they could use to learn more valuable skills and look for employment:

I wish they could overlook the components for the GROW program that we have, especially the Job Club, which is really discouraging everybody. I mean, nobody wants to go to the Job Club... Because they get bored—most of the people, they get bored with the Job Club, they think it's not helpful, and it's not fair for somebody who just got fired from a job...and comes and applies for the GR benefits, goes to Job Club, and next to him is sitting somebody who's on the GR for ten years.

And it's really discouraging to the person who's really ready to work, and I hope they can find like different classes like, I'd say, advanced class or like intermediate class for participants and really not make it mandatory for everybody to attend Job Club.

Another GROW Line Worker agreed as he talked about the fact that sending everyone through Job Club fails to meet the needs of middle-aged workers:

We have some that are not old enough for Fast Track, but they may be in their 30's, we sent through [Job Club], and they're like, the first three or four days, I was wasting my time; I should have been out there looking for a job instead. So we get that kind of feedback from the middle-aged workers, you might say.

This worker adds that the problem is compounded by the fact that recipients sometimes must wait several weeks for the Job Club session to begin, resulting in both more time lost from Job Search and wasted County resources:

But like, if today, if I'm scheduled for Job Club, next appointment is November 18. So, practically for three months, these people are doing nothing.

One problem, according to this worker, is that the fixed sequencing of program components means that assignment to subsequent components of the GROW program are linked to attendance at Job Club:

The problem is with Job Club is that we have to send them a lot of times because after that, you can assign for vocational assessment. And then a vocational assessor can look at what this person can do, then you can assign for short-term training. For instance, you cannot assign for certain components without Job Club. That's why sometimes Job Club is necessary.

Yet, one GROW Line Worker sounded a hopeful note, pointing out that mandatory attendance at Job Club is not consistently enforced as some offices in the County have begun to recognize the problems created by the uniform application of this requirement:

Worker A: Actually, it's (mandatory Job Club for all new recipients) not mandatory any longer.

Worker B: It is for us.

Worker A: In your office...already, that it's not mandatory to assign each participant to Job Club. Like you said, some participants, they already job ready; they are just new to the job search, just need a little push, but they

don't have to be in the classroom with participants who never have worked.

This worker also commented that distinctions are being made in his office regarding the diverse experience and needs of new applicants:

Well, that's why when we interview, that we try to frame it that they should go to Job Club, or we see that they just recently stopped working, well, then they really don't need to go to Job Club, they get assigned to Fast Track or job search or something like that. Usually, the people haven't worked in a while or never worked at all, then immediately we'll assign them to Job Club.

And, this worker reported that another solution had been worked out in his office that allows those who have been through Job Club in the last 12 months to opt out of this component of the program:

That's a rule at least our office follows, basically, if you've done Job Club within the last 12 months, we check, and it's an option whether or not you're going to send them back. So they do have that option to opt out.

Despite these reforms, workers complained about similar issues involving what they felt to be wasteful requirements that add to their workloads but do not benefit recipients. One such requirement involves the necessity to register for work each time they reapply to the program, whether this is after timing out or coming back to the program from a sanction. As this GROW Program Manager described the problem:

Worker A: Individuals they come in, and they failed one requirement and so you're denied. And then you come back in, and you're given those same requirements over. It may have been last month, but you're given the same requirements over. EDD says, "If you're registered for work, you're registered for work." And it's, you don't have to just come back and register, you're already registered.

Worker B: Every time.

Worker A: Every time you apply go register for work. ...it would be a cost savings to LA County if we didn't require that they go register because every time we ask them to register, we must provide them with transportation to EDD or whatever we are requiring that they do we have to provide transportation.

Worker A: Five dollars. So every time they apply. So five times a year, you know, \$25. So...we'll be able to save. But that's a bottleneck to me for the participant.

And this GROW Manager expresses significant frustration about the requirement that newly registered—and reregistered—participants must submit proof that they have applied for six jobs as a condition for eligibility which is both meaningless for the recipient and a source of additional, nonproductive work for Eligibility Workers:

And also we – one of the requirements is that they – for employable individuals, they must seek six job searches. Well, that's kind of like a joke. And I hate to really put it like that, but I'm just trying to be straightforward because we're saying that, "Okay, you look for, to qualify for general relief, you need to look for six job searches before you meet eligibility. And you go get the name, address, and telephone number, and the name of the individual where you were seeking employment."

Well, when they come back, the eligibility worker has to verify this. Validate. Well, if you too busy, you're probably not gonna validate it. Okay.

Facilitator: You mean by calling the employer?

Calling the employer. If you're too busy, you're not gonna validate it, or if you're one of those really conscientious workers, you're gonna really validate it because number one, you're gonna make sure that this person is denied. 'Cause, you know, we do have that type of employee. I'm gonna make sure this is denied. I don't need all those approvals.

And it's just, like, what is the purpose of us... I would like to know how many individuals actually obtain employment by looking for those six job searches. And it would probably be, it wouldn't even be one percent. I don't believe that it would even be one percent.

So that's, to me, it's what is the purpose. We're sending them to GROW individuals. A person who has been, if you look at the application, they've probably been on general relief for the last ten years, and they have not found any employment or had one or two little jobs in the last 10 years. What is the whole purpose?

It's not effective anyway. So why are we asking them to do it or to comply with a requirement that's not even functioning.

This GROW program Manager thinks that even the nine-month time limit on the receipt of GR assistance may intensify recipients problems, create inefficiencies, and waste County resources:

That the GR benefits are time limited, meaning that they can, participants can get only nine months out of the 12 months. I don't know how beneficial it is to cut [them off of aid] for three months and then give them

after three months again... I mean, are we really winning or gaining anything from cutting those three months rather than continue the services? I personally think it's creating more problems than actually helping.

Facilitator: And what kind of problems do you see it creating?

Like, if I'm relying on \$221, and I'm budgeting my living based on that amount, and, now, all of a sudden, I don't have, over three months, I don't have, then I might not have my room or my bed where I'm staying. Or, I might have to go on the streets because I don't have the money for the three months. So that will make me more sick. You know, I might end up going to the emergency room because I'm on the streets.

You know, that might cause many other problems. You'll have to do the whole process, the whole application time with the eligibility worker, time again with the going to unemployment, time with the health evaluator. I mean, really it's, it seems like a lot of time and a lot of effort in the same things... I mean, is that really necessary? I mean, instead of spending the money going through that process again, you know, it's probably cheaper just give the three months.

Overloaded GROW Workers Deal with Inconsistent Enforcement of GR's Eligibility Rules

There was marked contrast between the Housing Subsidy Caseworkers discussed above who typically want flexibility to intervene on behalf of those on their relatively small caseloads and GROW Line Staff who labor under heavy caseloads and complained about lax and inconsistent enforcement of eligibility requirements. In some cases they attribute the problem to complex GR regulations that no one understands, and in particular, neither the Eligibility Workers nor their supervisors understand the rules for counting a recipient's time on GR. This GROW line worker expressed frustration when ineligible recipients who should have been terminated remain on his caseload:

Some of the regulations are being interpreted by everybody differently.

Facilitator: Okay, can you give an example?

For time limits, a lot of our Eligibility Workers, they don't know how the timing is working. A lot of supervisors, they don't know how the timing is working, and even when you go to the GR book, regulations book, you won't understand how the GR timing is working.

Facilitator: You mean the nine-month timing?

Yes. For the nine-month timing, it's not, like, it can get interrupted any time during that nine months time, and they can come and reapply after three months being with the GR. They might get sanctioned, or they left the county, they came back, they don't know where to start the timeline. They don't know how to count, and that's why a lot of cases are being messed up.

He also cites failure to enforce sanctions as one reason that recipients who should be terminated from the program remain on his caseload.

The sanctions are not working... Let's say the regulation says that this participant is not doing this, not doing job searches or not doing Job Club... But once this participant receives that Notice of Action, he jumps to the office, he yells, screams that he didn't receive a Notice, even though he might have, he received it late, he didn't know; and every time when they complain, we just go forward, and we resume benefits. We say, "I'm sorry." And we continue the case, and the next month, the same story.

So you are not being really strict with the participants who are not complying. We always let them to have excuses, even though those excuses are not listed in a good cause listing, but we just excuse them. We are not really strict. That's what I think.

And another GROW Line Worker shared a similar experience about the failure to sanction or terminate recipients who had not fulfilled program requirements:

In (name of office), I had a case that just got terminated August 31. She had been on GR since April 2009, and I've sent request after request to the worker, requesting to have the case terminated. And it took me giving it to my deputy director, the request to get it terminated, because the workers there were just like passing their work around, like covering each other's desk when they was out.

And finally, it got to the point I gave it to others because I got tired of giving transportation for this person over and over again when it was way past the time limits... But once it passes the system, nobody has time to fix it. It's, even for a caseload, it's very hard to just keep working at it and try to get that removed. So, it's an issue.

Yet, another GROW Line Worker attributes the problem to supervisors who have told caseworkers in his office to "go a little bit easier on clients:"

Well, our office, in particular, we've been told quite a few times to go a little bit easier on the clients. We used to be more strict with them, now we're being told to go a little bit easier, in which I don't agree with, but we're sort of taking that route lately.

But, another GROW worker thinks that there might be more leniency toward recipients who fail to fulfill program requirements because of an understanding of their difficulties during hard times:

Yeah, we're pretty lenient in our office, too, as far as sanctions are concerned, it could cause them a lot, to avoid, you know, because hard economic times, you know, they give us their reason why they couldn't do what they did. I believe it would help if we did enforce the sanctions more. But we're pretty lenient as far as the sanctions are concerned.

Technological Inefficiencies Contribute to Caseload Processing Errors and Increased Workload

GR case managers rely on information from a computer program called LEADER for assignment and tracking of recipients on their caseloads. SSI Advocates and Managers, in particular, attributed bottlenecks and time wasted to inappropriate referrals from LEADER. As these SSI Advocates explained the problem:

Advocate A: I think one of the number one things is the automation, the LEADER system that we have. It's not doing a good job. They're not picking the right persons to come and see us.

Advocate B: They're just sending appointments right and left to some people that don't even have a disability. And then we have to tell them when they walk in, "Sorry, you were sent an appointment in error."

Advocate A: They have to pick the right ones...

While the focus of workers' complaints was on LEADER, the root of the problem appears to lie in how participants are entered into LEADER and referred to the SSI Advocate program. As Advocates described the process, recipients are often entered into LEADER and referred to SSI Advocates based on claims that they are disabled and unable to work after getting a diagnosis from a doctor. Yet, based on their Advocates knowledge of the disability threshold used by Social Security, they can predict that some of these participants' problems are not serious enough to qualify them for SSI. These workers provide insight into this process:

It's hard servicing the right ones because of LEADER is having a problem. Because they (GR workers) automatically give them an exemption just because the doctors they're sending them to, and they think that they're disabled because the other doctor that they send them to told them they're disabled, but that's not disabled for a good enough SSI application.

Compounding this problem is the fact that LEADER refers recipients for Advocate appointments who have previously been seen by another Advocate. This SSI advocate describes the confusion and work that this duplication creates:

Which is crazy, because some of the clients, your four people on your list could be all four of mine that I've already seen. So this is what I do. When I get my appointments for the month, I go through each of them through case comments, and that's where you know what's what and what's going on. I look through case comments to see who actually saw this person, and I note that this belongs to D142 or D143, that's our number code. And I try to give that list to our clerk, thank God we have one, who when the client comes in [can say], "Oh, this is a LEADER erroneously generated appointment."

The source of this problem stems from the fact that SSI Advocates are not able to update case files by entering new information into the system:

Because we can't update. Some of the screens that used to be we could update, this was called an SSIP screen, and it showed if the person has a pending claim. But if I find this person on my own, LEADER doesn't have a new button, so I can't input that person, and the only thing I can do is say I took a claim in case comments.

Not only does LEADER refer the wrong people to SSI Advocates, but the uneven timing of referrals, with several scheduled within a short period of time, makes it difficult to control the pace of their work:

And even to the LEADER people, when we've met them, they are not sure why one day we have 50 appointments, and the rest of the week we don't have any. They don't spread them out. We don't know what the criteria has been in the past. They say that it's a certain thing that various disabilities on the screen will generate an appointment, but it hasn't been so.

The scheduling of referrals leads both to difficulties in managing their caseloads and frustration for participants as well:

Yeah, but again we're getting four appointments, five appointments a day, plus the walk-ins, and they're wrong appointments. I mean, you have a frustrated participant already on GR barely having to make it to get to your office because they have no tokens, no money. They get to your office, and you just tell them, "I'm sorry, you were sent an appointment in error." That's frustrating for them as it is for us too.

