
Study of Emergency Assistance and Special Needs Programs

by Michael Sosin*

This article gives an overview of a research study concerning emergency assistance and special needs programs. It notes that the range of programs available in States and counties is large, but that due to a combination of rules, State and local priorities, and financial difficulties, coverage of groups of clients and types of needs is uneven. The nature of the emergency assistance and special needs system in States seems to be closely tied to reactions to the nationwide trend toward standardizing grants and to such long-standing State policies as those concerning the desired size of welfare grants and the level of individualization preferred.

In recent years, there has been an upsurge of interest in emergency assistance and special needs programs—that is, public welfare cash or cash equivalent programs designed to meet crises or unusual continuing problems. The General Accounting Office (GAO) published a study in 1978 that was critical of one such program, Aid to Families with Dependent Children—Emergency Assistance (AFDC-EA). The study claimed that the low Federal matching rate—50 percent—discouraged some States from adopting the program. Partly to meet this objective, there was a proposal from the Carter administration to turn the AFDC-EA program into a capped appropriation that each State would receive. Finally, in an attempt to increase flexibility, the Reagan administration proposes instituting a block grant that combines AFDC-EA with the Federal energy assistance program, basing future appropriations on past spendings.

In light of the GAO study and two administrations' proposals, Joel Handler¹ and the author undertook an examination of the range of public emergency assistance and special needs programs in States and counties, funded by the Office of Research and Statistics. This article summarizes some of the main points of that study.

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¹ Joel Handler, now a professor of law at the Georgetown University, Washington, D.C., was the other co-director of the research—awarded to the Institute for Research on Poverty, University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin—on which this article is based.

Nature of the Study

The examination of emergency assistance and special needs programs was aimed at placing these specialized efforts within the broader context of public social welfare. These limited, crisis-oriented programs were analyzed to determine how they were affected by the configuration of State basic grant programs such as AFDC, Supplemental Security Income (SSI), or, in some localities, General Assistance.

The study assumed that one important trend by which emergency assistance and special needs programs may be influenced is the adoption of “flat” grants in public welfare programs. This form of calculating benefits simplifies computational formulas. Under the flat grant system, only income, family structure, and (especially in AFDC) work-related items are taken into account. Other circumstances, such as individual differences in rent, medical needs, or utility costs are not considered. The flat grants, which most States implemented in the 1970's, replaced discretionary systems in which local welfare officials could take many more individualized circumstances into account.

The flat grant is standard policy nationwide in SSI. In addition, the vast majority of States have adopted a flat grant in AFDC. This form of calculating benefits is meant to increase the “horizontal equity” of the benefit system by ensuring that individuals in similar circumstances receive similar grants. It is also meant to simplify the system to reduce the discretion of welfare workers and to limit the possibility for errors.

This study was designed to test several propositions. One was that the adoption of flat grants in recent years

would increase the importance of specialized programs. Before the implementation of flat grants, special problems could be met by manipulating basic benefits; for example, an additional payment could be provided if there were a medical need for a special diet. Under the flat grant system, special requests can be handled only by a separate, emergency assistance or special needs program. One might thus expect a growth of the specialized efforts to follow the adoption of a flat grant.

It was also hypothesized that the emergency assistance and special needs programs in States might differ, depending on characteristics of the State public welfare system. For example, when the basic grant is less generous, it seems likely that there would be more of a demand for some form of supplementation. This would suggest that States with smaller flat grants might have larger emergency assistance or special needs programs. The counter-argument is that the specialized programs entail some cost and that they will be implemented by States that are more willing to finance welfare programs—States with relatively generous benefit levels in other welfare programs.

The study was also aimed at determining patterns of administration. The study attempted to discover exactly how States kept the size of the specialized programs under control. It also attempted to determine the extent to which States rules influenced decisions concerning which clients received aid and the extent to which local discretion played a role.

Methodology ↵

To provide an overview of the nature of the specialized programs and to examine the issues outlined above, questionnaires were sent to public welfare officials in all States and in the District of Columbia. The questionnaires included an executive schedule in which State welfare administrators outlined the overall nature of the public welfare system. Separate questionnaires sent to program heads asked about the nature of a number of specialized aid programs: AFDC-EA, AFDC-Special Needs, SSI-Emergency Assistance or Special Needs, Food Stamps Emergency Assistance and the largest emergency program existing in the State. In addition, officials in Wisconsin and Minnesota were interviewed in order to gain more detailed information about historical trends. These two States are similar in many ways but have opposite policies toward specialized aid.

