

**PERFORMANCE OVERSIGHT HEARING ON
“THE DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES”**

**Friday, March 11, 10:00 a.m.
Room 123, John A. Wilson Building
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20004**

**Testimony of Alexandra Ashbrook, Director
D.C. Hunger Solutions**

I appreciate this opportunity to testify today. I am Alexandra Ashbrook, the director of D.C. Hunger Solutions, an initiative of the Food Research and Action Center. I serve on the steering committees of the Fair Budget Coalition and Defeat Poverty D.C. D.C. Hunger Solutions works to improve and expand access to the federal nutrition programs (SNAP/food stamps; WIC; school breakfast and lunch; and afterschool, summer, and child care meals) and increase access to healthy, affordable food in low-income communities.

My remarks today will focus on the critical role the Department of Human Services, Income Maintenance Administration plays in administering the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly know as the Food Stamp Program. With an average benefit of \$138 per person per month, the program is not only a lifeline for the more than 130,000 District residents receiving benefits each month, it is also a real stimulus for our local economy.

Let me start with the good news about DHS’ administration of the SNAP/Food Stamp Program:

- **Tens of thousands of District residents are accessing the vital nutrition and income support that SNAP/Food Stamps provides.** The SNAP/Food Stamp Program has done a remarkable job in responding to the increased need and shielding residents from hunger. The recent data show that 131,611 residents received SNAP/food stamps in November 2010, an increase of 15.8 percent from November 2009 when program had 113,672 beneficiaries. From 2005-2010, there has been a 42.1 percent increase in participation from 92,595 people participating in 2005 to 131,611 people participating in 2010.
- **The benefits provided by the SNAP/Food Stamp Program are 100 percent federally funded and federal funding covers close to 50 percent of the administrative costs.** SNAP is one of the few federal entitlement programs for low-income people. Give the harsh economic climate, this is an opportunity for the District to help deliver human services and draw in more federal dollars. The SNAP/Food Stamp Program brought in nearly \$160 million in federal dollars in fiscal year 2009.

- **The SNAP/Food Stamp Program has served as a real stimulus to the local economy.** For every dollar spent in SNAP/Food Stamp benefits, \$1.79¹ is generated in local economic activity. In fiscal year 2009, when SNAP customers spent their food stamp benefits at local grocery stores, this resulted in more than \$280 million dollars in local economic activity.
- **The D.C. Department of Human Services has received two consecutive bonus awards from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) for timeliness in processing SNAP cases and participation increases.** In October 2010, the Department of Human Services Income Maintenance Administration received bonus awards totaling \$900,000 for both timeliness in processing SNAP applications and overall program access for fiscal year 2009. This was the second consecutive year that the USDA awarded the agency for its timeliness.
- **D.C. Department of Human Services has been supportive of community outreach and partnerships.** DHS is open to partnering with groups to conduct SNAP outreach. D.C. Hunger Solutions is a partner in the Agency's State SNAP/Outreach Plan. This partnership provides a federal match to private funding secured by a non-profit. By leveraging federal matching dollars, D.C. Hunger Solutions can double its outreach efforts, which include conducting SNAP/food stamp outreach at five D.C. EITC Campaign's tax preparation sites with the help of 60 volunteers.
- **D.C. Department of Human Services has agreed to meet with advocates on a quarterly basis to identify obstacles to participating in SNAP/food stamps (and other DHS-administered programs) and discuss opportunities for program improvements.** For the past six months, a group of advocates, spearheaded by Bread for the City, has been meeting with DHS officials on a quarterly basis. This forum encourages transparency, problem-solving, and partnering.

And most exciting, through the SNAP/Food Stamp Expansion Act of 2009, the D.C. Council has led the District's adoption of key SNAP/food stamp policies that are:

- Connecting hundreds of newly eligible residents to SNAP,
- Providing a more robust benefit level to hundreds of households, and
- Streamlining program administration.

The Department of Human Services is charged with implementing the SNAP/Food Stamp Expansion Act of 2010. A key provision of that Act is providing five

¹ <http://www.ers.usda.gov/Publications/ERR103/ERR103.pdf>

-months of transitional SNAP benefits to families leaving TANF. This provision is targeted to be implemented this summer. The swift and thorough implementation of this provision is an opportunity for the District to support households leaving TANF for work.

But more work needs to be done to connect all eligible residents to the benefits of SNAP/food stamps. In part fueled by the tremendous needs of District residents and budget cuts to the agency, the Department of Human Services has had challenges in responding to the thousands of people applying for SNAP/food stamp benefits. These challenges include customer service problems like phones that ring and ring and are never answered or phone voicemail boxes that cannot accept any additional messages. Other challenges include applications sent by mail not getting processed by the Agency and households getting inaccurate or conflicting information.

DHS is tackling some of these challenges by piloting a new process at service centers to improve the flow of customers, issuing a request for proposals to develop an on-line application for key safety net programs, and digitizing cases files. A key concern is the Agency's high negative error rates for SNAP/food stamps customers. This means people who are eligible are being denied SNAP benefits, and because these households typically end up applying again, these initial denials result in more work for the Agency.

DHS can further improve the Administration of the SNAP program with a focus on three themes:

- Taking advantage of permissible SNAP program policy options that help improve access to the program and in some cases, benefit levels, but also lessen the strain on the Agency;
- Improving the capacity of the Agency to handle the high volume of families through building the capacity of the call center and the development of an on-line application; and
- Continuing to partner with the community groups and advocates to conduct SNAP outreach and discuss ways to improve the system.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on how the District can improve its capacity to deliver human services – services that impact people at their core and are the soul of good government.

Sincerely,

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