

## **Spotlight: Alameda County Supplemental Security Income (SSI) Advocacy Trust**

Probation Departments throughout California utilize different strategies to meet their AB 1331<sup>1</sup> obligation to screen and help potentially eligible foster youth obtain [Supplemental Security Income \(SSI\)](#). Some handle the entire process internally using specially trained staff. Others refer youth to internal SSI advocacy units within the child welfare agency or probation department. Still others contract with third party providers. Alameda County's innovative countywide process partnering with local, community-based legal organizations as part of a larger SSI Advocacy Trust has proven to be an effective approach that has led to more clients receiving the support they need, while also creating cost savings for the county overall.

In 2011, Alameda County's Behavioral Health Care Services and Social Service Agency began jointly operating an SSI Advocacy Trust, through which the county contracts with several non-profit organizations to represent individuals in applying for SSI disability benefits. While first focusing on clients on General Assistance,<sup>2</sup> the SSI Advocacy Trust eventually expanded to include high utilizers of county behavioral health care services, individuals who are being released from county jail, and [probation-involved youth](#).

SSI is notoriously difficult to obtain and the process can stretch out for more than three years.<sup>3</sup> While claimants normally have a success rate of well below 50%, Alameda County's rate of approval exceeds 80% thanks to its combination of legal representation by non-profit legal services attorneys, expanded capacity for case management through community based organizations, and implementation of a housing subsidy program.

Prior to 2012, Alameda County's Juvenile Probation Department had tried to handle SSI screening and cases in-house and had also contracted with a large, national firm. They had limited success with both approaches. In 2013, the probation department partnered with the County Health Care Services Agency to launch a pilot to fund Bay Area Legal Aid, a local non-profit legal organization, to provide civil legal representation to probation-involved youth and their families. In addition to providing SSI advocacy, Bay Area Legal Aid attorneys also worked collaboratively with the probation department to assist families with school issues (including special education and school discipline cases), health access (including [Medi-Cal](#) and receipt of [community based mental health services](#)), housing (including eviction defense and habitability cases), consumer law, [permanency](#) (e.g., guardianships), and domestic violence-related family law. In a little less than three years, the pilot closed more than 200 cases and recovered approximately \$2.5 million with over 95% involving federal funding streams. Because the pilot was so successful, the Alameda County Probation Department and County Health Care Services Agency have continued and expanded it, folding it into the larger, countywide SSI Advocacy Trust.

Like the broader SSI Advocacy Trust of which it is a part, this pilot moves youth and families from county-only funded programs to entitlements with federal funding streams (e.g., SSI, Medi-Cal), resulting in cost savings for local government and better benefits for individuals. Further, the SSI Advocacy Trust is partially funded through recoupment of loan

payments made through General Assistance and through using SSI to help directly support youth in out-of-home placements.

Multiple factors make Alameda County Probation's SSI Advocacy Trust so effective. The probation department, the Health Care Services Agency, and a local legal aid provider closely collaborate in its implementation. Bay Area Legal Aid provides trainings for various juvenile justice system partners to ensure appropriate screening and referrals. The Health Care Services Agency helps to track data and progress. In addition to coordinating referrals to ensure youth get the assistance they need, the probation department provides intensive case management. With every organization playing its role to strengthen a youth's application and keep them engaged in the long process, the SSI Advocacy Trust has an incredibly high rate of SSI approval.

---

<sup>1</sup> AB 1331 (Reg. Sess. 2007-08),

[http://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill\\_id=200720080AB1331](http://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=200720080AB1331).

<sup>2</sup> General Assistance is a county program that provides a very small, time-limited monthly cash grant to individuals who are very low income and not eligible for any other type of aid. For more information, see California Department of Social Services, *General Assistance or General Relief*,

<http://www.cdss.ca.gov/General-Assistance>.

<sup>3</sup> Kathleen Pender, *Wait time for federal disability benefits appeal hits a record*, S.F. Chron., Aug. 19, 2017, available at <http://www.sfchronicle.com/business/networth/article/Wait-time-for-federal-disability-benefits-appeal-11943615.php>.