



www.legalaiddc.org
1331 H Street, NW
Suite 350
Washington, DC 20005
(202) 628-1161

**Testimony of Haley Hoff
Staff Attorney, Public Benefits Law Unit
Legal Aid DC**

**Before the Committee on Housing
Council of the District of Columbia**

**Budget Oversight Hearing Regarding the Department of Human Services
April 5, 2024**

Legal Aid DC¹ submits the following testimony regarding the Mayor's Fiscal Year 2025 proposed budget for the Department of Human Services (DHS). Our testimony will focus on programs administered by the Economic Security Administration within DHS.

The Committee should make improvements to cash assistance programs before final approval of the budget. Specifically, the committee should increase funding for Interim Disability Assistance (IDA), which is cash assistance for low-income individuals with disabilities who are unable to work, rather than continuing the pattern of chronically underfunding this program. The Committee should also fund a Human Services Ombudsman to provide residents with meaningful access to DHS and to resolve problems stemming from systemic service delivery issues that have persisted for years, and relatedly, restore cuts to DHS's information technology budget. Additionally, the Committee should permanently fund Give SNAP a Raise. These changes will allow District residents to benefit from improved operations and accessibility at DHS and an expanded social safety net.

¹ Legal Aid DC is the oldest and largest general civil legal services program in the District of Columbia. The largest part of our work is comprised of individual representation in housing, domestic violence/family, public benefits, and consumer law. We also work on immigration law matters and help individuals with the collateral consequences of their involvement with the criminal legal system. From the experiences of our clients, we identify opportunities for court and law reform, public policy advocacy, and systemic litigation. For more information, visit www.LegalAidDC.org.

Rather than Decrease the Budget for Interim Disability Assistance, DHS Should Double the Caseload for Interim Disability Assistance to Help Residents with Disabilities

As Legal Aid testified last year and in years prior, Interim Disability Assistance (IDA) plays a critical role in providing financial assistance for adults with disabilities in the District who are unable to work. However, rather than increasing funding for this program, the Mayor's proposed budget follows the trend of continuing to decrease funding for IDA each Fiscal Year since 2009. This year the Mayor is proposing to cut the already woefully underfunded program by \$1,166,000. The Committee must restore the \$1.6 million cut in order to provide the necessary financial support for District residents with disabilities.

IDA is a District-funded program that provides temporary financial assistance to childless adults with disabilities who have an application or appeal pending for Supplemental Security Income (SSI) before the Social Security Administration (SSA).² By definition, IDA recipients are unable to work and do not have other sources of income and must provide medical and other documentation to receive IDA. The application and appeals process for SSI is extremely lengthy and continues to grow as SSA faces increased application numbers and decreased funding and staffing issues. Even for initial SSI applications, the average processing time has increased. For the first six months of FY24 (October 2023 through March 2024), the average processing time for an initial application was over seven months, at 229 days, which is 119 days longer than the FY16 average of 110 days.³ This means that individuals with disabilities who have applied for SSI "are dying waiting for decisions, going into debt, or they're unable to access medical care."⁴ The monthly IDA payment of \$471 helps District residents with disabilities pay for basic needs related to housing, medical care, and transportation while they wait. If an IDA recipient is ultimately approved for SSI, SSA reimburses DHS for any IDA payments out of the retroactive SSI benefits that the individual is approved for.

² D.C. Code § 4-204.07 (a).

³ *Social Security Administration*, available at: <https://www.ssa.gov/open/data/Combined-Disability-Processing-Time.html>

⁴ Mark Miller, Column: *What to Expect when U.S. Social Security Field Offices Reopen in April*, Reuters, Mar. 24, 2022, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/markets/wealth/what-expect-when-us-social-security-field-offices-reopen-april-2022-03-24/>

Unfortunately, funding for IDA has decreased drastically since 2009, when the District spent \$10.9 million on IDA to serve approximately 2,750 residents.⁵ The proposed budget cuts are perplexing, as the number of individuals approved for IDA has only increased in recent years. In FY22 only 177 residents were approved for IDA⁶ while in FY23 840 total were approved.⁷ This number reflects a massive increase in the number of DC residents who need IDA and is at odds with the proposed drastic cut to funds. Additionally and importantly, the number of residents approved for IDA is an undercount of the true need and fails to accurately capture the number of individuals in the District who are unable to work and awaiting a decision on an SSI application or appeal, as they often face barriers to applying for IDA as a result of their health and/or may not understand or be aware of their eligibility for IDA. Additionally, the number of approved applicants may not account for applications that are misplaced or improperly processed or denied because of DHS service delivery issues.

While many services and resources in the District are focused on supporting families and children, IDA is the only source of cash assistance for disabled individuals without children in their home, many of whom are homeless. IDA is a critical lifeline and the District should increase, rather than decrease, this vital resource for a vulnerable population.

