

## Department of Social and Health Services Community Services Offices (CSO) Reopening Plan

Dear Governor Inslee, Secretary Meneses (DSHS), and Dr. Johnson (Office of Equity) Paige Dietrich, Senior AAG,

We are writing as organizations that provide direct service and advocate for low-income and homeless individuals and families across Washington. Many of our clients utilize state benefit programs to meet their essential needs. DSHS announced their plan to move permanently to a phone-based model of service in their Community Service Office reopening plan through a May 12<sup>th</sup> letter shared with community stakeholders. This plan presented some grave concerns for advocates and the clients we serve and since then we have met on multiple occasions with the Community Service Division staff. Despite these meetings and the written feedback which we have provided to DSHS, their reopening plans have not changed.

Over these months we have expressed our deep concerns and questions about the proposal. We believe that this plan violates the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and it is preventing individuals across the state from accessing entitlement programs. We also have concerns about whether this service model complies with federal regulations governing SNAP benefits. We have proposed actions that would help improve access immediately for those unable to access services in the current service model and improve departmental understanding of the needs of multiple groups for whom phone- and internet-based services and appointment-only services are not adequate.

We have seen the effect the closure of the DSHS offices has had on many individuals in our community since the offices shuttered in March 2020; specifically, those living without shelter who have many barriers to receiving services due to their everyday living situations, those with disabilities, and a significant number of individuals and families around the state who simply lack access to a reliable phone. The impact has been that many people are not able get their basic needs met and are not able to access safety net programs. Further, the extreme wait times on the phones, coupled with frequent times throughout the day when callers are simply disconnected due to the queue being full, have set up additional barriers for those in need of benefits.

For twenty months DSHS offices have been closed. Here is an example of the adverse impact of the DSHS closure from GK, who asked to share their story in their own words.

*I am 62 years old and I've been homeless for about a month now I couldn't work anymore because of my hand I have rheumatoid arthritis in my hands I can no longer work because of the pain i got kicked out of my apartment because I couldn't pay rent and now I am sleeping in my car I'm so confused right now I don't know what to do it's really cold at night I keep trying to call welfare and I never get through I keep getting hung up on and they're not open to the public I don't know what to do I really need some help I've never ever in my life been homeless I'm so confused and depressed and scared for my little dog too what happens to her if I die I have no family that can help I have one brother and he's in bad shape himself anyway thank you for taking the time to read my letter*

During the pandemic, many of our clients have been unable to access entitlement programs such cash, food, and housing benefits at a time when they need it most. As essential workers who cannot work remotely, case managers, outreach workers, staff at shelters, meal programs, and supportive housing

have attempted to fill the gap left by DSHS officers have been closed to the public, facilitating access as best they could, waiting on hold, attempting to help clients get answers. There are large numbers of people who have not been served well during the pandemic. We want to ensure that the reopening is successful for our clients. The reopening plan outlined in the attached letter dated October 8<sup>th</sup> is highly disappointing knowing how many people will continue to be unable to access benefits and it fails to account for many of the concerns that we have raised to DSHS during the past six months.

Everyone who is eligible to receive benefits should have equal access to apply for and recertify their benefits. For many people living without shelter, those who live with a disability or experience other barriers, being able to walk into a DSHS office to apply for benefits is the only way to access benefits.

- We ask that if an individual needs access in-person benefits assistance that they be able to walk into any of the Community Service Offices across the state to get help with the benefits that they are entitled to receive.
- We also ask that DSHS ensure that the call center is truly accessible meaning that someone can call and get through to a staff member in a reasonable amount of time which should not exceed a wait time of 30 minutes.

We respectfully request a meeting with your office to discuss our concerns and proposed solutions. Please contact Sara Robbins at the Seattle/King County Coalition on Homelessness for scheduling [sara@homelessinfo.org](mailto:sara@homelessinfo.org)