

March 19, 2020

CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

ALL COUNTY WELFARE DIRECTORS LETTER

This letter provides guidance on existing policy and flexibilities available to counties operating Housing and Homelessness Programs overseen by the California Department of Social Services (CDSS), as well as recommendations for serving communities affected by the statewide outbreak of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19 or novel coronavirus).



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GAVIN NEWSOM
GOVERNOR

March 19, 2020

ALL COUNTY WELFARE DIRECTORS LETTER

TO: ALL COUNTY WELFARE DIRECTORS

FROM: JENNIFER HERNANDEZ, DEPUTY DIRECTOR
FAMILY ENGAGEMENT AND EMPOWERMENT DIVISION

SUBJECT: INTERIM HOUSING AND HOMELESS PROGRAM GUIDANCE
AND RECOMMENDATIONS ON NOVEL CORONAVIRUS
(COVID-19)

REFERENCE: [ALL COUNTY WELFARE DIRECTORS LETTER MARCH 12, 2020](#); [WELFARE AND INSTITUTIONS CODE \(WIC\) 11450](#); [WIC 11330-11330.5](#); [WIC 16523-16523.1](#); [WIC 18999](#); and [WIC 15770 - 15771](#)

The purpose of this All County Welfare Directors Letter (ACWDL) is to provide guidance regarding existing policies and flexibilities available to counties operating Housing and Homelessness Programs overseen by the California Department of Social Services (CDSS), as well as interim guidance for serving communities affected by the statewide outbreak of COVID-19 (or novel coronavirus) specifically for individuals experiencing homelessness.

Background

This interim guidance is based on the latest information related to planning and responding to the impacts of COVID-19 for homeless services providers in California. The CDSS is working in close coordination with other state partners, including the California Office of Emergency Services, the California Department of Public Health, and the Business and Consumer Services Agency, to provide updated information and recommended practices as information becomes available. County Welfare Departments and partner agencies should work closely with their partners, including local Emergency Operations Center, County Public Health Departments and Homeless Continuums of Care, to address and respond to local needs as well.

CDSS recommends that County Welfare Departments visit <http://www.covid19.ca.gov> and <https://www.bcsb.ca.gov/hcfc/> regularly to access up-to-date information. General

guidance, including information on precautions, symptoms, and the latest developments regarding COVID-19, can also be found on the [California Department of Public Health \(CDPH\) website](#).

Summary of Executive Orders and Recommended Practices

On March 12, 2020, Governor Newsom issued [Executive Order N-25-20](#) and the [California Department of Public Health \(CDPH\)](#) issued guidance on minimizing mass gatherings. It is important to note that the CDPH guidance explicitly states that it “does not apply to congregate living situations, including dormitories and homeless encampments.”

On March 16, 2020, Governor Newsom issued [Executive Order N-28-20](#) authorizing local governments to halt evictions for renters and homeowners, slow foreclosures related to evictions, and protect against utility shutoffs for Californians affected by COVID-19. While the order does not relieve a tenant from the obligation to pay rent or restrict a landlord’s ability to recover rent that is due, it encourages cities and counties to enforce protections made available through May 31, 2020, unless extended.

CDSS Housing and Homelessness Program Guidance

CDSS has issued guidance specific to CDSS-funded programs, and will continue to provide updates as available, in response to COVID-19. Guidance and existing policies and flexibilities related to the following Housing and Homelessness Programs are outlined below: CalWORKs Homeless Assistance; the CalWORKs Housing Support Program (HSP); Bringing Families Home; the Housing and Disability Advocacy Program (HDAP) and Home Safe. Additional information will be provided by the CDSS as it becomes available, under separate cover.

County Welfare Departments are encouraged to review county policies and to create flexibility where allowable to respond to COVID-19. As a reminder, state guidance for CalWORKs HSP, Bringing Families Home, HDAP and Home Safe **does not limit the number of days a participant in these programs can access interim shelter options, including nights at hotels or motels.**

CalWORKs Homeless Assistance (HA) Program

Up to 16 days of motel vouchers are available through CalWORKs HA for eligible CalWORKs recipients or apparently eligible CalWORKs applicants. While all normal eligibility rules apply, due to the current public health concerns related to COVID-19, counties are encouraged to help minimize trips that clients must make into the County office. HA applications are not required to be made in person or to include a face-to-

face interview; therefore, counties have the discretion to complete the CW 42 for the client and have them sign electronically to avoid having them come into the County Welfare Office. Please see [ACIN I-60-13](#) and [ACL 17-57](#) for guidance on using electronic signatures in CalWORKs.

