



County needs better definition of employability, judge rules

By Chris Metinko
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An Alameda County Superior Court judge has ruled that while the county's plan to implement a time limit on those receiving general assistance benefits is legal, the county still must come up with a fair definition for who is considered employable and therefore eligible to lose the benefit.

Judge David Hunter ruled late Tuesday it was clear the county's Board of Supervisors had established time limits for its general assistance program and delegated the Social Services Agency to administer the changes. Those changes included a six-month time limit for clients deemed employable to receive assistance funds. However, Hunter added that the county must still define who is "employable," saying those who are physically and mentally fit for work may not necessarily be employable if they do not have the necessary job or language skills.

The ruling — which underscores a tentative ruling from the same judge July 14 — also follows Hunter's decision last month to issue a temporary restraining order that stopped the county's plan to cut general assistance benefits to some residents as of July 1. The Public Interest Law Project, the law firm Heller Ehrman, and Bay Area Legal Aid filed a lawsuit on behalf of six general assistance recipients, saying the plan violates state law and will cost thousands their homes.

Steven Weiss, an attorney from Bay Area Legal Aid, said one of the issues his group had with the time

limit on benefits was that it did not allow enough time for recipients to acquire skills needed to qualify for jobs.

"Some of these recipients are trying to get the proper training or take English classes, but these usually take longer than six months," Weiss said.

County Counsel Richard Winnie said officials from the county's Social Services department, and other officials, will see if the county's definition of employability can be refined.

The ruling should have little effect on the county's current administering of general assistance. Last month, county supervisors voted to suspend the program's redesign proposal. The supervisors agreed to convene a general assistance working group that is expected to look at the issue and report back to the board on any program redesign within four months.

Approximately 8,500 residents receive \$336 a month in general assistance from the Alameda County Social Services Agency.

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