

Human Services Committee, March 4, 2014
Testimony submitted by Lucy Potter, Attorney
Greater Hartford Legal Aid

S.B. 251 AN ACT CONCERNING PROGRAMS ADMINISTERED BY THE DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES.

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 December, 83% 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 at this point under the order.

Food stamp processing delay, though, is only part of the larger picture of DSS delay and dysfunction. We are hearing from people all over the state about food stamp, medical and cash applications and renewals that are delayed or lost. Call Centers and offices are failing dramatically to serve the public in resolving these issues.

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. We have 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. 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.

This bill aims to inject accountability by requiring DSS to accept applications at various out-stations and record the date of receipt so that a DSS applicant or recipient can know whether and when material was received. I also support the amendment proposed in Sheldon Toubman's testimony that shifts the burden to DSS, rather than the recipient, when DSS delays in processing timely submitted renewals. The proposed amendment would continue benefits, in such cases, until DSS completes the processing. In testimony, DSS has signaled some openness to considering such an option.

DSS must be accountable to program participants. Program recipients who depend on essential DSS benefits should not lose their food, their means to pay rent or needed medical treatment because of DSS's inability to timely process their applications and renewals.

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