



Testimony in Favor of RB 251: An Act Concerning Programs Administered by the Department of Social Services

Committee on Human Services - March 4, 2014

Good day Senator Slossberg, Representative Abercrombie, and members of the Human Services Committee, my name is Lucy Nolan and I am the executive director of End Hunger Connecticut!, a statewide anti-hunger advocacy, outreach and education organization. I am here to support R.B. 251, An Act Concerning Programs Administered by the Department of Social Services.

This bill requires the department to accept and time stamp client documentation in any, and every form (mail, email, fax, and in-person at regional offices) to decrease likelihood of improper termination of benefits due to (DSS staff) application processing delays. EHC! assists with SNAP (food stamps) application assistance and we have had to address DSS's losing pieces or lack of inputting information too many times. We've assisted applicants to assure that the date of signature on the application is the date from which benefits begin, per USDA regulations.

Our staff now helps applicants use the SNAP web-portal yet we know and help many applicants for SNAP who mail or hand-deliver their applications. There are many who are unable to access the web and are told to mail or deliver paperwork to the department. We must be sure to make the complete application/redetermination process available to everyone, not just those with access to computers.

End Hunger Connecticut! has participated in SNAP outreach for 10 years. We 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.

It is critical for the date of application to be marked so applicants are able to prove that they did apply on a date certain and it was accepted. USDA rules require that SNAP benefits run beginning the day the application was signed. When DSS tells some one that their application

was not received until two weeks later or never, because it was lost and there was no proof or receipt it takes away food from a family. The loss of paperwork or inability to process it in a timely manner is not fault of the applicant yet he or she is made to prove that their benefits should not cut off. This legislation would help with that victim blaming.

I would suggest that each page of any application be marked in numerical order as well so that entire applications are accounted for. Or like a fax cover page, the time stamp could record how many pages are in the application to assure that they are all there when processed.

EHC! staff members went so far before working in the web-portal to assure receipt by hand-delivering applications and waiting for a time stamp to mailing applications in certified mail once we were told we couldn't hand deliver the applications anymore. We have the ability to ask a staff person to wait and the organizational resources to pay for certified mail, but those looking for food assistance do not.

Redeterminations for SNAP benefits, a yearly occurrence for those still on the program require submitting an update of status. If the paper work is not updated the applicant loses their benefits. When DSS does not time stamp these redeterminations, or Periodic Review Forms (PRFs) and they are lost or not inputted into the system, the client loses their SNAP benefits. Many are told to reapply (it's easier than finding the paperwork) yet when they do they lose the accumulated benefits they would have received between denial of benefits and the new application. Families, children, older adults, the disabled and the working are losing benefits, are not eating and not thriving because of these delays. It's not their fault.

Applicants for SNAP, or those responding for requests for information, have the right to know that their information is being processed in a timely, error free manner. While DSS struggles with modernization the department must assure that clients do not fall through the cracks. It is clear that this is one piece of the puzzle that needs correction.

DSS serves nearly twice as many people in 2013 than it did in 2004. 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 to answer the phones, input the materials and be the front line staff necessary to take applications and required information and process it. It is clear that the department has not reached the sweet spot of enough staff to care for all the applicants and it is the hope of EHC! that this committee can help make that happen.

Thank you.

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

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