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Sweeney Announces Permanent Homelessness Prevention Plan

Proposal Would Replace Temporary Assistance Programs For Chronically Ill & Disabled

Trenton – Responding to the crisis that confronts the chronically ill and disabled New Jersey residents threatened with homelessness because of the abrupt termination of emergency assistance programs, Senate President Steve Sweeney today announced a proposal to make the short-term housing aid permanent.

The state’s Housing Assistance and Housing Hardship Extension programs, which provide emergency aid for the disabled, their caregivers, the elderly, the poor, the homeless and the chronically unemployed, expired in July with no real replacement in place.

“This is a crisis for some of the most vulnerable populations in New Jersey who have relied on emergency assistance to protect them from homelessness,” said Senator Sweeney. “The expiration of these so-called pilot programs puts them at risk of losing the only aid that prevents them from being forced onto the streets or into shelters. In fact, some have already been made homeless. I believe we have a moral obligation to make sure that our citizens, especially the most vulnerable ones, are entitled to affordable housing.”

Senator Sweeney will introduce legislation that will replace the three-year “pilot” programs with a permanent emergency assistance plan. The bill would make the funding permanent for individuals who are very low income, receive general assistance benefits, are Social Security recipients, are in imminent danger of homelessness, disabled or those who care for a disabled dependent, or are over 60 years of age and chronically unemployed.

“Homelessness can be a cruel fate for people trapped in poverty, unemployment or hampered by disabilities,” said Senator Joe Vitale, a cosponsor of the legislation. “They are victims of conditions that are beyond their control and if they become homeless they can get caught in a vicious cycle. Preventing homelessness is a vital remedy that allows them to repair their lives.” “We cannot stand by and do nothing, as our most vulnerable residents are threatened with homelessness,” said Staci Berger, President and Chief Executive Officer of the Housing and Community Development Network of New Jersey. “We’re very grateful to Senate President Sweeney for standing up for low-income people with disabilities by closing bureaucratic loopholes that are disrupting their lives and their living situations. We hope this legislation is the beginning of the end of patchwork solutions, and the first step towards a compassionate and comprehensive housing policy that gives our residents peace of mind.”

Prior to July 2015, those receiving benefits through the emergency assistance program were granted additional rental assistance beyond the 12 months through pilot programs implemented

by the Department of Human Services. These temporary, 3-year pilot programs put current participants in limbo on whether their benefits will continue.

“The poorest New Jerseyans in our state often have no options other than the Emergency Assistance program to maintain appropriate housing,” said Serena Rice, executive director of the Anti-Poverty Network of New Jersey. “When the Department of Human Services implemented a change in policy that ended this assistance for several thousand recipients, it was immediately evident that these families would face homelessness. We welcome this legislation by Senate President Sweeney to help maintain stable and safe housing for our state's most vulnerable residents.”

The pilot programs were funded by a combination of state and federal dollars provided to the counties. The programs were administered on the county level by County Boards of Social Services and various non-profit organizations. According to the department, the total cost equaled \$15.5 million in the last calendar year. At the conclusion of the pilot programs, there were approximately 760 Temporary Assistance for Needy Family clients, 1,770 General Assistance clients and 488 SSI clients.

Senator Sweeney's bill would utilize the same funding on a permanent basis.

“As an agency that works with disabled, vulnerable individuals and families we know firsthand that emergency assistance can be the difference between our clients having a roof over their heads, or becoming homeless or hospitalized,” said Steven Leder, Senior Attorney, Community Health Law Project. “This bill that will allow extensions to emergency assistance for vulnerable populations will preserve this life saving safety net.”

According to the state, as of July individuals who were enrolled in HAP and HHE were continued in the program for the remainder of their eligibility, but no new clients were enrolled. As of January 1, 2016, the department is funding, on a limited basis, intensive case management programs for individuals who were enrolled in HAP or HHE at the conclusion of the pilot.

At least 3,000 people were imperiled by the cutoff and transition, according to official accounts, but the actual number could be much higher.