



Commonwealth of Massachusetts
Executive Office of Health and Human Services
Department of Transitional Assistance

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**Testimony of Amy Kershaw, Commissioner
Department of Transitional Assistance
Joint Hearing of the House and Senate Committees on Ways and Means
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Good afternoon Representative Vargas, Senator Rush, and distinguished members of the Joint Committee on Ways and Means.

My name is Amy Kershaw and I am the Commissioner of the Department of Transitional Assistance. Over the past year, I have also served as a co-chair of the COVID-19 Command Center's Food Security Task Force.

I appreciate the opportunity to be with you today to not only share the work our agency has undertaken over the past year responding to the public health emergency, but also how the Governor's House 1 Fiscal Year 2022 investments will allow the Department to leverage advancements made in supporting our clients and the Commonwealth as we work towards a post-pandemic recovery.

At the Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA) our mission is to assist and empower low-income individuals and families to meet their basic needs, improve their quality of life, and achieve long-term economic self-sufficiency. Our 1,600 staff across the agency are committed to helping the individuals and families we serve through a comprehensive system of programs and supports, including supplemental food and nutritional assistance, economic assistance, and a variety of employment supports. The Department administers the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Transitional Aid to Families with Dependent Children (TAFDC), Emergency Aid to the Elderly, Disabled (EAEDC), and the state's SSI State Supplement Program (SSP).

The last year has proven to be an incredibly consequential time for each of us and has fundamentally changed the way state agencies do business, DTA included. The pandemic and the associated economic fallout have exacerbated many food access and economic security needs for Massachusetts residents generally. There has been, however, a clear disproportionate impact on our low-income communities, communities of color, and limited English proficiency communities.

The financial stability and food security that our programs and benefits provide have been essential to the Commonwealth's response to the economic fallout from the public health emergency. I am incredibly proud of the dedication and compassion our staff have consistently demonstrated in the face of this public health emergency. Their commitment to the communities, families, and individuals we serve has perhaps never been stronger.

In the midst of the pandemic our country also experienced a crisis and groundswell of calls for racial justice. We have had to reflect on how to credibly respond and meet our obligation to face the long-standing systemic racism within our programs and services.

Prior to the pandemic, the Department served one in every nine residents in Massachusetts, touching about 450,000 households each month. As household budgets were increasingly strained by the economic impacts of the pandemic and rising food prices, DTA saw a significant jump in the demand for services across our programs. In March and April of 2020 alone, applications for benefits increased by nearly 400% over pre-pandemic levels. Many of those reaching out were applying for these programs for the first time. Today, the Department's programs are assisting nearly 550,000 households and our programs reach one in eight residents in Massachusetts.

Over the course of the year, the Department saw considerable fluctuations in its caseloads as families responded to the availability of and subsequent lapse of federal COVID-19 supports, most notably expanded federal unemployment benefits. The termination of federal unemployment benefits in July led to a second wave of applications for benefits in August. Because these benefits were deemed non-countable for SNAP purposes, there has been a sustained, gradual increase in the SNAP caseload through the end of 2020. In total, more than 92,000 households have joined the SNAP caseload, reflecting a 20% increase over the pre-pandemic average of 450,000.

The Department's EAEDC program, which serves very low-income older adults and disabled individuals, has also seen a sustained increase from pre-pandemic levels. As of January, the Department was serving approximately 20,400 individuals through this program, a 7% increase from the program's pre-COVID-19 caseload averages. In contrast, the caseload of the Department's TAFDC program, which serves low-income families with children under eighteen years of age, decreased due to the availability of the expanded and more generous federal unemployment benefit. As of January, the Department was serving approximately 28,000 households through the TAFDC program, representing a decrease of 6% from pre-COVID-19 level.

As the federal government's response to the pandemic continues to evolve, the Department is monitoring the policy impacts of new and modified programs, which are anticipated to have continued effects on the Department's caseload.

Despite the continuously changing circumstances, the Governor's House 1 budget strongly positions the Department to build on our work to: 1) provide clients with multiple access points to apply for and maintain essential supports as they continue to navigate the public health emergency; 2) respond to anticipated caseload fluctuations; 3) advance our racial equity work;

and 4) fully participate in the Governor's Future of Work (FoW) initiative and leverage the innovations the agency has implemented in the past year to continue modernizing our operations, supporting our staff, and promoting an agile and responsive experience for the individuals and families we serve.

The Governor's H.1 proposal funds the Department at \$728.6 million, which includes an additional \$13.6 million for TAFDC over the FY21 GAA, funding the program at \$254.6 million in anticipation of future caseload increases. The EAEDC program and SSP are funded at \$83.4 million and \$202.5 million, respectively, which includes a \$27 million investment for the state's rest homes. The Department's employment services programs are funded at \$14 million, which will allow the Department and our network of contracted providers to continue engaging clients to position themselves for economic mobility in the state's post-COVID-19 economic recovery.

Prior to the public health emergency, DTA was largely a brick-and-mortar agency, with most of our client-facing work completed in one of our 21 local transitional assistance offices. In response to the public health emergency, DTA's local offices were closed to in-person services in March 2020. In a matter of weeks, the agency's entire workforce transitioned to telework operations, providing over one thousand laptops and cell phones to staff with minimal disruption to services. The field staff and the entire DTA team were flexible and did an incredible job with this significant transition. They did not miss a beat, even in the face of the increase of client and community needs. We also worked closely with our strong network of employment providers to strategically re-focus their efforts to virtual programming, training, and supports in order to continue to engage clients and position them to secure employment now and in the future.

