



**Performance Oversight Hearing: Committee on Housing**  
**February 23, 2023**  
**Testimony of Blake Turpin**  
**Anti-Hunger Program Associate – SNAP and Special Populations, D.C. Hunger Solutions**

Good Morning, Chairperson White and members of the Committee. Thank you for convening this hearing and for the opportunity to testify on the performance of the Department of Human Services.

My name is Blake Turpin, I am the Anti-Hunger Program Associate overseeing our SNAP and Special Populations work at D.C. Hunger Solutions. In my work, I provide direct assistance to community members to address their food needs, using the conversations I have every day to influence policy advocacy priorities and hold state agencies accountable to provide the best services possible.

I would like to thank D.C. Council for their work on the passage of Give SNAP a Raise Amendment Act of 2022 and the No Senior Hungry Omnibus Amendment Act of 2022. We at D.C. Hunger Solutions urge full funding for both pieces of legislation.

The Department of Human Services (DHS) administers the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) in the District of Columbia. Currently, over 141,000 D.C. residents receive SNAP benefits through DHS. D.C. Hunger Solutions has worked closely with DHS for many years to improve SNAP policies and the client experience. We also serve as the primary outreach partner in the SNAP Outreach in the District. We help D.C. residents complete the application process, submit documentation, 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 2022, D.C. Hunger Solutions provided SNAP assistance to over 1,100 residents.



First, I would like to acknowledge that the COVID-19 pandemic has been especially challenging for DHS and would like to thank them for their dedication to this crucial work. We know they are facing staffing shortages, high caseloads, and now the fallout of the ending of SNAP Emergency Allotments. Despite this, DHS has continued to work to improve SNAP access and quality. In particular, we would like to thank DHS ESA division for their ongoing collaboration in this work.

Next, we would like to thank and congratulate the DHS for applying for and being awarded the Elderly Simplified Application Program (ESAP) waiver. While we understand there may not be an implementation date established, we recommend rollout of each phase to begin as soon as possible. This is to ensure DHS is able to provide the best possible, immediate service to our older adults eligible for SNAP in the District. While we congratulate DHS for its successes, we also want to draw attention to areas that need improvement, namely understaffing, language access issues, and verification and recertification issues.

As mentioned earlier, DHS remains understaffed, especially at service centers. While we are extremely grateful that DHS has recently hired 84 new staff members, we want to note the current staffing levels are insufficient to meet the high demand for services. Organizations such as D.C. Hunger Solutions have been providing outreach and application assistance, but we know residents are still falling through the cracks. There are residents who prefer the assistance they can get at a service center over the online application and want to have the option of receiving help in person, and we want to ensure that this remains a viable option. While DHS has made improvements to their phone systems, many people are still experiencing long wait times due to the staffing of the call center and that others are unable to reach the call center at all. As a result of the lack of staffing, one resident has told me that she feels “disheartened” that no one is able to help her, and another has told me that she feels she is being “denied basic needs.” These sentiments are common among the residents I speak with. We know that DHS is trying to address



staffing shortages and is currently hiring to fill these gaps. We ask that DHS be given the funding and support they need from the D.C. Council to successfully recruit and retain service center and call center employees.

Another significant challenge is the language access barriers that have been placed on non-English speakers applying for benefits with DHS. This includes the lack of access to interpretation at DHS offices and certain emails only being sent in English and certain pages on the District Direct website only being in English. SNAP clients have expressed concern that they are unable to get the services they needed from DHS over the phone and in-person at service centers due to language barriers. We encourage D.C. Council to provide additional funding for DHS to hire bilingual staff and provide cultural sensitivity staff training for all DHS service centers and call centers, as well as for DHS to ensure that all communications are sent out in households' preferred language when feasible.

While DHS is required to process applications within 30 days, my experience working with clients has shown this is often not met. There have been instances where applications have been processed closer to 45 days. There have been times, based on client interaction, where SNAP application processing times have exceeded 45 days. On occasion, applicants have waited up to four months to receive benefits. Additionally, if an application is rejected or needs more verifications, DHS is required to supply the applicant with a notification of why their application has been rejected or why it is not being approved. There have been cases where clients have not received notification.

Even after the initial application, many residents have stated they have not received the communications needed to recertify to continue receiving their benefits. While DHS is required to send these notices at least 15 days before benefits are cut off, households have indicated times when these notices have come within the 15-day mark or even after benefits have already been cut off. Additionally, some households



are not receiving notices that they are missing verifications, benefits have been denied, and/or reasoning why benefits have been denied. This leads to benefits getting cut off and many households going months without benefits, left confused and without food access.

We also recognize as part of the DHS policy, verification documents such as income and housing expenses are not required to process or approve an application unless it is deemed “questionable. However, there have been instances where cases deemed “questionable” are those disproportionately belonging to households of color and Spanish-speaking households. Especially now, as District residents are still negatively impacted because of the COVID-19 pandemic and agencies are understaffed and overworked, we must prioritize efficiency in providing benefits and feeding people. It may be helpful to have specific guidance and technical assistance to remove opportunities for internalized or implicit biases. It is crucial that these communications are sent out in a timely manner and in accessible language.

Finally, I want to flag an additional challenge that the community members we serve often face: the length and inaccessibility of the Combined Benefits Application. The current application is 68 pages long, contains many unnecessary and inappropriate questions, such as those related to domestic violence history, criminal history, and immigration status, and ultimately burdensome for people who are just looking to have their basic needs met. I have worked with many clients who have called because they do not understand many aspects of the application, and I have even had to withdraw and redo applications for people who were confused by the application. While much of this responsibility falls on the Department of Healthcare Finance, we have worked successfully with DHS on improving aspects of the application, and we look forward to finding more ways to collaborate with both the Department of Healthcare Finance and DHS to improve the application.



**D.C. Hunger Solutions**

Ending hunger in the nation's capital

Thank you for your time and consideration. We look forward to working together to improve the quality of and access to these crucial benefits for District residents.

Respectfully,

Blake Turpin, Anti-Hunger Program Associate  
D.C. Hunger Solutions  
[BTurpin@D.C.hunger.org](mailto:BTurpin@D.C.hunger.org)  
(202) 640-1088 ext. 3042