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FOOD BANK
of ALASKA



March 11, 2021

Hello Representative Josephson,

As the chair of the House HSS Finance Subcommittee, I wanted to bring a budget item we are concerned about to your attention. There is a proposed cut of \$10m to Division of Public Assistance staffing. We commend DPA staff for their excellent work navigating the many changes that have come due to the pandemic, including the transition to telework, staying on top of the ever-changing regulatory environment, rolling out a brand-new program (Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer), and assisting the growing number of Alaskans in need. Through our close partnership, we have seen first-hand the dedication and tremendous work put forward by DPA staff. However, recently we have seen clients encountering many challenges in accessing benefits like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and because of these challenges we have some major concerns with the proposed cuts. Concerns include:

- Clients are having a lot of challenges getting through to the DPA right now and having their cases worked in a timely and clear manner. We've seen many clients wait 5-6 weeks to get their applications processed in recent months, with some waiting over 8 weeks.
- COVID specific SNAP waivers have eliminated pockets of work (interviews, recertifications), but they will eventually go away, and that work will return. We saw a first-hand example of how this played out from September - December last year when we opted not to renew these key waivers, and the result was dramatic increases in application times.
- Efficiencies such as an online renewal process haven't happened yet, which is pointed to as justification for the cuts. This technological advancement. The roll-out of new technology platforms has been fraught with challenges for the Department, staff, Alaskans, and providers. Confirming the efficiencies are working as planned before eliminating positions should be considered to avoid negative impacts to Alaskans who receive the services and the staff administering the programs.
- Challenges accessing State services leads to more steps for Alaskans in need and additional pressure on nonprofits. When Alaskans do not get a timely response from the State, they turn to nonprofits for help navigating the system. For example, the State of Alaska reported a drop in clients receiving SNAP from 79,626 recipients in November to 73,208 in January. These same months were the second and third busiest months ever for the Food Bank of Alaska's SNAP Outreach team which helped 294 Alaskans in December and 268 in January. The



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Food Bank of Alaska had to hire additional outreach staff to try and keep up with the additional inquiries. This may signal that FBA's team is taking on a lot of people who can't get a hold of DPA, that Alaskans are having access issues, and there are unmet needs in our communities.

We urge the legislature to consider if it is right time to cut front line staff when there are still significant process and access barriers to receiving SNAP. The state is moving in the right direction with technology and efficiencies, and we applaud them for that, but we would like to see the efficiencies in place and running smoothly before hastily cutting staff. We are concerned that these cuts will put further burden on the already burdened emergency food network.

Feel free to contact me if you have any questions. Thank you!

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