

Dear Appropriations Committee,

The Torrington branch of The Department of Social Services is an important life-line for the communities in Litchfield County. Without the accessibility that that office provides, many people living in rural areas in CT will be cut off from their basic needs such as food, heat and health insurance. It is inhumane and dangerous to close that office, and as our representative, you must stand up for your constituents in Northwest CT before the state strips all of the essential services away from our area simply because it is a different model or mode of distribution here than it is in the cities. Let it be known that even though we do not have the highest concentration of DSS users in Litchfield County, we do have the most vulnerable population because the Torrington office serves those families who live in rural places and are more at risk of becoming isolated from basic needs programs.

I spent a year working for the Town of Plymouth Human Services Department and the past seven years working for the Plymouth Community Food Pantry. While working for the town, we sent people to the DSS office when there were issues with their benefits that we could not reconcile. The types of problems that we could not correct were the ones stemming from an error, or errors, made by the Department of Social Services. In order to understand the situation fully, you must understand that no town office, non-profit or other aid office can fix these errors; only DSS can.

It is very frustrating for people to call the 800Connect phone number for assistance and have to wait on hold for over an hour on average. It is even more unreasonable if you are sick or elderly. I have witnessed, on multiple occasions, people using up their entire monthly allotment of minutes on their state-issued, free, "emergency" phones just waiting on hold with DSS. If that isn't government waste, I don't know what is. Often times; consequently, people get overwhelmed (or run out of minutes) and their benefits lapse.

Don't be fooled by the rhetoric that everyone has internet access now, so applications can be done on-line; the Torrington DSS office is a lifeline for a great many people who do not have access to these resources. A great number of people who we serve do not have internet access (a lot of seniors for starters). Furthermore, mailing in applications has proven to be flawed because applications, too numerous to count, have become lost in the process. The loss of paper copies is not an isolated instance; it is commonplace. Anyone who has ever worked with the Department of Social Services knows this, to the point where many clients use certified mail to try to keep a record of their submission. Yes, non-profits and organizations like the Human Services office I worked for can help people file on-line submissions; but remember- only DSS can fix DSS errors.

I remember one of the people we helped was a mother of two small children. She went to the grocery store and filled the cart with the staples her family needed. At the register, her EBT (SNAP benefits) card was denied. No funds had been added on the first of the month. Her carriage, piled high, was pushed aside and the family had to leave the store empty-handed. Upon inquiry by the town's Human Services office about the reason for the error, we discovered that the Department of Social Services had not yet processed the paperwork we had sent in for her redetermination. Because DSS was running behind schedule; this mother and her two little girls left that grocery store with nothing. There was nothing we

could do for this hungry family at the town office. The Mother's only recourse was to drive up to Torrington and speak with a DSS representative. It was either that, or go hungry. The fact that she was there, in person, allowed the DSS worker to prioritize her case, find her paperwork and reinstate her benefits on the spot. What if she had not been able to access that office?

If the Torrington office were to close, people from Litchfield County would be forced to go to Waterbury or New Britain when issues arise with DSS benefits. According to Mapquest, a person in Salisbury, for example, could expect to travel 87.98 miles round trip with an estimated time of 1 hour and 56 minutes and an estimated fuel cost of \$10.07 to get to the DSS office in Waterbury. Currently families have to travel to Torrington which, round trip, is 55.42 miles, 1 hour 20 minutes and costs \$6.75. Torrington is already far enough. For a great many people, an extended trip to Waterbury or New Britain would be impossible. In these cases, closing the Torrington office would be excluding people from meeting their basic needs. In less severe cases, closing the office would increase cost to already financially burdened families. (ie... cost of gas, bus, or taxi, unpaid time off of work, childcare.....) For anyone who wants to fully understand how this impacts a family, you could liken this to the cost you would incur if someone moved all the grocery stores in the Northwest Hills to Waterbury or New Britain.

Food for thought? I know you will give the closing of the Torrington Department of Social Services office the thoughtful consideration it deserves. Please keep the DSS office accessible for the citizens of Litchfield County.

Sincerely,

Erin Kennedy