Existing rules regarding issuing 3-days of benefits while homelessness is verified, followed by weekly increments, are still in effect. However, counties are strongly encouraged to find ways to issue benefits without requiring clients to come into the office. For example, counties should allow sworn statements and grant good cause in lieu of requiring clients to come into the county office to submit these verifications. Additionally, while existing guidance requires counties to issue vendor/voucher payments when a finding of mismanagement has been determined, if there is no feasible way to issue a vendor/voucher payment due to COVID-19 restrictions, counties should consider issuing benefits directly on the client's EBT card, as they remain entitled to their remaining days of benefits, despite a finding of mismanagement.

Lastly, clients affected by COVID-19 may be eligible for an exception to the once-every-12 months rule for HA. For example, if one parent in an AU is concerned that they have been infected and requests HA to isolate themselves from the rest of their family, HA should be granted based on an exception due to a medical illness.

Housing and Disability Advocacy Program (HDAP)

Welfare and Institutions Code (WIC) section 18999.4(a)(1) specifies that counties shall use HDAP funds to establish or expand programs that provide housing assistance, including, when necessary, shelters for clients during the clients' application periods for disability benefits. This allows counties operating an HDAP program to use HDAP funding to expand existing housing programs utilized by HDAP clients, including shelters, recuperative care housing, hotel or motel leases, or interim housing programs, as defined in [ACL 19-104](#). For example, expanding a shelter program could include offering specialized quarantine options as a new shelter service or procuring leases with local motels or hotels to provide housing for homeless individuals in the community impacted by COVID-19. If a specialized quarantine area is created to expand an existing housing program, this would also include procuring supplies for the program. Similarly, rather than funding an existing program, counties participating in HDAP can establish a new shelter program for HDAP clients specific to COVID-19, pursuant to WIC section 18999.4(a)(1).

As a reminder, current HDAP guidance allows for funds to be spent on outreach. For example, HDAP funds may be used to support homeless outreach teams to locate residents potentially eligible for HDAP residing in homeless encampments who require medical care related to COVID-19. Homeless outreach teams may consist of mobile

medical units and personnel, such as a public health nurse or other medical staff. HDAP funds may also be spent on interim housing solutions including motels and hotels for eligible recipients which can be critical as individuals seek alternative options to shelters or other congregate spaces during this time.

Home Safe

Home Safe guidance allows for funds to be spent on landlord engagement pursuant to WIC section 15771(c)(2)(E). “Landlord engagement” could include providing incentives and payments to landlords participating in the Home Safe Program, in exchange for housing Home Safe clients. Such payments may include in-kind goods to address or alleviate the impacts of COVID-19, such as specialized medical or sanitizing equipment and supplies. Home Safe funds may also be spent on interim housing solutions, including motels and hotels for eligible recipients, which can be critical as aging individuals seek alternative options to shelters or other congregate spaces during this time.

CalWORKs Housing Support Program (HSP)

WIC section 11330.5(c)(2) specifies that CalWORKs HSP funds can be used on a range of financial and supportive services, including case management, outreach and engagement, rental assistance, and landlord recruitment. Resources and supports for program participants may include, but are not limited to: providing interim housing options consistent with [interim guidance](#) for homeless assistance providers; helping participants navigate systems of care and resources needed to remain stably housed; providing rental assistance, or incentives and payments in the form of goods to landlords participating in the CalWORKs HSP program to move families into or maintain permanent housing; and supplies necessary to ensure participants’ homes remain habitable. For example, counties administering CalWORKs HSP can provide landlord mediation and discussions of tenant rights to avoid evictions or housing displacement for families impacted by reduced employment earnings, school or child care closures, or any other impact to a family’s financial stability and ability to maintain housing.

As a reminder, supporting interim housing solutions, including motels and hotels for eligible recipients, can be critical to disrupt the impact of COVID-19 as families seek alternative options to shelters or other congregate spaces during this time. CDSS strongly encourages counties to seek out safe interim housing options for CalWORKs families experiencing homelessness. Further, counties are reminded that state guidance does not limit the number of days a family participating in CalWORKs HSP can access hotels or motels; counties are strongly encouraged to expand or provide greater flexibilities in county policies related to motel and hotel stays in response to COVID-19.

HSP clients may meet eligibility criteria for additional assistance through other public benefit programs. CDSS has issued guidance and will continue to provide updates as available, specific to CDSS funded programs in response to COVID-19. Please refer to program-specific guidance that was released in the [March 13, 2020 All County Welfare Director Letter \(ACWDL\)](#), which includes information on planning and preparedness, eligibility requirements, and flexibilities for CDSS-funded programs, including: CalWORKs, CalFresh, and Refugee Cash Assistance (RCA)/Refugee Support Services (RSS).

Bringing Families Home (BFH)

Per [Welfare and Institutions Code sections 16523-16523.1](#), the Bringing Families Home (BFH) Program, for eligible families—families experiencing homelessness or at risk of homelessness with an open child welfare case—can also be utilized to support critical housing stabilization needs. This can include, but is not limited to, interim housing assistance, tenant engagement, case management, public systems assistance, and conflict mediation with landlords and neighbors.

