

Process for applying for Asylum and available Social Services

1. Arrival in Maine of a person or family wanting to apply for asylum and needing financial assistance.
2. The Asylum Seeker goes to General Assistance (GA) for a short interview about their situation:
 - a. Individual/family will need to show Passport and Visa if they flew into the US (“Affirmative” Asylum Seeker) or travel documents if they entered the US across the southern border without a visa (“Defensive” Asylum Seeker).
 - b. If they are homeless, GA will send them to either the Family Shelter (families), Oxford Street (men’s shelter) or Florence House (women’s shelter). If they know someone here, or they are connected to a faith community, they may end up staying with another family temporarily. If the Shelters are full, GA might agree to put them up in a hotel until more permanent housing can be found or a bed becomes available at the shelter.
 - c. New arrivals can also apply for Free Medical Care (Free Care) at MMC/Mercy/Greater Portland Health Clinic. During COVID they can call the financial offices and ask for an interpreter or download and mail in their applications, as the offices are closed. If people have a “parole” stamp on their travel documents they are eligible for all U.S. benefits. For others, until they have filed for asylum and received an A# their benefits are very limited – they will get GA vouchers but not DHHS benefits (like Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) or Food Supplement (SNAP).
 - d. People should set up medical appointments at Greater Portland Health (or other federally qualified health center) for a full checkup and vaccine update.
 - e. Families and individuals receive food and non -food vouchers from GA and sometimes additional food cards from faith communities. Individuals or couples may use soup kitchens in Portland and in some other communities at various churches (most are closed during COVID) or and get food at pantries in various towns. When living with a host family or a friend.
 - f. A host/friend can write a dated note/letter confirming that the new arrival is living with them. In those circumstances, GA will give them food and non -food vouchers, even if they are not requesting rental assistance. In 2020, a single person got about \$45 non-food and about \$150 food. The food and rent vouchers depend on family size. If their rent exceeds the GA guidelines, they will get less in food and non-food vouchers.
3. Housing
 - a. GA determines the person’s total allotment (through a formula)
 - b. GA pays rent, utilities and whatever is left (from the allotment) is given in food and non-food vouchers. Note: If they have a phone, the person might be asked to provide proof of who is paying the phone bill. In addition, the phone bill may be deducted from the total amount vouchers. According to their policy, phones are considered a luxury, not a necessity. Of course, there is disagreement about that and in many cases GA doesn’t ask about or pay much attention to phones. The Maine Immigrant Resource Network (MIRC) has money to pay for phones - people should contact any local program that works with new Mainers to learn how to get this assistance.

4. Vouchers

- a. Once someone gets set up with GA, the expectation to participate in workfare (voluntary work) begins. The amount of required work is based on the amount of vouchers one receives, which depends on the size of the family: \$10 = 1 hour of work. \$12 or minimum wage (note: workfare has been suspended during COVID)
 - b. GA has a list of accepted workforce places (Oxford shelter, PAE etc.) but in the beginning when people have limited work time and don't speak English they may not be asked to participate in workfare but instead be able to take English classes toward that obligation. Often, people are first placed at places such as one of the soup kitchens or shelters to do basic tasks.
 - c. In 2020 a single person received about \$45 non-food and \$90 food vouchers (all amounts are subject to change).
 - d. A Family's GA allocation varies depending on the family size.
5. Once an asylum seeker has formally filed for asylum and receives their A-number, they may go to DHHS, 151 Jetport Boulevard in South Portland (near the airport) and apply for: *see "Parole" above
6. SNAP (Supplemental -Nutrition-Assistance -Program – formerly called food stamps) and MaineCare.
- a. TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families), and if they qualify, they are directed to FedCap (the workfare part of the program) for services. DHHS, will schedule a meeting at the FedCap office, 220 Maine Mall Road, South Portland. From then on, all services will be administered thru FedCap, except for the regularly scheduled renewal/eligibility assessment appointments back at the DHHS office (usually every 6 months)
 - b. Participants are expected to report all changes in their status (including getting a Work Permit, SSN, changes in family size, etc.) to both FedCap and DHHS.
 - c. Once their Work Permit is received:
 - FedCap ends the month people the work permit is received:
 - Families lose SNAP and the adults in the family get emergency-only MaineCare, while their children under 18 continue to get MaineCare and SNAP;
 - They may return to GA for benefits (food and non-food vouchers) depending on their income;
 - They may continue to apply for Free Care from Maine Medical Center or Mercy Hospital (now called Northern Lights) which gives free access to doctor appointments but does not cover the total amount of some medicines.
 - d. For parents of young children, WIC (Women, Infants and Children Food Services), is managed through The Opportunity Alliance at 190 Lancaster Street, 3rd floor, Portland. 207 -553 -5800. Other cities/towns have different offices, and can be found thru the local GA or DHHS office.
 - WIC is a program designed to help pregnant women and babies prenatally to 5 years old. The program gives food vouchers, diapers and baby formula.

- e. LIHEAP/HEAP (Fuel Assistance - Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program)
<https://www.opportunityalliance.org/programs/housing -and-energy -services/liheap/>
- This program is designed to help with electricity/gas bills;
 - Families need to have the following documents when they go to the appointment to apply for assistance:
 - Proof of address from correspondence or a copy of your lease agreement;
 - A Passport or other Photo ID;
 - A CMP and/or Util bill;
 - The most recent copy of your GA benefits receipt
- f. GA benefits are capped at 24 months. The time period does not need to be sequential). If a person is files for asylum as soon as they are ready, and then files of their work permit when they are eligible, most are employed and off of GA before 24 months. However, if they are unable to keep working, and need to reapply, they may do that as long as they have not used their entire 24months. This has been relaxed during COVID, and the rule may be changed if USCIS does not lift their new policy of not allowing people to apply for a work permit for 365 days after their asylum application is received.

It goes without saying, with the new Administration in Washington DC, many USICS rules are being reviewed so it's best to check with others at Welcoming the Stranger if families are getting conflicting information.