

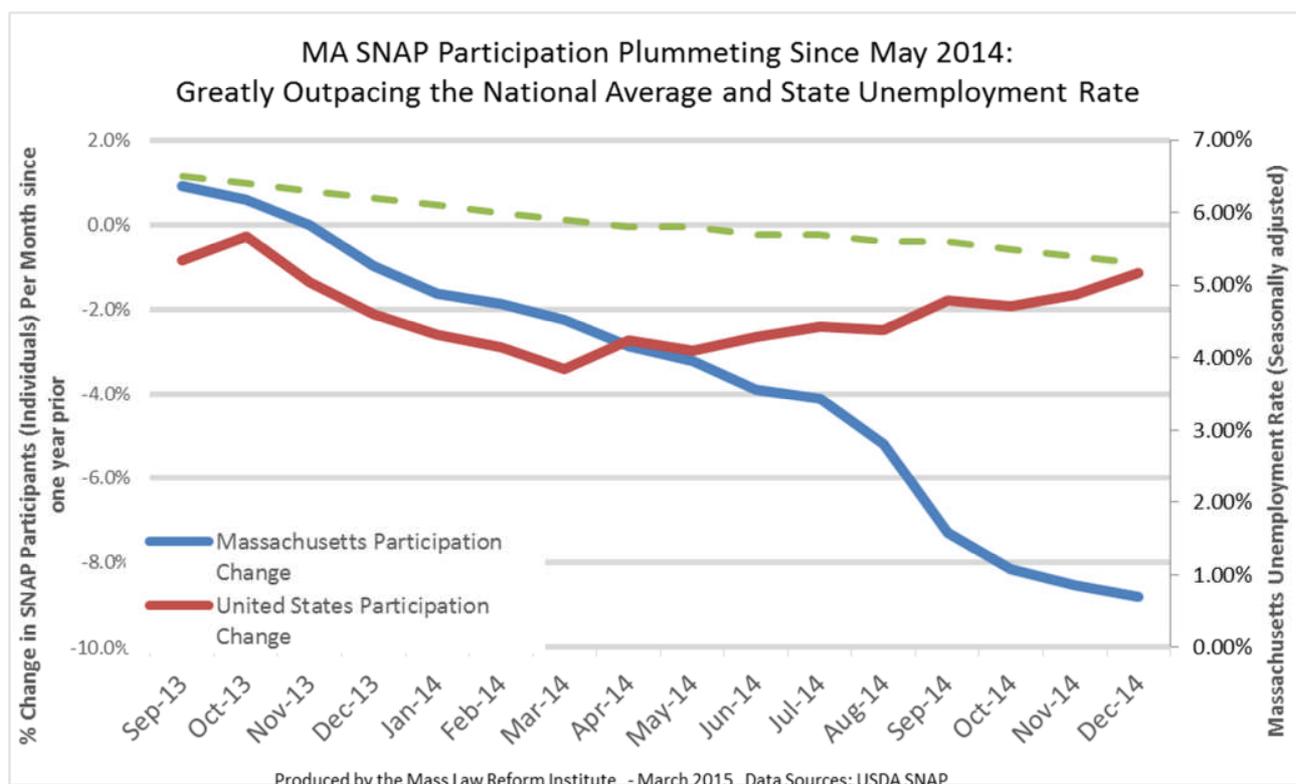
SNAP Crisis in Massachusetts

Massachusetts is now losing over \$9.5 million per month in federal SNAP nutrition dollars.

Since the spring of 2014, low income households and the anti-hunger agencies that serve them have **faced significant access barriers** in getting and keeping SNAP benefits. The access barriers are the direct results of the state's hastily implemented "business modernization." Massachusetts has created an impenetrable bureaucracy coupled with unfiltered, erroneous data matching; extreme verification demands; and automatic case closings without worker review. Food pantries report a spike in demand for emergency food (9% increase reported by Food Bank of Western Mass) and families are losing direct certification for free school meals.

SNAP Caseload Decline—The SNAP participation rate in Massachusetts is declining at a much faster rate than the rest of the country.

