



Testimony regarding H.B. No. 5030 AN ACT MAKING ADJUSTMENTS TO STATE EXPENDITURES FOR THE FISCAL YEAR ENDING JUNE 30, 2015.

February 14, 2014

Senator Bye, Representative Walker and members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Lucy Nolan and I am the executive director of End Hunger Connecticut!, a statewide anti-hunger and food security organization that focuses on policy, education and outreach on the federal food programs. We do a significant amount of work on the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP (formerly food stamps).

We applaud the Governor's commitment to hire more staff for the Department of Social Services. Additional staff, coupled with the modernization efforts, should help resolve our timeliness and error rate issues. At the moment I am not sure we are going down that path. Given the number of state residents applying for and using DSS programs it is clear that additional staff than allotted in the budget are needed at DSS to ensure that the modernization efforts are used to their full potential.

We're frustrated. Recently we've been receiving calls to our office from DSS clients who had received redetermination notices **after** the date of the mandatory interview with a DSS worker, therefore missing the chance to continue their SNAP benefits without interruption. As recently as last week we were receiving calls from DSS clients who were told to call End Hunger CT! to reapply when they found out that their benefits were cut off. Who told them to call us? DSS Benefit Center staff members, who finally answered the clients' calls, after a long wait.

We try to help people who have waited for up to two hours, using 120 of their cell phone minutes, to talk to someone at the Benefit Center. Clients come to our office to ask us to call DSS so their minutes aren't used up. We have helped clients to complete applications and then submitted those applications to DSS ourselves and still the clients never heard from DSS as to their status - some as long as six months after applying. As you well know, these are people who cannot afford to pay to get SNAP, or other benefits, yet that is what DSS is asking of them.

Paperwork continues to get lost, and even if it isn't lost, it is not input into the new system in a timely enough manner to avoid benefits being discontinued. Clients have to either reapply or continue trying to contact DSS for more information. Wait times for clients who go to the DSS office in person are long, and at some offices applicants are asked to come back another day.

We grow significantly more frustrated. We are not trying to tie DSS's hands or cast aspersions. The work they have taken on is extraordinary given the lack of resources put into the department over the last 20 some odd years. As I understand it DSS has staffing levels comparable to 2002 - yet

SNAP alone has more than doubled since 2004, as the attached graph on household participation shows.

The modernization plans are good and should work well. But they cannot work unless there are adequate resources (staff) to handle the calls and process the work. That requires an influx of staff to answer phones, to be at the front line in the offices, and at Central Office to help those of us who do outreach on the programs.

We were told over two months ago that there will be an Escalation Unit, or a place for advocates to contact someone at DSS to check on problem cases. Before the modernization many of us had a person to call to try to work out issues on our clients' cases. Now, there is no such person and that creates additional backlogs for DSS. Every time a client loses benefits due to lost paperwork they are told to reapply; not only do they lose benefits they should have received but more paperwork is created.

EHC! is currently working with the AARP Foundation to help with application assistance for older adults in Connecticut. Older adults have a difficult time navigating the online system and we find that we must do most of the application process for them, which we do by phone and by mail. We have changed our outreach process to better coordinate with DSS's ConneCT. However, many older adults are reluctant to call the ConneCT line as it is confusing.

End Hunger Connecticut! has participated in SNAP outreach for 10 years. We try to work with DSS to suggest and implement solutions to access issues. For example, we created Regional Advisory Boards and statewide SNAP Improvement meetings for advocates, DSS and USDA staffers to come together to iron out client issues, questions and policy issues. We instituted an electronic application and document submission system (eFax) used by many community groups and other non-profits to get complete applications sent directly to a DSS computer. We work with other community and social service offices as a resource to answer SNAP related questions, and help train outreach workers. Our goal is to make access to the program run as smoothly as possible and welcome any and all efforts to partner with DSS.

We thank the Governor and you, the Appropriations Committee, for protecting our safety net. To make our modernization plans work as well as they can, many more staff are needed, and more than the 66 in the budget. DSS serves nearly twice as many people in 2013 than it did in 2004. e Even with modernization performing at full capacity, DSS still needs several hundred more staff to serve the 1,146,215 people/711,477 households¹ (672,332/374,941 in 2004) who receive assistance from the array of DSS programs.

¹ From the DSS "Assistance Units and Recipients, Average Monthly by Town" Report
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