Because of problems with how LEADER refers and tracks recipients, workers feel that they each have to devise their own ways of managing appointments, a necessary workaround that creates additional work:

Worker A: You have to be creative to find a way that works for you until they do it, um, in the system, find a way that works for you that helps you keep up with your caseload activity.

Worker B: Right, but it's our own Excel worksheets (laughter from group, crosstalk and excitement).

Caseworkers Face Lack of Coordination and Conflicting Inter-agency Priorities

Despite budget cuts and rising caseloads, focus group members talked with pride about the help they could provide, especially the services to which they could refer recipients with special needs. Yet, they also were frustrated by the lack of coordination between agencies and the obstacles to accessing their services and benefits.

The Barriers to Successful SSI Applications

Nowhere were barriers to programs that would benefit GR recipients more apparent than among the SSI Advocates who talked about the difficulties that the participants encounter when applying for SSI benefits. The application process is long and arduous, especially for an applicant population with significant physical and mental disabilities. Most applicants, even successful ones, report long waits punctuated by several appeals when their applications are denied. The job of SSI Advocates is to help facilitate this process which entails helping recipients fill out paperwork and get documentation of their disability from medical personnel. For Advocates, this requires dealing with the Social Security Office as well as with Health Advocates, a group contracted by LA County to provide legal counsel to recipients whose SSI applications have been denied. At times in these dealings, the SSI Advocates felt that these agencies were working at cross purposes and not in the best interest of recipients who are attempting to qualify for the program.

The greatest problems come from dealing with the Social Security Office, which Advocates feel present numerous roadblocks that make their jobs more difficult and approval harder to obtain. This Advocate stated the problem directly:

So the basic bottleneck is through Social Security, which is beyond our control.

As noted above, in guiding recipients through the Social Security application process, SSI Advocates help applicants to accumulate medical evidence of their disability. But the major problem, as Advocates see it, is that Social Security typically refers applicants to doctors whose examinations are brief and lack sufficient depth to appropriately detect and diagnose applicants' conditions. This Advocate described how working with Social Security and their doctors presents a major bottleneck in obtaining approval for recipients on their caseloads:

...once we do take an application, when the Social Security has hired the so-called doctors with those little offices that they go there, and they have their exams... And the way that my participants tell me that they go in there, they examine them, for them to really find out if they're disabled, what they go in there and do, I don't even think it's five minutes for them to really know that they're disabled. When they should, in reality, be looking at their medical records and not just basing it on that one doctor. I just think there's more things they should do.

Facilitator: And how do they get to these doctors again?

Social Security has appointed them.

As these and other workers' comments suggest, such brief medical examinations often are not sufficient to detect disabilities, especially those involving mental health problems. To deal with this roadblock, one Advocate reported that workers in her office try to collect sufficient medical documentation of recipients' disabilities *before* they go to the Social Security office and are referred to one of their doctors.

Previously, the Advocates could send recipients to community clinics and other health care agencies, but with the worsening economy, many of these sources of medical care have closed down, and applicants have had to increasingly rely on the SSI doctors to diagnose their disabilities.

The hospitals are closing down. They used to have Watts Health Center, this health center, they're all gone. There's nowhere for our clients to go to get care if they need it. There's not enough shelters and food banks, there's nowhere for them to go. That's a real problem for the clients, and it becomes a problem for us too.

Facilitator: How is it a problem for you?

Because if there are no clinics for them to go to get their medical care, they don't go. And they can't document that they're disabled. Martin Luther King is shut. There's nowhere for them to go. And if they used to go to Hubert Humphrey, they can't go more than once every six months... It's very difficult for the clients.

Facilitator: So where do they go then to get the documentation?

They don't go. They just don't go.

Yet another example of the obstacles that Social Security presents is the refusal to accept Green Cards as documentation, making immigrants from Mexico go through the difficult, if not impossible, step of obtaining birth certificates from their home country.

From this Advocate's perspective, this is an unnecessary barrier, one that requires "talking to the right person" to overcome:

And it's so dumb because sometimes, some of them will have their green card, but because of the fact that they're approved, they still want their birth certificate. These people were born in Mexico. How can they go to Mexico, and how can they even have relatives over there to get their birth certificate... Again, it's the Social Security that puts these little things. Because I said, why would you need a birth certificate if the person already has a green card, INS confirmed that, because INS won't just give you a green card just because, they have to have already gone through the whole process. And they still want them to have a birth certificate, and they're holding their benefits because they want that birth certificate. So there's ways....

As in the case of medical documentation, SSI Advocates have devised ways to facilitate approval of SSI applications for these participants but at the cost of additional effort to work around the obstacles that Social Security office presents. As one worker put it:

Facilitator: So you really have to psyche out Social Security quite a lot?

We're at their mercy. And they don't care how many swords we swallow, how many fire hoops we jump through, ta-da, we're at their mercy.

Part of "jumping through hoops" is watching recipients' applications be turned down, often several times. When this happens, Advocates may refer their clients to a legal firm contracted by the County to represent recipients on appeal. Advocates appreciate the work of this firm and their attorneys who work closely with her:

[Name of firm] actually has a representative up in the [name of office] area that goes and sees the people and goes to their houses or meets them wherever they need to. And [name redacted] talking about being inundated with the faxes, I like that because I know what's going on... And I stay in very close contact with [name of firm]... I'm constantly on the phone, they're calling me...

However, several Advocates focused on the fact that these attorneys are selective and can refuse to represent recipients whose cases they believe will not be successful. Some advocates wanted to know much earlier about these assessments before working with a participant for months or even years only to find out that the lawyers would not appeal their cases:

[Name of firm] only take like the best cases. If they feel like they don't have a good case, they won't even...

And that's one thing I've brought up in other workgroups is if they know ahead of time we do not have a good case, why are we having these people for a whole year and a half waiting around so you can tell them when you meet them that they don't have a good case? When you could have told them right off, "You know what? Let's not proceed, start going to the doctor, it's not a severe condition for us to process or proceed with this case."

This SSI Advocate expressed particular concern about the fact that the attorney makes the decision to reject the recipient's case after only a brief interview just before the appeal hearing compared to the significant time and effort spent by the Advocate building the case for a successful outcome:

They actually are able to withdraw before they see a judge, but they still have that case for that year and a half and they're still working on it. But the actual attorney doesn't meet with the client until 15 minutes before seeing the judge. At that time they look at the medical records, they see the condition, they can say, "You know what? We don't think we should proceed."

And I don't think that's right.

While they appreciate having this group, the fact that they notify them that they will not represent their client just as the case is going to hearing means that a year or more of work to help qualify the recipient for SSI has been wasted. Advocates wish that the legal firm would identify those whom they think do not have good cases much sooner in the process—for the applicants' sakes as well as their own. These SSI Advocates described the labor intensive work that they carry out with applicants over a year to 18 months while they await approval of their SSI applications:

...we have to maintain contact with the client throughout, because I believe they (firm that handles appeals) call them at least once a month or once every two months to update their medical information, make sure they're going to the doctor, make sure if there's any new diagnosis that they can include. So that by the time they meet with the attorney at the actual hearing, they'll review the case before seeing the judge. So it's a long process.

At the end of the day, the total care of the client is our job. There is no say, "You do this, I do this, and I can't do this because this is not my job." It's not like that. If the client needs help, and you can help the client, it's the total care of the client. Because if you don't take care of one aspect...they don't want to hear nothing else about the next part. So at all times, you try to completely service that one client. Because sending them from one section to get this, to get that, confuses them, too. "I'm supposed to go here, what am I supposed to do there?"

So for me, as an individual, I try to walk them. If you're supposed to go here, I try to take them there and say, "This person's going to help you, and this is what they're going to do, this is what their function is," and whatever. Because without that explanation and that care, they get lost. Some of them are bright enough to totally function. You can say, "Go over there." But most of the times, you have to actually walk them through every single aspect. It depends on what stage these clients are, which 90 percent of the time they're in a bad place, and you have to help them through the whole thing.

Lack of collaboration and coordination of services with other agencies also creates bottlenecks. One SSI supervisor who works with mental health evaluations states:

In terms of DMH (Department of Mental Health)... they don't have an open door policy. So if that person lives in this side of the Valley, and they, for whatever reason, they're referred to that treatment center on that side of the Valley, that treatment center doesn't have to actually honor that referral.

And it's happened to us where the person was actually having an episode, and they still wouldn't treat them unless. I had to call their supervisor, the DMH supervisor, to make a call to them so that they would accept that person.

Then the appointment was done in April; the referral was made in April. The person went in April. The person didn't actually get an appointment until June 4th. So they're backlogged within that department, DMH department, so far back that it causes again stress for our workers because we have their parents, their advocates, their whoever calling us, "You know my son, my daughter" whatever "is having an episode, and you guys aren't doing anything." Well, where exactly can we do anything? If our staff at our office is doing what they're supposed to, I guess, but within their department, they don't have that open door policy, these people are falling through the cracks.

While most of the concern related to coordinating service delivery came from SSI Advocates, GROW workers also pointed out inefficiencies resulting from duplication of services offered by both the County and the community and even within the County itself:

And it's, we're kind of frustrated with that, but we try to work with other departments. Right now, if you really analyze all the County departments, DHS, even the Work Source Centers and other resources that are out there, there's a lot of duplication of services. And if we can ...get a form together and say, "Well, let's streamline this together so there won't be a lot of duplication of services." That would really help us.

Facilitator: Could you give me some examples of duplication?

Okay. Duplication is, for example, yesterday, I went to I guess it's the recovery substance abuse program that is in (name of community), and they provide housing. And they wanted to know about General Relief and all the housing programs.

It's a non-profit organization, but they're providing the same services that we are. For example, they're sending people to food banks and all these different resources to get food. And I told them, "Well why don't you just send them to apply for food stamps once they leave here?" And they just didn't have the information. I mean, I think we're duplicating a lot of the health services, a lot of the food services. And there's just other avenues out there where they do have housing programs, but we're just not informed about it.

Finally, the need to coordinate and create better working relations with a whole host of agencies—from the Departments of Health and Mental Health to law enforcement agencies—is so important to SSI Advocates that one manager said that working to create better working relations with these agencies is her highest priority:

Department of Health, Department of Mental Health, DPSS, L.A. County Sheriff's Department, even getting some collaboration. I mean, we have some with Social Security Administration, but with Parole, Parole Department, Department of Rehabilitation—just things that we can work with so that, especially for the SSI Advocacy Program, is you have people who come out that are severely disabled coming out of prison and are on heavy medication that needs to be—that we need to get them on a fast track from being on General Relief back onto SSI coming straight out of prison to get them, you know, I mean just move them quickly.

But if we can try to collaborate—and we're working on it now, but I mean I think that's the biggest—that's the biggest thing for me to overcome is working with other departments and all of us working towards getting participants from here to there and in a better, you know, better living conditions.

Workers and Managers Identify Best Practices: SSI Advocates Provide a Model

GR workers and managers not only spoke in the focus groups about the inefficiencies and barriers but also about “best practices” that contribute to effective service delivery. Some of these are informal practices discussed earlier in this report consisting of improved “workarounds” to solve problems and overcome barriers to getting their jobs done. These include, for example, encouraging contact with participants by temporarily stopping benefits or developing their own Excel spreadsheets to keep track of caseworker contacts with participants. Often thought of as less-than-ideal solutions, these “best practices” are reactive and used to respond to problems when no other means for accomplishing worker goals are available.

In other instances, workers and managers talked about practices that seemed directed toward preventing problems before they occurred. GROW workers and Housing Subsidy caseworkers clearly implemented a number of such strategies for making their work more efficient and effective, but SSI Advocates were the most vocal and detailed in their descriptions and, from their conversation, appeared to be the most systematic in their application. In part, this may be because successful SSI applications entail following precise steps that depend upon ongoing contact and cooperation between participants and Advocates. This means that Advocates must tackle head-on one of the major problems confronting all workers—how to gain trust and build the rapport that would enable ongoing contact and communication with participants.

Whatever the reasons for this emphasis, Advocates talked at length about a systematic approach to case management that emphasized intensive monitoring and support for participants during each step in the application process as well as strategies for building rapport and cooperation necessary to maintain ongoing, cooperative relations with them. These efforts start early on with practices in place for early identification of participants with physical or mental disabilities, called NSA (Needs Special Assistance) participants, which is facilitated by the presence of a mental health workers in each office who are skilled in identifying GR applicants with mental health problems. Once identified, participants are referred right away to the Advocates, and the SSI application process begins.

This first involves helping participants to submit successful applications to the Social Security office. SSI Advocates reported that participants often have difficulty filling out the complicated SSI application and filing it with the Social Security office. Left on their own, participants often make errors or fail to turn in their applications. To prevent these problems, Advocates have worked out a collaborative relationship with Social Security that enables applications to be filed online. Advocates fill out the application for the participant sitting in front of her/him and file it on the spot electronically, thus insuring that the application is both filled out correctly and that it is also submitted.

