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May 28, 2020

Department of Human Services Reminds Pennsylvanians of Assistance Programs, Support Outlets Available to Help Ease COVID-19 Recovery Period

Harrisburg, PA – Department of Human Services (DHS) Secretary Teresa Miller today reminded Pennsylvanians that public assistance programs remain available to families throughout the COVID-19 public-health emergency.

Programs include the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Medicaid, the Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP), and other services established specifically in response to COVID-19 like the Emergency Assistance Program (EAP), the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) Recovery Crisis Program, and the Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT) programs. Each of these programs can help Pennsylvanians who have lost income or employment meet basic needs until they are able to start work again.

“We know that many people have lost jobs, income, and health insurance as a result of this public health crisis,” Sec. Miller said. “That’s why I want to ensure Pennsylvanians that DHS is here to support them – nobody should go without food, health care, or other services. These safety-net programs exist to help all of us in the best of times, and they are critical in the worst of times. We cannot always plan for an injury or accident, a divorce, or a pandemic, but DHS’s programs exist to help people get through these tough times. These services are available now and they will remain available in the months ahead.”

DHS has taken steps to ensure that Pennsylvanians who need help receive it and worked to make sure that people who qualify for these programs are able to access them. DHS has also worked with partners at the state and federal levels to implement policies that are responsive to the public health crisis. This includes extending certification periods for public assistance programs or suspending the closure of Medicaid cases except in certain circumstances so participation can continue through the public health crisis.

Health Care

Pennsylvanians who have lost health coverage or are currently uninsured and need coverage for themselves or their children may qualify for coverage through Medicaid and the Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP). Medicaid and CHIP provide coverage for routine and emergency health services, tests and screenings, and prescriptions, and COVID-19 testing and treatment are covered by both Medicaid and CHIP. Medicaid and CHIP enroll individuals throughout the year and do not have a limited or special enrollment time, so people needing health coverage can apply for these programs at any time. There are income limits for Medicaid, but all children qualify for coverage through CHIP.

Food Security

SNAP helps people expand purchasing power by providing money each month to spend on groceries, helping households have resources to purchase enough food to avoid going hungry. Inadequate food and chronic nutrient deficiencies have profound effects on a person's life and health, including increased risks for chronic diseases, higher chances of hospitalization, poorer overall health, and increased health care costs. Children who have enough to eat go on to have higher graduation rates, increased adult earnings, and improved health outcomes in their adult life. Older adults who are enrolled in SNAP are healthier, hospitalized less and are less likely to go to a nursing home. As the nation faces the COVID-19 pandemic, access to essential needs like food is more important than ever to help keep people healthy and mitigate co-occurring health risks.

All SNAP applications are screened for expedited services criteria which can accelerate processing time for those with emergency needs. DHS is also issuing an additional benefit made possible by the Families First Coronavirus Response Act to households who are not currently receiving the maximum monthly SNAP benefit. For June, this benefit will be issued beginning June 16 pending approval from the federal government.

Pennsylvania was also approved to offer a temporary Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT), which extends benefits to families with children who receive free or reduced-price school meals through the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and is designed to bridge the gap left by schools closing and help families who may have strained resources due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

P-EBT benefits are issued through EBT cards issued to qualifying families. A family's benefit would be determined based off the federal reimbursement rate for the daily rate of free school breakfasts and lunches, or approximately \$5.70 per child. This benefit would be calculated for the remainder of the school year, leading to an approximate benefit of \$370.50 per child if they were receiving free or reduced-price school meals when school closures began. P-EBT will allow DHS to provide funds to cover the cost of breakfast and lunch for approximately 958,000 Pennsylvania school-aged children. If a family's economic situation has changed since school closures began, they can still apply for NSLP and, if determined eligible, receive P-EBT benefits. Families can apply online at www.compass.state.pa.us.

Pennsylvanians who need help feeding themselves or their family can also find and contact their local food bank or pantry through [Feeding Pennsylvania](#) and [Hunger-Free Pennsylvania](#) to access food resources in their community.

Other Temporary Programs in Response to COVID-19

DHS also established the [Emergency Assistance Program \(EAP\)](#) to help low-income families who lost wages experiencing financial challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Qualifying families will be issued a one-time grant equal to two months of TANF benefits to assist them in meeting basic needs. The emergency assistance application is available online at www.compass.state.pa.us, and applications will be accepted through June 12 or until all funds are expended.

LIHEAP provides assistance for home energy bills for both low-income renters and homeowners, helping ensure continuity of utility and other energy services. The [LIHEAP Recovery Crisis Program](#), created in response to the pandemic, provides a crisis benefit up to \$800 for households that had their main or secondary energy source completely shut-off or will shut off in the next 60 days, has broken energy equipment or leaking lines that must be fixed or replace, or is in danger of being without fuel in 15 days or less. LIHEAP Recovery Crisis program will run through August 31, 2020, or until all budgeted funding is expended.

Pennsylvanians can apply online for these programs at any time at www.compass.state.pa.us or, if preferred, paper documentation can be mailed to their [local County Assistance Office \(CAO\)](#) or left in a CAO's secure drop box, if available. While CAOs remain closed, work processing applications, determining eligibility, and issuing benefits continues. Clients should use COMPASS or the MyCOMPASS PA mobile app to submit necessary updates to their case files while CAOs are closed.

If you have questions about any of these assistance programs or need help applying, help can be reached through DHS' customer services centers. Clients in Philadelphia with questions or information to report about their case should call the Philadelphia Customer Service Center at 215-560-7226. Clients in all other counties can call the Statewide Customer Service Center at 1-877-395-8930.

“There is no shame in reaching out for help when you need it,” Sec. Miller said. “The act of submitting an application for SNAP or Medicaid during a time of crisis is an act of advocacy for yourself and your family. DHS is doing everything it can to connect families and individuals who are struggling economically with the programs that will help them through this crisis. No matter what challenges you are facing, you do not have to go at this alone. It’s ok to ask for help because we can and will get through this together.”

Secretary Miller also encouraged anyone who is struggling to cope during this time of crisis to reach out for help. Anyone struggling with mental health and in need of referrals to helpful programs can call Pennsylvania's new Support & Referral Helpline, which is operated 24/7 by skilled caseworkers who can provide emotional support during this difficult period. The number to call is 1-855-284-2494. For TTY, dial 724-631-5600. Another helpful resource is the United Way of Pennsylvania's 211, which can connect people and families to local resources that can help during the public health crisis. Visit www.pa211.org or text your zip code to 898-211 for information on programs in your community.

For more information on COVID-19 in Pennsylvania, visit the [“Responding to COVID-19” guide](#) or the Pennsylvania Department of Health's dedicated [Coronavirus webpage](#) for the most up-to-date information regarding COVID-19.