

Testimony of

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Supporting
*HB 7123: An Act Concerning Telephone Wait Times for Persons
Contacting the Department of Social Services*
Human Services Committee
February 28, 2019

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments in support of House Bill 7123: An Act Concerning Telephone Wait Times for Persons Contacting the Department of Social Services.

On behalf of the Community Health Center Association of Connecticut (CHCACT), and its sixteen member federally-qualified health centers, I want to thank the Committee for raising this bill on this critical issue. Connecticut's federally-qualified health centers serve almost 400,000 people each year, providing medical, behavioral health and dental care in over 100 locations across the state. Of those patients, approximately 62% are Medicaid enrollees; unfortunately, the health centers have many years of experience with waiting on hold with the Department of Social Services (DSS).

CHCACT supports this bill, which would require DSS to answer calls within 60 minutes, and importantly, offer a call-back option for people who cannot or choose not to wait on hold. **CHCACT recommends reducing the maximum wait time listed in the bill to 10 minutes.**

People who call the Department of Social Services most often do so because they are vulnerable and in need. They might be applying for SNAP, or trying to resolve an issue around HUSKY coverage for themselves or their children. Over the past several years, DSS has made a number of improvements to the system – including making more services available online, and more available through the IVR. However, we will always need people working in the Benefits Center, to help those whose issues are best resolved by speaking to a person who can help (as well as those who simply prefer to talk to someone about their issues).

Unfortunately, despite some improvement, we continue to see long wait times to reach a person in the Benefits Center. Wait times reached a peak last March at 107 minutes on average and are down to 28 minutes, as of January.

Here are data for the past seven months, from the DSS web site. The abandonment rate refers to people who hang up before reaching a person:

| Month | Average Wait Time (minutes) | Percent of Calls Abandoned | Average Time Before Abandoning Call (minutes) |
|----------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------|---|
| July 2018 | 78 | 59% | 36 |
| August 2018 | 66 | 56% | 28 |
| September 2018 | 50 | 50% | 20 |
| October 2018 | 45 | 47% | 17 |
| November 2018 | 32 | 38% | 14 |
| December 2018 | 35 | 40% | 16 |
| January 2019 | 28 | 34% | 14 |

As demonstrated, wait times have improved significantly. However, 28 minutes is still a long time to wait on hold. Many people, particularly people with limited incomes, have limited minutes available on their cell phone plans. But these calls are important – they relate to food, health care, and other necessities of life. They are willing to wait, now, 14 minutes on average, before giving up.

One obvious solution is to offer a call-back option, as proposed in the bill. The state Department of Motor Vehicles implemented such a system last Spring, and, as of December, 71% of callers chose that option, saving an estimated 10 million minutes of waiting on hold. This idea has been presented to DSS in the past. The time is now to implement such a system – if DMV customers are worthy of a call back, DSS clients are as well.

Here is just one of the stories I received from health centers across the state:

“My client Greydi scheduled a 7:30am redetermination appointment for her individual SNAP/HUSKY entitlements. After checking all paperwork, we called DSS at 7:45am in an attempt to be the first phone call in the bank for an 8am opening. We were put on hold for 3 hours until we were connected with a representative. Once they picked up, the DSS worker only assisted us with one of the redetermination forms and informed me that I would have to call again in order to get assistance with the 2nd redetermination form. **We were on hold for a total of 5 hrs for this client.**”

I hope this Committee will take significant action to improve our system. Thank you for your consideration and your hard work on behalf of Connecticut residents. Please feel free to reach out with any questions: dpolun@chcact.org or 860.667.7820.