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Protecting and Maximizing Public Benefits

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This outline presents the law as of this writing, with the warning that many public benefits in Texas are presently in a state of change. Nothing contained in this publication is to be considered as the rendering of legal advice for specific cases, and readers are responsible for obtaining such advice from their own legal counsel. This publication is intended for educational and informational purposes only.

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Protecting and Maximizing Public Benefits

I. TABLE OF CONTENTS

II.	OVERVIEW OF TEXAS HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICE AGENCIES	2
A.	TEXAS AGENCIES.....	2
1.	<i>Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC)</i>	2
2.	<i>Department of State Health Services (DSHS)</i>	2
3.	<i>Other Texas Agencies</i>	2
B.	FEDERAL AGENCIES.....	4
1.	<i>Social Security Administration (SSA)</i>	4
2.	<i>Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS)</i>	4
C.	EQUAL PROTECTION FOR PARTNERS IN SAME-SEX MARRIAGES.....	5
III.	SUPPLEMENTAL SECURITY INCOME (SSI).....	5
A.	ELIGIBILITY	5
1.	<i>“Categorical” Requirements: Aged, Blind or Disabled</i>	6
2.	<i>Citizenship/Immigration/Residency Status</i>	7
3.	<i>Income</i>	9
4.	<i>Resources</i>	18
B.	BENEFITS	19
1.	<i>Cash Benefits</i>	19
2.	<i>Medicaid Eligibility</i>	19
C.	TRUST RULES	19
1.	<i>Third-Party Settled Trusts</i>	20
2.	<i>Self-Settled Trusts</i>	21
3.	<i>Judicial Reformation of Wills</i>	30
4.	<i>Self-Settled Trusts-Key Provisions in 2018 POMS Revisions</i>	31
5.	<i>Restrictions on Early Termination Provisions in Self-Settled Trusts</i>	35
6.	<i>Factors Affecting Type of Trust and Selection of Trustee</i>	36
7.	<i>The Sole Benefit Rule</i>	40
8.	<i>Treatment of UTMA Accounts</i>	41
9.	<i>SSA's System for Evaluating SSI Trusts</i>	42
10.	<i>Texas Implements the ABLE Act</i>	43
11.	<i>Child Support Paid from Self-Settled SNT is "Income" to the SNT Beneficiary</i>	47
12.	<i>Pooled Trust is Now an Alternative to a 142 Trust</i>	47
D.	TRANSFER RULES	48
E.	APPLICATION	50
F.	SSI SOURCES OF LAW	50
IV.	CHILDHOOD DISABILITY BENEFIT & DISABLED ADULT CHILD MEDICAID	51
V.	SOCIAL SECURITY DISABILITY INSURANCE (SSDI)	53
A.	ELIGIBILITY	53

1.	<i>Work History</i>	53
2.	<i>Disability</i>	54
B.	BENEFITS	54
1.	<i>Cash Benefits</i>	54
2.	<i>Medicare Benefits</i>	55
C.	APPLICATION	55
VI.	REGULAR MEDICAID BENEFITS	55
A.	ELIGIBILITY	56
B.	BENEFITS	57
1.	<i>General Scope of Benefits</i>	57
2.	<i>Texas Health Steps (THSteps)</i>	58
3.	<i>Prescription Medications</i>	59
C.	MEDICAID SERVICE DELIVERY MODELS	59
1.	<i>Historical Background in Texas</i>	59
2.	<i>Changes Should Not Adversely Affect Clients</i>	60
3.	<i>Changes in Program Names</i>	62
4.	<i>More Choices in Service Delivery</i>	63
5.	<i>Value-added Services</i>	63
D.	APPLICATION	63
VII.	MEDICARE	64
A.	ELIGIBILITY	64
1.	<i>Eligibility at Age 65</i>	64
2.	<i>Work Requirements</i>	64
3.	<i>Eligibility in Connection With Social Security and Railroad Retirement Disability Benefits</i>	64
4.	<i>Medicare Premiums</i>	65
5.	<i>Continuation of Medical Coverage After Total Disability Ends</i>	65
B.	BENEFITS	66
1.	<i>Hospital Services</i>	67
2.	<i>Nursing Facility Services</i>	67
3.	<i>Home Health Services</i>	67
4.	<i>Hospice Services</i>	68
5.	<i>Physician Services and Other “Part B” Benefits</i>	69
6.	<i>Part B Deductibles and Co-Pays</i>	69
7.	<i>Prescription Drugs</i>	69
8.	<i>Medicare Improvement Standard Abrogated</i>	72
C.	APPLICATION	73
VIII.	“LONG- TERM CARE” MEDICAID	73
A.	ELIGIBILITY	74
1.	<i>Income</i>	74
2.	<i>Resources (Countable Assets)</i>	76
3.	<i>Medical Need Requirements</i>	83
4.	<i>Citizenship/Immigration/Residence Status</i>	84
5.	<i>Age, Blindness or Disability</i>	84
B.	BENEFITS	84

