

For Immediate Release : August 04, 2022

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Massachusetts Law Reform Institute and National Association of Social Workers-MA Applaud the Massachusetts Legislature and the Baker Administration for Streamlining Access to Safety Net Programs

Newly implemented systems will increase program efficiency and improve access to critical safety-net benefits for all low-income Massachusetts residents

BOSTON, MA (August 4, 2022)- On July 27th, the Baker Administration implemented a portion of FY21 and FY22 budget language and began allowing low-income households applying for or renewing MassHealth online to apply for SNAP food benefits at the same time.

Today, the Legislature officially re-enacted language from the FY23 budget that had been amended by the Governor and sent it back to his desk for his signature. This language directs the Administration to create a common application for SNAP, MassHealth, cash assistance, childcare and housing subsidies, fuel assistance, and other needs-tested benefits.

These two actions in tandem represent significant steps toward making benefit programs more efficient and effective, closing participation gaps, and ensuring more residents connect to the programs they desperately need.

For many years, Massachusetts had separate application processes for MassHealth and SNAP, as well as many other safety-net programs, that all asked for the same basic information. Burdensome and duplicative application processes have caused low-income families to fall through the cracks and connect to some but not all of the programs they are eligible for. For example, the separate application process for MassHealth and SNAP resulted in the “SNAP Gap” – approximately 700,000 MassHealth recipients who are likely income-eligible for, but not receiving, SNAP.

Massachusetts Law Reform Initiative (MLRI) and the Massachusetts chapter of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW-MA) led a coalition urging the adoption of a common application. De-siloing government programs and closing gaps were core goals of legislation and subsequent budget language filed by State Senator Sal DiDomenico and State

Representative Jay Livingstone, *An Act to Streamline Access to Critical Public Health and Safety-net Programs through Common Applications* (S.761/H.1290). More than 70 State Senators and Representatives supported this legislation, demonstrating widespread bipartisan and bicameral support.

“For too long, Massachusetts households in need have faced bureaucratic obstacles in order to access benefits they need to put food on the table or make their rent payments. Low-income people seeking assistance already face many challenges in their lives. We should be doing everything we can to ease the burden and to remove bureaucratic barriers that impede access to benefits. We applaud lawmakers and the administration for taking major steps in the right direction,” said Georgia Katsoulomitis, Executive Director of the Massachusetts Law Reform Institute (MLRI).

Patricia Baker, MLRI Sr. Policy Advocate and Chair of the statewide SNAP Coalition, added, *“We are deeply grateful to both the Massachusetts Legislature and the Baker Administration for their efforts to break down silos and allow healthcare applicants the right to apply for nutrition benefits at the same time and close the “SNAP Gap.” Along with our Coalition partners, we look forward to breaking down remaining barriers by implementing a simple and accessible Common Application.”*

“Social workers understand how important it is to address the root causes of poverty and food insecurity through public policy. Passage of this law will provide streamlined access to essential, life-saving benefits, which will improve economic mobility and, in turn, overall health and mental health outcomes for kids and families across our commonwealth,” said Rebekah Gewirtz, executive director of the National Association of Social Workers, Massachusetts Chapter. *“We are grateful the legislature took this bold action to create a common application and we look forward to working with the administration on implementation.”*

“It is long overdue for the state to provide a common application portal for social benefits that will help those seeking assistance and streamline government operations,” said Representative Jay Livingstone, a lead sponsor of the bill and successful budget language passed in the FY21 and FY22 budgets requiring the healthcare/SNAP common application. *“I have been proud to lead the charge in the House towards the creation of this portal and look forward to seeing it come to fruition with the next Administration in the coming years.”*

“By tapping into 100% federally funded nutrition dollars, this legislation will help more low-income students access free school meals and help countless families and elders meet their basic needs,” said Senator Sal DiDomenico, a lead sponsor of the bill and the FY21 and FY22 successful budget language. *“Simply put, the creation of a common application would streamline the application process for Massachusetts residents, increase government efficiency, improve public health, lower health care costs, reduce hunger, alleviate poverty, and boost local economies. At a time when we are experiencing more food insecurity in Massachusetts than ever before, getting this signed into law must be a*

top priority so we can connect children and families with the assistance they need and deserve.”

The Common App Coalition is a coalition of more than 150 organizations across Massachusetts committed to reducing hunger and alleviating poverty and is led by the National Association of Social Workers - Massachusetts Chapter (NASW-MA) and the Massachusetts Law Reform Institute (MLRI). The Coalition has been advocating for a Common Application and looks forward to continuing to work on the implementation of this initiative with the next administration.

About Massachusetts Law Reform Institute (MLRI)

Founded in 1968, Massachusetts Law Reform Institute (MLRI) is a nonprofit poverty law and policy center. It provides statewide advocacy and leadership in advancing laws, policies, and practices that secure economic, racial, and social justice for low-income people and communities. MLRI advances its mission through legal initiatives and policy reforms that address the root causes of poverty, remove barriers to opportunity, and create a path to economic stability for low-income individuals, families, and communities. For more information, please visit www.mlri.org or follow us on Twitter ([@MassLawReform](https://twitter.com/MassLawReform)) and [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/mlri).

About National Association of Social Workers-Massachusetts (NASW-MA)

Founded in 1955, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) is the largest membership organization of professional social workers in the world, with more than 120,000 members across its 55 chapters. The Massachusetts Chapter of NASW is one of the largest chapters in the country with more than 6,500 members. NASW-MA advances professional social work practice throughout the Commonwealth and advocates for equity and justice for all people.