



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

Fiscal Year 2023, House 2 Recommendation
Joint Committee on Ways and Means
February 15, 2022

Good morning, Vice Chair Donato, Vice Chair Friedman, 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 (DTA). I appreciate the opportunity to join you to discuss the important work of our agency and how the Governor's House 2 Fiscal Year 2023 (FY23) investments will support our continued effort to increase and streamline access to our benefits for individuals and families, promote economic stability for clients, and modernize the Department's operations as we work towards a post-pandemic recovery.

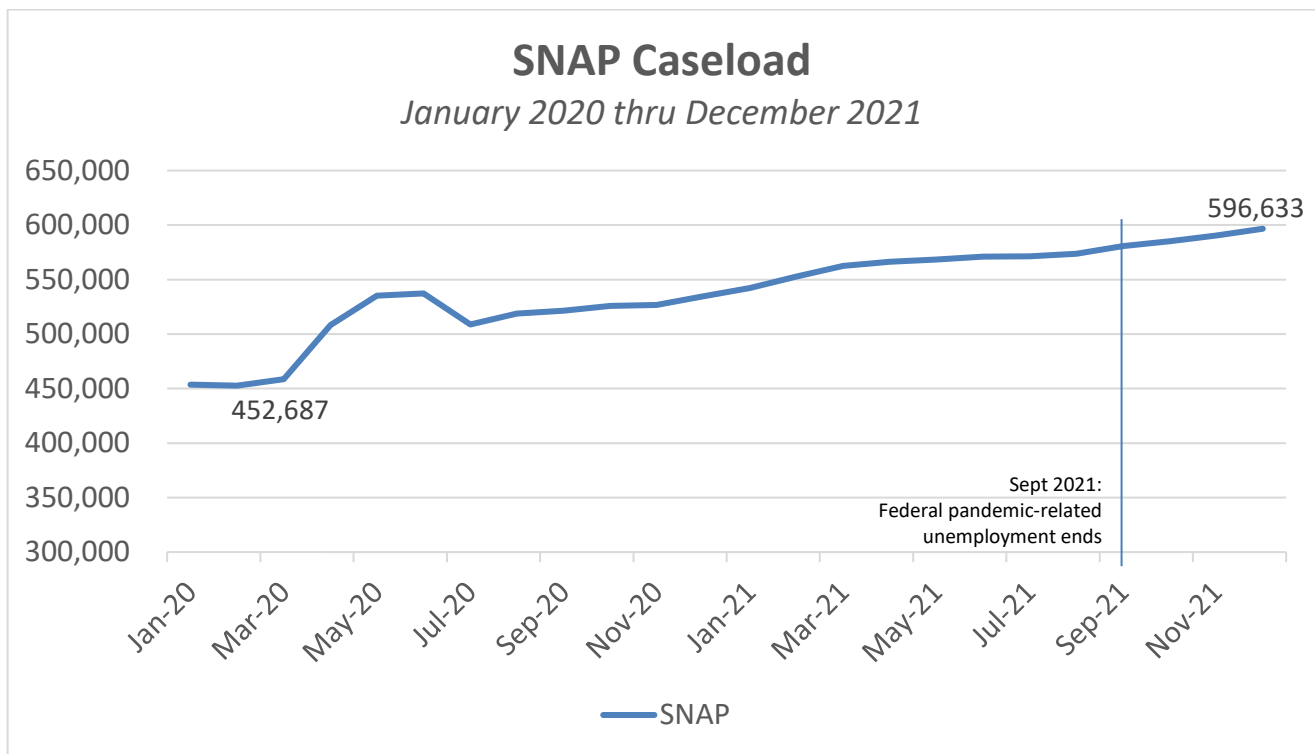
DTA's mission is to assist and empower low-income individuals and families to meet their basic needs, improve their quality of life, and achieve long-term economic self-sufficiency. As I look at the agency today, I'm proud to say that we've kept our mission at the heart of our work as we've navigated the public health crisis. Each day, the nearly 1,600 staff members across the agency bring their commitment to our mission of serving the one in seven Massachusetts residents who utilize our programs. The Department administers the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Transitional Aid to Families with Dependent Children (TAFDC), Emergency Aid to the Elderly, Disabled (EAEDC), the state's SSI State Supplement Program (SSP), the Healthy Incentives Program (HIP), and provides important workforce training opportunities and supports.

