



TO: Human Services Committee
FROM: Brunilda Ferraj, Director of Policy Research and Organizational Initiatives
RE: H.B. 7123 An Act Concerning Telephone Wait Times for Persons Contacting the Department of Social Services

Hello Senator Moore, Representative Abercrombie, Senator Logan, Representative Case and distinguished members of the Human Services Committee:

My name is Brunilda Ferraj, Director of Policy Research and Organizational Initiatives at the CT Community Nonprofit Alliance (The Alliance). The Alliance is the statewide advocacy organization representing nonprofits, with a membership of more than 300 community organizations and associations. Nonprofits deliver essential services to more than half a million people each year, many of whom receive assistance and benefits from DSS.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of HB 7123 An Act Concerning Telephone Wait Times for Persons Contacting the Department of Social Services.

The DSS call center is a vital line of communication for people in need of services who telephone DSS for help in receiving basic human needs such as health care or SNAP benefits. Yet over the past five years, DSS has been plagued by difficulties in implementing a system for managing people's calls.

DSS' unreliable call center has resulted in long call wait times that have had serious negative consequences for people in need. This past June 2018, the average wait time was 85 minutes for a person on hold to reach a DSS worker. This does not account for the large percentage of callers who wanted to speak to a representative but hung up before their call was answered.

The inability of people to reach DSS workers can jeopardize people's quality of life. Over the years, people have been turned away or discouraged before they can even apply for benefits. Others who wish to submit or update renewal information and cannot reach a DSS worker have received notices that their coverage may be terminated, while others have experienced a total termination of health care or SNAP benefits altogether.

For people with disabilities, the DSS call center is a critical resource, as they may not have the option to visit a DSS regional office and wait for an appointment in person. Long call wait times also pose a barrier for low-income people who rely on cell phones with limited minutes and do not have the luxury or financial resources to wait on hold for 85 minutes or more.

Long call wait time also result in lost productivity and resources for nonprofits that serve people receiving DSS benefits. Nonprofit staff often assist people in applying for or renewing their benefits and provide services, often unbillable, helping people navigate the complicated social service system. The longer they are on hold the less time they spend on service provision. Additionally, when people lose their health coverage due to their inability to contact DSS, it results in added costs to nonprofits and the State in the long term.

We acknowledge the Department's efforts over the years to improve the situation with the call center, such as modernizing the system by digitizing all paperwork, contracting with a new vendor and committing to deploy additional staff. Yet there is still much progress to be made to ensure people who need to reach a DSS worker can do so.

In the interim, HB 7123 would put in place provisions to protect people in need as DSS continues to make improvements. The bill would ensure that no person contacting DSS wait more than sixty minutes to speak with Department staff. It would also direct DSS to track incoming telephone calls by number, date and time. This is important, as it would ensure that no person receiving benefits administered by DSS would see a reduction or termination of those benefits for failing to provide information to DSS if it has been established that they placed a call to the department but was unable to speak to a staff-person within the designated 60 minutes.

We respectfully urge the Committee to protect Connecticut residents' benefits through the passage of this bill. Thank you for your time and consideration.