

Notes and Brief Reports

Improving State Assistance Payment Procedures

The provision in the Social Security Amendments of 1950 that assistance be given with "reasonable promptness" resulted in recommendations, made by the Bureau of Public Assistance after consultation with State public welfare administrators, to improve the public assistance program in this respect. The experience of one State in carrying out the recommendations insofar as they involve fiscal procedures is summarized here.¹

In Oklahoma the Division of Finance did not believe it was possible to shorten materially the time between the date of application for assistance and receipt of the first check. At the time the recommendations were made, the division was finding it difficult enough to maintain established payroll deadlines without assuming any additional responsibility that might jeopardize the accounting controls. In the State, added work had been made for the division with the designation of the Department of Public Welfare as the official State agency to administer the old-age and survivors insurance program for public employees. Administering the new assistance category—aid to the permanently and totally disabled—had also added to the heavy load. These and other problems, including staff turnover, made the revision of fiscal procedures seem an impossible undertaking.

The recommendations, however, indicated that failure on the part of the State to act on an application within 30 days might constitute undue delay. Since the Division of Finance did not wish State action to be held up because of any inadequacies of the fiscal procedures, it determined to try to improve the procedures and to ensure that the system, which was geared

¹ Summarized from material presented by J. Fred Spear, Supervisor, Division of Finance, Oklahoma Department of Public Welfare, at the American Public Welfare Association Conference, July 9-10, 1951, Oklahoma City.

to speed and volume, had sufficient operational flexibility.

A review of fiscal operations was therefore begun to find out exactly how long it was taking to process a new certification from the date of application to the local office until receipt of the first check by the client. It was found that the time involved was excessive and that a correction of the situation was sorely needed.

In Oklahoma, certifications of assistance payments are received from the local office and processed in two control sections of the Division of Finance. The certifications and change-of-status forms are received in the predetermined control section, where they are checked and audited, verified, recorded, and balanced in an over-all master control ledger by separate categories, by counties, and by day's business before they are transmitted to the tabulating machine section. Thus this section predetermines the results of the day's business and establishes the various amounts against which the tabulating machine section must balance.

The tabulating machine section then key-punches the information received from the predetermined control section and verifies and balances the totals. Both control units must be in exact agreement on money totals and number of persons, by counties or in any other sequence desired, before the preparation of the checks and the check register is begun.

Before May 1951, checks were written once each month on a month-to-month basis. Checks were made out during the latter part of the month, postdated the first day of the following month, and mailed in time to reach the client on the first day of the month for which the assistance had been granted. A certain day in the month (which had been previously determined) was specified as the last day on which to accept changes that would affect the following month's roll; on that day the predetermined control ledger was balanced, and the total amount of the roll and number of persons thereon determined. After

the tabulating machine section had balanced with the predetermined control ledger, the writing of the checks and check register was begun. The checks were signed, inserted into window envelopes, sealed and stamped mechanically, and mailed from the office under one mailing.

Under this procedure it was not unusual for at least 30 days to elapse between the receipt of certification in the state office and the date the check was mailed to the client. A recipient for whom certification was received on June 29, for example, would not receive a check until August 1. The majority of the certifications were, however, processed in a much shorter period of time.

The solution to this problem was a weekly payroll on all new cases and reinstated cases that had been suspended. On May 1, 1951, a separate weekly payroll was established for each assistance category. The procedure provides that, for all new cases and reinstated cases received in the Division of Finance before noon on each Thursday, a check will be mailed to the client not later than the following Saturday. The predetermined control section maintains a separate worksheet control of the weekly payrolls and adds them into the over-all ledgers when the month's roll is determined; the work material is processed in this section on Thursday afternoon. The tabulating machine section key-punches, balances, and writes the checks on the following day. The checks are mailed on Saturday.

This weekly payroll procedure has shortened the time between the receipt of certification in the State office and the mailing of the check from more than 30 days to less than 1 week for most cases and to no more than 10 days for the most unusual situations.

When the new procedure had been in operation 60 days, sufficient time had elapsed to gauge its effectiveness. Staff had been gaining experience during the transition period, and errors observed were being corrected. The Division found the procedure to be thoroughly sound and certainly practicable.