When I testified before this Committee last year, I shared four key priorities as we looked ahead to FY22. Those priorities included 1) expanding the ways in which people can do business with the Department; 2) managing anticipated caseload fluctuations; 3) embedding equity-driven policies, procedures, and practices in our work; and 4) modernizing the agency's operations and services to promote an agile and responsive experience for the individuals and families we serve as we engage with them to set and achieve meaningful goals on their path to economic mobility. Over the course of the last year, we've made great progress in each of these areas. The Baker-Polito Administration's FY23 budget proposal, which funds DTA at \$831.4 million, represents a 5% increase over the

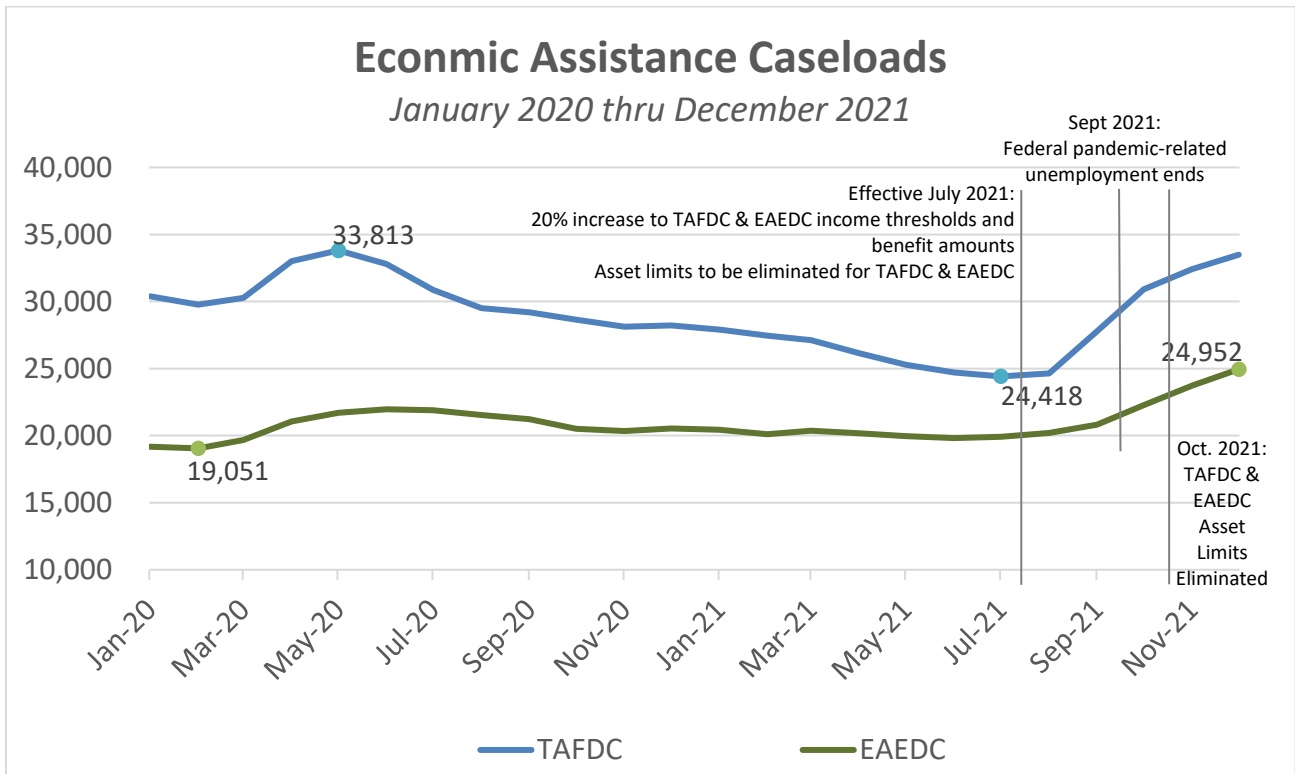
agency's FY22 GAA funding, enabling the Department to continue to advance these agency priorities and build on recent successes.

This year's budget proposal positions the Department well to continue responding to fluctuations in the state's SNAP, TAFDC, and EAEDC caseloads, while promoting benefit stability for the households we serve. In recent years, the Department's caseloads have responded to shifting state and federal policies and pandemic-related supports as individuals and families sought economic supports that best met their basic needs. Following the expiration of federal pandemic-related unemployment assistance in September of 2021, the state's SNAP caseload increased by just over 30% above its pre-pandemic average of 450,000 households. As of December, nearly 600,000 households receive food assistance each month through SNAP, as well as the emergency COVID-related supplemental SNAP payments. DTA's economic assistance caseloads also saw dramatic increases in applications following the expiration of federal pandemic-related unemployment assistance.

In addition, these programs have been impacted by recent state-level legislative changes that expanded eligibility, including a 20% increase to the income thresholds and the monthly grant amounts and elimination of any asset limits. As of December 2021, the TAFDC caseload was 33,492 households, 12% over the program's pre-pandemic caseload and 37% more than the pandemic low level. The December 2021 EAEDC caseload was 24,952 households, 31% over the program's pre-pandemic caseload and 21% more than the pandemic low level, an historic high for this program. The Administration's budget proposal funds TAFDC at \$295.9 million and EAEDC at \$122.2 million in anticipation of continued caseload growth. The Administration will continue to closely track these caseloads and projected expenditures throughout the budget process.



