



The District's Dime

Going Beyond the Budget Book

The DC Fiscal Policy Institute blog
www.dcfpi.org

December 18, 2013

DC NEEDS MORE STAFF TO HELP FAMILIES APPLY FOR PUBLIC BENEFITS

By Wes Rivers

DC's new online site to sign up for health insurance is modern and convenient. It is a stark contrast to the antiquated in-person paper application for other types of public benefits such as food stamps and cash assistance. Residents often face delays — and sometimes a temporary loss of assistance — as a result of the inefficient application process.

Unfortunately, the rollout of health reform has made things worse recently, because more residents are showing up at social service offices to apply for Medicaid and offices have limited number of staff. This has worsened backlogs at these offices for families who need basic assistance, like food stamps.

DCFPI and a group of consumer advocates and legal service agencies, recently submitted a [letter](#) to the DC Council to ask that they devote more resources to easing the burden that our most vulnerable residents face when applying for and renewing public benefits.

DC's new online enrollment system screens for eligibility of both Medicaid and subsidies for private insurance in one streamlined application process. It is a very easy way to apply for health insurance. In a couple of years, the District will be able to incorporate other public benefits such as DC Healthcare Alliance, food stamps, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and housing assistance programs, making it easier to apply for those.

In the meantime, however, residents looking to apply or renew these benefits have to use the traditional paper applications or in-person visits to the District's public benefit service centers. The problem is that service centers tend to lack sufficient staff and space to adequately address peak periods of client visits. In the past, this has led to long-wait times, lost paper documents, and delays in application processing.

As health reform implementation has rolled out in the past few months, these issues have increased in frequency -- with new clients applying for health insurance and staff having to learn new processes related to Medicaid. Legal service agencies report clients having delays in application processing for food stamps and Alliance recipients, some to the point where they face a delay or even a loss of benefits.

The letter submitted to Council asks that service centers and the agencies responsible for administering public benefits programs be given the staff, space, and resources needed to manage caseloads until the new computer system can handle applications for both health insurance and other benefits. More staff in the interim will mean that the District can offer consistency and continuity in the services and supports residents need.

To view the full letter, click [here](#).