However, close monitoring and support does not stop with filing the application. As this worker describes, Advocates remain closely involved in the application process all along the way, providing support that sometimes includes accompanying applicants to appointments. As this conversation between Advocates reveals, this is a common practice among Advocates:

Advocate A: And, then, to know that, if the Advocate, if the participant needs the Advocate to go with them to say the Social Security Administration office, you know, they can meet the participant there and be sure that they get to that spot. So that makes a difference.

Facilitator: Does that happen very often that the Advocates go to the appointments?

Advocate B: At times, at times.

Advocate C: Yes, I know we go quite frequently where we work with the office in (name of office) where we meet our participants there to help them go through the application process. So that's something we do quite frequently.

These comments indicate that these practices not only help to channel participants to Advocates and successfully launch their applications, but they lay the foundation for building the trust and rapport between Advocates and participants that are key to the success of the application process. This Advocate describes the smooth integration of these practices:

So the participant that comes into the office to apply for General Relief and is determined that they may have a need for special services and are identified NSA, they're immediately referred to the SSI Advocate. And also having that mental health worker in our office, that helps tremendously. And then, you know, to have the worker actually complete the application with the individual. They've established a relationship with our participant, and sometimes that's the only person, the SSI Advocate's the only person the participant will communicate with.

Another Advocate agreed—the initial concrete, practical steps toward a successful application lead to essential relationship building between participants and their SSI Advocates:

But what works well...is when we see a participant who we identify, or the LEADER identifies, as having some medical or health issues, and that person works with us, and we have a rapport going, and we are able to assist them through the process, and that's what's working very well to me.

But as Advocates talked about their work with participants, it became clear that there was much more involved in establishing and maintaining good relations with participants than assisting them to successfully fulfill Social Security's requirements. They needed to be available and willing to help with whatever issues or problems the participant was having with their GR case. This meant being willing to go beyond the bounds of rigid job descriptions in responding to participants' needs. For example, one Advocate spoke about going outside of his job description to resolve a participant's GR issue that had he not intervened would have required the participant to make additional trips to the office to see a GR worker. He talked about building trust and connections with participants by letting them know that they could count on him in times of need.

A lot of these folks trust the Advocate. I know they trust me more than the (GR) worker... So they'll call and say, "I've got a problem with my GR case, can you help me out?" So [for them] it's, "If I can get him to do it, they don't have to talk to a worker. He's going to get it done as opposed to I've got to wait, go through the phone call system and all that stuff with my worker." So if I have 'em as an SSI Advocate, I will go ahead and take care of their GR issues.

This worker's actions spoke to what he knew were participants' priorities and the importance of responding to them. He went this extra mile because he knew that it could help to gain the participant's trust, cooperation, and ongoing contact that processing their applications required:

If I don't take care of their GR issues, they're not going to talk to me about SSI in the first place. [They're going to be focused on] "I didn't get my check," "I didn't get this." So they're not going to want to listen to anything I've got to say anyway. They want to get their benefits first, then it's easier for you to get the other things done, which SSI is a part of it.

Advocates working with physically and mentally disabled participants did not always have the luxury of using the traditional appointment model for maintaining contact with participants—these participants sometime forgot or for other reasons could not make it to pre-established appointments. This meant that they sometimes took whatever opportunities presented themselves to work on aspects of the SSI application process, an approach that requires flexibility and a willingness to adapt to participants' priorities and needs. One Advocate described seizing the opportunity afforded by the participant coming to her for help in resolving a problem that restored his benefits to work on an aspect of the SSI application:

Because then I can go to the Eligibility Worker, there's another form that I wrote up to clear to him, and get that to the worker or the supervisor, let the participant know, "Okay, today after five, your benefits will be back on. But, you still have to deal with me with X, Y, and Z." But like I said before, now he's in the front of the line, "I can trust this particular individual, he took care of me, I'm going to do what I need to do to get his done."

Still another way that Advocates cultivate relationships is by being accessible outside of the office whenever participants need them. These two workers said they were available by phone any time that participants want to call:

Advocate A: I think one of the reasons is because the social workers are more accessible than the eligibility workers also.

Advocate B: We don't have phone hours per se like they do.

Facilitator: So they can just get access to you – how do they get access to you?

Advocate B: They can call at any time.

Participants also knew that when they came to the GR office with a problem, they could count on seeing their Advocate, someone who knew and understood their circumstances, rather than a GR or Duty Worker whom they might not ever have seen before:

Or if they come in, we see them. It's not like if you come in, you have to see a duty worker, and you're not able to see your actual worker. And they don't like to see different people, they like to see who they've been dealing with on a steady basis. So when they come in, "Oh, you have to see..." they get upset, they get real angry for that. But every time they come in, they will see the actual social worker, 90 percent, unless we are on vacation or something. But 90 percent of the time, you will see your actual social worker, most of the time.

As noted previously, many SSI applicants have their applications rejected, often a number of times. Advocates said that this was especially true of applicants who had applied on their own. In this context, one Advocate hoped to gain the trust required to see the application through providing hope that by working together, this time the outcome of the application process could be different:

Because a lot of these folk have filed claims on their own, they went through the denial circuits where they get denied every four or five months and keep filing claims. So I'll give them a different approach at things, let them know about the appeal process. I'll tell them, "Your medical history is shaky right now, I need to get you over to the County hospital or clinic." There are all types of scenarios that I have at my disposal to use.

Listening to Advocates recount these successful practices, one SSI Advocate was helpful in clarifying that they were only possible because of the Advocates' smaller caseloads compared to Eligibility Workers. With fewer demands on their time and energy, they could expend the effort required for such accessibility and the flexibility to go outside of their job descriptions:

In defense of the eligibility staff, their caseloads are much higher than ours. We do have a lot of cases, but we do have that opportunity to establish a rapport with the client and a relationship, so that if they see that we took care of something, they'll trust us enough to take care of their SSI application and the whole process. If I say we're going to take care of something, we both go through with it and follow through. So sometimes, yeah, they (Eligibility Workers) might not be as, what is the word, as approachable as we may be with the client in trying to resolve issues.

Participants Talk About General Relief: What Helps and Hinders Their Progress Through the Program¹

As part of the effort to better understand “best practices” and areas for needed improvement in the General Relief program from the points of view of participants, focus groups were conducted with two groups of GR participants: GROW program participants and SSI applicants with physical or mental disabilities. Focus group sessions conducted with GROW participants centered on the following issues: background characteristics (e.g., age, how long in GR, education, housing status, number of children, etc.); participants’ experiences with the application process; assistance from the program to find work; housing assistance; communication and relations with staff; receipt of GR in any other state or county; and how services have been helpful in progressing toward employment and self-sufficiency. Questions for SSI applicants focused on background characteristics (e.g., age, how long in the SSI application process, education, housing status, number of children, etc.); participants’ experiences with the SSI application process; assistance from the program in applying for SSI; housing assistance; communication and relations with staff; receipt of GR in any other county or state; and how services had been helpful in assisting participants with their SSI applications. Both GROW and SSI-pending participants were asked how they thought these programs could better assist them in progressing through the program and achieving their goals.

The results presented in this section of the GR program process evaluation focus on the following issues: GROW and SSI-pending participants’ priorities and concerns about securing employment and getting onto SSI; the ways that GROW workers, SSI Advocates, and GR workers have been helpful; participants’ concerns about the program’s operating procedures; how their needs are being met by the program; and recommendations for improvement in program operating procedures and services.

Limitations to this report include the fact that recruitment efforts were unsuccessful for one of the groups—18 to 24-year-olds and/or non-custodial parents—that were to be included in the study.² The study also is not able to provide an understanding of participants who come to LA County from other states or counties, since none of the focus group participants fit that description.

¹ The names of the recipients interviewed for this study have been changed in the text.

² Efforts were made on three separate occasions to recruit and interview participants who were between the ages of 18-24 and/or non-custodial parents and who had participated in the Subsidized Work Program. However, these recruitment efforts were unsuccessful as only one former Subsidized Work Program participant attended a focus group session. For reasons that are not entirely clear, GROW participants came to these focus groups which results in an over representation of GROW participants in this study.

“If this Program Wasn’t Here, I’d be Having Problems, Big Problems:” GR Helps Participants to Survive

All focus group participants were either disabled and unable to work or had been looking unsuccessfully for work for months or even years. All were also either homeless or would be living on the streets were it not for finding a recovery house or relatives who had taken them in. They were people who had hit bottom and had nowhere else to turn but to GR and its small \$221 per month cash grant, food stamps, and the program’s transportation allowance to assist them in looking for work. And while a number of participants complained that the cash grant was not enough, they also acknowledged the critical difference that even this small amount of money, combined with food stamps, made in their lives. Tina, who at age 50 was homeless when she applied for GR and is now applying for SSI, described how the program immediately provided her with food and shelter: “...when I first applied for GR, I was homeless and they gave me a motel room and stuff like that. They gave me food stamps and stuff. They really helped me...” Hester, who at fifty years old was another homeless SSI applicant, also thanked GR for the help that the program gave her: “I managed, and I do thank GR for being there for me because it kept me from being on the street, and I was homeless.” And, Ronald, a 45 year-old participant who turned to GR two years ago, applied to GR on the recommendation of his parole officer after being released from jail and then getting laid off from his electronics job. Now disabled from a shoulder injury and waiting for SSI approval, Ronald described the difference that receiving GR has made in his life:

If it weren’t for GR, I don’t know what a lot of people would do. ...I think, because GR is saving a lot of people. Because I think if they ever stop GR, it’s going to be problems, it’s going to be big, big problems. I know it’s not a lot of money but, you know, this money is good for us, because we really need it, you know what I’m saying? It’s really helpful, you know what I’m saying? Food, you know what I’m saying? It’s a blessing.

It’s pretty cool, it’s pretty nice, you know. Like I say, this is a blessing, because if this program wasn’t here, man, I’d be having problems, man, big problems.

“They Go the Extra Mile:” GROW Workers Help with Immediate Needs and Job Search

GROW Line Staff and Managers focused their assessment of the GR program on the complex and multifaceted work of delivering services that are both efficient and effective while dealing with ever-expanding caseloads. By contrast, participants’ concerns focused on their poverty situations and how the program was helping them to meet their immediate survival needs and longer-term goals of getting work. All GROW focus group participants, except those who could not work due to disabilities, said what they most wanted was help to get a job. But, in an economy in which jobs are scarce, much of the conversation centered on how hard it was to find work. Many participants realized that they were handicapped by a lack of education—they all had some high school but many

did not graduate. Others, like 28-year-old George who has been off and on GR for the past five years and is now “staying from place-to-place,” was handicapped in his attempts to find work because he went to jail after falling on hard times.

It's been about like almost six years now. I lost my job and fell into hard times, and I'm going to jail, got a record. When I came back out, I was trying to get employment again—in what I used to do. I just couldn't because of what I have the charges, and it's just been ongoing to this day.

Yet, even those with work histories who had little difficulty finding jobs in the past were unsuccessful in the current economic climate. Duc was a 35 year-old participant who worked for 10 years until he lost his job when the company he worked for shut down. On GR for the second time and living with his sister, his struggle to find work was typical of several of those in the focus groups:

Facilitator: So it's been hard to find a job?

Duc: Yeah, right now, you know, every company that, you know, I ask about a job is, they say they told me it's very slow so. I even like go out, you know, like you call a business card, get the business phone number and all that kind of stuff. Every company I got like, I know, like, like 100 business cards. They say, they told me the same thing. Right now, there's no job, jobs. They're slow.

While younger and less experienced in the workforce than Duc, 18-year-old Tom who had been on GR for one year and lived “from friend-to-friend,” also had been able to find jobs in supermarkets until about a year ago. When these jobs seemed to dry up, he turned to GR:

Tom: I worked in a supermarket before. I worked on a lot of stuff, it's just like the jobs I used to work, they're hard to get now. I can't even work in like a supermarket no more 'cause it's hard. I don't know.

Facilitator: When did you work in a supermarket?

Tom: About two years ago now? When I was 16, 17. And now, it's kinda, like, when you apply, it's like hard to even get an interview and stuff. Like I tried to apply at Vons. They're only taking people that work at another Vons. They'll take them, and they switch... They don't like new people comin' in.

Greg, a high school graduate who was taking college courses, and Tanya who had been homeless since 1992, also had difficulties finding employment:

Greg: You might even get the call, “Oh, we like your application, but right now, we're in a hiring freeze, so we'll call you maybe in six months. Well in six months—

Tanya: There used to be so many jobs around there, factory jobs. I could just walk down the street, get one job and go down get another job, just like that. Didn't even have a high school diploma or anything. Now, it's just a lot of competition now. There's just so many people, there's just not enough jobs.

