

The Honorable Kate Walsh
Secretary of the Executive Office of Health & Human Services
One Ashburton Place, 11th Floor
Boston, Massachusetts 02108

November 26, 2024 (*updated to address a data error on January 8, 2025*)

Dear Secretary Walsh:

On behalf of the low-income communities and families with whom we work, we are writing to urge your support for increased administrative resources for the Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA). In recent months struggling families have faced extraordinary barriers getting help from DTA. When SNAP for eligible families is delayed or denied, both they and their communities suffer. Because SNAP benefits are 100% federally-funded and issued directly to families, SNAP is the most efficient and effective benefit program we have to address food insecurity, support local grocers, and stimulate the Commonwealth's economy.¹ **We urge the Administration to include sufficient funding in a supplemental budget and in House 1 to provide DTA with the resources it needs to provide timely, accurate, and fair service to the Commonwealth's residents who have no or extremely low income.**

Severe access issues have created persistent barriers for residents seeking help from DTA:

- For the past 18 months, on average, one of every two calls seeking to reach a DTA SNAP worker were automatically disconnected due to high call volume. Between July and October 2024, the rate of calls disconnected increased to an average of 59 percent.
- Callers who are not disconnected are often on hold for lengthy time periods. In August 2024, 39 percent of callers in the queue waited 50 to 60 minutes to reach a worker; in September and October, about 45 percent had to wait that long.
- When callers can't get through by phone, they may go to a local DTA office. In-person visits to local offices have tripled from an average of 17,718 visitors per month from July through October 2022 to an average of 51,932 visitors per month from July through October 2024.²
- For months, DTA has struggled to timely process tens of thousands of unprocessed documents.³

There are a variety of reasons underlying these access barriers, some of which are shared by SNAP agencies across the country. Key issues include insufficient IT resources and staffing challenges, combined with a reduction in COVID-era workload management tools from the federal government.

¹ Currently, SNAP brings about \$250 million federal dollars per month to one in six Massachusetts residents, who spend those dollars at thousands of local retailers. These dollars generate approximately \$4.5 billion in economic benefits annually for communities across the Commonwealth.

² Call disconnect rates, hold times, and in-person office data from DTA's monthly Performance Scorecards.

³ For example, this month MLRI represented a client who sent DTA documents about a loss of income. It took DTA 58 days - and MLRI intervention - to act on her report and increase her SNAP.

We are deeply concerned that the current access challenges are beginning to cause a decline in the SNAP caseload. The SNAP caseload has decreased for three months in a row - August, September, and October 2024.⁴ In September alone, the caseload went down by 5,095 households. This substantial decrease⁵ has not been the result of a decline in need. On the contrary, food insecurity rates have not abated. Our emergency food partners report that the need for their services is as high or higher than during the peak of the pandemic. We fear the caseload decline in spite of persistent need will continue if DTA does not have adequate resources to address glaring shortfalls in IT and staffing that impair DTA's ability to serve households and close participation gaps.

To make matters worse, the incoming Trump Administration may rescind waivers, revoke administrative flexibilities, seek benefit cuts, and try to impose new eligibility requirements, exacerbating DTA's challenges. Given the federal landscape, it is critical that Massachusetts invest in administrative resources to provide access to necessary benefits for our lowest income families.

State spending on SNAP administrative expenses is eligible for a federal dollar-for-dollar match and supports the provision of SNAP benefits. **Support from the Healey Administration for adequate funding for SNAP administration is a cost effective way to reduce food insecurity for low-income families and bring resources into their communities.** We urge the Healey Administration to take every possible step to secure funding to increase DTA IT and case manager resources so that eligible families are not harmed by DTA, causing pain to the families and financial loss to their cities and towns.

We would welcome an opportunity to meet with you, your team, and DTA to discuss these concerns. Please contact Vicky Negus at vnegus@mlri.org or 857-241-1723, or Pat Baker at pbaker@mlri.org.

Sincerely,

MLRI's Economic Justice Unit

Vicky Negus, Pat Baker, Betsy Gwin, Deborah Harris, and Tasmiah Ahmad

Cc:

Undersecretary Mary McGeown

Chris Harding, Chief of Staff, EOHHS

Commissioner Jeffrey McCue

Brooke Leahy, Chief of Staff, DTA

Erin Quinn, Acting Assistant Commissioner of Policy and Programs

Shelly Yarnie, Associate Commissioner of Food Security and Nutrition Programs

Nola Ward, SNAP Director

⁴ Caseload data from DTA's monthly Performance Scorecards.

⁵ For nearly a decade (since July 2015) there have been only two months with greater caseload declines than September 2024. In July 2016, about 5,000 households were cut-off due to federal time limits. In July 2020, DTA terminated SNAP for thousands of families who received a short-term federal pandemic unemployment boost.