



March 16, 2021

Dear Commissioner Crum,

As coalition organizations that work in close partnership with the Division of Public Assistance (DPA), we are concerned with the proposal to cut roughly 25% of the division's front-line staff. DPA oversees programs that provide critical resources for struggling Alaskans. We are concerned about reducing capacity of one of the key agencies working on the front lines of COVID.

We believe the proposed cuts to DPA staffing will result in more challenges for Alaskans in connecting with health and nutrition resources like SNAP and Medicaid when the need for assistance is at unprecedented levels. Furthermore, as we support communities with recovery, we anticipate increased caseload work once Medicaid 1135 waiver provisions to support rolling enrollment expire.

We commend DPA staff for their excellent work navigating the many changes that have come due to the pandemic, including the transition to telework, staying on top of the ever-changing regulatory environment, rolling out a brand-new program (Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer), and assisting the growing number of Alaskans in need. Through our close partnerships, we have seen first-hand the dedication and tremendous work put forward by DPA staff. However, more recently we have seen Alaskans struggling to access benefits and connect with staff at the Division due to current resources being overwhelmed by demand.

Here are specific challenges we are currently seeing, and reasons for concern in the proposal to reduce staff capacity:

Application processing times have increased and seem to be dependent on the presence of COVID waivers. This is most evident in the SNAP program. Food Bank of Alaska's SNAP Outreach Team works directly with clients to provide application assistance and case status checks. They have seen the processing time for applications dramatically increase. Many applications are processed outside of the 30-day window, with clients waiting 5 to 6 weeks to even get their case looked at. Some clients have waited over 8 weeks.

While processing times were good for many months of 2020, we received waivers for the SNAP interview and recertifications once COVID-19 hit. When the state did not renew the waivers in the fall, processing times increased quickly and dramatically as a result. With the waivers in

place again as of January, processing times are improving. The waivers have been a great tool to help manage caseloads, however, since they are tied to COVID, they will eventually go away. Ensuring the state has the staff capacity for this normal workload is key for Alaskans in need.

Alaskans are struggling with additional documentation burdens. When SNAP interviews were waived, simple informational points previously covered in the interview were then required as documentation. Applicants sometimes receive a laundry list of items they need to provide to the DPA, such as a written statement on monthly rent expenses from a landlord. Applicants were often confused and challenged to secure all of the requested documents, and some just gave up.

Alaskans applying for assistance encounter a variety of issues, such as:

- Receiving notices for a scheduled interview after the interview date. The client is unable to contact anyone at DPA for assistance.
- Requests for documentation on a wide variety of expenses, including statements on how the client plans to pay for expenses that are more than their income.
- The number of pended cases doubled in December that the Food Bank of Alaska's SNAP Outreach team assisted Alaskans on, and approval ratings declined.
- Processing time has dramatically increased for general Medicaid or TEFRA and Medicaid waiver service approvals. As a result, agencies are providing services without being reimbursed or individuals are going without necessary services.
- When individuals renew their Medicaid eligibility, the processing time for reapplications are taking much longer than before. In addition, when DPA requests additional information for the reapplications, the processing times can be extremely lengthy.

Alaskans struggle to reach staff at the Division for assistance. Outreach staff and assisters report clients cannot reach DPA staff, whether it is to ask a question, check on their case status, or try to call in for an interview. This can be extremely detrimental to individuals as their support services may stop, they might not receive needed medical supplies, and they aren't able to seek medical or dental services. By decreasing DPA staff, processing times will continue to get longer. When individuals who need waiver services go without support services, they may seek emergency services which impact our state financially in a different way.

Challenges accessing State services leads to more steps for Alaskans in need and additional pressure on nonprofits. When Alaskans do not get a timely response from the State, they turn to nonprofits for help navigating the system. For example, the State of Alaska reported a drop in clients receiving SNAP from 79,626 recipients in November to 73,208 in January. These same months were the second and third busiest months ever for the Food Bank of Alaska's SNAP Outreach team which helped 294 Alaskans in December and 268 in January. The Food Bank of Alaska had to hire additional outreach staff to try and keep up with the additional inquiries. This may signal that FBA's team is taking on a lot of people who can't get a hold of DPA, that Alaskans are having access issues, and there are unmet needs in our communities. We support

the plan to roll out a call center later this month and encourage the department to acknowledge the additional capacity necessary to address the volume of demand for services.

Efficiencies cited as justification for staffing cuts have not happened yet. For example, electronic renewals have not rolled out. This technological advancement will be a much-needed improvement, but the timeline for rolling this out remains unclear. The roll-out of new technology platforms has been fraught with challenges for the Department, staff, Alaskans, and providers. Confirming the efficiencies are working as planned before eliminating positions should be considered to avoid negative impacts to Alaskans who receive the services and the staff administering the programs.

We feel strongly that cutting additional staffing positions would result in poor outcomes for Alaskans in need, and Alaska's nonprofits cannot fill this gap in service delivery.

This is not the right time to cut front line staff when there are still significant process and access barriers to receiving assistance through the Division of Public Assistance. The state is moving in the right direction with planning technology and efficiencies, and we applaud you for this progress, but the system is not yet ready to withstand this significant staffing reduction.

We appreciate the opportunity to share these concerns with you, and we look forward to more discussion on this issue moving forward. We would welcome the opportunity to discuss this issue further with you and your team. Follow up can be directed to Jessie Menkens at 907.297.9986 or jessiem@alaskapca.org or Eve Van Dommelen at 907.222.3103 or evandommelen@foodbankofalaska.org.

Sincerely,

Mat-Su Health Foundation
Alaska Association on Developmental Disabilities
Alaska Native Health Board
Alaska State Hospital & Nursing Home Association
Lutheran Social Services of Alaska
Disability Law Center of Alaska
Food Bank of Alaska
Alaska Primary Care Association
Alaska State Medical Association
Statewide Independent Living Council
Planned Parenthood Votes Northwest and Hawai'i
Southeast Alaska Independent Living, Inc.
Alaska Children's Trust
Christians for Equality

The Alaska Christian Conference
Alaska Center for Pediatrics
American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network
AARP Alaska
AGENET
Southeast Alaska Food Bank
Nenana Tortella Council on Aging, Inc.
Upper Susitna Food Pantry
He Will Provide, Inc. (Seward)
F.I.S.H.
Alaska Food Policy Council
Alaska Public Health Association
Catholic Social Services of Alaska
Bean's Café
Kenai Peninsula Food Bank
Helping Hands Food Bank, Tok
Qawalangin Tribe of Alaska
Bread Line Inc. (Fairbanks)
Alaska Public Interest Research Group
Anchorage Reentry Coalition
Lutheran Social Services of Alaska

List of signing organizations updated 3.17.21