



**D.C. Hunger Solutions**

Ending hunger in the nation's capital

JOINT HEARING WITH COMMITTEE ON HUMAN SERVICES AND  
COMMITTEE ON HOUSING AND NEIGHBORHOOD REVITALIZATION  
DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES  
PERFORMANCE OVERSIGHT HEARING  
1 March 2019  
TESTIMONY OF MELISSA JENSEN  
ANTI-HUNGER PROGRAM ASSOCIATE, D.C. HUNGER SOLUTIONS

Good morning. 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. Thank you, Chairwoman Nadeau and the committee for convening this hearing and the opportunity to testify on the performance of the Department of Human Services.

The Department of Human Services (DHS) administers the SNAP in the District. 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 9<sup>th</sup> best rate in the nation.<sup>1</sup> However only about 62% of eligible low wage workers,<sup>2</sup> and 48% of eligible seniors (60+), receive SNAP benefits.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 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](http://www.frac.org/?post_type=resource&p=4483&state=District%20of%20Columbia).

*An Initiative of the Food Research and Action Center*

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We would like to highlight some of DHS' successes the past year. In particular, their response to the federal government shutdown was exemplary. The Department provided information on early benefit distribution, how furloughed employees could apply for benefits, and general shutdown updates. These updates were provided through a multi-front approach that included robocalls, website updates, letters, community partners, and local officials. Clients with whom we spoke had a clear understanding of what was happening and were satisfied with the communication process. The Department also worked with local and federal officials to ensure benefits, in case the shutdown continued past February.

In addition, we would like to note the steps DHS has taken 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, so clients can drop off applications and other documents at a service center, and then receive a phone interview call within 48 hours, rather than spend all day at a service center to have 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.<sup>4</sup> 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

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<sup>2</sup>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](http://www.frac.org/?post_type=resource&p=4483&state=District%20of%20Columbia).

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

<sup>4</sup> 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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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 to create an online portal for clients to upload verification documents, but is facing technical difficulties with implementation.

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 where all members are 60+ and have no earned income.<sup>5</sup> Nine states currently participate in ESAP, including Maryland and Pennsylvania.<sup>6</sup>

Thank you again for the opportunity to offer testimony on the performance 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,

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

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<sup>5</sup> 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. FNS. Elderly Simplified Application Project Guidance.

<https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/elderly-simplified-application-project>.

<sup>6</sup> FNS. State Options Report. <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/snap/14-State-Options.pdf>

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