Data labels represent the respective program's maximum and minimum caseloads in this period. Maximum points are reflected above the program's line and minimums are below.



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To support client and staff safety while responding to increasing caseloads, the Department has focused on moving the agency past the traditional brick-and-mortar approach to more modernized and flexible operations. These investments have enabled Massachusetts residents to do business with us at times and locations convenient to them, whether that's online, over the phone, with one of our many community partners, or in a local DTA office. Today, individuals and families can do all of their business with DTA without having to visit one of the agency's 20 local offices, unless they choose to do so.

Through modernizing our operations, pursuing all available federal waivers and heavily investing in technology changes to our online and telephonic services, including the DTA Connect mobile app, DTA significantly expanded access for the vast majority of families and individuals receiving services. In calendar year 2021, the agency sent more than 13 million text messages and 1.8 million emails to clients. We also have more than 219,000 new users on the DTA Connect mobile app. Building on the efficacy of the agency's proactive case-related text messaging, we worked with community partners and sister agencies to connect DTA clients with critical federal and state resources that helped support the health and economic stability of whole families. Our text message outreach campaigns included sharing information about COVID-19 vaccine availability and safety in partnership with the Department of Public Health (DPH); pandemic-related housing supports through the Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD); and the Child Tax Credit and Earned Income Tax Credit.

To support clients with limited access to technology and those who cannot safely access DTA's wide array of remote services, DTA reopened its 20 local offices in June 2021 under a new operating model that focuses on guided self-service options. A client visiting a DTA office is now greeted by a staff member trained in a new customer service model, which allows clients to conduct their urgent business today while also offering them the opportunity to learn about the many remote service options they can

use for future business. DTA's broad expansion of options to conduct business with the agency has drastically reduced wait times in our lobbies and has brought daily foot traffic in the offices down to about 20% of what it was pre-pandemic.

Further, we launched significant changes to the DTA Assistance Line, including simplified menu options, expanded languages and direct connections to our domestic violence services, workforce and education opportunities and disability client assistant coordinators. These enhancements also allow the Department to accept electronic telephonic signatures for program applications and eligibility forms.

The agency has also focused on expanding access through strategic partnerships with trusted sources and co-locations at community sites to meet low-income residents where they are to apply for and maintain their benefits. This has involved close work with our network of more than 100 community-based partners and sister agencies, including schools and organizations supporting the state's immigrant population. A key focus of this work in particular has been identifying individuals who are likely eligible for DTA supports and services but have not connected with the agency. We also have more than 40 kiosks placed at community locations throughout the Commonwealth.

Another important part of DTA's community engagement work is with employment providers across the state in support of clients on their pathway to long-term economic security. During the past year, DTA implemented a redesigned approach to its employment and training programming, focusing on leveraging partnerships with workforce development to provide meaningful, tailored opportunities to connect with in-demand careers.

The Administration's proposal includes more than \$24 million to support the Department's continued work to promote economic mobility and connect clients with workforce opportunities. These investments include

- \$15.6 million for our recently redesigned employment services program now called Pathways to Work;
- \$5 million for our Secure Jobs program, administered in partnership with DHCD;
- \$2.5 million for the two-generational economic mobility grant program in collaboration with the Department of Public Health; and
- \$1M for the Work Participant Program, jointly administered with the Department of Career Services (DCS) and the MassHire Career Centers.

Investments at both DTA and the Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commissioner (MRC), also support our ongoing partnership, Empowering to Employ, to engage DTA clients with disabilities in vocational rehabilitation and job placement services at MRC.

For low-income families with young children, a common barrier to meaningful participation in the workforce opportunities is child care. In recognition of this, the Administration's FY23 proposal invests \$9.2 million across DTA and the Department of Early Education and Care (EEC) that will improve timely access to child care for our families engaging in employment programming, and for the first time provide priority access to child care subsidies for families participating in the SNAP Employment and Training Program.

Lastly, the Administration remains committed to promoting food security across the Commonwealth and bolstering a resilient and just local food system. To date, the Administration has invested more than \$100 million to support food security efforts and build a more equitable food system following recommendations of the COVID-19 Command Center's Food Security Task Force. A key area of

focus included the Healthy Incentives Program (HIP), where in 2021 we launched DTAFinder.com, a mobile friendly and multilingual website that connects clients with local HIP vendors and safe shopping options. The Administration's FY23 budget includes \$5 million for HIP with an additional \$8 million from FY22 that will be authorized for spending in FY23. In total, the \$13 million invested in the program will support the agency's work to ensure vendors are equipped to provide clients with a smooth program experience and increase HIP awareness among SNAP clients. Moving forward, the Administration is capitalizing on the strong partnerships that were facilitated by the Task Force to continue addressing food insecurity through ongoing inter-secretariat work and in partnership with food security stakeholders.

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. I am happy to take any questions committee members may have.