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TESTIMONY BEFORE THE APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE CONCERNING STAFFING LEVELS AND PROCESSING DELAYS AT THE DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES

Good evening, Senator Bye, Rep. Walker and members of the Appropriations Committee. I am Roger Senserrich, Access Benefits Director at the Connecticut Association for Human Services. In this role, I work with 35 community based organizations across the state helping families enroll for public benefits with the Department of Social Services (DSS), offering application assistance to close to 1,000 households per month.

During the past few months, our clients have grown more and more frustrated with DSS and its inability to process applications. Wait times have skyrocketed. Applications and supporting documents repeatedly are lost or misplaced. Clients have to wait on hold for hours when they try to reach a case worker over the phone, with wait times over two hours being routine. Our data shows widespread delays and errors from the department, leaving thousands of families without the help they need.

We appreciate DSS' recent efforts toward modernizing its systems. The Department has made great strides moving toward online applications and a web portal that enables clients to access their case information. A transition like this is no doubt a big challenge. We are worried, however, that DSS' lack of staff is hampering how it processes applications and gravely affecting benefits access for its clients.

As a result, our clients are facing:

1. Applications that need to be resubmitted repeatedly, as the new processing and scanning contractor struggles to cope with the application volume.
2. Families that routinely see their benefits discontinued even when sending their redeterminations on time, as DSS struggles to process applications in a timely manner.
3. Individuals in critical need of assistance who have to wait weeks or months to receive benefits, as application delays extend even to expedited applications.
4. Clients who are unable to get in touch with DSS on the phone due to jammed lines and long waits and cannot go to the regional offices for assistance, and offices that are in turn overwhelmed with clients and often unable to help.
5. Community-based organizations that have limited staff who have to spend valuable time resubmitting applications for clients, and thus limiting their ability to provide other services.

The new online application system is not of much help. Many families do not have reliable internet access to either send applications or check their status. Even for those who can apply online, DSS still requires them to provide additional documents, either by mail or by uploading them separately. As scanning is seldom an option, the mailed documents are often lost or misplaced, and the applications face similar or worse delays.

The cause of all these delays is not new, and has been known for years: DSS has been underfunded for at least a decade, and it has to process a much increased workload with limited staffing and outdated technology.

EMS, the mainframe computer still in use to process applications, was put into service in 1989. All applications, even today, need to be processed and introduced in the system by hand. Although DSS' move to document imaging and electronic filing is welcome, case workers still have to process each application manually, even if it was completed online through DSS' website. EMS replacement has been postponed time and time again due to lack of funding. The Department is finally moving towards rolling out a new system, but it is not scheduled to be in service until 2016, years behind schedule.

The primary reason for the slow transition is the same as for the slow application processing times: insufficient staffing. DSS currently has the same number of workers that it had in 2002 (even with recent hiring), but it has to process much larger caseload. Due to the recession and expanded eligibility, SNAP caseloads have doubled in the past 12 years. Due again to the poor economy and the new enrollments from the Affordable Care Act, Medicaid/Husky case loads have increased at a similar pace.

With applications not being processed any faster and an aging infrastructure, DSS has tried to shift resources around, often leaving call centers and client support staff understaffed.

For years, DSS has stated that modernization is around the corner, and that new processes and systems will greatly increase productivity and reduce waits without requiring additional staffing. Modernization is finally here, and even with many new processes and technology, the efficiencies have not yet arrived. The transition to a new client eligibility system is proving much more challenging than expected, and access to benefits has only gotten worse.

To ensure that those in need can get the help they deserve, DSS needs more resources. The Governor's budget includes a proposal for hiring 103 additional DSS staff, with 66 new positions and 37 to cover vacancies. This is a welcome first step, but we believe it is far from sufficient to address the agencies' woes. DSS is making a huge effort bringing its systems up to date with their ambitious modernization program. Additional staffing and resources, however, are required to make sure that its transition to new systems is successful. Without them, DSS will continue falling to serve its clients.

Thank you for hearing our concerns this evening.