1.	<i>Nursing Home Medicaid</i>	84
2.	<i>Extension of Managed Care to Nursing Facilities</i>	87
3.	<i>Home Care Under the “Community Care” Programs</i>	90
4.	<i>Home and Community Care under the Medicaid “Waiver” Programs</i>	92
C.	THE HCBS WAIVER “SPOUSAL PROTECTED RESOURCE AMOUNT”	96
1.	<i>Both Spouses at Home</i>	96
2.	<i>One Spouse in a Nursing Home</i>	98
D.	ELIGIBILITY RULES WHEN BOTH SPOUSES APPLY	98
E.	THE HCBS WAIVER PROGRAM INTEREST LISTS	101
1.	<i>Interest List Wait Times</i>	101
2.	<i>Bypassing the Interest Lists with “Money Follows the Person”</i>	102
F.	TRUST RULES	103
1.	<i>Third-Party-Settled Trusts</i>	104
2.	<i>Benefits of a Testamentary Trust for a Spouse</i>	104
3.	<i>Self-Settled Trusts Generally</i>	104
4.	<i>Rules applying to revocable trusts established by the client</i>	105
5.	<i>Rules applying to irrevocable trusts established by the client</i>	105
6.	<i>Exceptions to General Rules Governing Trusts “Established By” The Client</i>	106
7.	<i>Exempt Assets Remain Exempt if Transferred to Revocable Trust—Except the Home</i>	109
G.	TRANSFER (“GIFTING”) RULES	110
1.	<i>Nature and Purpose</i>	110
2.	<i>Rules for Calculating the Penalty Period</i>	110
3.	<i>Treatment of Multiple Transfers</i>	111
4.	<i>How to Determine the “Start Date” of the Penalty Period</i>	112
5.	<i>Medicaid Programs Subject to the Transfer Penalty</i>	113
6.	<i>Disclaimers as Transfers</i>	113
7.	<i>What is “Compensation” Reducing a Transfer Penalty</i>	114
8.	<i>Cash Compensation or Returns of Transferred Assets</i>	115
9.	<i>Transfers by or to a Community Spouse</i>	119
10.	<i>Certain Transfers Excepted From Penalty</i>	119
11.	<i>Exception: Transfers Solely for Non-Medicaid Purpose</i>	122
12.	<i>Exception: Transfer Penalty Would Result in “Undue Hardship”</i>	123
13.	<i>Motor Vehicle Transfer on Death Avoids Transfer Penalty and MERP</i>	124
14.	<i>Gifting by Guardians</i>	125
15.	<i>Fees of Guardians Deductible From Copayment</i>	126
H.	APPLICATION	127
I.	AGREEMENTS OF EXCLUSIVITY BETWEEN ATTORNEYS AND SKILLED NURSING FACILITIES	127
J.	MEDICAID ESTATE RECOVERY PROGRAM	128
K.	LADY BIRD DEED	128
L.	TRANSFER ON DEATH DEED: THE NEW LADY BIRD DEED?	131
1.	<i>Features of the Transfer on Death Deed</i>	131
2.	<i>Comparison of TODD and LBD</i>	135
M.	ACA EXTENDS SPOUSAL IMPOVERISHMENT PROTECTIONS TO HCBS WAIVER PROGRAMS	141
N.	1915(C) IS NOW HCBS	142
O.	EFFECT OF COURT ORDERS TRANSFERRING ASSETS AND INCOME BETWEEN SPOUSES	142
P.	NON-WAIVER COMMUNITY-BASED LTC MEDICAID PROGRAMS	144
1.	<i>Community First Choice</i>	144

