



THE STATE  
of **ALASKA**  
GOVERNOR MIKE DUNLEAVY

## Department of Health

FINANCE AND MANAGEMENT SERVICES  
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February 13, 2023

The Honorable Bert Stedman  
Senate Finance Co-Chair  
Alaska State Legislature  
State Capitol Room 518  
Juneau, AK 99801

The Honorable Lyman Hoffman  
Senate Finance Co-Chair  
Alaska State Legislature  
State Capitol Room 516  
Juneau, AK 99801

The Honorable Donald Olson  
Senate Finance Co-Chair  
Alaska State Legislature  
State Capitol Room 508  
Juneau, AK 99801

Dear Senators Stedman, Hoffman, and Olson:

The Department of Health received the following request from the Senate Finance Committee on February 6, 2023, regarding the SNAP program:

***Senator Hoffman: Please report on how the department is handling the backlog with the SNAP program.***

Thank you for your question about the current backlog in processing Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits at the Division of Public Assistance (DPA). We appreciate the gravity of this issue.

In response to the backlog, the department is recruiting and onboarding both permanent eligibility technicians and long term non-permanent positions. Most recently, the Division of Public Assistance onboarded 14 eligibility technicians who are currently being trained. Unfortunately, the division unable to recruit and onboard more than 14 eligibility technicians at once due to the staffing and space needed to support in-person training and development. After this most recent recruitment, the division has approximately 4 permanent positions remaining. The division is considering quarterly recruitments, and whether to request additional positions.

As an added measure, the department has implemented a temporary contract for call support to supplement the Virtual Call Center (VCC) which is currently experiencing high-call volumes of 1,000-1,500+ calls per day. This will allow department staff to focus on making eligibility determinations while contractors cover the phones.

Last fall, the department applied for and received a waiver from the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) allowing the state to waive unnecessary interviews for the period of October 2022 through September 2023. This significantly accelerates the redetermination process. Additionally, upon completion of prerequisite IT projects, the department will be lengthening

certification periods from 6 to 12 months. If everything goes according to plan this transition will occur in the May/June 2023 timeframe.

While our immediate priority is to process the backlogged applications as quickly as possible, we also recognize the need for system improvements to prevent future backlogs. Our eligibility technicians rely on as many as 9 different legacy systems—some which date back to the 1960s—to process applications. The Department has already put out contractors for programmers to work on the outdated and overburdened Eligibility Verification System (EIS). We will continue to prioritize updates to our IT infrastructure.

The Division of Public Assistance is working Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) eligibility and renewals in date order based on the date the document was received. Currently, the division is working on November 2022 benefits. October SNAP recertification is currently in pending status. Households who meet expedited SNAP criteria because the household has less than \$150 in countable resources and less than \$100 in liquid assets are being prioritized and are being processed within seven days.

The Alaska Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) provides supplemental food benefits to low-income households. This program is commonly referred to as food stamps. The federal government funds 100% of the SNAP benefit. The state pays half the costs of operating the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program in Alaska.

- The Division of Public Assistance issues SNAP benefits via the Alaska Quest card. The amount a household receives each month depends on the household's countable income and size of the household. Eligible households use SNAP benefits to buy food products from authorized stores statewide.
- Eligible applicants must pass income and assets tests. The gross monthly income test is based on 130% of the current Alaska poverty standard.
- Alaska has special rules that allow for higher SNAP benefits in rural areas, and the use of benefits to purchase certain hunting and fishing subsistence supplies.

Additionally, Commissioner-designee Hedberg provided a detailed rundown of the situation on Tuesday, January 24th in the Senate Health and Social Services Committee. If you go to about minute 33 – she talks for about 30 min in depth on the causes, temporary and long-term solutions related to the SNAP backlog.

<https://www.akleg.gov/basis/Meeting/Detail?Meeting=SHSS%202023-01-24%2015:30:00>

If you have additional questions, please contact me at 907-465-1630.

Sincerely,



Josephine Stern  
Assistant Commissioner

cc: Valerie Rose, Fiscal Analyst, Legislative Finance  
Laura Stidolph, Legislative Director, Office of the Governor  
Torrey Jacobson, Office of Management and Budget  
Heidi Hedberg, Commissioner  
Anne Zink, Chief Medical Officer  
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