

The operational hours for the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) Customer Service Contact Center (CSCC) exacerbate inequality by imposing an administrative burden on clients. This barrier could be alleviated by extending operational hours.

DSHS serves as the primary access point for most of Washington State's cash and food programs and many of its medical programs. Clients call CSCC in order to submit applications, make changes and complete reviews for said programs. Of these, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) has the largest number of enrollees. Demand for SNAP is on the rise. From 2021 to 2022, household food insecurity in the United States rose from 10.2% to 12.8%.¹ Additionally, after years of declining SNAP participation, the COVID-19 Pandemic and subsequent inflation have resulted in a sharp uptick in SNAP applications.² Both CSCC and physical DSHS offices are open from 8:00 am to 5:00 pm on weekdays. However, interviews are only processed before 2:00 pm. Until recently, they were offered up to 3:00 pm, but due to an inability to clear the phone and lobby queue before 5:00 pm, DSHS recently moved up the cut-off time, which effectively reduces the total number of clients assisted each day. At the same time, DSHS has struggled to recruit enough workers to meet the increased need for its programs resulting in longer hold times and application processing delays. The limited hours DSHS is currently operating represents an administrative burden for clients. A report by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) published in 2021 details how administrative burdens do not impact all clients equally, but instead disproportionately impact those most in need of services.³

¹ Matthew P Rabbitt et al., "Household Food Security in the United States in 2022 - USDA ERS," USDA Economic Research Service, October 2023, <https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/107703/err-325.pdf>.

² "Policy Basics: The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)," Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, June 2022, <https://www.cbpp.org/research/policy-basics-the-supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-snap>.

³ "Study to Identify Methods to Assess Equity: Report to the President," The White House, June 2021, https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/OMB-Report-on-E013985-Implementation_508-Compliant-Secure-v1.1.pdf.

Washington could extend CSCC hours in order to improve access to benefits. For example, some counties in California process cash, food and medical applications from 6:30 am to 8:00 pm. An analysis by the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC) found eligible households that contain an employed individual have some of the lowest SNAP participation rates.⁴ Extending CSCC hours could increase enrollment by providing more opportunities for working individuals to access services without having to take time off. FRAC also identified rural communities as another group with lower than average participation. For rural communities, time and distance to a physical office make accessing telephone services more critical.⁵ OMB's report on inequities in administrative burdens specifically recommends offering assistance outside business hours as a potential solution to reducing inequity in government services. Finally, increasing the hours of operation could be beneficial in reducing call wait times by helping recruit more talent to the department through the incentive of flexible schedules.

⁴ Lexie Holden, "The Snap Gap: A State-by-State Glance," Food Research & Action Center, May 28, 2021, <https://frac.org/blog/the-snap-gap-a-state-by-state-glance>.

⁵ "Rural Hunger in America - SNAP: Get the Facts," Food Research & Action Center, 2018, <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/rural-hunger-in-america-get-the-facts.pdf>.