2.	<i>“Texas Dual Eligible Integrated Care Project” affects 6 counties</i>	145
IX.	CHILDREN’S MEDICAID	146
A.	ELIGIBILITY	146
1.	<i>Residence and Citizenship</i>	146
2.	<i>Age 18 or Under</i>	146
3.	<i>Resources</i>	146
4.	<i>Income</i>	147
B.	BENEFITS	148
C.	TRUST AND TRANSFER RULES	148
X.	PREGNANT WOMEN’S MEDICAID	148
A.	ELIGIBILITY	148
1.	<i>Residence and Citizenship</i>	148
2.	<i>Resources</i>	148
3.	<i>Income</i>	149
B.	BENEFITS	149
C.	TRUST AND TRANSFER RULES	149
XI.	PARENTS & CARETAKER RELATIVES MEDICAID	149
A.	HISTORY AND RELATION TO TANF	149
B.	ELIGIBILITY	150
1.	<i>Relationship to Dependent Child</i>	150
2.	<i>Resources</i>	150
3.	<i>Income</i>	151
C.	BENEFITS	151
D.	TRUST AND TRANSFER RULES	151
E.	APPLICATION	152
XII.	MEDICALLY NEEDY PROGRAM	152
A.	ELIGIBILITY	152
1.	<i>Age & Gender</i>	152
2.	<i>Income</i>	152
3.	<i>Resources</i>	154
B.	BENEFITS	154
C.	TRUST RULES	154
D.	TRANSFER RULES	155
E.	APPLICATION	155
XIII.	THE TEXAS CHILDREN’S HEALTH INSURANCE (CHIP) PROGRAM	155
A.	ELIGIBILITY	155
1.	<i>Age</i>	155
2.	<i>Residence/Citizenship</i>	155
3.	<i>Waiting Period</i>	155
4.	<i>Income</i>	156
5.	<i>Resources</i>	156
6.	<i>Exclusions</i>	156

B.	BENEFITS AND COSTS	157
C.	TRUST RULES	157
D.	TRANSFER RULES	157
E.	APPLICATION	157
XIV.	THE AFFORDABLE CARE ACT	158
A.	INTRODUCTION	158
B.	CHANGES PUT INTO EFFECT BEFORE 2013	158
1.	<i>The “Federal Risk Pool”</i>	158
2.	<i>“Money Follows the Person”</i>	158
3.	<i>Coverage for Children With Pre-Existing Conditions</i>	159
4.	<i>Coverage for Children Until Age 26</i>	159
5.	<i>Medicare Part D “Donut Hole” Reduction</i>	159
6.	<i>Part D Cost-Sharing Eliminated for Waiver Program Beneficiaries</i>	159
7.	<i>Nursing Home Disclosures Required</i>	159
C.	CHANGES EFFECTIVE JANUARY 1, 2014	159
1.	<i>No Pre-Existing Condition Requirement</i>	160
2.	<i>Sliding-Scale Premiums Based on Income</i>	160
3.	<i>Sliding-Scale Cost Sharing Based on Income</i>	161
4.	<i>Spousal Impoverishment Rules Apply to Waiver Programs</i>	162
5.	<i>No Annual or Lifetime Caps</i>	162
6.	<i>Medicaid Coverage Based on Low-Income</i>	162
7.	<i>Effect of the ACA on Special Needs Practices</i>	163
XV.	EMERGENCY ASSISTANCE TO UNDOCUMENTED ALIENS.....	164
A.	ELIGIBILITY	164
B.	BENEFITS	164
XVI.	QMB AND OTHER MEDICARE SAVINGS PROGRAMS	165
A.	ELIGIBILITY AND BENEFITS	165
1.	<i>Qualified Medicare Beneficiaries (QMB)</i>	166
2.	<i>Specified Low-Income Medicare Beneficiaries (SLMB)</i>	166
3.	<i>Qualifying Individuals (QI)</i>	166
4.	<i>Qualified Disabled and Working Individuals (QDWI)</i>	166
5.	<i>Income & Resource Methodology of the Medicare Savings Programs</i>	167
B.	TRUST AND TRANSFER RULES	167
C.	APPLICATION	168
XVII.	MEDICAID BUY-IN PROGRAM	168
A.	ELIGIBILITY	168
1.	<i>Disability</i>	168
2.	<i>Income</i>	169
3.	<i>Resources</i>	170
4.	<i>Calculation of Monthly Premium</i>	170
B.	BENEFITS	170
C.	APPLICATION	171
XVIII.	MEDICAID BUY-IN FOR CHILDREN PROGRAM.....	171

