



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
AUSTIN

October 8, 2009

Bill Ludwig, Regional Administrator  
Food and Nutrition Service, Southwest Region  
United States Department of Agriculture  
1100 Commerce St.  
Dallas, Texas 75242

Dear Mr. Ludwig:

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) provides a critical safety net for millions of needy Texans, including many of our constituents. We are highly concerned over the State of Texas' persistent failure to process SNAP applications within the timelines required under federal law. These delays are hurting our most vulnerable constituents, draining the resources of our local food charities, and impeding the road to economic recovery in our state. We encourage USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) to take all steps necessary to ensure that Texas comes into compliance with federal law related to the timely processing of SNAP applications.

As you know, Texas has failed to meet federal timeliness standards for SNAP application processing for almost four years. These delays have become more severe in the last year as rising unemployment has increased the demand for food assistance. Last month, less than two-thirds of SNAP applications were processed on time, delaying benefits to more than 43,000 families. In the Dallas area, families are being told they must wait up to three months before they receive an interview. In Houston, where only one-third of applications were processed on time in September—the worst delays in the state—a family must wait up to two months for an interview. Moreover, we hear anecdotal reports of applications piling up local offices, and caseworkers entering applications into the system weeks or sometimes months after they are received. As you know, this violates applicants' right to file an application on the same day they contact the SNAP office and represents a cut in benefits for these families.

Our offices have become overwhelmed with complaints from constituents struggling to feed their families. While HHSC responds diligently to each of these complaints, we know these are just the tip of the iceberg.

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We thank you for the advance warning letter that you sent to HHSC Commissioner Tom Suehs last month. We are grateful for your intervention on behalf of our constituents, and we support your recommendations for reducing staff workload, such as by eliminating the asset test and suspending finger imaging. We have pushed for similar policies in the past as a means to simplify SNAP enrollment and improve access.

But these measures alone will not significantly reduce the delays in SNAP application processing or ensure that needy Texans can access this critical food assistance. Therefore, we respectfully urge FNS to take every possible action to bring Texas into compliance with the Food Stamp Act. Your recent letter fails to acknowledge what we believe to be the single most important problem facing our SNAP eligibility and enrollment system: the lack of sufficient numbers of trained staff. We now have 1,500 fewer eligibility workers than we did a decade ago, but are serving twice the number of SNAP recipients.

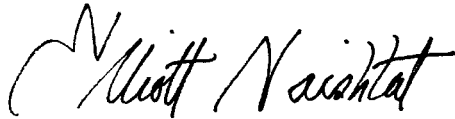
Without the strongest possible enforcement from the federal government, we are concerned Texas won't take the necessary steps to improve SNAP administration. As you know, despite the severe delays in SNAP application processing and your letter to HHSC, our Legislative Budget Board denied HHSC's request for 649 additional staff, instead approving only 250 new workers. We fought hard during the recent Texas legislative session to secure the budget authority for these staff to meet anticipated caseload and workload growth. LBB's refusal to approve HHSC's full staffing request at a time when tens of thousands of needy Texans are waiting up to three months for food assistance is a disgrace. Moreover, it is indicative of the governor's unwillingness to address the serious performance issues in Texas SNAP administration.

Your letter demands a corrective action plan from HHSC within 60 days. By the time HHSC submits this plan, a needy family in the Houston area who applies for SNAP today may still be waiting for an interview. We hope your national office can convey a greater sense of urgency and demand a more immediate course of action. We further encourage FNS to give HHSC the support it needs to simplify enrollment as a means to reduce workload and improve access.


SNAP plays a vital role in fighting hunger and helping needy Texans afford a nutritious diet. These benefits are more important than ever as we weather the most serious economic crisis since the Great Depression. People in our districts are suffering and need help. We respectfully ask that you keep us informed of the steps FNS is taking to improve Texas SNAP administration and your expectations for when these changes will occur.

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Sincerely,



Elliott Naishtat  
State Representative, District 49



Sylvester Turner  
State Representative, District 139



Garnet Coleman  
State Representative, District 147



Jessica Farrar  
State Representative, District 148



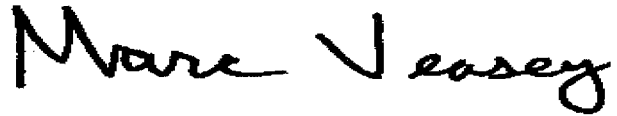
Lon Burnam  
State Representative, District 90



Rafael Anchia  
State Representative, District 103



Ruth Jones McClendon  
State Representative, District 120



Marc Veasey  
State Representative, District 95

Cc: Secretary Tom Vilsack, USDA  
Under Secretary Kevin Concannon, Food and Nutrition Service, USDA  
Julie Paradis, Administration, Food and Nutrition Service, USDA  
Jessica Shahin, Associate Administrator for SNAP, Food and Nutrition Service,  
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Governor Rick Perry  
Legislative Budget Board  
Executive Commissioner, Tom Suehs, Texas Health and Human Services  
Commission