Irving, a 27-year-old participant who had turned to GR intermittently for the past seven years and, at the time of the interview, lived "from friend-to-friend," had been more fortunate in sometimes finding jobs. But his problem was that they did not last:

Facilitator: What about in finding work? Can you maybe talk a little bit about difficulties around finding or finding and keeping work?

Irving: The difficult thing is keeping it. 'Cause like what they, sometimes they, like agencies, come through with job openings like warehouses and things like that.

Facilitator: Temp agencies?

Irving: Yeah. And the job might last probably a week or two, but it's still somethin' though. The longest temp work I had lasted four months.

Because they recognized the importance of education to their chances for employment, all focus group participants who had not graduated from high school said that they would welcome earning a GED if the County were to offer that opportunity. Nonetheless, getting work had been difficult for everyone, and one recipient succinctly reflected on their experiences when he said, "...it's hard out there. They just don't want to hire people." Discouraged by months and sometimes years of looking for work, some participants like Duc were ready to give up:

Yeah, I have a question. So you want me to still go out and look for a job, or I'm just like want to, you know, give up because (Laughs) I went to every company. They tell me the same thing. It gets you discouraged.

And 28-year-old Tony provided poignant testimony to the discouragement that some participants in the focus groups felt about their efforts to find work:

Where I was coming from, I am coming out of high school, not graduating. I am trying to better myself, I really didn't want to apply for GR. But I did because I had to. Once they started letting me know you are going to look for work, okay, I am going to look for work. I did everything that I could do. But sometimes, they want more. How much more can we give them? We try to give them what we could, but it is hard to find a job.

These GROW participants' experiences show that while work was a goal, their efforts may have been hampered, in some cases, by personal barriers such as education, prison and jail records, or lack of job skills and experience. Yet, the fact that neither

higher levels of education, employment history, nor housing status seemed to make the difference in participants' ability to get jobs signals a larger problem in the economy. Still, some participants blamed themselves, and, in some cases, their failed efforts resulted in discouragement that made them feel like giving up. Such circumstances made everyone in the focus groups who faced this problem extremely grateful for the help that GR provides.

Given these difficulties, focus group participants appreciated the difference that the GROW program made as they struggled to survive while they looked for work. With so little money from their GR checks, participants such as Stanley talked about the importance of the assistance they received from GROW workers for such basic necessities as grooming and clothing for their job search: "They give you money for like haircuts, too. Like dress clothes, and if you don't have anything to wear, they give you clothing vouchers, too." Irving also talked about how his GROW worker not only met these needs but always seemed to "go the extra mile" to help him out:

Yeah, I had called my GROW worker once before, uh, I was like, I need money for a haircut, and she could have put probably like \$15.00, \$20.00 on it, but she put \$65.00. So with the change, I went and got soap and underclothes and everything like that and just showed her the receipt. Yeah, 'cause she didn't have to do that. She could have just put enough just for the haircut.

GROW workers also helped young and inexperienced participants obtain documents and skills that are necessary for job search. Eighteen-year-old Cheryl who had been on GR for four months talked about how her GROW worker helped her get an ID card: "Like, 'cause they (GROW) could be so helpful. Like they give you like papers to get your ID for like seven bucks. You can go get an ID for seven bucks!"

But participants not only appreciated the help that GROW Workers gave with their immediate, practical needs; they also valued their help in acquiring skills that would enable them to take the next steps toward fulfilling their goal of one day getting a job and leaving GR. Eighteen-year-old George said that the help from his GROW worker to put together his resume, along with advice about how to dress for interviews, gave him confidence when he went to look for jobs:

I don't know, how to create a better resume, stuff like that. Resume, um, gave me confidence and, um, with interviews and stuff like that. How to dress appropriately for interviews, like what questions to ask, not to ask, stuff like that.

Stanley, who had only worked at short-term, "odd jobs" in the past, appreciated his GROW worker helping him to learn how to fill out job applications:

Yeah, they (GROW workers) help you fill out applications if you don't know how to fill them out. They give you practice applications, master applications. Yeah, 'cause at first, when I used to fill out my job

applications, like for salary, I used to put like, you know, I used to put a number down. And they used to tell us like, "No, don't put that" or whatever, "because that might be below what they pay, and just put negotiable" and things like that.

And, Jose also talked about the practical help that his GROW worker provided in filling out forms and writing a cover letter for a job application: "Like they'll give me like emails or like forms, or like he'll show me how to make a cover letter, so a real proper resume. He showed me that himself."

Advocates Helped Participants Travel the Long and Difficult Road to SSI Approval

Focus group members with SSI applications pending described the approval process as long and arduous. Most had been in the application process for several months or even years, and a number had had their applications turned down one or more times. While most seemed resigned to the wait, it nonetheless wore on them: "You have to go through this session and then this session, and each one, you have to wait. You just have to wait." Some like Alicia felt that the SSI application requirements, with their inflexible deadlines, were designed more to make the process difficult than to enable access to the program. Angela and 45-year-old Adrian who applied four years ago when she was homeless, talked about how this made them feel:

Alicia: Okay, you being homeless, right, and then you miss coming to check the mail. You've got to check that mail every day, because they will, that's how they get you. And then, okay, like I didn't even bring my little, uh, doctor's papers. I started to bring it. If you miss, like, you've got to call in that week. You can't call before, the week before your time expires, to go for the job thing, and that's the... See, I'm a person, I put all my paperwork in one big old purse, and I forget.

Facilitator: I see other people nodding their heads [in agreement].

Alicia: They make it difficult for you. They make it difficult for you so you can get cut off.

Adrian: Unfortunately, I agree.

In addition to keeping track of appointments and deadlines, the amount of complicated paperwork was one of the most difficult aspects of the application process. Fortunately, SSI Advocates help participants fill out the required forms. This assistance made all of the difference for SSI pending applicants like Tanya who had been waiting for SSI approval for three or four years. She said that the amount of paperwork, along with the number of denials that she received, were the only things that made her think she might not continue the application process:

Facilitator: Are there any reasons that you would have wanted to avoid applying for SSI or anything that would have made you want to quit?

Linda: Uh, a lot of paperwork, a lot of hell, a lot of, a lot of them denying me.

His Advocate's help with filling out forms, along with reassurances about ongoing support through the application process, was also critical to Ronald's ability to continue his efforts to get into the program:

I had a worker that told me that by me being disabled, they helped show me how to fill out my SSI papers and stuff like that, and that was really, really helpful to me because I can't work... He just told me, you know, I should be receiving some more forms in the mail, fill them out, you know...if I get denied, there's some kind of way they'd help me get an attorney and stuff like that. That's so good about GR because if you go outside the GR building, they're going to charge you. He was real, very helpful to me... I needed that. So, I've gotten that going for me right now... I can't work, no way.

Ronald's comments reveal that SSI Advocates not only help with forms, but they also encourage participants to apply and to qualify for benefits that they might not otherwise have known about. On GR for two years, 43-year-old Alice's SSI Advocate not only helped her fill out forms but also encouraged her to pursue disability benefits to which she felt Alice might be entitled:

Alice: She was very nice. She was really, really nice. She did all the paperwork for me.

Facilitator: She filled it out for you?

Alice: She did everything. I didn't have to do nothing. All I had to do was sign my name. She did all the paperwork for me. She just was excellent. I have no complaints with that. I have no complaints with her. She told me that she was going to call me if she had any more questions when she gets on the computer because she was talking to my son about my disability, that I should have been receiving disability. Because of my background history and working and everything, I should have been getting disability instead of, you know, GR and everything. So she was in the process of, "Let's go get your disability till your SSI comes through." So, she was very, very helpful.

“Anyone Trying to Help Me is a Blessing:” Participants Appreciate GROW Workers and SSI Advocates Who are Accessible and Understand Their Situations

In addition to the practical assistance that they provide, what participants most appreciated were GROW workers and SSI Advocates who were both easy to get a hold of and understood the difficulties they were going through. As Alice put it:

When you get somebody that's concerned about your needs and somebody that cares about you, then that makes you feel good on the inside to motivate you to do better. But, if you get people that don't care...then that makes you feel, like damn, and get you in a depressed stage to where you lie down—what am I going out there for? They don't give a damn. They don't care.

Integral to feelings that workers were concerned was participants' ability to contact them in times of need. When asked about her GROW worker, 19-year-old Cynthia who has been on GR for nine months appreciated how her GROW worker was “always there”: “Uh, I like my GROW worker ‘cause I can call her like if I need anything, and she can help me.” And Joe, a 22-year-old participant who had been on GR for six months and lived out of his truck, talked about being able to see his GROW worker without long waits that he had often encountered at the GR office:

And it's (seeing the GROW worker) immediate, too. It's not like waiting for hours. When I get into that office, the GROW office, I'm there for maybe 10 minutes, and they're already seeing me.

Perhaps surprisingly since unanimity is rare, no one in the GROW focus groups had a negative thing to say about their GROW workers. Underlying their universal praise was both workers' availability and participants' feelings that GROW workers respected and listened to their needs. Conversation between Joe and Cheryl reflects this experience:

Facilitator: Some of you have talked a little bit about the ways that the staff talked to you. Do you feel that you're respected by them? Do you feel that they're there to help you?

Joe: Absolutely.

Cheryl: Yes. Mm-hmm.

Facilitator: In what ways? What makes you think that?

Cheryl: And like I don't know, they just be there, and they put, like, let me see, how can I say it? Like they hear you all, you know, when you talk to them or whatever. They hear you.

Joe: I definitely agree. I have (name of GROW worker), and he's pretty cool. And I, he always, you know, helps me out.

It also meant a lot to Joe that his GROW worker believed him and provided reassurance that his benefits would not be cancelled for failing to fulfill GROW requirements as a result of having been in an accident:

When I told him (GROW worker), you know, that I got into the accident, he's like, "Oh come on in, and we'll discuss this," and I just came in today, you know, 'cause I have—I was in an accident, so they're trying to prove I was in the accident. So he just said, "Oh, come on in, you know, we're not gonna cancel you. You know, just go to this appointment, and you'll stay on GR."

GROW workers had the benefit of long-term relationships with participants that enabled them to build up trust and good will. But what seemed to contribute most to these positive relations were GROW workers' accessibility, their empathy with participants' poverty situations and difficulties, and their flexibility and willingness to meet needs related to participants' efforts to find work.

Operating Procedures Lead to Mixed Experiences with GR Workers

When asked about their experiences when applying for GR services, a number of participants said that their entire experience in the GR program "went smooth" and that not only the GROW workers, but also the GR caseworkers, had been helpful to them. As Jose put it, "Yeah, it went very smooth. They helped me out, explained everything." Tanya echoed this feeling, saying, "Yeah, my worker was nice. My GROW worker and my GR worker, they're both nice." And, Duc agreed, saying, "Same thing with my worker, man. He's nice." Alice and Floyd from the SSI pending focus group also said that their application process went smoothly. As April put it:

They was really nice, you know. They benefitted me as far as their pleasant attitude. That was a plus to me, see that was just a total plus, and then they helped me do whatever I could do. And, I was like, okay.

Ronald saw difficulties with GR workers as the exception:

One worker or two might be a little bit too hard, you know what I'm saying, than the other workers, you know what I'm saying? But, maybe they're having a bad day or something, you know.

Nonetheless, in contrast to the overwhelmingly positive feelings toward GROW workers, several participants thought that other GR workers presented barriers to fulfilling requirements and progressing through the program. Such feelings appear to stem, in part, from the fact that those such as Eligibility workers are on front lines of applying the rules regarding eligibility and fulfilling requirements. These are the workers whom they

associate with the long waits when they first apply and the ones they see for missed appointments or failure to fulfill other GR requirements that could lead to sanctions or cutting off their aid.

Yet, the source of participants' problems did not seem to stem so much from how they felt treated by GR workers—they did not indicate that, for the most part, GR workers were rude or disrespectful; rather, the source of the problems were the result of operational procedures associated with their dealings with GR workers that participants felt hindered them or created "hassles." In contrast to relations with GROW workers, these operating procedures—for example, the automated customer service line that makes getting in contact with workers difficult and the fact that caseworker assignments frequently changed—resulted in communication that was much less user friendly, and relationships that, overall, were much more impersonal and fleeting, than those that participants had with GROW workers.

Even before meeting GR workers, the long waits that participants experienced when first applying to the program began to set a tone of frustration and alienation from the workers they would soon encounter. Nineteen-year-old Greg who has been in GROW two months described the wait as, "slow and tiring," and Joe explained what this was like:

But, we are talking about serious long lines, like an hour or two hours. Oh, yeah, the first time I ever did it, I got here at like 8:00 and left at 5:00. I was there all day just waiting. [They couldn't see me] so then I had to come back, I think, two or three days later.