A survey was also made of a stratified, random sample of counties (or equivalent local areas). Two questionnaires were sent: An executive schedule, and a program questionnaire concerning either AFDC-EA or the largest emergency program in the county. A separate section asked about AFDC-Special Needs programs.

Besides the county survey, officials in six local sites were interviewed. The interviews were meant to supple-

ment the questionnaires and to provide more detail on how emergency assistance and special needs programs operated. The local interviews also helped verify the accuracy of the conclusions drawn from the survey.

Responses to the survey were relatively complete. Forty-five States returned the State questionnaire. There were 240 county respondents, 63 percent of the potential sample. However, individual items often had a lower response rate.

Study Results

The study, now being prepared in book format, uncovered considerable information about the specialized programs. Given the lack of “hard” data on most programs, much of this information comes from the potentially subjective perceptions of respondents. Extremely specific answers to the research questions could not be obtained, but many general points are supported by the two surveys and the two sets of case studies. These points can be summarized in five major categories—range of assistance and programs, extent of benefits and coverage, nature of coverage, patterns of aid and State characteristics, and discretionary policies.

Range of Assistance and Programs

The range of emergency assistance and special needs programs is extensive in most States and local areas. Based on the sample of 45 reporting States, there were (on the average) four programs per State. Only one State reported no emergency assistance or special needs program.

Executives reported the existence of general assistance and food stamp programs most often—in 26 of the States. Because the responses are based on perceptions of individuals, however, figures are a bit misleading for both programs. The general assistance emergency programs—the case studies revealed—are often simply basic grant programs for individuals without children; these programs are often short term, so that they are considered to be emergency assistance. On the other hand, an “expedited food stamp” program is required in all States. This program mandates that individuals with no income must be given stamps within 3 days of application. Although States must have this program, only some of them considered it significant enough to list as an emergency assistance program.

The next most common programs include the use of title XX social services, the service provision of the Social Security Act, to meet emergency or special needs (24 States), the Federal emergency energy program (23 States), AFDC-EA (22 States), and AFDC-Special Needs (18 States). Less frequently reported are State emergency programs (17 States) and State fuel programs (14 States). Ten of the State emergency programs are ex-

tended AFDC-EA programs in which the States pick up the cost for individuals who are not eligible for the Federal program. Finally, only 10 States have an SSI program, funded as part of the State supplement, that meets special or emergency needs, and only seven States have an "other" program. Most of the programs in the "other" category are actually General Assistance programs or State emergency programs.

The reported range of programs at the county level is similar. Among the 232 jurisdictions responding to this question, the average number of programs was five. Only six counties reported that they had no emergency or special needs programs.

The most commonly reported programs at the county level were title XX social services (84 percent), expedited food stamps (72 percent), and General Assistance (70 percent). At least half of the counties reported using AFDC-EA (63 percent), the Federal emergency energy program (54 percent), a program for SSI recipients (52 percent), or AFDC-Special Needs (50 percent). Fewer respondents reported the availability of a State emergency program (38 percent) or a State fuel program (31 percent).

The discrepancies in the percentages reported by county as opposed to State officials are due to a number of factors. First, the county sample slightly overrepresents counties in States in which AFDC-EA is available. Second, counties often reported using programs in ways that apparently were not known to State officials. For example, counties may use a small proportion of funds from title XX for emergency or special needs programs even though this use is not mandated by the State; they may develop a general assistance program that is totally a local option; or they may develop a program for SSI recipients that is not part of the State system.

One of the underlying factors behind the distribution of specialized aid is discretion. That is, with some exceptions, States are free to decide whether to adopt the emergency assistance and special needs programs, and counties may also make independent decisions about some of the programs. Patterns of coverage thus reflect a number of different decisions.

