

March 15, 2021

The Honorable Teresa Miller
Secretary, Pennsylvania Department of Human Services
Commonwealth of Pennsylvania
333 Health & Welfare Building
Harrisburg, PA 17105

Dear Secretary Miller,

Our application assistance teams are answering an alarming number of distressed calls from current SNAP recipients who are losing benefits or running into a brick wall trying to comply with the semi-annual reporting requirements and annual renewals.

Bernadette, who lives alone in the Williamsport area, told the helpline she resorted to eating food she otherwise would have thrown in the garbage because she had nothing else. Despite mailing in her paperwork, her SNAP benefits had been turned off. The Food Bank was able to connect her with a local pantry but only after several desperate days of not knowing what to do.

Diane, who is battling cancer in Philadelphia, knew how important it was to stay connected to SNAP. She called the customer service line in the spring and summer to ask when her renewal paperwork was due and was told it was not required at that time. When renewals resumed in the fall, she did not receive her packet in the mail. Eventually, she found her way to our SNAP hotline after she lost benefits when she desperately needed them to support her health.

Tom is visually impaired and normally has a reader come to his home to read his mail for him. Due to the pandemic this service is not available. When his benefits stopped, he did not know why. He learned from the call center that he had been mailed a renewal packet, but staff there referred him to COMPASS and offered to mail him an application - neither of which he could complete on his own. After calling around for two weeks, he was able to find our helpline for service.

DHS can and must do better for our most vulnerable residents. Pennsylvanians need help now more than ever. We write to implore you to take action to keep them connected to SNAP during this continuing crisis. **Please ask FNS for a waiver of SNAP semi-annual reports and renewal forms for 6 months; or ask for a delay of 12 months to avoid creating a paperwork backlog.**

We deeply appreciate that the Office of Income Maintenance plans to extend the time period for SARs and renewal forms to be returned by 30 days. This will be a tremendous help for clients who currently lose benefits as a result of mail delays. However, it will not alleviate the very significant barriers many of our callers face. With the County Assistance Offices closed and the Customer Service Centers experiencing very high volume and an unanswered call rate above 10%, SNAP households often cannot access the help they need. Many face a variety of barriers in addition to the well-documented delays with the U.S. Postal Service, including lack of internet access, language barriers, low levels of literacy, or disabilities that make it difficult for them to do paperwork without assistance.

We commend the Department for its responsiveness to the myriad challenges posed by the pandemic. However, we cannot lose sight of who matters most in our work – Pennsylvanians who need a helping

hand. The last thing our neighbors facing economic uncertainty and threats to their health need is to run into roadblocks with their SNAP benefits, which may very well lead to more significant health issues and magnify challenges in meeting other basic expenses. Nothing has returned to normal for them; adaptations are still necessary to make sure they have access to this fundamental human need. Requesting this flexibility from FNS will prevent clients from losing critical benefits until DHS is able to fully serve clients with literacy, language, and/or internet access barriers. Many other states have continued to use available waiver flexibilities to keep clients connected to their SNAP benefits during this incredibly challenging time.

Losing SNAP benefits for a single month due to paperwork problems can be devastating, impacting their physical and mental wellbeing. You can prevent this from happening. Please ask for the waiver, as many other states have done.

We welcome the opportunity to discuss this further.

Sincerely,

Joe Arthur
Executive Director
Central Pennsylvania Food Bank

Louise Hayes
Supervising Attorney
Community Legal Services

Kathy Fisher
Policy Director
Greater Philadelphia Coalition Against Hunger

Ann Sanders
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Just Harvest

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Westmoreland County Food Bank

cc: Drew Wilburne, Director of Intergovernmental Affairs
Elizabeth Tilahun, Deputy Secretary, OIM