Jose also reported having to wait four to five hours to see his caseworker. And Charles agreed that, "Waiting in line is the hardest part." Even with an appointment, Tom talked about having to wait hours beyond this time to see a GR worker:

Say your appointment is like 9:30. By the time you get in from 9:00-10:00, so she puts you like somewhere on the list when she has time, so you probably be getting called after lunch. I guess they go to lunch, so you don't get called until 1:00.

After the initial application process, participants' next encounters with GR workers are when they file QR7 reports to maintain eligibility or come to request transportation money, replacement of a lost EBT card, or to respond to a Notice of Action for failing to fulfill a program requirement. On these occasions, many in the focus groups such as Joe reported difficulty in getting a hold of their worker: "I had to come directly here because either the phones kept ringing, you can't ever get a hold of them." Gordon, an SSI pending applicant, talked about the problems he had contacting his GR worker even during her designated call in hours:

You got some workers who don't answer their phone during their phone hours. They'll sit there and let it ring. They said, "Now, my phone hours are from 9:00-11:00, those two hours. I got to call them, right, to tell them what I need to tell 'em. So, I'll call and be on hold for 15 or 20 minutes, and nobody will pick up the phone.

Tanya, another SSI pending applicant, said she only got through to her worker by frequent and repeated calling: "I'll try almost every, every 20 minutes till I get through. I'm a real, I'm a harasser (laughs)." These sorts of difficulties lead Irving to compare the accessibility of the GROW worker to the difficulties he had getting a hold of the GR worker:

Yeah, the GROW workers, they help, but like with the other workers, like the GR, it be hard to get in touch with them. You try to call them and call them again, and by the time you get in touch with 'em, they send you a termination letter, and then you gotta come down here and go through all this process. It's hard to get in touch with them.

Irving attributed this problem to a new customer service call-in system that participants use to get in contact with GR workers: "Yeah, 'cause now they don't have no direct phone no more. They go, you gotta call some kind of customer service thing." The problem with the customer service line, as George and Stanley described it, is that while participants are told that they will be called back, they must wait by the phone or risk missing the call. If this happens, they must start the process all over again:

Greg: They'll call you back in 72, 48 hours type deal.

Facilitator: Do they call back then?

Greg: Most likely, yeah, but then you don't know what time, so throughout those hours, you gotta be by the phone, I guess. They don't give you a specific hour and day. You're gonna be getting a job, and, you know, you go home, and somebody left you a message. You have to call again.

On occasions when he could get through to the GR office on the phone, Irving sometimes experienced long waits before being connected to a worker:

'Cause when I waited for them, it was at least 45 minutes. They said the wait is long, and we appreciate your time waiting, but that's a long wait.

Encountering these difficulties, participants like Stanley often abandoned attempts to make phone contact and came to the GR office to attempt to deal with his issues in person.

That's what happened to me. That's why I gotta go Monday 'cause if she woulda called when they said she would, then after awhile she called and

left a message, and then I called her back. But she don't answer, she left, um, I guess a number to her cell phone or somethin'. I called that number, and it goes straight to voicemail.

Several participants reported mistakes made by GR workers. Joe expressed frustration about nearly losing his benefits for failure to attend a meeting that he said he was never told about:

I've also noticed that I get cancelled a lot. They just cancel you for no reason. I call in, and they tell me I've missed stuff. There's bad communication. They don't ever send anything out, 'cause I use my girlfriend's mailing address. They never send anything out. I almost go there, you know, almost daily. I never get anything. You know, they never give me a phone call. They have my cell phone. They never call me.

Hearing Ronald's story, Brenda also reported a near sanction that she attributed to a worker error:

Because I had to do the same thing. They sent me a letter saying that they didn't receive my form. But, I told her that she'd better go down and check because I know I personally brought it down because he stuck it in the box. And I asked him for a receipt also, but they don't give you no type of receipt to verify that you did bring it down here. When she looked again, she had it, so everything went through, and it was okay.

Twenty-eight-year-old Tony was in GROW but did not see his GROW worker on a regular basis because his back problems left him unable to work. Denied twice by SSI but hoping to apply again, Tony needed ongoing support and spoke poignantly about the encouragement he wished that GR workers could give:

No contact, the only contact I get is through the 1-800 [number], that's it. How will I know my worker. I've seen her one time only. GR should help out, and the workers should talk to their clients, see how they are doing. Ask them, "How's your work?" "How is your life living at home?" At least a little something, so they can be thankful that they could say, "Now my worker called me to see how am I doing, what I am doing. Is there any jobs available, or come and see me in case you need anything," help people out more.

I get frustrated over that. I wanna know who my GR worker, who she is. I wanna know what's her number, so in case anything, emergency, I can call her. What if you don't have anyone else to call, you don't have a family member, you are living on your own?

Encountering these problems leads participants to make unfavorable comparisons between the service they received from GR workers compared to their GROW case managers. Stanley made such a comparison:

Mostly, it's like the GR worker you get all the hassles from. With the GROW worker, not really, you don't have, there's nothin' bad you can say about the GROW worker. Every time I call her, she pick her phone up. She sees you when she's supposed to see you. But the GR worker, that's the hassle right there.

'Cause they're like, if you don't get your benefits on that day, then it takes all day to talk to your worker, and you're goin' through the whole weekend without nothin'. Like no benefits, no food stamps, or anything like that. Um, yeah, that's the only thing. The GROW worker, they might, the GROW worker, they on top of their stuff. It's just at the GR. That's the hassle, the GR worker. Yeah, but then the GROW, they always there though. The GROW workers, they're always there, but the GR workers, you actually have to come down to this place to talk to 'em.

Often participants contact GR caseworkers during times of stress when they are attempting to get onto the program or they must deal with problems such as missed appointments or failure to fulfill other program requirements that might lead to sanctions or cutting off their benefits. Under these circumstances, GR workers may be seen as gatekeepers, impersonal rule enforcers with power to grant or deny participants' benefits. This, combined with problems communicating with GR workers and the lack of a relationship with a GR caseworker who knows and might possibly understand their circumstances, leads participants to focus their frustrations on these workers.

The Mismatch Between GR Services and Participants' Needs

Beyond the feeling that they had about GR and GROW caseworkers, participants talked about ways that GR services could have been more helpful in assisting them to progress through the program. The main concerns for GROW participants were in the areas of job leads that did not result in employment, the transportation allowance that was inadequate, and housing assistance that was too costly and rules were too stringent. Concerns among SSI pending participants centered primarily on the waiting period that was too long and medical examinations that are too brief and superficial to adequately document their disabilities.

"I Don't Think They Really Help You find a Job:" GROW Participants Complain that Job Leads Do Not Help them Find Work

As discussed earlier in this report, what all but the disabled members of the focus groups wanted the GR program to do was help them to find work. When asked how helpful the GR program had been in assisting them to reach this goal, participants'

responses were mixed. Stanley said that he had been successful in getting jobs, primarily through the leads he received from his GROW worker.

Yeah, they actually have helped me get me a job, you know, here and there, you know, at warehouses. And I worked at, uh, a formal warehouse once for like seven months. And they, they let you know when your time is up. The job is over, so they send you somewhere else and somethin' like that. If there's some more work, they'll let you know.

But for other participants, these job leads proved to be less useful. Leroy, for example, spoke positively about the resources his GROW worker had provided for job training: "And you want to get a forklift license, I'll give you \$40.00. Check your card in a couple of days, and it will be on there. Here, go over this way." He also appreciated the job referrals that his GROW worker provided but felt disappointed when the employers he had been sent to were not hiring:

Well, when I go visit him (GROW worker), he got job leads up there. And he might even say, "What do you do? Oh, go check that one out!" "Do you drive a bus? Yeah, go check that one." 'Cause I got a commercial license. [But when I applied] they said, "Oh, we're in a hiring freeze."

After numerous unsuccessful leads, Cheryl gave up on referrals from GROW workers and decided to find a job on her own:

It's (GR program) been cool, but I don't think that they, they don't really help you find a job because you got to call so many numbers they gave you, and I never got hired until I started, I'm just like forget it, I'm gonna look for a job on the street, and I just found a job quick. Like one day, and I just found a job, and I started the next week.

While some job leads from GROW workers worked out and others did not, participants were unanimous in feeling that the job search requirements—attendance at Job Club and submitting 48 job applications per month—did more to impede, than to assist, them in finding work. Heading the list of program requirements that participants thought were not only unhelpful but a hindrance was the requirement to attend three weeks of Job Club. Cheryl, for example, thought that while the information and training provided in Job Club might be useful for those who were just beginning to look for work, she already had significant job experience and did not need instruction in how to dress appropriately for work, prepare resumes, and fulfill a quota of job applications. Alice's anger was palpable when she talked about her experience in Job Club:

I went to the GROW program. But the GROW program to me is BS, due for the simple fact I don't need nobody taking me through résumés and telling me how to get a job. I know how to get a job. I know how to do my résumé. Just give me direction on who's going to hire me. Sending me all through these classes and things, I don't need these classes, I've been in there and done that. You know, just give me a job. I'm searching for a

job. I'm out searching for a job. You're sending me doing something that I'm already doing. So, to hell with you, I'm not going to go through all of this. It's okay for people that don't know how to do a résumé, who don't have experience on working on a job. That's good for those. But those who know, they need a different type of program for that.

Cynthia complained about being delayed in her job search because she was dropped and had to start Job Club all over again for what she considered to be a minor infraction of the rules:

Hmm, I didn't like it 'cause like you have to go through all these classes. When I went to the class, I was like two minutes late, and I got dropped so I had to start all over again. With the lady, I was like, "I'm runnin' two minutes late," and she didn't care. So I had to wait for like another two weeks for the next class to start, and I had to finish it.

And, after fulfilling these requirements, neither Leinesha nor China felt that the leads they received in Job Club helped them to get a job.

China: But they tried to help, but I don't think they helped because I still don't have a job. And they give you all these job leads, and you call, and they want something different and they say something else.

Facilitator: So the leads aren't helpful.

Cheryl: ...so like I called a lot of numbers but they still were we have no work, we have no work. Like, it's not helpful at all.

When asked how Job Club might be more helpful, Cheryl and Cynthia responded that they thought that instead of the current one-size-fits-all approach, Job Club would benefit participants more if workers were to take time with participants to learn about their interests and what needs they had for job search skills: "I think they take their time and work with us. They just try to rush everything through, like they don't take their time or nothing or find out what we are interested in."

A second component of the job search is the requirement to submit 48 job applications per month. Participants did not seem to think that the number of applications was unreasonable or too difficult to fulfill. For example, while Dwight did not think it was easy, he also did not think the requirement was impossible: "Uh, it's pretty – I mean, I wouldn't say it's easy, but, I mean, it's a lot, you know, 48, but, you know, it's not impossible, you know."

However, Josh said that it wasn't the number of job applications that GR requires that is difficult; rather, the problem with the job search requirement is that most employers require online applications, and GR would only allow a limited number of online applications to fulfill the quota. As a result, Joe said he spent more time looking for

employers who would allow him to submit the paper applications required by GR than he did actually looking for work:

Like fill out 48 jobs, applications a month. But what I found tricky about that is I went to the mall, and I, you know, I went to pretty much every store, and mostly everything's online. But the requirement is you can only apply for 16 online, and I think 32 or whatever it was paper applications. The thing about that is, no one has paper applications. I got five applications that day. I was there for five hours. Yeah, five applications out of the 60 or 70 stores that are in the mall. Everyone said go online, go to this website, and just submit it straight through the Internet.

GR participants not only have to fulfill job search requirements during the nine months of the year that they are on GR, but they also must engage in community service work after they time out of GR in order to continue to receive food stamps. None of the focus group participants complained about fulfilling this requirement, but some had difficulty with how it was implemented. Earlier in this report, for example, Irving talked about how he had gotten lost when he was sent to a work site far from his home. And, Leroy was upset because he was given an assignment to work in an area that he knew to be dangerous:

They be trying to send me to the park. I'm not going to the park. Are they crazy? I'm not getting shot at for no food. You see, I grew up in Compton so I know all the bad areas. I'm not going to no park in Compton to clean up. No way.

Facilitator: So some of the places you feel could be dangerous that they send you to.

Dwight: I know it's dangerous!

Transportation Allowance is Inadequate

Those who are fulfilling community service hours after timing out of GR also complained that with no GR money coming in, the small transportation allowance they received was not enough to get them to and from the work site. Several focus group participants agreed as Leroy explained the problem:

Dwight: Okay, you don't get no money. All you get is food stamps. How you able to catch the bus to do those 20 hours?

Tanya: Yeah, really, that's what I'm saying.

Dwight: See it's a Catch-22. So you call her (GR worker) and tell her, "Hey, I'm, I'm trying to do my hours. I need some bus transport, transportation." So she might give you \$10.00 because, what is it, \$5.00 a day for a day pass? Excuse me, well, that's gonna add up to more than

what they give you. So, you'll be, you'll still be sitting somewhere stranded like.

