

The Benefits Center is an abysmal failure. Callers wait hours on hold without being able to speak to a worker. I have heard this complaint from social service providers in the community as well as clients. I encourage any legislator who doubts this to dial 1-855-6-ConneCT and make a personal test. DSS admits on its public website that the Call Center's average wait time is over an hour and that it answers only about a third of the calls made to it. Low income individuals in low wage jobs generally have limited cell phone minutes and limited time during DSS working hours to make extended calls to try to reach a worker.

As an alternative to the Call Center, individuals can try to reach a worker at the Regional Offices. Long lines form there at the beginning of each month, regardless of the weather, as people try to get their benefits issued resolved. I have seen these lines personally in Bridgeport, and my colleagues have seen them in other Regional Offices around the state. Sometimes people in these long lines are turned away and told to come back another day.

Furthermore, these people should not need to make contact with DSS at all – because they have already provided all the information required. I know this because in some cases I have helped them send it in, and I have maintained proof of mailing in their files. When I present this proof to DSS, the case is generally quickly corrected, and benefits are granted or reinstated. That is fine for my clients, although they still experience the fear of receiving the notice, and they still have to take out time and find transportation to bring the notices to my office. But I worry more about the more disabled or less knowledgeable people who are also receiving these incorrect notices and are not able to bring them to my attention. How are their cases being resolved?

There are other problems with the administration of DSS programs. Applications for Medicaid are sometimes approved through Access Health CT computers, but not correctly input into DSS computers, so that providers cannot verify eligibility. Disabled or elderly persons are told by Access Health CT that they are ineligible for Medicaid when in fact they are eligible for Husky C, which must be applied for through DSS. Disabled individuals are not always accorded the accommodations they need and to which they are entitled. The list is long -- I am sure you will hear from many people who will share with you the problems they have had with DSS.

We have been told for years that the modernization of DSS' outdated computer eligibility system, EMS, was going to solve all these problems. That modernization

is still years away, and elderly, disabled and low income people are having problems with access to DSS now.

In addition to studying the entire administration of DSS, an immediate solution is obvious. DSS needs more staff -- more staff to handle calls at the Benefits Center, and more staff to help people with their eligibility issues at the Regional Offices.

I support SB 280 and I encourage this Committee to consider every option at its disposal to assist these vulnerable citizens in accessing the benefits to which they are entitled through DSS.