Extent of Benefits and Coverage

There is no readily available information on total costs of all the specialized programs in each State or county; the necessary data are simply not kept. But the scattered data that could be gathered support the notion that benefits are small and coverage is uneven. For example, national data concerning the size of the federally funded AFDC-EA programs demonstrate that benefits average only 1.1 percent of AFDC expenditures for States that participate; the largest program stands at 3.4 percent of AFDC expenditures, the smallest, 0.05 percent. Moreover, when information was reported on the

other programs, their costs tended to be even smaller than those for AFDC-EA.

The only relatively large programs are the State programs that supplement the SSI program. For example, California reports an average annual expenditure of \$605 per recipient of SSI-Special Needs. For other States, the average is \$219. When they exist at all, SSI programs allow for coverage of many types of special situations.

Some of the emergency or special needs programs may cover more than one group of individuals or one type of need. Thus, as a part of the questionnaire, State executives were asked to report the types of clients and situations covered in their State. The results, noted in table 1, show that many types of recipients are covered by at least one State program. The coverage of AFDC recipients is most nearly complete. Food stamp recipients, nonrecipients of other public aid, general assistance clients, and migrants and transients are covered by at least one emergency program in about two-thirds of the reporting States. Clients receiving AFDC-Unemployed Parent (AFDC-UP) benefits are least likely to be covered—even so, they received help in 50 percent of the reporting States. It must be kept in mind that these figures represent coverage of any kind as it was perceived by the State executives; the size of the allowed grants, and the types of need covered, are other issues.

The figures for the coverage of groups of clients reported by county executives are similar, although counties are inclined to report higher levels of coverage, as table 1 shows. The discrepancies are consistent with previous information concerning the existence of some county programs with which State officials were unfamiliar. In general, according to both county and State officials, the majority of jurisdictions have at least one program for many types of recipients, although at least some groups are often not covered at all.

Table 2 notes the reported coverage of various circumstances under State and county emergency assistance and special needs programs. At the State level, reported coverage is quite common for natural disas-

Table 1.—Groups covered by emergency assistance and special needs programs: Number and percent of jurisdictions reporting coverage

Group	Number reporting coverage		Percent reporting coverage	
	State (N = 44)	County (N = 221)	State	County
AFDC cases	33	209	75	94
AFDC-UP cases	22	144	50	80
SSI cases	30	189	68	90
Food stamp cases	29	196	66	91
General assistance cases	31	177	70	88
Nonrecipients of other public assistance	25	164	57	81
Migrants and transients	30	174	68	86

Table 2.—Circumstances for emergency assistance and special needs programs: Number and percent of jurisdictions reporting coverage

Circumstance	Number reporting coverage		Percent reporting coverage	
	State (N = 44)	County (N = 232)	State	County
Special, one-time disaster such as flood or fire	33	208	75	92
Sudden, one-time extra expense such as refrigerator breakdown	19	116	43	51
Lost or stolen checks	32	191	73	84
Lack of funds pending application for other public assistance	29	147	66	67
Unusual, continuing circumstance such as special diet or laundry service	14	89	32	40
Inability to meet basic needs	11	51	25	23

ters, lost and stolen checks, and the needs of individuals who are in the process of applying for ongoing assistance. Less likely to be covered are sudden expenses such as refrigerator breakdowns, special continuing needs, or the need for a supplement when the regular public assistance grant does not cover all food, shelter, or utility costs. Information on this topic as reported by the county executives was quite similar.

Table 2 thus implies that certain types of needs are often not covered in emergency assistance and special needs programs. In particular, a majority of recipients who have special needs (such as a medically related need for a special diet) or who simply run out of cash, are apparently not able to obtain any special public assistance.

Nature of Coverage

The emergency assistance and special needs programs are often limited in coverage due to a combination of Federal and State regulations. For example, title XX social services and AFDC-EA are by statute limited to families and to those who are at or near the poverty level. (AFDC-EA is currently limited to one grant a year, covering at most a 30-day period.) AFDC-Special Needs is an addition to the basic AFDC grant, and is thus only available to those who receive AFDC. SSI programs, general assistance programs, and food stamp programs are also limited to specific groups of clients. Thus, unless States or counties have nearly all of the various emergency assistance and special needs programs, some groups of clients will not be covered.