Tom: Okay. You have the different passes. But, you can't use one pass. See, so that's, and that makes it hard there too.

Housing Assistance: Placements Too Restrictive and Costly

Housing assistance has the potential to be of great assistance to GR participants, many of whom are homeless. Yet, most of those in the focus groups said that they either had not been offered this assistance or had declined to take advantage of it. They turned it down because the rules in the housing facilities were too restrictive or because the money that was deducted from their GR check, if they accepted housing assistance, seemed too costly. George talked about initially accepting housing assistance in the form of hotel vouchers but then declining them because of the curfew rules that restricted his coming and going from the facility where he was placed:

Tom: They're called hotel vouchers.

Facilitator: Right. So you've been able to access that some, too?

Tom: One time I did, but it didn't really work out, so I just stopped. I told my worker she could, like I didn't want it no more so she could like not give it to me. I didn't want the vouchers.

Facilitator: Can you tell me why it didn't work out?

Tom: Well, those, like you gotta be at the room like at the same time and all that, and they never did, my schedule where I had to actually, I got home a little later than the time they, they requested.

Irving was also offered hotel vouchers but refused them because of the money that would be deducted from his small GR check had he accepted them. In Stanley's case, he had other options:

I never used the voucher 'cause I was able to, you know, go through like from friend to friend, and the reason why I denied the voucher was they said, like, it would take from like the benefits they give you. So that's why I like denied the voucher.

SSI Applicants Complain About Long Waits for Approval, Too Much Paperwork, Inadequate Medical Exams, and Lack of Information about Services

Consistent complaints from participants whose SSI applications were pending also centered on the difficulty that they had in getting their SSI applications approved. Even though he cannot work because of throbbing pain caused by a lack of cartilage in his

knee that makes it impossible for him to “stand on my feet for longer than 30 minutes at a time,” Gordon said his case had been denied because he lacked sufficient medical documentation to declare him disabled. Tony felt he suffered from the same problem and blamed such difficulties on what he deemed to be inadequate and superficial medical exams from doctors to whom participants were sent for diagnosis and documentation of their disabilities.

Tony was a participant who had been on GR and searching for a job for the first year and a half until he hurt his back and was diagnosed with depression. His SSI application had been denied twice, and he was about to see a doctor at a Free Clinic from whom he hoped to acquire documentation of his disabilities for yet another attempt to qualify for SSI disability benefits. Frustrated with his several rejections, he spoke bitterly about the inadequate care he felt he had received from the doctors who had examined him:

And those doctors, they don't do nothing. They only check your pressure in your palm, that's it. They don't check you that good.

Facilitator: So they don't check your back either?

Tony: No, he looked at the back and puffed it. [I screamed] ahhh, because it hurts you know. [The doctor said], “Okay, you're disabled.” But how are you gonna know how I am, you know. I walk in, and then five minutes later, boom, I am gone? I didn't even spend half an hour with you guys. I say they need more, I guess, better doctors. They already have the doctors, but they need more equipment, you know.

Tony: I guess they wanted someone out of the office right away, so they can keep their own time. But if they are going to send us to the doctor, I think that the doctor should be doing everything that they are supposed to do. Say if it is a physical, a physical.

Most of these problems were the result of referrals from the Social Security office rather than GR's procedures and requirements, and the Advocates' job was to help SSI pending participants navigate these waters. And, as noted earlier, most applicants found assistance from the SSI advocates helpful and they appreciated their assistance. Michael and Leah described their SSI Advocates as friendly and helpful:

Michael: I just had a good experience. My advocate is [name of Advocate], and he took care of the paperwork. I was not home that day, I went to get the newspaper for my mom, and she said that my SSI advocate [name of Advocate], he left a number. I returned the phone call, I talked to him, and then he, you know, basically took care of me. In fact, that's why I'm here today, because of him.

Leah: It's basically the same as Michael because [name of the same Advocate], and he said, you know, he basically told me from the beginning

how it was going to go, and I just took it at that. And he called me asking me if I wanted to participate in this, and I said, yeah, okay, and I'm here.

And Tanya who had once been on SSI, but was cut off and had now been waiting for three years for her application to be approved, appreciated her Advocate's encouragement during the long wait for approval: "[They keep telling you] don't give up. Yeah, yes, keep on going. Don't stop. She keeps on giving me encouragement." However, after being denied and going through the appeals process seven times, Gordon worried that support from the SSI Advocates might not continue. And, because of his disability, he did not know how he would be able to fulfill the GROW program's work requirements:

Now, what they'll do here...they've been behind you for seven appeals. I'm thinking that after a certain amount of appeals, then they don't believe that, you know, they say that you have a chance of winning. [They'll say] "The only way we can retain you on GR is that you now have to apply as able to work. Now, we have to put you on the right work project, right?"

Participants Who Don't Fit the GROW or SSI Pending Programs: The Case of Tony

Tony is one of several in the focus groups that seems to comprise a subset of GROW participants with disabilities that were severe enough to keep them from working but not sufficiently debilitating to qualify for SSI. Still in the GROW program but unable to hold down a job, they were not held to GR's job search and reporting requirements, and they had little of the contact and support that others got from GROW workers. With no clear pathway out of their situations, because of stringent SSI qualification requirements and a job market that increasingly requires increasingly competitive mental skills and abilities, these participants seemed especially lost and in need of support from caseworkers. But, since they were not actively pursuing work or in the SSI application process, their only contact with workers was with the GR caseworkers. Tony wished there was help in the GR program for people like himself:

Facilitator: But they are not making you go out to look for work because you are disabled?

Tony: Yeah, yeah.

Facilitator: Have they suggested that you apply for SSI?

Tony: I have, they denied me twice. But I just went to a doctor in a Free Clinic because it is hard to find medical. I came here to apply, but they refused me, they denied me. So one of my friend's mom gave me this location that I went to. It is called St. John's Wild Children's Center, it's in Compton, and they are helping me out. I found out that I have asthma. They gave me depression pills for my depression because I have

depression from my back [pain]. So now it is better. I wish this program right here would help people who need help, especially [with] depression. A lot of people out here are depressed because they might not have what they have. They have no car, no job, no money, no way to see their kids. It is bad living, but you gotta make it good, you know.

Tony's problem, and the problem of a number of others like him, is that the program is designed to help those who are either employable or are deemed sufficiently disabled to qualify for SSI. It provides less help to participants who because of disabilities could not work or qualify for SSI. When asked about his experience with services, Tony seemed more lost than angry about the fact that the program had little help to offer him. And, his answer to the question about whether he had ever felt judged or disrespected by caseworkers was especially telling: "No, not really. Probably just left to the side."

Conclusion

DPSS and the Chief Executive Office (CEO) are currently undertaking a large-scale effort to restructure GR so as to render the program more efficient in its delivery of services and more effective in its promotion of self-sufficiency. The CEO's Research and Evaluation Services (RES) unit is releasing a supplemental paper concurrently with this report, which compares the County's GR program with similar programs in five other California counties.³ One of the striking differences distinguishing GR in LA County is its sheer size. As of December 2010, the County's GR caseload stood at close to 110,000 recipients. San Francisco County has the next largest program in the State, but its caseload is only roughly 7 percent the size of the caseload in LA County. Four neighboring counties – Orange, San Bernardino, Riverside and San Diego – each have GR-type programs that are much smaller still. Moreover, while LA County's GR caseload grew by 75 percent between December 2007 and December 2010, the caseload for San Francisco County's GR-type program grew by only 14 percent over the same period.⁴ RES' supplemental paper shows that the larger size of LA County's overall population explains the caseload size differential in absolute but not relative terms. While there is roughly 1 GR recipient for every three adults between the ages of 18 and 64 living under the poverty threshold in LA County, the ratio is 1 to 6 in San Francisco County. In the other four counties observed, the ratio is at least 1 to 100, and in Riverside County the ratio is almost 1 to 300. The LA County Board of Supervisors, mindful of the fiscal consequences of the outsized growth of the County's GR program, has directed DPSS and the CEO to explore steps that can be taken to reduce

³ Chief Executive Office, Service Integration Branch, Research and Evaluation Services. *A Comparison of the Rules and Regulations Governing General Relief Programs in Six California Counties*. County of Los Angeles. April, 2011.

⁴ According to the most widely referenced agency for the dating of recessions, the National Bureau of Economic Research, the recession that led to the current economic downturn officially began in December 2007. While the downturn explains why LA County's GR caseload has grown steadily since 2007, it does not explain why the rate of caseload growth has been much more dramatic in LA County since December 2007 than in all but one of the counties observed in RES' supplemental paper.

dependence on the program. In weighing the options available to accomplish this objective, DPSS and the CEO will be asked to strike a fair balance between placing an increased portion of the burden of self-sufficiency on the program's participants, and recognizing that GR is frequently a last resort for the County's most vulnerable indigent adults. The importance of finding this balance informs the recommendations that follow, which flow from the insights provided by the managers, staff and recipients interviewed for this report, and are offered with the restructuring process and its goals of increased efficiency and effectiveness in mind.

Policy Recommendations

1. *Add additional Eligibility Workers and Line Staff to the GR program to reduce caseloads and enable enhanced assessments and service delivery to GR recipients.*

The large caseloads supervisors and line staff are asked to handle is an issue that bears on both the efficiency and effectiveness of the GR program. Some line staff report that they are currently carrying caseloads of around 600 recipients and are seeing upwards of 20 recipients per day. It is exceedingly difficult under these conditions to provide the attention necessary to meaningfully assist recipients in finding necessary services and employment. Overwhelming caseloads can also lead to lax enforcement of eligibility rules and inadvertently contribute to the growing number of adults on GR in the County more generally. Adding workers to GR should be framed as a cost avoidance strategy insofar as smaller caseloads will enable staff to serve the GR population more effectively and provide recipients with the support they require in moving from GR to self-sufficiency. Additional staff will also ease the burden of enforcing eligibility rules.

2. *Add and/or train caseworkers and create programs for disabled participants who are categorized unemployable but cannot qualify for SSI.*

The focus group interviews with GR recipients revealed a significant subset of those whose disabilities are not severe enough to qualify them for SSI but are severe enough to place them in the program's unemployable category. DPSS might consider training caseworkers and creating programming specifically for these types of recipients. In cases where recipients have exhausted all possible appeals and still do not qualify for SSI, it may be fruitful to provide them with training geared towards limited employability as opposed to maintaining them in the unemployable category, a position from which they are not likely to cycle off GR permanently.⁵

⁵ Effective May 17, 2011, as part of GR Restructuring, DPSS implemented enhanced disability assessments for GR participants who claim to be unemployable due to a physical disability and previously implemented enhanced mental health assessments for GR participants with a mental health disability. As part of this enhanced process, two new employability categories are being introduced: (1) *employable with accommodations*, for GR participants who can work, despite some level of disability; and (2) *unemployable with accommodations*, for participants who qualify as unemployable based on a

- 3. Add and/or train caseworkers whose central responsibility is to assist GR recipients in completing subsidized housing applications.*
- 4. Contract with an outside agency or agencies to locate housing and recommend housing placements appropriate to the needs of varied types of GR recipients.*

A consensus has emerged in the research literature on supportive housing about the importance of housing for self-sufficiency. Improving the mechanisms through which GR recipients are assisted in finding housing should be central to the efforts to reduce dependence on the program. However, interviewed line staff indicated that their caseloads are currently too large to effectively take on added responsibility in the effort to house the recipients they are working with, and they suggested that DPSS contract with an outside agency or agencies to perform this function. Additionally, interviews with Homeless Case Managers indicated that it would be helpful to train caseworkers whose main function would be to assist GR recipients to complete the applications for subsidized housing.

- 5. Review and revise policies related to Job Club so that the job search process is more efficient and meaningful.*

Improving the GR program's promotion of self-sufficiency will be key to decreasing dependence on GR in LA County. For this reason, DPSS might consider conducting a detailed evaluation of Job Club with the specific goal of identifying ways the program should be restructured and enhanced. Interviews conducted for this report suggest that Job Club's one-size-fits-all approach to helping GR recipients gain employment makes the program counterproductive for a significant segment of the increasingly diverse GR population, which now includes growing numbers of adults who have recently lost jobs, are employment-ready, and do not require rudimentary job preparedness skills. Some District offices have taken the positive step of allowing recipients to opt out of Job Club if they have attended the program within the last 12 months, but more needs to be done to create a flexible, streamlined program responsive to a population with varied skill sets and employment needs.