A.	PROGRAM DESCRIPTION	171
B.	ENABLING STATUES.....	171
C.	ELIGIBILITY REQUIREMENTS	171
1.	<i>Financial requirements</i>	172
2.	<i>Non-financial requirements</i>	173
D.	MBIC PREMIUM AMOUNTS	173
1.	<i>No ESI</i>	173
2.	<i>ESI with State-Paid HIPP</i>	174
3.	<i>ESI and No State-Paid HIPP</i>	174
E.	EXEMPTIONS AND WAIVERS	174
XIX.	HELP WITH INSURANCE PREMIUMS—THE HIPP PROGRAM.....	174
XX.	FOOD STAMPS (SNAP).....	176
A.	ELIGIBILITY	176
1.	<i>Resources</i>	176
2.	<i>Trust Rules</i>	177
3.	<i>Transfer Rules</i>	177
4.	<i>Income</i>	178
5.	<i>Citizenship/Immigration Status</i>	178
6.	<i>Work Requirements</i>	179
B.	BENEFITS	179
C.	APPLICATION	179
XXI.	TEXAS MENTAL HEALTH & INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY PROGRAMS	179
A.	ELIGIBILITY	181
1.	<i>Medicaid-Funded Services</i>	181
2.	<i>Non-Medicaid-Funded Services</i>	181
B.	BENEFITS	183
1.	<i>Mental Health Facilities</i>	183
2.	<i>Intellectual Disability Services</i>	183
3.	<i>Community Services</i>	184
4.	<i>Group Homes</i>	185
C.	TRUST RULES	185
D.	TRANSFER RULES	187
XXII.	LOCAL MEDICAL ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS & OTHER BENEFITS.....	188
A.	LOCAL MEDICAL ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS	188
B.	EMERGENCY ROOM ASSISTANCE.....	189
C.	INDIGENT-CARE RESPONSIBILITIES OF HOSPITALS	189
D.	LOCAL NONPROFIT AGENCIES	189
E.	PROPERTY TAX EXEMPTIONS.....	190
F.	UNLISTED AGENCIES & BENEFITS	190
XXIII.	BREAST CANCER & CANCER CONTROL SERVICES AND MEDICAID.....	190
A.	THE BREAST & CERVICAL CANCER CONTROL SERVICES (BCCCS)	190
B.	MEDICAID FOR BREAST AND CERVICAL CANCER	191

XXIV.	APPLICATION FOR TEXAS HHS BENEFITS	191
A.	SUBMITTING PAPER APPLICATIONS	191
B.	FILING ONLINE	192
C.	APPLICATION PROCESSING AND DETERMINATIONS	193
D.	ADVOCATING DURING THE APPLICATION PROCESS	194
1.	<i>Step 1: Medicaid Eligibility Specialist</i>	195
2.	<i>Step 2: Service Improvement Manager in the Office of Eligibility Services (OES)</i>	195
3.	<i>Step 3: Office of the Ombudsman</i>	196
E.	WHEN A CLIENT COMES UP ON A STAR+PLUS WAIVER (SPW) INTEREST LIST OR COMMUNITY ATTENDANT SERVICES (CAS) INTEREST LIST	197
1.	<i>SPW Application Process</i>	197
2.	<i>CAS Application Process</i>	197
XXV.	COVID-19-RELATED LEGISLATION.....	198
A.	FISCAL RELIEF	198
B.	EXPANDED COVERAGE FOR COVID TESTING	199
C.	INCREASED CARE SETTING FLEXIBILITY	199
D.	MEDICAID DEMONSTRATION PROGRAM EXTENSION	200
XXVI.	COVID-19-RELATED MEDICAID POLICIES	200
A.	MEDICAID COVERAGE MAY NOT BE TERMINATED	200
B.	“UNWINDING” OF MEDICAID CONTINUATION DUE TO THE PUBLIC HEALTH EMERGENCY	200
C.	MEDICAID ANNUAL RECERTIFICATIONS INVOLVE UNCERTAINTY	203
D.	STIMULUS PAYMENTS USUALLY DO NOT AFFECT BENEFITS	204
E.	“BEST AVAILABLE” INCOME VERIFICATION IS SOMETIMES GOOD ENOUGH	204
F.	SOURCES OF INFORMATION ON COVID-19 MEDICAID POLICY	205
APPENDIX 1:	2023 BENEFIT ELIGIBILITY NUMBERS.....	206
APPENDIX 2:	HOW TO CALCULATE “PRO RATA SHARE” OF HOUSEHOLD EXPENSES.....	208
APPENDIX 3:	THREE WAYS DIFFERENT MEDICAID PROGRAMS DEFINE “INCOME”	209
APPENDIX 4:	LIMITS ON ELIGIBILITY OF ALIENS FOR PUBLIC BENEFITS IN TEXAS.....	214
APPENDIX 5:	SOURCES OF FREE AND REDUCED PRICE PRESCRIPTION MEDICATIONS	216
APPENDIX 6:	SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	217
APPENDIX 7:	HHSC REGIONAL DIRECTORS.....	221
APPENDIX 8:	HHSC ORGANIZATIONAL CHART	223
APPENDIX 9:	CHECKLIST FOR TERMINATION OF SPECIAL NEEDS TRUST WITH MEDICAID PAYBACK PROVISION	224
APPENDIX 10:	DRAFTING FOR USE OF POOLED TRUSTS	225
APPENDIX 11:	LIST OF MEANS-TESTED PUBLIC BENEFIT PROGRAMS IN TEXAS	227
APPENDIX 12:	SOCIAL SECURITY CLAIM NUMBER SUFFIXES	244
APPENDIX 13:	SOURCES OF LAW.....	245

