

Foodshare is the heart of greater Hartford's fight against hunger. Serving as the region's food bank, Foodshare works to distribute food each day to a network of nearly 300 local partners to help feed our hungry neighbors. Through these programs, Foodshare served 128,000 people, including 50,000 children, last year.

Foodshare and private charities cannot hope to collect enough food to meet the need. We currently meets under half the need in our community. At the same time, public programs like The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) are under-utilized. If we could increase enrollment in SNAP by just 5%, it would provide more than 12 million pounds; the amount we distributed last year.

That is why Foodshare takes an active role in ensuring families in need can access federal and state nutrition programs. For three years Foodshare has partnered with End Hunger Connecticut! to helped individuals and families apply for the SNAP Program. We believe this is so important that we have a full time staff person training and placing volunteers in the community to prescreen and help residents apply for SNAP. Foodshare submits the applications and follows up to help families receive their benefits in a reasonable time frame. We also train our nonprofit partners, like local food pantries, shelters and community kitchens, to provide SNAP pre-screening and application assistance.

Through this street-level work we hear the frustration of the public and understand the issues that keep SNAP benefits out of reach for so many Connecticut families. SNAP applications are being submitted at an alarming rate. With a 30% increase in SNAP participation rates in the last year, we need the infrastructure in place to process applications quickly and accurately.

Deputy Commissioner Claudette Beaulieu was quoted as reporting that the Connecticut DSS currently has each case worker "handling an average of 1,750 cases each month." This far exceeds a manageable case load per worker.

Connecticut has the second to worst quality rating in the country. The USDA reports that fewer than 60 percent of applications in Connecticut are being processed within the federally mandated 30 days. When Foodshare follows-up, we often see applications take up to twice the mandated time. The current system at the Department of Social Services is so broken that the state is in danger of being fined up to a million dollars.

At the same time, families in need are suffering. They are forced into a system that does not work. Foodshare's Outreach Coordinator receives daily calls from residents who have applied for SNAP with a complete application and full verification. They wait patiently, trying to make ends meet from local pantries and Mobile Foodshare, and they hear nothing about their application.

We also receive calls from residents who have been approved, but have a question about the program that they cannot get answered. In one case an elderly woman was approved for SNAP and was mailed her EBT card. She called in tears because she had received her card over a month ago but was confused on how to access the benefits that were on it. She had tried contacting DSS but could not get through. She was hungry and had the benefits right at her finger tips but was not able to access them.

These are families who must decide between putting food on the table or paying their heating bill. Across the state, Foodshare and many of other non-profits are focused on helping families apply for SNAP at a time when they are most vulnerable. These families end up at the Department of Social Services, where it is crucial that applications are processed in a timely and accurate manner. When:

- applications take twice as long as mandated to be processed, the system is broken.
- frequent errors cause families to be rejected from the program, the system is broken.
- enrolled families cannot get questions answered to use and maintain their benefits, the system is broken.

Foodshare gratefully appreciates our legislator's time and energy in wrestling with these issues. The timely and accurate processing of these applications is critical to residents of Connecticut in times like these.

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