- 6. Revise the rules on the number of job applications recipients are required to submit per month as a condition of eligibility and consider adopting more flexible policies with respect to the ability GROW participants have to submit online job applications.*

According to interviewed recipients and staff, the current requirement the GR program places on employable recipients to submit 48 job applications per month as a condition of eligibility is overly cumbersome and detracts from time that could be spent pursuing meaningful employment leads with real potential to bear fruit. In connection with this, DPSS might also consider increasing the number of

disability, but who nonetheless want to participate in the GROW program and pursue employment. These changes should substantially address this recommendation.

online job applications employable recipients are allowed to submit, which currently stands at 16 per month. Online applications are an efficient way to apply for jobs, requiring less time and less money spent for transportation.

7. *Appoint at least one liaison in each DPSS office to improve coordination between the GROW program and prospective employers who could potentially hire GROW participants.*
8. *Community service assignments to timed-out GR recipients should more carefully consider the recipients' circumstances, such as distance from where they live and the safety of neighborhoods.*
9. *Transportation allowances available to GR recipients should reflect the increasing cost of public transportation.*
10. *Further evaluate the impact that sanctions and time limits policy changes would be likely to have on the GR population and the size of the County's GR caseload.*

The focus group interviews with staff and managers do not provide a conclusive sense of whether stricter noncompliance policies and/or shorter time limits would be an effective means of reducing the County's caseload. Some interviewed workers feel, for example, that sanctions are an indispensable tool that compels recipients to take the rules seriously and that weed out those who fail to do so. Others are of the opinion that sanctions, along with time limits, are punitive and sometimes unfair to a population with significant, often severe impediments to complying with program requirements. Some also raised the possibility that stricter sanctions and shorter time limits could be fiscally self-defeating if those who no longer have GR available to them are forced to draw more heavily on other County services. At the same time, policymakers should not lose sight of the potential human consequences that would accrue from making GR a more restrictive program or ignore the voices of those interviewed recipients who emphasized how critical the program is to their survival.

These issues require careful analysis and informed projections. DPSS and the CEO should consider conducting a study projecting the likely effects and service utilization patterns that would result from scenarios under which sanctions and time limits policies were changed. For example, what would be the expected impact – in terms of service utilization, homelessness, employment, etc. – if a first-time episode of noncompliance carried a mandatory sanction of three months, or if time limits were altered from 9 months of aid in a period of 12 months to 6 months of aid within a period of 12 months? The CEO's Enterprise Linkages Project technology (ELP, formerly ALP) is expected to be implemented by the first quarter of 2012 and will provide analysts with the capacity to answer these types of questions. A study based on findings yielded through use of this technology would give policymakers a predictive picture of the implications of

micro policy changes, not only for DPSS and the GR program but for multiple County Departments serving the GR population.

11. *Simplify eligibility regulations so that they can be applied more uniformly. Additionally, examine the impact that changes in residency requirements would be likely to have on GR recipients and the size of the County's GR caseload.*

Interviews with GROW workers suggest that Eligibility Workers, line staff and supervisorial staff lack a common understanding of some eligibility regulations. DPSS might consider mandating all appropriate staff to receive periodic refresher trainings on all eligibility regulations. Additionally, the Department might consider lengthening the 15-day residency requirement and waiting period preceding eligibility and explore possible steps that can be taken to curtail 'county hopping', where recipients collect aid but do not reside in the County permanently.

12. *Improve procedures for identifying disabled participants and entering their names into LEADER; allow SSI Advocates to update files by entering information into the LEADER system; diagnose and solve problems connected to LEADER scheduling of participant appointments with SSI Advocates.⁶*
13. *Address problems in the telephone communication system – e.g. limited telephone availability of staff working with recipients, long waits while on hold, uncertain call back times - that make contacting workers difficult, frustrating, and, in some cases, interfere with job searches and resolution of problems related to eligibility.⁷*

⁶ It should be noted that, in keeping with GR Restructuring Recommendation #8, DPSS has addressed issues related to the identification of disabled participants by implementing an enhanced medical/mental health disability assessment process. This enhanced assessment will better identify the GR applicants/recipients who have a permanent disability and are potentially eligible for SSI. Information is entered into the LEADER system by the contractor. Once the information is in LEADER, the system generates an appointment with the SSI advocate. Additionally, SSI Advocates have the capability to enter participant information into LEADER via the SSIMAP screens. When recipients are referred to an SSI Advocate outside the LEADER system, the SSI Advocate is able to insert them into LEADER. DPSS is currently working to further enhance the SSI Advocate Appointment System to ensure that the appointments are scheduled, appointment notices sent, and appointment dispositions tracked more efficiently.

⁷ DPSS is in the midst of a multi-year, incremental implementation of a Customer Service Center (CSC), which provides direct telephone access during regular business hours to a dedicated group of trained eligibility workers to assist the participant. In addition, DPSS recently completed implementation of county-wide access to an automated Interactive Voice Response (IVR) system, which provides computerized, case-specific information to all DPSS participants 24 hours a day seven days a week either over the phone, as well as a parallel on-line system which provides the same information over the internet at a site called "Your Benefits Now". These strategic efforts are specifically designed to address problems that participants encounter in trying to reach DPSS eligibility staff by phone.

14. Coordinate and create better working relationships with outside agencies and organizations serving participants' needs.

Interviewed SSI advocates and GR recipients with SSI applications pending talked about what they see as the inadequate medical examinations recipients frequently receive from the Social Security Administration. Along with GROW workers, the SSI advocates also spoke at some length about the need for improved coordination and communication among all the agencies, both inside and outside the County, providing the GR population with services. The implementation and deployment of the CEO's Enterprise Linkages Project (ELP) will facilitate enhanced inter-agency cooperation. The implementation of ELP will make it possible for agencies to share data on common clients by means that remain in compliance with confidentiality laws. This will provide departments with a powerful analytical tool that can be used to inform policy, but will also enable the provision of targeted, cost-effective services to clients and reduce service duplication.

The deployment of ELP technology will eventually provide SSI advocates with their clients' service utilization histories (pending the clients' permission to have access to this information). These histories have the potential to give corrective impetus to the often cursory medical examinations their clients receive through the Social Security Administration, and they will give the advocates valuable documentary evidence as they build their cases for SSI eligibility. Access to these histories will also allow the advocates to have more informed communication with the attorneys representing their clients' SSI cases legally, and they additionally could bolster the arguments the attorneys make on behalf of the clients. Furthermore, the ELP can be utilized to build predictive models showing which cases are more likely to be approved, which would make it possible to prioritize SSI applications and invest more time in more difficult cases.

One manager working in DPSS' SSI advocacy program listed improved coordination with other County departments as her top priority moving forward. ELP will greatly improve this coordination, not only for SSI advocates but also for all staff working with the GR population. In providing recipients with targeted services, DPSS will be supporting them as they strive to achieve increased self-sufficiency. DPSS, as well as the other partnering County departments working to implement the ELP, are aware of the project's potential to decrease dependency on GR and other increasingly scarce County resources, and the project will be a key component of the efforts to restructure the GR program for this reason.

15. Maintain greater consistency in GR workers' caseload assignments – keep the same worker assigned to a recipient throughout the recipient's time on GR, where possible – so as to facilitate trust and better communication between GR workers and program participants.

Next Steps: The Restructuring of the GR Program

The process of restructuring GR and specifically of implementing policies to reduce dependence on the program in LA County will present challenges in the coming months. Recipients will be asked to assume increased responsibility for their own welfare and DPSS will be asked to make significant changes in the way GR is operated and administered. However, these challenges will be worthwhile if they create a more effective and efficient program centered on the goals of caring service and self-sufficiency. This report is being released to the Board concurrently with the supplemental paper referenced above and a quantitatively-oriented study based on statistical analysis of DPSS' administrative records for the GR program. Taken together, these reports will provide the Board and key policymakers within both DPSS and the CEO with a roadmap to ensure that GR is restructured along lines consistent with LA County's core values.

APPENDIX A. QUALITATIVE METHODOLOGY

The Purposes and Contributions of Qualitative Methodology

As noted in the body of this report, the purpose of this research is to identify the GR program's best practices as well as areas of needed improvement for moving participants' movement through the program toward self-sufficiency. In so doing, the research highlights areas in need of enhancement due to programmatic barriers, inefficiencies, ineffective communication and coordination, and other obstacles to effective service delivery. Finally, in addition to these process-oriented findings, the report offers a series of policy recommendations based on the evaluation.

Quantitative and qualitative methods approach such questions in different, but complementary, ways. Using random samples and standardized questions, surveys and analyses of administrative records have the advantage of producing statistical data that identify patterns that are broadly representative of, and can be generalized to, the larger participant population. By contrast, open ended, qualitative interviews are in depth discussions of selected topics that are central to the research interests at hand but which emphasize participants' concerns and perspectives. Thus, in reading participants' words, it is important to keep in mind that while qualitative interviews provide an in depth understanding of individual and shared experiences and perceptions, they may not be representative of GR participants as a whole. Therefore, their responses may not be generally applied to the larger population.

However, the advantage of this qualitative method is that it can capture the knowledge and lived experience of GR participants. Qualitative interviews therefore hold the possibility of discovering new information that may not have been previously known or included in a quantitative survey. Engaged in a focused, yet informal and open-ended discussion, qualitative interviews reveal what surveys cannot—in this case, an in-depth, “person level” exploration of participants’ perceptions and experiences with the GR program.

Qualitative interviews thus complement quantitative data by revealing important data obscured by numbers, a concrete sense of how things really happen. While, as noted above, qualitative findings may not be generally applied to larger populations, the strength of qualitative interviews lies both in the new discoveries that they hold and the depth in which they explore issues of concern to the study. Moreover, instances in which there is consistency between qualitative and quantitative findings, qualitative findings may provide an understanding of the social processes that help to shape individual and collective behavior and lead to the broad patterns and outcomes found in quantitative results.

Sample and Data Collection

All decisions about the research design, as well as the interpretation and presentation of qualitative results, were made in consultation with the Research and Evaluation Services (RES) research team.

Research and Sampling Design: Data for this report were collected from five focus groups conducted with General Relief (GR) line staff and their supervisors as well as GR participants. The GR line staff focus groups consisted of caseworkers recruited by DPSS from the following GR programs: SSI Advocates (8 participants), GROW Line Staff (7 participants), and Housing Subsidy Caseworkers (8 participants); focus groups were also conducted with supervisors for the following GR programs: SSI Advocate Program (8 participants) and the GROW Program (5 participants).

Data were also collected from participants recruited by DPSS who were in the following programs: GROW Program (23 participants) and the SSI Advocates Program (11). As noted in the body of this report, DPSS attempted on three occasions to recruit participants who were age 18-24 and/or custodial parents had been in the Subsidized Work Program. However, for reasons that are not clear, these recruitment efforts were unsuccessful as GROW Program participants came to these groups. This resulted in over representation of GROW participants in the study.

Supervisor and line staff interviews focused on program rules and procedures that create bottlenecks and inefficiencies as well as practices that are especially effective in contributing to the flow of participants through the program. Supervisors and line staff were also asked about topics that included whether or not involving staff in assisting clients to obtain housing assistance would make this process more efficient and about the effect of sanctions on GR participation and participants' efforts to reach self-sufficiency (see staff focus group interview schedules below).

Interviews with GR participants emphasized their experiences related to enrolling in the GR program, receiving services in a timely manner, communicating with staff, and their experiences with GR programs outside of LA County. Participant interviews also focused on problems that recipients encountered in fulfilling the requirements of the program as well as the helpfulness of staff in assisting them to progress toward self-sufficiency by finding work, applying for housing, and helping them acquire alternative sources of support and services (see participant focus group schedules below).

Qualitative Focus Group Protocol and Interview Questions

Interview questions for this study were formulated as based on a review of study objectives described in the research plan provided by RES and in consultation with the RES research team. During the interviews, GR participants and staff were reminded of the purpose of the research and that what they said in the groups would be written into a report but that nothing they said would be attributed to them directly. Each of the focus group interviews was audio recorded and later transcribed for analysis.

Transcripts were coded and analyzed for themes related to the study objectives, and responses that represent a range of focus group participants' experiences were included in the report.

Finally, it is important to note that interview excerpts presented in the report reflect participants literally speaking in their own words and that every day, unrehearsed speech is very different from carefully crafted, grammatically correct written text. The goal of qualitative interviews is to capture the spontaneity and unedited insights of an informal discussion. Thus, in accordance with accepted conventions for qualitative research, GR staff and participants' words are quoted verbatim and indented in the report.

After a general introduction to the research and a discussion of confidentiality, researchers asked GR staff and participants questions designed to elicit standard background information. For staff this consisted of their positions, what their work consisted of, and how long they had worked in various capacities in the GR program. GR participants were asked for background information consisting of their age, education, housing status, and number of children as well as the length of time they had been in the GR program and whether they had come from outside of the County or State. Interview questions were then formulated to elicit information about issues related to staff and participant' experiences and perceptions of the program's best practices as well as inefficiencies and impediments to assisting/progressing through the program toward self-sufficiency. Below are the interview protocols containing prompts designed to elicit responses for each GR staff and participant population included in the study.

