

Class-action suit assails residential treatment plan

Not enough shelters now, say plaintiffs

by Jim Simon
Times staff reporter

Despite physical disabilities and battles with alcohol, Donna Norburn has lived on her own in a small downtown apartment for the past five months. Now, she claims, her cherished independence is about to vanish as the state eliminates its cash-assistance program for alcohol and drug users.

In September, Norburn's sole source of support — her \$314 monthly check from the state General Assistance Unemployable (GAU) program — was cut off and she was ordered to report to an in-patient alcohol-treatment center at the end of the month.

This month's rent was paid with a donation from a private social-service agency. But while Norburn vows she won't go into a treatment center, she concedes she'll probably have to give up her apartment.

Norburn is one of two plaintiffs in a class-action lawsuit filed by Evergreen Legal Services yesterday challenging the cutoff of direct general-assistance benefits.

Under a program passed by the Legislature last year, the general-assistance recipients considered to have alcohol or drug problems will be required to enroll in a residential treatment program or live in a designated shelter. If they refuse, they will forgo public assistance.

The state, says Evergreen attorney Deborah Perluss, "intended the program to be so burdensome that these people would just disappear. Go to California or something."

The lawsuit challenges the shelter residency requirement of the new program, alleging that it will force people to give up their cheap apartments in favor of shelter living.

Perluss said shelter living is an unacceptable choice and predicts that many recipients will opt for the streets rather than live in a dormitory-style shelter.

The plaintiffs also claim that the state hasn't provided an adequate number of shelters or treatment programs.

In particular, Perluss said, there are very few beds for women, leaving clients such as Norburn in limbo from the time their checks are cut off until they are accepted in a residential treatment program.

And since there are so few



Benjamin Benschneider / Seattle Times

Donna Norburn has lost her monthly income of \$314 that the state General Assistance Unemployable program provided her. She now faces losing her apartment.

shelter beds now, the program will make worse the already acute shortage of housing for the homeless, Perluss added.

The lawsuit is likely to be a rallying point for opponents of the new program.

They have found an apparent ally in State Sen. Lorraine Wojahn of Tacoma, who chairs the Senate Health and Human Services Committee.

Yesterday, in testimony before the Joint Administrative Rules Committee, Wojahn asked legislators to overhaul the rules established by the Department of Social and Health Services. She says those rules, particularly the shelter requirement, "have de-

stroyed the original intent of the law."

Wojahn wants the department to establish a voucher system that would pay the rent for those with their own apartments instead of forcing everyone into shelters.

She says she is particularly concerned that those on General Assistance Unemployable primarily because of medical disabilities, rather than alcoholism, will wind up homeless.

Department of Social and Health Services officials say there has been a significant dropoff in applicants for that general-assistance program since the new rules went into effect last summer.