



D.C. Hunger Solutions

Ending hunger in the nation's capital

COMMITTEE ON HUMAN SERVICES
DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES BUDGET OVERSIGHT HEARING
10 APRIL 2019
TESTIMONY OF MELISSA JENSEN
ANTI-HUNGER PROGRAM ASSOCIATE, D.C. HUNGER SOLUTIONS

Good afternoon. Thank you, Chairwoman Nadeau and the committee for convening this hearing and for the opportunity to testify on the budget of the Department of Human Services. My name is Melissa Jensen and I am an Anti-Hunger Program Associate at D.C. Hunger Solutions. My work focuses specifically on the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and senior hunger in the District of Columbia.

The Department of Human Services (DHS) administers the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) in the District of Columbia. D.C. Hunger Solutions has worked closely with DHS for many years to improve SNAP policies and the client experience, and we are also the primary outreach partner in the SNAP Outreach Plan for the District. We help D.C. residents complete their applications, submit documents, follow up on the status of their applications, and submit inquiries if any issues arise. In addition, we provide eligibility information, dispel myths about participation, reduce stigma, and connect residents to other crucial services offered by our partners. In 2018, we helped over 1,600 residents who were potentially eligible for SNAP.

In 2018, 11.2% of D.C. households experienced food insecurity, meaning they lacked the money or other resources to access enough food. 111,312 individuals received SNAP benefits, with the average benefit amounting to \$141 per month. 98% of eligible persons in the District are participating in SNAP, the 9th

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best rate in the nation.¹ However only about 62% of eligible low wage workers,² and 48% of eligible seniors (60+), receive SNAP benefits.³

As we stated in the Performance Oversight Hearing on March 1, 2019, DHS has taken steps to improve wait times at service centers and on the phone. By changing the hours at service centers and putting more employees on the phone line, DHS has seen reduced wait times for both. In addition, DHS is working to increase the number of SNAP interviews done by phone. This will allow clients to drop off applications and other documents at a service center and receive an interview call within 48 hours, rather than spend all day at a service center to wait for an in-person interview.

That being said, we still regularly hear about customers experiencing extensive wait times. We regularly get case status requests from clients who cannot get through on the phone line to receive answers to their questions, and from clients who did not receive their requested calls for phone interviews. We also still hear anecdotally about long waits at service centers.

One greatly needed improvement is an online SNAP application. D.C. is one of only five states that lack an online SNAP application.⁴ An online application would simplify the application process, ensure that clients receive DHS communications, and allow applicants to upload verification documents. Even for applicants who do not use the online option, it would reduce wait times at service centers and on the phone.

DHS currently plans to have an online application in two years; however this project has been delayed multiple times already. DHS also received a grant from the USDA to create a mobile application called SNAP SENTral. This app will allow SNAP clients to take pictures of their signed mid-certification forms

¹ FRAC. State of the States: Profiles of Hunger, Poverty, and Federal Nutrition Programs. http://www.frac.org/?post_type=resource&p=4483&state=District%20of%20Columbia.

² FRAC. State of the States: Profiles of Hunger, Poverty, and Federal Nutrition Programs. http://www.frac.org/?post_type=resource&p=4483&state=District%20of%20Columbia.

³ National Council on Aging. Senior SNAP Participation Visualization. <https://www.ncoa.org/economic-security/benefits/visualizations/senior-snap-participation/>.

⁴ Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. SNAP Online: A Review of State Government SNAP Websites. <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/snap-online-a-review-of-state-government-snap-websites>.

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and upload them directly to the DHS document management system. It will have the capacity to expand to include re-certification forms and verification documents in the future.⁵

While the SNAP SENTral app is a step in the right direction, it falls very short of what is needed. It will initially only help with a single piece of paperwork: the mid-certification form. This will help stop people from losing benefits because a paper was not submitted, but since the mid-certification form is normally mailed in, it will do little to reduce lines and wait times at service centers.

The Department of Health Care Finance operates the SNAP application through the DC Access Systems (DCAS) Project Management Administration. DCAS is an integrated eligibility system for all health and human services in the District. The Mayor's proposed budget decreases the funding for Information Technology Management (340A) under DCAS Program Administration (300A) by \$5,826. While DHS may be able to find money to create and improve online systems in their budgets, it is not being prioritized by the Mayor's proposal. We request that the Council allocate funding to the DHS budget specifically for creating and improving online SNAP functions, to prioritize and expedite the creation of an online SNAP application for the District.

The Elderly Simplified Application Project (ESAP) would also help reduce wait times and improve customer service. ESAP is an option for states to increase SNAP participation among seniors by streamlining the application and certification process for households in which all members are 60+ and have no earned income.⁶ ESAP applications are generally streamlined to two pages. Additionally, ESAP waives recertification interview requirements, makes use of data matches to reduce the amount of client-provided verification, and extends the certification period to 36 months. Nine states currently participate in ESAP, including Maryland and Pennsylvania.⁷ DHS Director Laura Zeilinger has told us that since the Performance Oversight Hearing, she and her staff are looking into implementing ESAP. We request that the Council allocate funding for the creation of the ESAP application.

⁵ 2020 USDA Explanatory Notes-Food and Nutrition Services. p. 32-120.

<https://www.obpa.usda.gov/32fns2020notes.pdf>

⁶ FNS. Elderly Simplified Application Project Guidance. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/elderly-simplified-application-project>.

⁷ FNS. State Options Report. <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/snap/14-State-Options.pdf>

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Thank you again for the opportunity to offer testimony on the budget of the Department of Human Services. We look forward to working together to improve the health, nutrition, and wellbeing of everyone in the District of Columbia.

Respectfully Submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Melissa Jensen'.

Melissa Jensen, Anti-Hunger Program Associate
D.C. Hunger Solutions

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