Introduction

This overview of the most significant public benefits for persons with disabilities in Texas is intended to assist attorneys and other benefits counselors to identify the major benefits to which such clients may be entitled.

Its focus is primarily on the “means-tested” benefits, which are available only to persons with assets and income below certain limits. Therefore, particular attention is paid to rules relating to trusts and transfers of assets to assist attorneys and other professionals with estate planning for family members and with planning for dispositions of personal injury awards, inheritances and other assets of persons with disabilities.

Although much of the law discussed is federal law, many rules are state-specific. Accordingly, with regard to cases governed by the law of jurisdictions other than Texas, it must be used, if at all, with great caution.

This outline is intended as a “bridge” to help the practitioner better understand and use the voluminous statutes, rules, and agency operating instructions applying to each program. Therefore, although it seeks to cover the most important rules, it cannot include every benefit, exclusion, exemption, etc. contained in the numerous sources of law, which are cited for further reference.

2023 UPDATES

Expansion of the onset of the disability age for Achieving a Better Life Experience (ABLE) accounts from age 26 to age 46.	43
Legal Standard for Determining Whether Home Acquired After Admission to a Facility is a Countable Asset (<i>Burt</i> case)	78
Taking RMD for months before Medical Eligibility Date in a lump sum	82
Deducting Pre-Eligibility Medical Expenses	85
New Section on Filing Medicaid Applications Online and Working with HHSC	191
What Happens in the “Unwinding” of PHE-Protected Medicaid	200
Updated Appendix 1: Benefit Eligibility Numbers	206
Updated Appendix 3: Methodology for calculating income for Medicaid eligibility	209

II. OVERVIEW OF TEXAS HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICE AGENCIES

A. TEXAS AGENCIES

1. HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES COMMISSION (HHSC)

The Texas Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC) administers the government programs Special Needs Trust beneficiaries need the most often:

- Long-Term Care Medicaid (nursing home and home care programs)
- Medicaid for children and their caregivers
- SNAP (food stamps)
- TANF (cash assistance for families)
- Behavioral Health Services
- Intellectual Disability Services
- Women's Health Services

HHSC also licenses long-term care facilities, certifies certain nursing facilities as Medicaid providers.

2. DEPARTMENT OF STATE HEALTH SERVICES (DSHS)

Within HHSC, the Texas Department of State Health Services (DSHS) manages birth and death records, gathers and shares public health data, collects data to monitor for chronic and infectious disease, provides emergency response services for health emergencies, regulates producers of consumer health goods and service providers that pose potential danger to public health. Most, if not all, of the client-side health and human services have transitioned to HHSC but DSHS may come up in discussions related to public benefits in Texas.

3. OTHER TEXAS AGENCIES

The Texas public benefits system has been going through an iterative transformation process for decades. A system that was administered by 12 separate agencies in the mid-90s is now mostly centralized within the HHSC/DSHS umbrella.¹ The roles and responsibilities, or even existence, of certain agencies, has also changed.

¹ TEX. HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES COMM'N, *Health and Human Services System Strategic Plans for 2019-2023*, <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/about-hhs/budget-planning/strategic-plans/2019-23/strategic-plans-2019-23-volume-i.pdf>.

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