



April 26, 2016

Bill Ludwig
Southwest Regional Director
United States Department of Agriculture
1100 Commerce St. Room 555
Dallas, TX 75242-980

Mr. Ludwig:

The purpose of this letter is to request, on behalf of our members, that the U.S. Department of Agriculture immediately investigate reports from employees of the New Mexico Human Services Department's Income Support Division (ISD) about systemic errors in administering the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

The American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) is the exclusive representative for 15,000 public employees throughout New Mexico. AFSCME represents the employees who work for ISD, which administers the SNAP program in the state.

ISD caseworkers in New Mexico have an increasingly difficult job keeping up with the demand for SNAP assistance in our state. Our members report that the job of a caseworker has become insurmountably difficult in the last few years because of ISD's systemic failure to provide clear and comprehensive policy directives and training to staff, problems with New Mexico's Information Technology (IT) system, and a severe lack of program accountability. Workers report that there is a statewide policy and practice of adding false asset information to casefiles not processed timely for SNAP, thereby preventing them from appearing untimely in data reported to the USDA. AFSCME members employed at ISD request that the Food and Nutrition Service investigate these problems to the greatest extent possible.

Unclear Policy Directives and Inadequate Staff Training

Instead of having one central worker manual like other states, ISD provides policies and procedures to employees through a variety of sources: the New Mexico Administrative Code (NMAC), General Information Memorandums (GIs), Manual Revision Forms (MRs), and Interim Policy and Procedures (IPPs). Caseworkers access GIs, MRs and IPPs through a central shared drive that is not indexed. ISD is constantly issuing new GIs, MRs and IPPs, making it impossible for workers to keep up with current ISD policy, and sometimes new GIs, MRs and IPPs conflict with the NMAC or old policies that were never rescinded. When major policies do

change, workers are not receiving adequate or timely training. For example, when the state implemented the three-month time limit for ABAWDs on January 1, 2016, many staff were not trained until after the rule went into effect. A lack of clear directives, policies, and trainings results in caseworkers being unable to effectively provide benefits to eligible New Mexicans.

IT Errors

In the fall of 2013, ISD obtained a new computer eligibility system – ASPEN. Our members report that the implementation of this IT system has been disastrous and has resulted in thousands of eligible New Mexicans being denied food assistance. For the last two years, workers have encountered a variety of ASPEN IT problems that have prevented them from certifying benefits and which have caused improper SNAP overpayments. When caseworkers encounter an ASPEN IT problem that prevents them from processing a case, they have to submit a help-desk ticket to have the issue resolved. There is no deadline for when the help desk has to respond to a help-desk ticket, and workers report waiting weeks for a response. When ISD discovers that an ASPEN problem is system-wide, workers have to do time-consuming workarounds in each individual case until ISD can get ASPEN reprogrammed. For example, households eligible for SNAP that previously had an Intentional Program Violation (IPV) have their benefits inexplicably terminated by ASPEN every month. Once a worker is aware of the problem, usually after the household's benefits have been terminated, the worker must set a timer to be reminded to manually issue benefits each month. This will continue until the ASPEN system is fixed.

Improper Processing of Expedited SNAP

Our members are primarily concerned about SNAP program accountability and ensuring that low-income New Mexicans receive the benefits they are entitled to. Several of our members who work in different ISD offices across New Mexico report that New Mexico ISD has a statewide practice of adding false information about household asset information to cases so that they do not appear eligible for expedited SNAP. Statewide, supervisors have a policy that any case that is late for processing and eligible for expedited SNAP cannot be processed by a caseworker and must be sent to a manager. Managers and supervisors have a pattern and practice of either adding asset information that should be counted as income or simply adding assets with no basis in the casefile whatsoever. Workers report that the addition of assets makes the case appear that it is not eligible for expedited processing, even though the family did not report assets on the original application or at any time thereafter. Workers report that the case notes were altered by management to avoid violating the time frames of the court order for expedited SNAP processing. An example is attached to this letter. The cases are returned to frontline workers after managers have added the new asset information to finish processing.

We have confirmed that this practice is occurring in offices in Roosevelt County, Taos County, and Doña Ana County. Unfortunately, our members who work for ISD are very fearful of retaliation for reporting this information. There are several ISD employees who have agreed to come forward and talk to the USDA about ISD's expedite SNAP processing practices and their

name and contact information can be obtained through AFSCME Legal Counsel, Shane Youtz, 1 (505) 244-1200. We look forward to USDA's response regarding these important issues.

In response to the administrative failings and reports of directives to falsify case information, we request that the USDA's Food and Nutrition Service launch an immediate and thorough investigation into ISD's SNAP application processing.

Connie Derr
AFSCME Council 18 Executive Director