

PERFORMANCE OVERSIGHT HEARING: COMMITTEE ON HUMAN SERVICES

JANUARY 29, 2020

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 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 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 Fiscal Year 2019, we provided application assistance for over 1,300 residents who were potentially eligible for SNAP.

Over 112,000 residents use SNAP benefits in D.C. each month. Overall, the SNAP participation rate is 97 percent. However, the participation rate among low-wage workers is closer to 62 percent. This is largely because many low-wage workers do not have the time to make the required trips to service centers to apply. Applying at a service center is a significant time commitment and many people are unable to fit it in with their work hours. Even more alarming, participation among low-income seniors is 46 percent. Many seniors cite difficulty applying and keeping up with certifications as their main reason for not participating. For others, the eight-page application, required verifications, and interview are simply too much work when they only qualify for small benefit amounts. As DHS's contracted outreach partner, D.C. Hunger Solutions helps D.C. residents through the process. We do this through training partners, tabling in the community, and a massive volunteer outreach campaign during tax season. However, our work is not enough to totally overcome these application barriers.

An online application is fundamental to helping residents access SNAP and keep their benefits. We are one of only five states that do not have an online SNAP application, and the only state in our region. Even West Virginia, which lacks internet services in much of the state, has an online SNAP application. It is, quite frankly, an embarrassment that in our nation's capital, in 2020, residents have to line up outside a DHS service center at five o'clock in the morning in order to receive services that day. DHS has stated the plan is to have an online application in 2021. While we want to stress that this is about 21 years too late for what is now basic technology, we are happy to hear that they are still on track for this 2021 rollout. We ask that the Council keep DHS accountable to this timeline.

Last year, D.C. Hunger Solutions testified about the continued need for an online SNAP application and the Elderly Simplified Application Project (ESAP), and also advocated for additional funds to accelerate the process of implementing both in Washington D.C. We were assured by the Council and the Department of Human Services that additional funding was not needed because DHS would have an online application by 2021. In addition, Director Laura Zeilinger said in a Fair Budget Coalition meeting on April 3, 2019 that while she was not previously aware of ESAP, she would have her staff look into it, and thought it could be implemented without additional budget funds. On April 18, 2019, D.C. Hunger Solutions sent Director Zeilinger a package of information about ESAP, including guidelines and best practices from USDA's Food and Nutrition Services (attached).

D.C. Hunger Solutions was finally able to meet with DHS staff on December 4, 2019 to discuss progress on ESAP. The draft ESAP application presented by the Department was nine pages long, a far cry from the two-page applications created by most states. DHS told us this is because their legal team would not allow the application to be shorter, despite the fact that other states have accomplished this. We could accept this explanation, though we did not like it because it conflicts with the fundamental goal of simplifying the application. What alarmed us even more, however, is that DHS seemed completely unaware of the guidelines and best practices created by FNS. Per FNS, "[t]he ESAP demonstration project is a collection of several waivers of the Food and Nutrition Act of 2008, as amended, (the Act) and SNAP regulations. Specifically, the ESAP waives: The Food and Nutrition Act of 2008:

- Section 3(f). States that the certification period shall not exceed 12 months, except that the certification period may be up to 24 months if all adult household members are elderly or disabled. The waiver allows State agencies to establish a 36-month certification period for ESAP households.

- Section 11(e)(3). Requires the State agency to verify all non-excludable income and household size. The waiver allows State agencies use data matches, in lieu of asking the client for income verification. Households are only asked to verify this information when it is questionable.”¹

When we asked the DHS employees in the meeting about these waivers and asked which ones they planned to apply for, they had never heard of them. We also asked about the suggested best practices, including centralizing ESAP processing, establishing an ESAP Call Center, assigning a special code to ESAP cases, screening for ESAP cases, developing a community resource guide, and applying for the Standard Medical Deduction Waiver. Again, the employees we spoke to had not heard of any of these best practices, and had no plans to implement any of them, though they did say they would review them. They were also open to the idea of applying for the Standard Medical Deduction Waiver. We have not heard any updates on ESAP since this meeting, though we did re-send the FNS Guidelines to those we met with.

Given how difficult it is for DHS to process its current application case load on time, we believe introducing the ESAP application in the state we saw would lead to further confusion and possibly make the application process harder for seniors. Furthermore, we are very concerned by the lack of communication between DHS teams on this project, since we sent all of this information to Director Zeilinger before they started working on the project. Seemingly, no one working on ESAP looked up the project’s requirement with the governing federal agency before beginning to create the application. Unfortunately, this inefficiency is all too familiar with the residents and organizations that work with the Department of Human Services.

It can be difficult to address these issues directly with the agency, even for partners with longstanding relationships. DHS only hosted two of its planned Quarterly Advocates Meetings in 2019, and meeting with department employees are frequently canceled or re-scheduled. While D.C. Hunger Solutions is able to resolve micro-issues on individual SNAP cases, the systematic problems remain. These include, but are not limited to, long lines (upwards of 2 hours) at service centers, long hold times (upwards of an hour) on the phone line, difficulty receiving phone interviews, DHS not leaving voicemails when calling clients, clients never receiving communications about their cases, clients not receiving communications about renewing benefits, clients having to pick up EBT cards rather than them being mailed, clients not

¹ Food and Nutrition Services, United States Department of Agriculture. *Elderly Simplified Application Project Guidance*. 2015. Available at https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/snap/ESAP_Guidance.pdf.

receiving language services, applications not processed in a timely manner, and more. Many of these issues cause residents to simply quit and try to get a long without benefits to which they are entitled.

We know that good, smart people work at DHS who want to improve the programs. We saw DHS jump into action with efficiency during the government shutdown in early 2019. We saw genuine concern over the new SNAP time limits for able-bodied adults without dependents. And yet, the same problems persist year after year. I will probably be here next year giving similar testimony, unless something is done by this Council.

In the past year, the USDA has released a series of proposed rules that would have a devastating impact on SNAP in the District. The Council has been a marvelous ally, by showing public support for SNAP and writing comments against these proposed rules. We greatly appreciate your efforts in those fights; however, we cannot ignore the SNAP problems in our own house any longer. We ask you to continue to be an ally for SNAP by pushing for the changes necessary to make SNAP and other programs truly accessible for every eligible DC resident.

Thank you again for the opportunity to offer testimony on the performance of the Department of Human Services. I sincerely thank you for your time and support. 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". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

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