The Council Should Fund a Human Services Ombudsman to Assist and Serve District Residents with Accessing Public Benefits

As Legal Aid, other advocates, and customers testified during the DHS Oversight hearing in February, DHS service delivery issues that have persisted for years have only gotten worse and residents' ability to access the agency has decreased. The result is that District residents struggle to access and maintain the critical benefits administered by the agency – including SNAP, TANF, Medicaid, Alliance, and IDA. Understaffing is one

⁵ Kate Coventry, *What's in the Approved Fiscal Year 2020 Budget for Interim Disability Assistance*, DC Fiscal Policy Institute, Oct. 9, 2019, available at: <https://www.dcfpi.org/all/whats-in-the-approved-fiscal-year-2020-budget-for-interim-disability-assistance/>

⁶ Department of Human Services Performance Oversight Responses 2023, p. 99, available at: <https://dccouncil.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Pre-Hearing-Question-Responses-DHS-2.20.2023.pdf>

⁷ Department of Human Services Performance Oversight responses 2024, Question 17.

factor contributing to DHS's service delivery crisis. As of February 2024, DHS service centers have 90 FTE vacancies.⁸ This exacerbates service delivery issues, including:

- Lack of in-person service delivery and support at the Service Centers, particularly for NEP/LEP customers, including the agency's failure to provide receipts to prove that a customer was at the Service Center,
- The failure to timely process applications and paperwork that customers submit at Service Centers or electronically via District Direct,
- Extremely high caseloads for ESA staff,
- The failure to send notices about customers' benefits, or sending erroneous notices (e.g. telling TANF applicants that they "voluntarily withdrew" their applications or requesting documentation unnecessary to receive the benefit they're applying for),
- The inability to connect with ESA staff via the Call Center, the only option DHS gives customers to follow up on questions and issues related to their benefits, and
- Widespread technological issues that prevent the timely processing and issuance of benefits.

Addressing the sources of chronic service delivery problems, including staffing shortages, training, and technology issues, will be critical in the long term to ensure that District customers can access benefits within the timeframes required by law. However, District residents cannot afford to wait longer for the agency to take these corrective actions and overhaul their systems. The Committee should work with DHS to fund and create a Human Services Ombudsman, which would be a crucial step in assisting District residents with public benefits issues. The person in this role would serve as a liaison between District residents and DHS.

As Legal Aid testified during oversight, we have a working model for an effective Ombudsman in the Office of Health Care Ombudsman and Bill of Rights, which assists District residents with resolving problems with health care coverage, including facilitating application processing and retroactive benefits, filing appeals around denials of coverage, and finding health care resources. Unlike the Call Center, the Health Care Ombudsman's representatives provide callers with next steps and a specific point of contact to follow up on cases if they are having problems with their insurance. DC

⁸ Department of Human Services Performance Oversight responses 2024, Question 7.

residents deserve the same level of assistance and resolution from an Ombudsman's office for issues related to their TANF, SNAP, and IDA. Not only would the Ombudsman's office create a meaningful option for customers to obtain updates and resolve issues around their benefits, but it would free up DHS capacity at every level by lessening the need for processing multiple applications, verifications, and fair hearings that people currently submit when they cannot get information from a Service or Call Center or receive conflicting information.

For these reasons, Legal Aid urges the Committee to work with DHS and the Mayor to fund a Human Services Ombudsman.

The Council Should Increase or Maintain DHS's Information Technology Budget

Pervasive technology issues at DHS exacerbate service delivery issues. As Legal Aid has testified many times, the technology that DHS relies on, both the DCAS system and the District Direct electronic application and submission system, must be improved.⁹ Customers at the Service Centers, Call Center, and with fair hearings at the Office of Administrative Hearings are frequently told that there is a technological error or glitch that prevents DHS from providing benefits, even when the agency recognizes that they are eligible. Given the technology issues that plague the agency, Legal Aid is disappointed that the proposed budget reduces the agency's budget for Information Technology by \$848,000. At a minimum, the Information Technology Budget should be restored, if not increased.

The Council Should Fully Fund Several Proposals that Increase Access to Safety Net Benefits

In addition, Legal Aid urges the Council to fund the following bills.

- **Permanently Fund the Give SNAP a Raise Amendment Act.** The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) provides nearly 140,000 low-income individuals and families in the District with a monthly benefit to purchase food.¹⁰ However, for most SNAP recipients the SNAP allotment is only sufficient for two weeks of food. Legal Aid appreciates the

⁹ Testimony of Haley Hoff and Rebecca Steel, *Joint Public Oversight Roundtable: "Health and Human Services Benefits Enrollment and the DC Access System,"* <https://www.legalaiddc.org/media/3801/download?inline>

¹⁰ Amanda Michelle Gomez, *D.C. Mayor Agrees To Implement SNAP Increase After Threat Of Lawsuit*, Jan 4, 2024, available at: <https://dcist.com/story/24/01/04/dc-snap-increase-mayor-bowser-funding-lawsuit/>.

steps the Council took last year to pass the Give SNAP a Raise Amendment Act, which would provide a 10% increase to recipients' monthly benefit amounts, and fund it temporarily with excess revenue.¹¹ Now, Legal Aid urges the Council to permanently fund this vital measure to improve food security for SNAP recipients.

Conclusion

Legal Aid appreciates the opportunity to submit testimony on the Mayor's proposed FY25 budget for DHS. We look forward to continuing to work with the Committee to improve the budget before final approval, and to ensure that DHS has the funding and necessary tools to provide District residents with effective and transparent service delivery for the crucial benefits programs it administers.

¹¹ Id.