The way in which States and counties set rules when they have discretion also limits coverage. For example, the program questionnaires for both State and county officials contained a list of circumstances that the emergency assistance or special needs program might include. The officials were asked to give rough estimates of the percent of the total cost of the specialized pro-

gram each item entails. Although the list included about 20 items, the large majority of respondents said that one item represents most of the costs. At the State level, 73 percent of the programs are said to include one item that accounted for over 80 percent of the total costs. The corresponding figure for the counties is 81 percent. Natural disasters, overdue utility bills, and lost or stolen checks are most commonly the subject of specialization.

When one item is not the exclusive focus, often two or three make up the entire program. For example, New Mexico's AFDC-Special Needs program includes only school clothes, room and board for clients who needed unusual care, and layette allowances. Very few programs attempt to cover a large range of needs.

Patterns of Aid and State Characteristics

The pattern of offered aid was determined by correlating a number of variables concerning the welfare effort to the number of programs that each State made available. In addition, the expenditures (compared with the cost of AFDC) of the only program for which national data is available, AFDC-EA, were also correlated to these factors. The basic point of the research was to consider how recent trends and the nature of the welfare environment affect the specialized programs. Three patterns developed.

First, some States tended to have many emergency and special needs programs. Most of them, however, have programs with limited costs, at least if AFDC-EA were representative. In these States, a number of environmental conditions seem to lead to the pattern. First, most of these States seem to have placed less emphasis on maintaining horizontal equity, simplicity, and a low error rate. Second, these States tend to have relatively high AFDC benefits and relatively large per capita incomes. Finally, the Federal matching rate for AFDC in these States is relatively low—near its minimum of 50 percent.

A second group of States has few specialized programs. When any of these States has an AFDC-EA program, however, it tends to be relatively expensive. In general, these States have opposite characteristics to those in the first group. They have lower than average AFDC grants, small per capita incomes, and a higher than average Federal matching rate. They also have flat grants, and a relatively strong commitment to the recent interest in horizontal equity, standardization, and error control.

A third group has few specialized programs and no AFDC-EA program. These States are much like those in the second group. But there is no indication in the data that these States have any larger specialized program.

What accounts for these patterns? For the States in the first group, three explanations for the relatively

large range of programs seem likely. (1) These States have larger State per capita incomes and higher AFDC benefits, and it appears that the specialized programs are viewed as simply one more piece of the extensive package of benefits the States desire to fund. (2) Because these States often have a low Federal matching rate, they are probably more attuned to spending relatively large sums of State (as opposed to Federal) money on the specialized programs—the programs that often have low Federal matching or no Federal matching at all. (AFDC-EA, for example, is matched at a 50-percent level, as low as the match for the basic AFDC grant in any State.) And (3) these States have less of a commitment to the flat grant and its philosophy, and apparently believe that the specialized programs are one way of continuing a tradition of providing individualized services to clients.

The States with few programs probably have opposite motivations. These States have low per capita incomes and limited grants, and they are either unwilling or unable to support many extra expenditures in the form of an emergency or special needs program. Due to the relatively high Federal match in AFDC, they also are apparently convinced that specialized programs, with a lower match, are too expensive to the State. The States in this group also favor the flat grant and its trends, and may view specialized programs as running counter to the trends. By their very nature, specialized programs decrease horizontal equity and standardization. They also threaten to increase errors because of the difficulties in determining exactly who is eligible for the programs.

But the data also indicate that when States with few programs have an AFDC-EA program, that program is more costly than it is in States with several other needs programs. This fact may be due to the hypothesized existence of a compensation principle—the intentional use of emergency aid to fill gaps in welfare programs. Most of these States have limited public welfare programs, relatively high poverty rates, and small amounts of individualization in basic grants programs. In this situation, clients have relatively few resources to turn to when an emergency or special need arises. Apparently, more clients request specialized aid when difficulties arise, and State policies encourage a response to requests. In fact, States with the above characteristics often tend to have less restricted—that is, more wide open—emergency assistance and special need programs.

There is some evidence from county data that the increasingly limited level of benefits in basic programs is affecting specialized assistance. AFDC grants have not kept pace with inflation over the past decade. For example, there has been no increase in the basic AFDC grant in Texas during this period, and even in Minnesota, a State with one of the most generous programs, the highest annual increase has been 7 percent. Clients are apparently finding it increasingly difficult to make ends

meet on the AFDC grant, and county data show that many clients have sought specialized programs for a supplement.