As such, BFH funds can support eligible families, including to locate and pay for motel and hotel stays if a family is seeking interim housing that is not a shelter. BFH funds can support the procurement of supplies necessary for ensuring safe and stable housing such as cleaning supplies. BFH funds and staff can support with landlord mediation during this time of crisis and uncertainty. BFH funds and staff can help participants navigate systems of care and wellbeing including health care systems as needed and accessing additional benefits as needed to support safety and security.

BFH programs should refer to the HSP guidance outlined above in relation to procurement of hotels and motels, social distancing in shelters, and expanding flexibility on any county limitations of use on daily motels and hotels. As a reminder, state guidance does not limit the number of days a family participating in BFH can utilize motels or hotels supported by BFH funds.

Questions and Answers

- 1. Question:** Does a three-day pay or quit notice meet the program eligibility requirements for CDSS-funded programs?

Answer: A three-day pay or quit notice meets the eligibility requirements of imminent risk of homelessness for CalWORKs HA [Welfare and Institutions Code section 11450\(f\)\(2\)\(B\)](#), the BFH Program, [Welfare and Institutions Code sections](#)

[16523-16523.1](#), HDAP [Welfare and Institutions Code section 18999](#), and Home Safe Program [Welfare and Institutions Code sections 15770 - 15771](#).

2. Question: How can CDSS programs help with housing instability?

Answer: On March 16, 2020, Governor Newsom issued [Executive Order N-28-20](#), which authorizes local governments to halt evictions for renters and homeowners, slows foreclosures related to evictions, and protects against utility shutoffs for Californians affected by COVID-19. While the order does not relieve a tenant from the obligation to pay rent or restrict a landlord's ability to recover rent that is due, it encourages and authorizes local governments to enforce protections available through May 31, 2020, unless extended.

CalWORKs HA can be used to pay up to two months of rental arrearages to prevent eviction. Additionally, the CalWORKs HSP, BFH, HDAP, and Home Safe program funds can be used to provide supports and financial assistance, as needed, to prevent program participants from returning to homelessness.

3. Question: For program participants impacted by COVID-19, can housing assistance be extended, including rental or interim housing assistance?

Answer: For all program participants, routine assessments of service and financial assistance needs should be completed, and programs should provide necessary resources, consistent with current program guidance, to ensure housing stability is maintained and loss of shelter or returns to homelessness are avoided as much as possible.

Additional Resources on COVID -19 Response for Homeless Service Providers

Specific guidance for California homeless services providers on planning for and responding to COVID-19 was issued by the [Business, Consumer Services and Housing Agency on March 10, 2020](#) (see [Guidance for Homeless Assistance Providers on COVID-19](#)), in addition to the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\): Interim Guidance for Homeless Service Providers to Plan and Respond to COVID-19](#), which includes recommendations for homeless service providers on suggested strategies to help homeless service providers plan, prepare, and respond to this emerging public health threat. It is summarized below:

Plan & Communicate

Continuums of Care (CoCs), city and county homelessness officials and their partners should prepare now to protect people experiencing homelessness, homeless service provider staff, and volunteers from COVID-19. CoCs, city and

county homelessness officials and their partners should communicate frequently about COVID-19 and everyday preventive actions.

Specific steps include but are not limited to:

- Establishing ongoing communication with local public health departments and connecting to community-wide planning.
- Providing prevention supplies, such as alcohol-based hand sanitizers, tissues, trash baskets, disposable facemasks (to be used only by sick individuals in your organization), and mobile hand washing stations.
- Developing procedures for reporting suspected COVID-19 cases to local health officials.
- Identifying spaces that can be used to accommodate unsheltered people with mild respiratory symptoms and those at significantly elevated risk of infection who have no option to self-quarantine outdoors.
- Identify and address potential language, cultural and disability barriers
- Counter stigmatization and discrimination.

Other Resources

- [CDC Interim Guidance for Homeless Shelters](#)
- [CDC Guidance for Preparing Facilities for COVID-19](#)
- [US Department of Housing and Urban Development \(HUD\) Health Preparedness for Homeless Assistance Providers](#)
 - [Preventing and Managing the Spread of Infectious Disease for People Experiencing Homelessness](#)
 - [Preventing and Managing the Spread of Infectious Disease within Shelters](#)
 - [Preventing and Managing the Spread of Infectious Disease within Encampments](#)
 - [Webinar on Infectious Disease Preparedness](#)
- [Eligible ESG costs for Infectious Disease Preparedness](#)
- [Specific Considerations for Public Health Authorities to Limit Infection Risk Among People Experiencing Homelessness](#)

If you have any questions or need additional guidance regarding the information in this letter, please contact the Branch at (916) 651-5155 or at housing@dss.ca.gov.