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Hawai'i Drug & Alcohol-Free Coalitions

Hawai'i Farm to School Network

Hawai'i Oral Health Coalition

Hawai'i Public Health Training Hui

Healthy Eating + Active Living

Kūpuna Collective/Healthy Aging & Community Living

Public Health Workforce Development

Date: January 28, 2025

To: Senator Joy San Buenaventura, Chair
Senator Henry J. C. Aquino, Vice Chair
Members of the Committee on Health and Human Services

RE: Support for SB 960 Relating To The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program

Hrg: Wednesday, January 29, 2025, at 1:00 PM, Conference Room 225

Hawai'i Public Health Institute (HIPHI)[1] and the Healthy Eating, Active Living[2] (HEAL) coalition is in **support of SB 960**, which appropriates funds to the Department of Human Services to improve Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program rates, including establishing additional positions.

One in three households in Hawai'i face food insecurity.[3] Federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits are a lifeline to many of these residents. Local families in need receive over $600 million annually in SNAP benefits.[4] Unfortunately, the state has made accessing these benefits incredibly difficult. The state needs to improve the enrollment process and ensure local SNAP-eligible residents can receive the federal benefits they need.

Difficulty Enrolling

Local Hawai'i residents face immense barriers when trying to enroll in SNAP. Wait times often exceed four hours, causing many applicants to abandon the process out of frustration.[5] Physical office locations are frequently inaccessible, further compounding the issue.

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[1] Hawai'i Public Health Institute's mission is to advance health and wellness for the people and islands of Hawai'i. We do this through expanding our understanding of what creates health of people and place, fostering partnerships, and cultivating programs to improve policies, systems, and the environments where people live, learn, work, age, and play.

[2] The Healthy Eating + Active Living (HEAL) Coalition, formerly known as the Obesity Prevention Task Force, was created by the legislature in 2012 and is comprised of over 60 statewide organizations. The HEAL Coalition works to make recommendations to reshape Hawai'i's school, work, community, and health care environments, making healthier lifestyles obtainable for all Hawai'i residents.

[3] The State of Food Insecurity in Hawai'i - Hawai'i Food Bank. https://hawaiifoodbank.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/HawaiiFoodbank_TheStateOfFoodInsecurityInHawaii_2023.pdf

[4] Hawai'i Department of Human Services. https://humanservices.hawaii.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/SFY-2024-SUMMARY-apr.pdf

[5] KHON https://www.khon2.com/local-news/changes-in-procedure-short-staffing-causing-long-lines-at-state-benefits-offices/

When residents call the Department of Human Services (DHS) at their scheduled time for the required interview, their calls often go unanswered, leaving them unable to complete the process. Days or weeks later, they receive a callback from an unrecognized number at an unscheduled time, making it difficult for many applicants to answer—especially if they are at work or attending to other responsibilities. As a result, their missed interview leads to a denial of their application, creating an unfair cycle that denies residents the support they need.

Currently, only 62% of eligible residents participate in the program, with participation among kūpuna even lower at just 30%.[6] Systemic challenges, including incorrect application denials and missed interview opportunities, leave many families without the critical support they need.

SNAP Office is Understaffed Following Increased Demand
In 2024, the SNAP department processed 90,000 applications—a 50% increase from 60,000 in 2018.[7][8] Despite this dramatic rise in demand, staffing levels have remained stagnant at around 275 employees for several years. This lack of sufficient staffing has made the enrollment process so difficult. To adequately support residents, the state must increase staffing to match the escalating demand.

With demand already on the rise, fifty thousand additional households will become eligible for SNAP this year as the net income threshold is removed from the eligibility test.[9] The need for more staff is urgent now—and will become even more critical once this policy change takes effect.

We must increase both the number of budgeted positions and the pay for these roles to ensure they are filled. Raising salaries will help attract and retain qualified staff, while expanding available positions across the board will allow for targeted recruitment in areas with low vacancy rates, ensuring equitable access to services statewide.

Much like the unemployment office during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, this is an emergency that demands an immediate, all-hands-on-deck response.

10:1 Return on Investment
Our low SNAP participation rate means far fewer Hawai'i residents are accessing critical federal benefits than they should. Since half of SNAP processing staff salaries are covered by federal funds, increasing staffing levels would require the state to contribute only half the investment.[10]

Adding an additional $10 million for staff on top of the roughly $20 million we spend now would bring in an additional $10 million in funding from the federal government for those staff. If that can help raise the

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[6] Census - Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Eligibility & Access.
https://www.census.gov/library/visualizations/interactive/snap-eligibility-access.html
[7] Department of Human Services Budget 2025-2027.
https://budget.hawaii.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/21.-Department-of-Human-Services-FB25-27-PFP.7Lt.pdf
[8] Department of Human Services Budget 2019-2020.
https://budget.hawaii.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/20.-Department-of-Human-Services-FB19-21-PFP.ef3_.pdf
[9] UHERO - Hawai'i's Unnecessary Benefit Cliff.
https://uhero.hawaii.edu/hawai%ca%bbis-unnecessary-benefit-cliff-how-one-small-policy-change-could-deliver-in-45m-per-year-in-federally-funded-snap-benefits/
[10] SNAP State Activity Report 2021.
https://fns-prod.azureedge.us/sites/default/files/resource-files/snap-state-activity-report-fy21.pdf

SNAP participation rate from 62% to just 75%, we could bring in over $100 million in additional federal funding annually. A $10 million investment now would give more than a 10:1 return on investment, with more than $100 million coming back to the state.

By failing to hire enough staff to ensure a smooth and efficient application process, we are effectively leaving federal dollars on the table and missing an opportunity to better support our community.

Please pass this bill to ensure that federal SNAP benefits remain a reliable and accessible lifeline for all eligible residents in need.

Mahalo,



Nate Hix
Director of Policy and Advocacy