Sixty-two percent of the county officials in this study reported increasing requests for assistance over the past few years. Of those who indicated a specific area of increase, the majority mentioned problems involving rent and fuel needs. An additional 11 percent (for a 73-percent total) indicated that although demand was not increasing, the budget for the specialized program had been cut. The complaint that a constant budget actually means a net decrease when inflation is taken into account is common. Only a small proportion of counties (19 percent) reported any funding increase in response to an increase in demand.

In most jurisdictions, declining discretionary funds and tax revenues—coupled with a “proposition-13 fever” by taxpayers—means that demand increases or funding cuts must be met by program cuts. As table 3 indicates, few executives (only 3 percent) report that specific groups of clients were completely cut off because of these needed adjustments. It was more common, however, to adopt written policies that restricted the coverage of situations, to impose new conditions for receiving aid (such as budget counseling), or to screen cases more carefully (these items were cited in 66 percent of the responses).

Discretionary Policies

Although the coverage of groups of clients and types of situations is set by States in a general way, local welfare officials and workers are given much discretion in dealing with individual cases. Part of the evidence for

Table 3.—Responses of county administrations to increased demand for AFDC-EA

Response	Respondents	
	Number	Percentage ¹
No response	49	28
Informal response such as rationing	100	57
Aid granted on first-come, first-served basis until funds were exhausted	34	19
Average amount of grants was reduced without written rule changes	5	3
Each request was screened more carefully	56	32
Some requests were denied for more specific eligible applicants	5	3
Formal (written) response	58	34
Written rules were adopted to restrict demand	29	17
Stricter conditions for receiving specialized aid were imposed	29	17
Obtained increases	43	24
Staff increases	8	5
Funding increases	35	19

¹Percentages do not total 100 because respondents could check more than one response category.

this finding involves the manner in which State officials exercise control. According to responses from the State program questionnaires, State officials on the average communicate with any county official about a specialized program once per month. These State officials only require counties to send them reports on costs and case-loads. Further, except for AFDC-Special Needs programs—in which a quality control review is part of the AFDC review—quality control of specialized programs occurs in only 43 percent of the programs.

The limited amount of State control leads to local discretion. There are some slight modifications of State rules as programs filter down to the county level. It thus appears that county officials often add a few circumstances or groups of clients who were not included by State emergency or special needs program rules. This occurrence partly accounts for the higher coverage reported in counties, as noted in tables 1 and 2.

In addition, county officials often increase outreach efforts beyond those that are mandated. For example, only two State programs mandate outreach, but 23 percent of these counties have an outreach program. Only 13.5 percent of State programs mandate that applicants for any grant be considered for an emergency or special needs grant, but 50 percent of the county programs contain this provision. On the other hand, counties often increase the level of verification required of clients; they are twice as likely as the States to verify family structure

and living arrangements of applicants. Apparently counties expand the pool of potential recipients more than States require, but they also more carefully screen clients to determine which ones should receive support. Counties also tend to use voucher and vendor payments in well over half the cases (62 percent), despite expectations on the part of the States that cash is the primary mode of payment. (Half of the State programs intend to use cash exclusively.)

Conclusion

Emergency assistance and special needs programs are highly discretionary, and this study suggests the patterns that have developed. The emergency and special needs network seems to be characterized by the existence of a range of highly scattered, specific programs. States vary considerably according to which programs they provide and the extensiveness of the programs. A common theme is some specialization by client groups—often as a response to law—and more complete specialization of the circumstances covered by each program. Within State rules, county officials have considerable discretion to determine the procedures that affect which clients receive benefits and which do not. The emergency assistance and special needs network thus is not a consistent, national system but instead is a varying system that responds to State and county predilections.

Errata

Correction to page 20, April 1981 issue. The following should be inserted after item 3 in column one:

4. Dropout years: The Committee modified the subcommittee provision relating to dropout years so that benefits for the survivors of disabled workers would be figured using the regular 5 dropout years applicable in the case of survivors of nondisabled workers. Under the subcommittee bill, the survivor of a disabled worker would have received a benefit based on proportionate dropout years just as the disabled worker would have if he or she had remained on the rolls.