

Local

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Lawsuit threatened over welfare delays

By Joel Achenbach Staff Writer

With her child-support payments locked up in the district attorney's office and no luck finding a job, unemployed school instructor Linda Fleming decided to take a quick trip last month to the county's East Valley welfare office.

Fleming says they told her to come back later for her eligibility appointment — a month later, in fact.

Officials at the non-profit Community Legal Services said the Department of Social Services is violating the law by failing to provide speedy service to the scores of needy welfare-seekers who jam the county agency's 10 branch offices.

CLS has drafted a class-action lawsuit that aims to end the delays in eligibility appointments by forcing the county's Department of Social Services to follow more close-

ly state and local laws requiring rapid assistance to individuals with immediate needs.

"We've been seeing this problem for a number of years, and it's been more acute in the past two years," CLS spokesman Chuck Greenfield said Thursday. "The problem is widespread abuse throughout many offices."

However, Katherine Mason, assistant director of the Department of Social Services, denied that abuses of the law are widespread. "As far as we're concerned, we're substantially in compliance with the law. At least up until the first of July," Mason said Thursday.

Department regional manager Roger Cackler concurred, saying, "We don't abuse the law. We do our very best to conform to the letter of the law."

However, Greenfield said a lawsuit is being filed.

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ly with immediate needs that is eligible for Aid to Families with Dependent Children is supposed to receive up to \$100 within 24 hours of application. Food stamps should be issued to those in immediate need within three days, he said.

"These standards are simply not being met," Greenfield said.

The CLS lawsuit will be filed in August on behalf of "a number" of individuals, as well as the Welfare Recipients League, Greenfield said.

However, Mason acknowledged she had held a meeting early Thursday with the staff of the East Valley welfare office after her discovery that immediate need re-

quest forms are seldom distributed by the office.

Regulation 40-129 of the state Eligibility and Assistant Standards rulebook states that "when an applicant indicates verbally or in writing that he/she is in immediate need, a Form CA-4 shall be completed and the county shall review it immediately."

During the month of June, only four of the 151 "standbys" waiting in the office with immediate needs were given a CA-4 form to fill out, department records show.

"I talked to the staff this morning and told them they did have to distribute the CA-4s. Their concerns were the abilities of the supervisors to review all the requests," Mason said.

Mary Buster, acting director of

the East Valley office, said CA-4s were being given "routinely" to the standbys in the office Thursday.

That office also has received calls from citizens offering money, food and shelter to needy individuals after a Mercury and News story Thursday about a transient and penniless family of four seeking help at the office.

Cackler plans to visit East Valley today to monitor procedures there.

"There is a problem (in the county). Any time that we have a waiting period as long as we do it's a problem," Cackler said.

The four offices with the longest backlogs in the county are at East Valley, Tully Road, Milpitas and Blossom Valley, Cackler said.

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