

Appropriations Committee, February 14, 2014  
Testimony submitted by Lucy Potter, Attorney  
Greater Hartford Legal Aid

## Fund full staffing for DSS ConneCT system

I am an attorney at Greater Hartford Legal Aid and have represented many clients who seek cash and medical help from DSS. I am counsel in Briggs v. Bremby, a case that seeks timely processing of food stamps benefits. The Federal District Court granted a preliminary injunction in Briggs, finding that DSS was not complying with federal processing timeframes. DSS has shown improvement in its processing of food stamps, but is not meeting the benchmarks under the order. Based on the most recent report for November, 85% of the cases that should be processed in 30 days and 79% of the cases that should be processed in 7 days are processed timely. The court's order requires the state to be processing 90% of the cases on time by the end of 2013.

Progress in food stamp processing, though still short of the court's order, seems to be coming at the expense of other types of applications. We are hearing from people all over the state that Medicare savings programs applications are routinely delayed. These are cases in which the state pays the Medicare supplement for Part B coverage for low income seniors and disabled people. When the state fails to process these cases the premiums come out of people's Social Security checks and they are suddenly \$100 short for food and rent. We have seen similar delay in processing of cash assistance for single people (SAGA).

The bigger problem, though, is that the Call Centers that were instituted in July are not working. I hear from clients who have been unable to get through or who got through after over an hour on the phone. Last week we heard reports of several people waiting five hours to reach a person. Who would even wait five hours? People wait because it is their only recourse to make sure they can keep their medical coverage or buy food. I try to use the Call Center line periodically, keeping the number on speaker phone while I work. In the past couple of months I have not gotten through in less than an hour. This is not an occasional delay. This is every call, over an hour. For clients who rely on limited minute phones, this phone line is not an option. So clients have turned to the offices. The offices are turning people away every day because they cannot handle the traffic. DSS workers now are assigned to handle case processing, phones, or office walk-in traffic. But none of these functions are working. The system is overwhelmed. People, many people, go without benefits for months as a result.

Others will testify today detailing the history of staff reduction and caseload increase over the past ten years. Staffing was increased over the past couple of years but not enough. I was pleased to see that the Governor's budget calls for further staff increases. I urge this committee to approve sufficient staffing so that this system can work.

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