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FOOD BANK
of ALASKA



April 19, 2021

Dear Members of the Legislature:

On behalf of Food Bank of Alaska, I would like to express support for HB168, which supports the efforts of the Division of Public Assistance to create an online application for SNAP and other programs found on the GEN50C application. We know the Division has been working hard toward the goal of providing an online option for these programs, and we hope this bill will help ensure they have the support and resources needed to achieve that goal.

Food Bank of Alaska has a robust SNAP Outreach Program, which is a federally funded program carried out in partnership with the State. Our charge is to provide education, outreach, application assistance, and case status updates for potential and current SNAP recipients statewide. Alaska has a lower participation index for SNAP – 76% - which is the percentage of eligible people who access the program. In Alaska, almost a quarter of people who are eligible for the program are not accessing it. This gap is not surprising given the significant and unique challenges Alaskans face in accessing benefits. One major barrier is the lack of options for how to apply, which will be improved by the creation and addition of an online option.

Currently Alaska has just a paper application option that has required a “wet” signature (pen to paper) for SNAP and many other programs. Because not all communities have a DPA office, and currently offices are closed, it can be challenging to get a hold of an application. Some clients don’t have access to the PDF application online, some don’t have printing or mailing capabilities, some just need helping walking through and understanding the questions on the 28 page application. Often our SNAP Outreach team is helping people over the phone, asking questions of the client and filling the application out on our end. If they don’t have printing capabilities, which many do not, we then mail the application to them with a pre-paid stamped return envelope. The client then reviews, signs the application, and mails it back. When we are working with rural communities this process can take weeks, and we’ve found that it more often than not does not result in a submitted application. We know some of these clients do have access to internet and could self-submit, even with guidance over the phone, saving all that mailing time and associated costs.

Another benefit of an online application is that it could be used to simplify the application for clients. Right now clients can apply for multiple benefits at the same time, which is a great option, but it results in a long application because some of the questions can be irrelevant. Our outreach team knows what questions are required and what ones are not, so they can simplify what can be a daunting process for clients. An online application could be made predictive, requiring clients to just answer relevant questions, and even provide further explanation of the information needed. This would streamline the process for clients, and likely create better efficiencies within the State’s processing, as well as within our own outreach efforts.



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We know the Division of Public Assistance is working on some alternate signature options, including an e-signature and a telephonic signature, and has also recently given our outreach team some additional flexibilities to sign on behalf of clients. All these options are important things to pursue and will complement an online application, and we applaud the efforts of the Division to pursue multiple access points for clients. A variety of application options is one of the surest ways to ensure access in a state as unique and diverse as Alaska.

An online application is a tool that will be very beneficial to Alaskans applying for services like SNAP, and we are happy to see the additional support that HB168 provides for this project.

Sincerely,

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