- Individual SNAP participation rate in MA is declining at **8 times the national average**. Household SNAP participation rate is declining at **7 times the national average**.
- Between December 2013 and December 2014, the number of SNAP recipients in Massachusetts fell by **8.8%** - a drop of **77,140 individuals in that 12 month period**. The national average decline for individual recipients during the same time period was 1.1%.¹
- Fiscal impact of this rapid decline: **\$115 million dollars per year**, economic multiplier: **\$200 M per year**.²



¹ USDA SNAP Participation Data, as of 3/6/15 available at <http://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-snap> Since October of 2013 there are 100 K fewer individuals receiving SNAP in the state (a benefits drop equal to \$12 M per month decline in federal nutrition dollars).

² USDA data shows average SNAP benefit per individual in MA at \$123/month. With a decline of 77,140 individuals, MA is losing over \$9.5 million in federal benefits every month (77,140 individuals x \$123/month) annualized at \$115 M/year (\$9.5 M/mo x 12 mos). According to USDA Economic Research Service, every \$1 in SNAP creates an economic stimulus of \$1.72. MA is losing \$200 M per year in economic activity (\$115 M x 1.72 multiplier).

Why the precipitous SNAP participation drop in Massachusetts?

Erroneous data matching— *In the spring of 2014, the Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA) changed its data matching process resulting in thousands of erroneous SNAP denials/closings.*

- Incorrect data matches result in clients having to prove they no longer work at businesses (sometimes from months or years in the past), erroneous wage matches of non-countable income including earnings of children, training stipends, college work study and income already reported to the state.
- DTA's computer system was automatically issuing wage match notices and automatically closing cases without SNAP worker review to determine if requested documents were sent in or even needed. As of March 23, DTA has temporarily stopped automatically mailing letters to clients about wage matches-- but the system is far from fixed and thousands of clients have been hurt in the past year by this policy.

Documents Not Processed— *Documents are put in case record but not processed timely, resulting in denials and case closures. Clients are asked to send in documents multiple times.*

- Food pantries and other community organizations continually report documents sent to the DTA "Document Management Center" are not acted on or reviewed by SNAP workers.
 - SNAP applications and renewal forms filed are frequently not acted on until advocate contacts DTA.
 - Many SNAP workers do not know how to find on-line (Virtual Gateway) SNAP applications and clients are told to reapply.
 - Food pantries report high amount of application denials for "lack of verifications" already sent to DTA.

Ineffective Phone and Staff Capacity to Communicate with SNAP Clients— *The DTA Assistance Line was built to handle 6-7,000 calls per day, but DTA Central reports it was receiving between 20-25,000 calls per day-meaning many phone calls were dropped or callers could never get through the line.*

- Clients are not receiving pre-scheduled DTA phone calls for the required application interview.
- It continues to be very challenging for clients to get through the DTA Assistance Line to get an interview or ask questions. Clients must call multiple times to get through, using up valuable cell phone minutes.
- The DTA Assistance line automatically hangs up when too many people are calling in, making it impossible for low wage workers and clients with no regular phone access to get through.

Families, Seniors Turned Away from Local DTA Offices — *Since October 2014, DTA offices have refused to accept hand delivered documents.*

- Clients who are anxious that the state receive their paperwork and attempt to hand deliver them are routinely told they must "mail documents to Taunton" or they can "wait 2-3 hours" to hand a document to a DTA worker. Despite repeated requests, DTA has refused to amend the process to permit a drop off policy where a clerk simply date stamps and ships paperwork to the DTA Document Center.
- Walk-in clients are often not screened for expedited (emergency) SNAP benefits upon first contact, in violation of federal law, and instead handed paper applications to mail on their own. Walk-ins are also sometimes told to leave and call DTA Assistance Line for help with their case.

Lack of Adequate Staff Training— *Six months into "Business Process Redesign" or modernization, inadequate staff training continues to be an issue.*

- Community organizations report that many DTA workers do not understand basic policy, demand incorrect documents and erroneously deny or close cases that get reopened by superiors with some advocacy.
- Many DTA workers do not appear to understand how to find and work on a new application or documents submitted to the DTA Document Center.
- Many workers refuse to assist clients in gathering required information, in violation of federal SNAP law.