

## Appendix: Department of Social Services

To: Andrea Barton Reeves, Luis Perez, and Governor-Elect Lamont's Transition Team

From: Geralynn McGee, Greater Hartford Legal Aid

Date: December 6, 2018

RE: Subcommittee Report, Barriers to Access to Services, Department of Social Services

The Department of Social Services is the federally designated agency for eligible people to apply for public benefits. Please see the below for an accounting of unresolved problems with transparency and key functions of the agency.

- Regular and consistent public reporting on data tells us how DSS is doing in performing essential functions related to providing medical, food, and cash assistance. Therefore, transparency in the following is essential:
  1. Number of staff assigned to help clients in critical areas including:
    - a. Benefits Centers - The place clients must call to speak with someone about assistance at DSS
    - b. Service Centers - The place where clients can go to interact with DSS staff in person or physically pick up or deliver something
    - c. Processing Centers - The people who determine whether or not a person is eligible for an assistance program
    - d. Long-term care eligibility processing - The people dedicated to determining eligibility for long term care assistance.
  2. Timeliness of Benefits Center
    - a. Average wait time to speak with a live person
    - b. Average wait time before caller gives up and hangs up (abandons call)
  3. Timeliness of case processing

- a. Average time to process a new application for assistance
  - b. Average time to process a renewal for assistance
    - i. Rate of churn- number of people losing benefits due to delayed processing of documents that were timely submitted, then becoming eligible a month or two later when their documents are processed.
4. Number of fair hearings
    - a. Requested
      - i. Held
        1. Issue
        2. Outcome
      - ii. Not held
  5. People have a right to know what rules will be used to determine whether or not they are eligible for benefits and what the rules are for the programs they are participating in. Currently the policy manual that provides these rules is not up to date. DSS should update the Uniform Policy Manual which has not been substantively updated since 2012.
  6. The DSS Website should be accessible to those DSS serves. It is very unfriendly. For example if one wishes to use the search function, it seems to be necessary to know the exact title of what is sought.
- The Benefits Center is the only phone line which the public can call to speak to DSS about applying for assistance, problems with accessing services, or a need for an accommodation for their disability. For nearly a year, the wait times when calling the Benefits Center have been over 45 minutes on average; at times over 90 minutes. Benefits Center delays need to be permanently addressed. DSS switched to a call center system in 2014 and implemented a new computer system (ImpaCT) in 2016. The wait times at the Benefits Center have exceeded an hour for much of that time. (There was a period in 2015 when it approached 10 minutes for several months before IMpaCT implementation.) DSS has increased staffing, and there was a slight downtick in the most recently reported wait time (October, 2018), likely related to this.

Month	Staffing level	Wait time, minutes
4-18	944	105
5-18	972	96
6-18	967	85
7-18	963	78
8-18	992	66
9-18	985	50
10-18	985	45

- Service Center delays need to be permanently addressed. In addition to the Benefits Center, DSS also maintains eleven regional offices that clients can walk into. I commend DSS for maintaining this in-person option, which is crucial for clients who cannot get through to the Benefits Center, and especially for people who are not capable of negotiating the phone system and other automated options. Unfortunately, the lines and waits at the Service Centers are also very long, especially at the beginning and end of the month when notices go out, and individuals are sometimes denied the right to file an application for benefits that day, which in the case of federally-reimbursed benefits violates federal law, but in so many cases is unacceptable in light of the individual circumstances people have overcome to get themselves to the office.
- When there is a delay processing renewals for assistance, people end up with gaps in their health care coverage, periods without food, no money for rent, utilities, or gas. The result of these gaps can be catastrophic. In many cases these gaps are happening when DSS does not timely process returned renewals, even when documents are timely submitted to the agency in the prescribed manner.
- One of the critical rights citizens have is due process- a right to be heard. When a person does not receive their benefit or it has been reduced or it has been changed, that person can ask for a fair hearing. But, people are having trouble accessing hearings. We have heard of increasing incidence of hearing requests disappearing and not being scheduled. We have had clients with fax confirmations of requests for

whom no hearing was scheduled. Even when scheduled, the hearings typically are not scheduled until weeks after the request, and there is often a long delay from hearing to decision, which can create serious harm in cases where individuals go without benefits pending the hearing (denials instead of terminations/reductions).