



COMMONWEALTH OF MASSACHUSETTS  
**THE GENERAL COURT**

STATE HOUSE, BOSTON 02133-1053

April 28, 2015

Secretary Marylou Sudders  
Executive Office of Health and Human Services  
One Ashburton Place, 11<sup>th</sup> Floor  
Boston, MA 02108

Commissioner Jeff McCue  
Department of Transitional Assistance  
600 Washington Street  
Boston, MA 02111

Dear Secretary Sudders and Commissioner McCue:

We are writing to express our deep concerns regarding the significant drop in Massachusetts Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) enrollment. The recent decline has resulted in the loss of nutrition funding for our constituents' households, and has negatively impacted our grocery retailers, neighborhood markets, and local farmers.

The individual SNAP participation rate in Massachusetts has declined at 9 times the national average. This statistic parallels the household SNAP participation rate which is declining at 7 times the national average. Between January 2014 and January 2015, data provided by the United States Department of Agriculture shows that the number of individual SNAP recipients in Massachusetts fell by 10.1% which equates to a drop of 88,159 individuals or 44,525 SNAP households. In sum, Massachusetts is losing an estimated \$10.8 million per month in direct and ancillary economic activity due to the significant drop in SNAP enrollment.

Non-profit agencies in our districts work hard to screen their clients for SNAP eligibility and often assist them with the application process in a pro bono capacity. An April 10<sup>th</sup> community meeting in Worcester brought together numerous organizations including the Worcester Food & Active Living Policy Council, the Worcester County Food Bank, approximately 50 food pantry representatives, Councils on Aging, senior centers, group homes, shelters, and social service agencies serving Worcester, Fitchburg, North Brookfield, Uxbridge, Grafton, Northborough and Lancaster.

During the meeting, participating organizations shared many of the difficulties that their low income clients have when accessing and maintaining their SNAP benefits. We heard countless testimonies of low income constituents and local social services staff who are unable to reach the Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA) via telephone. Additionally, calls are often dropped after long waiting periods which quickly deplete clients' limited cell phone minutes. One of the elder service agencies shared a letter that an elderly client received from DTA, which described how his SNAP benefits were terminated, despite full compliance, simply because DTA had not been able to process the case.

We also learned about the experiences of constituents who were sent denial letters for allegedly failing to submit paperwork that they had in fact submitted in a timely manner. In particular, one elderly woman was never notified of her benefit termination until trying to checkout at the grocery store. Staff at Worcester State University also reported that low income students had their work study income counted toward their SNAP eligibility. This resulted in a reduction in benefits despite federal law, which excludes work study pay from benefit calculations.

Information obtained from area food pantries has indicated an increase of clients who are seeking food, but have lost their SNAP benefits. Area small businesses have also voiced their concerns about their workers having to take time away from their jobs to resolve issues with their benefits that were caused at no fault of their own.

Community and statewide organizations have expressed frustration with DTA operational changes that began in 2014, and have contributed to the sudden increase in errors and a drop in SNAP clients. Based on what we have heard, it seems that DTA implemented significant changes in a manner that may have unintentionally harmed low income households. We understand that certain modernization changes, if done correctly and methodically, can improve services for low income households and be administratively efficient. This does not seem to be the case in the recent changes adopted by DTA.

We urge the Executive Office of Health and Human Services (EOHHS), in conjunction with DTA, to take immediate steps to address the plummeting caseload numbers, which are causing substantial distress for low income clients making every possible effort to comply with DTA rules and regulations.

Specifically, we urge EOHHS to (i) review what seems to be a very flawed data match and automated case closure system, (ii) increase DTA staff resources needed to handle the calls and process documents, (iii) prevent the closing or denial of any SNAP benefits until all documents received are reviewed by a DTA worker, (iv) require a case sign off by a DTA worker and supervisor to ensure there are no erroneous denials, and (v) streamline the application process by establishing an integrated benefit system which identifies all assistance programs that are available to eligible applicants. Further, we request EOHHS to instruct DTA to identify, contact and restore benefits to all low income households and individuals whose SNAP benefits may have been wrongly closed, denied or reduced.

Thank you for your time and attention to these pressing concerns. We look forward to hearing from you regarding the requests outlined within this letter, and how EOHHS and DTA are taking proactive steps to ensure that our qualifying constituents have access to important nutrition assistance benefits.

Sincerely,



**MICHAEL O. MOORE**  
State Senator  
Second Worcester District



**STEPHEN L. DiNATALE**  
State Representative  
Third Worcester District



**HARRIETTE L. CHANDLER**  
State Senator  
First Worcester District



**DANIELLE W. GREGOIRE**  
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**DANIEL M. DONAHUE**  
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**JAMES J. O'DAY**  
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**JAMES B. ELDRIDGE**  
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State Representative  
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**ANNE M. GOBI**  
State Senator  
Worcester, Hampden, Hampshire and Middlesex District

CC: Governor Charles D. Baker  
Lieutenant Governor Karyn E. Polito