For the vast majority of DTA's clients, the move to remote operations necessitated by the public health emergency, coupled with considerable technology and policy enhancements, has resulted in significantly expanded access to DTA services. Clients can now apply online or by phone for all our programs. They can also send documents, update their cases, or get case information online or through our app, DTA Connect. Beginning in April 2020, DTA began sending clients proactive text and email messages to keep them informed about the status of their cases, such as when their applications were received or their EBT cards issued. These proactive messages provide clients with additional clarity, which has led to reduced call volume on the DTA Assistance Line. To date, the Department has sent more than 6.5 million text messages and emails to more than half a million families.

To support clients or applicants without access to or who are uncomfortable with technology, homeless families, and individuals who cannot safely access services from their own home, DTA is implementing new policies to avoid disruption in their access to benefits. The Department established Homeless Liaison positions who work directly with local shelters across the Commonwealth to ensure access to benefits and services. We have also set up new procedures for our staff to identify and escalate emergency circumstances that may require an immediate and creative solution to help a family or individual in crisis.

In the face of skyrocketing food insecurity and the economic fallout of the public health emergency, Department worked to leverage every federal opportunity to increase SNAP benefit levels to help Massachusetts residents. Beginning in March 2020, families received additional

monthly SNAP payments that brought all families up to the maximum benefit level for their household size.

Another important COVID-related effort that increased access to food for SNAP clients was the launch of the SNAP online purchasing program in May 2020. The program enables those receiving SNAP benefits to safely shop by using their EBT card to purchase groceries online from federally authorized retailers. In addition to safety, this has brought greater equity to food purchasing options for low-income households in the Commonwealth. To date, more than \$33 million worth of SNAP purchases have been made online. We are hopeful that more of the state's grocers will pursue federal approval to participate and expand the reach of the program.

One of the most impactful pandemic-related programs we have been able to implement is Pandemic EBT, or P-EBT. DTA, in partnership with Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), quickly stood up this entirely new federal program. Massachusetts was one of the first states to roll out P-EBT in April 2020 and was the first state in the nation authorized to continue P-EBT for the full 2020-2021 school year. P-EBT provides direct food assistance to students to help ease the strain on families' household budgets because they were not receiving free or reduced-price school meals due to school closures. The program has reached upwards of 550,000 students across the Commonwealth since its inception, providing about \$47.2 million to students and their families each month. DTA and DESE also recently worked with the Department of Early Education to expand this program to children under age six who receive SNAP. We have heard from countless families about how important this program has been during these difficult times.

To further support residents' food needs during the public health crisis, effective January 2021, the federal government increased SNAP benefit amounts by 15%. Families began to see these supplements at the beginning of February and will continue to receive them through June of this year. On average, households have received an increase of \$32.70 to their monthly benefits. The state's fiscal year 2021 budget also temporarily increased TAFDC and EAEDC benefits by 10% in response to the pandemic to provide additional support to low-income families.

Together, the new programs and benefit increases have driven more than \$524 million in new dollars, primarily federal, into the state since March 2020, keeping food on the tables of hundreds of thousands of households in the Commonwealth and injecting dollars into the local and state economy. These funds do not just help low-income families, but also farmers, grocery stores and corner stores and their employees. This money is in addition to the \$1.2 billion in regular SNAP payments that were issued annually to Massachusetts families since March 2020. DTA also continues to work with our partners in education, unemployment insurance, and public health, as well as with MassHealth to ensure that all potentially eligible clients are aware of and able to easily access DTA benefits, particularly SNAP.

During the public health emergency, the COVID 19 Command Response Center created a Food Security Task Force to rapidly respond to the growing food insecurity needs of our residents. I have also been serving as a co-chair of the state's Food Security Task Force alongside Massachusetts Emergency Management Director Samantha Phillips, Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs (EEA) Secretary Kathleen Theoharides, and President of the Shah Foundation, Jill Shah. The task force's composition of public, non-profit, and private

organizations reflects the Administration's commitment to address food security needs through a cross-systems approach.

To support the Task Force's recommendations, the Administration invested \$57.2 million to help combat urgent food insecurity needs due to COVID-19 and strengthen our food system infrastructure for the long term. The investments led to the creation of a \$36 million Food Security Infrastructure Grant Program administered by EEA, \$12 million for the provision of 25,000 family food boxes per week through a regional food supply system, \$3 million in funding as a relief valve to food banks, \$1.2 million for a food program for isolating and quarantining individuals, and provided for a \$5 million increase for the Healthy Incentives Program (HIP), which is administered by DTA.

In partnership with Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources (MDAR) and the Department of Public Health (DPH), we used the \$5 million provided for HIP to add 39 new vendors, expanding access to populations and communities most significantly impacted by COVID-19, including seniors, communities of color, and those living in areas designated as food deserts. The majority of these new vendors live and work in the communities they serve. Once fully onboard these vendors will create 81 new access points across the Commonwealth, 16 in Gateway Cities, and 11 in new cities not previously served by the program.

In what has been an extraordinarily difficult year for everyone, DTA has strategically improved our customer service experience by modernizing and expanding points of access, leveraged opportunities to maximize federal funding that puts food on the tables of hundreds of thousands of families and bolstered the state and local economies, and streamlined our processes to promote efficient application processing and benefit stability for our clients.

Thank you all for your continued partnership in addressing food insecurity, promoting economic opportunity, and improving the customer service experience for our clients. I am grateful for the opportunity to provide this testimony to you today, and look forward to working with you as we continue to modernize and improve our system to come back stronger. I am happy to take any questions committee members may have.