General Introduction to Focus Groups (modified for each focus group)

Welcome. My name is (name of researcher). I am a university professor who has been hired by LA County to conduct this focus group with General Relief recipients. I also want to introduce you to my research assistant (name of assistant).

The purpose of this research is to provide information that will guide the County's efforts to restructure the General Relief (GR) program to make it more efficient in the provision of services and more effective for participants as they make strides toward achieving self-sufficiency. We will be asking questions to identify the best practices in service delivery—what is working well that is needed and effective and areas in need of enhancement and/or overhaul due to bottlenecks, programmatic barriers, inefficiencies, and ineffective communication and coordination.

One way to find the answers and solutions is to ask GR recipients/staff who deliver the program/those who administer the program like you about your experiences with the GR program, what obstacles you have encountered in applying and progressing through the program (or working in and administering the program), and how helpful the program has been to you (or to recipients) to move toward self-sufficiency. What you tell us is of great interest and importance because it can help the GR program improve its services to recipients such as yourself (those you serve).

It is important that you know that we are not here to judge you in any way but to listen to your stories and learn from your experience in order to improve the GR program. Please feel free to express yourself honestly and openly. We value and respect your opinions. Everything you say will be confidential. While we will summarize our conversations and sometimes quote you in our reports, we will not reveal your actual name to the County or to anyone else.

- Assurance of confidentiality
- Filling out the consent form and signing for the food certificate (participant focus groups).
- The focus group rules of procedure: Speak one at a time; give other people time to speak; it's okay to respectfully disagree; give your first name when you speak.

Staff Focus Group Interview Protocols

Focus Group Questions: GROW Program Managers and SSI Managers

1. Please tell us your position and what you do in working with the GR program.
2. How long have you been doing this work?
3. What are the biggest and most difficult challenges you face in your work with the General Relief program? Please describe any bottlenecks, obstacles, or programmatic inefficiencies you are aware of in your work with the GR program?
4. From what you know and hear, what are the various ways participants find out about the GR program?
5. In your view, are there rules that stand in the way of participants enrolling in the GR program? If so, what kinds of requirements make it more difficult for participants to enroll in the program?
6. Are there aspects of the GR program process that are especially effective in adding efficiency to the flow of participants as they enroll in the program and either apply for SSI or participate in GROW?
7. Do you think that involving staff in assisting clients to obtain housing assistance (i.e., having staff rather than participants submit the paperwork) would make this process more efficient and helpful for both staff and participants?
 - a. Would this create efficiencies in their work with clients?
 - b. Would this be helpful to participants?
 - c. How feasible would this be given their current caseloads?
 - d. Would there be any obstacles to implementing this procedure?

8. What do you think is the effect of sanctions on encouraging participant compliance with program requirements? How common is it for participants to leave GR due to sanctions?
9. Are you provided all the necessary tools to complete your assigned duties? If not, what tools would you recommend?
10. Is adequate training given to your staff in order for them to complete their duties? If not, what training would you recommend?
11. Overall, what are the greatest obstacles that the GR program faces in achieving its goals? What changes would better help the GR program meet its goals?

Focus Group Questions: SSI MAP Advocates and GROW Line Staff

1. Please tell us your position, what you do in working with GR recipients, and how long you've been doing this work.
2. Describe the program process that the participants you work with go through from enrollment onwards?
3. What is the size of your caseload?
4. What are the biggest and most difficult challenges you face in working with the GR population?
5. Please describe any bottlenecks, obstacles, or program inefficiencies that make your work with the GR population more difficult?
6. In your experience, what are the various ways participants learn about the GR program?
7. Do you find that there are rules that stand in the way of participants enrolling in the GR program? If so, what kinds of requirements make it more difficult for participants to enroll in the program?
8. Given your caseload, would it be feasible for you to assist participants to obtain housing (i.e., fill out the initial paperwork)?
 - a. Do you think that this would improve efficiencies in your work with clients?
 - b. What would be your concerns –the obstacles—if you were to undertake this task?
9. What do you think is the effect of sanctions on encouraging participant compliance with program requirements? Do you find that a significant portion of the participants you work with leave GR due to sanctions?

10. Do you have all the necessary tools to make your work as efficient as possible? If not, what tools would you recommend?
11. Do you have any recommendations you'd like to make as far as steps that could be taken to make your work with the GR population easier, more efficient, more effective?

Focus Group Questions: Housing Subsidy Case Managers

1. Please tell us your position, what you do in working with GR recipients, and how long you've been doing this work.
2. What is the size of your caseload?
3. What are the biggest and most difficult challenges you face in working with the GR population?
4. Please describe any bottlenecks, obstacles, or program inefficiencies that make your work with the GR population more difficult.
5. In your experience, what are the various ways participants learn about the GR program?
6. Do you find that there are rules that stand in the way of participants enrolling in the GR program? If so, what kinds of requirements make it more difficult for participants to enroll in the program?
7. Other than the sheer size of LA County, do you have any ideas as to why the County's GR caseload is so much larger than the caseloads in neighboring counties? Are the eligibility requirements for LA County so much different?
8. Given the size of your caseload and the responsibilities you already have as GR Housing Subsidy Case Managers, would it be possible for you to do more of the leg work in helping the recipients in obtaining housing assistance?
 - a. How feasible would it be for you to complete, procure and submit the paperwork recipients need to obtain housing assistance instead of having the recipients themselves do this?
 - b. Do you feel that taking on this added responsibility would expedite the application process and reduce errors?
 - c. Do you think that this would improve efficiencies in your work with clients? What would be your concerns—the obstacles—if you were to undertake this task?
9. What do you think is the effect of sanctions on encouraging participant compliance with program requirements?

10. Do you find that a significant portion of the participants you work with leave GR due to sanctions?
11. Do you have all the necessary tools to make your work as efficient as possible? If not, what tools would you recommend?
12. Do you have any recommendations you'd like to make as far as steps that could be taken to make your work with the GR population easier, more efficient, more effective?

Participant Focus Group Questions

Focus Group Questions: GROW Participants

1. Getting to know each other: Let's go around the table and get acquainted.
 - a. Please tell your name, your age, and your current living arrangement; If homeless, ask: For how long? For what reason?
 - b. Do you work? If so, how many hours do you work per week and how much do you make per week?
 - c. Do you have any children? If so, are they in your custody?
 - d. Have you been in the Armed Forces? If so, are you a disabled veteran? Are you receiving VA compensation?
 - e. How far did you go in school? If not a high school graduate, would you consider enrolling in a GED program from GROW?
 - f. How long have you been in the GR program?
1. How did you find out about the General Relief program?
2. Please describe your experience in applying for the program.
 - a. If you experienced problems or delays please talk about what they were.
 - b. In enrolling for General Relief, please describe any rules or requirements that made it difficult for you to enroll in the program?
 - c. What parts of the application process went well?
3. How would you describe the services you've received from GROW?
 - a. Are your Eligibility Worker and GR worker assisting you in bettering your situation? Did a worker do anything that was especially helpful?
 - b. Did your Eligibility Worker or GR Worker provide services in a timely and efficient manner?
 - c. Was there anything that a worker could have done that would have made things go more smoothly?

4. Since you've been in GR, have you experienced problems in fulfilling the requirements of the program? Please describe what happened.
 - a. Are the rules and requirements clear to you? Were they explained? Were the explanations clear?
 - b. Did staff answer questions that you had in a way that was easy to understand?
5. Have you experienced obstacles to taking the following steps toward self-sufficiency? Please describe what happened in each case:
 - a. finding work? (This group may not have been involved in attempts to find work)
 - b. applying for housing assistance?
 - c. applying for other sources of support and services (e.g., V.A. benefits, mental health services, food stamps, domestic violence services, assistance with expunging criminal backgrounds and homeless court referrals, etc.)?
6. How have staff and the program been helpful to you in taking the following steps toward self-sufficiency? Please describe what happened in each case:
 - a. finding work? (Again, they may not have been involved in this)
 - b. applying for housing?
 - c. applying for alternate sources of support and services (e.g., V.A. benefits, mental health and substance abuse services, food stamps, domestic violence services, assistance with expunging criminal backgrounds and homeless court referrals)?
8. Did you have any difficulty in reaching and communicating with staff?
9. Were GR and GROW caseworkers professional and courteous? Did you feel respected by caseworkers when you had questions or difficulties?
10. What has been most helpful in assisting you to fulfill requirements of the program?
11. How have staff been helpful in assisting you to fulfill program requirements?
12. Have you ever been asked to pursue job leads and/or attend workshops to help you prepare for employment (such as how to prepare a resume, how to prepare for job interviews, career planning, work ethics, other work related topics)?
13. Were you ever referred to an employment interview by GR staff?
14. How could staff and the program be more helpful in assisting you to pursue your employment goals?
15. How could staff and the program be more helpful in assisting you to apply for other sources of support and services (e.g., V.A. benefits, mental health and substance abuse

services, food stamps, domestic violence services, assistance with expunging criminal backgrounds and homeless court referrals)?

16. Are there any reasons why you might not have wanted to apply for GR or anything that made applying difficult (e.g., program restrictions or requirements, housing conditions or affordability, feeling like you didn't need them, feeling treated badly by the staff, personal problems, living circumstances, etc.)?

a. Please describe other difficulties or obstacles (probe for long waits, transportation problems, etc.).

17. What can the GR and GROW caseworkers SSI Advocates do to serve you better?

18. Were you ever sanctioned for failing to fulfill program requirements? Please tell us what happened?

a. Have you ever had your case closed as a result of not fulfilling program requirements? Please describe what happened.

b. How do sanctions affect your participation in the program?

19. Do you have any experience with General Relief-type programs in other counties or other states?

a. If so, was it easier or more difficult for you to enroll in the General Relief program in LA County? In what ways was it easier or more difficult?

Focus Group Questions: SSI Pending Participants

1. Getting to know each other: Let's go around the table and get acquainted.

a. Please tell your name, your age, and your current living arrangement; If homeless, ask: For how long? For what reason?

2. Do you have any children? If so, are they in your custody?

3. Have you been in the Armed Forces? If so, are you a disabled veteran? Are you receiving VA compensation?

4. How far did you go in school? If not a high school graduate, would you consider enrolling in a GED program from GROW?

5. How long have you been in the GR program?

6. How did you find out about the General Relief program?

7. Please describe your experience in applying for the program.

- a. If you experienced problems or delays, please talk about what they were.
- b. In enrolling for General Relief, please describe any rules or requirements that made it difficult for you to enroll in the program? Please describe what happened.
- c. What parts of the application process went well?
- d. Are the rules and requirements clear to you? Were they explained? Were the explanations clear? Did staff answer questions that you had in a way that was easy to understand?

8. How long have you been in the SSI application process and at what step are you on?

9. Have you ever applied for SSI in the past?

10. How did you find out about your potential eligibility for SSI? What did the person say?

11. Thinking back, how was your experience at the initial interview with the SSI Advocate?

12. Do you feel that DPSS staff have been compassionate about your disability?

13. Is the communication between the SSI Advocate and yourself helpful and informative?

- a. Did you have any difficulty in reaching and communicating with staff?
- b. Were GR staff and SSI Advocates professional and courteous?
- c. Did you feel respected by staff when you had questions or difficulties?

14. How have staff been helpful in assisting you to fulfill program requirements?

- a. Did your Eligibility Worker and SSI Advocate provide services in a timely and efficient manner?
- b. Was there anything that a worker could have done to be more helpful in making the SSI application process go more smoothly?

15. Would it be helpful to provide you with additional support like clothes, shoes, shower or Motel Voucher in order to help you comply with the SSI process?

16. Overall, how would you rate the overall assistance provided by the Eligibility Worker and the SSI Advocate in regards to your SSI application?

<input type="checkbox"/> Very Helpful	<input type="checkbox"/> Helpful	<input type="checkbox"/> Neutral	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat Helpful	<input type="checkbox"/> Needs Improvement
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17. Are there any reasons why you might not have wanted to apply for SSI or anything that made applying difficult (e.g., program restrictions or requirements, housing conditions or affordability, feeling like you didn't need them, feeling treated badly by the staff, personal problems, living circumstances, etc.)?

a. Please describe other difficulties or obstacles (probe for long waits, transportation problems, etc.).

18. Were you ever sanctioned for failing to fulfill program requirements?
Please tell us what happened?

a. Have you ever had your case closed as a result of not fulfilling program requirements?
Please describe what happened.

b. How do sanctions affect your participation in the program?

19. Do you have any experience with General Relief-type programs in other counties or other states?

a. If so, was it easier or more difficult for you to enroll in the General Relief program in LA County? In what ways was it easier or more difficult?