

Food stamp applications mired in bureaucracy

County agencies' backlog totals more than 1,000

By Myung Oak Kim

Saturday, December 15, 2007

It shouldn't take more than 30 days to process a food stamp application - and no more than seven days for emergency cases, federal rules say.

Tell that to Margaret Stearns and more than 1,000 local residents who've been waiting for months because of bureaucratic snags.

Stearns, a 47-year-old former mountaineering instructor, was cut off from food stamps in March after her renewal application was held up at Denver Human Services. It took more than 10 months to get things straight. She got food stamps Thursday after a reporter contacted Denver Human Services about her situation.

Stearns said she felt lost in a government black hole. "I think people should know how difficult they make it and how a lot of people just give up."

On any given week in Colorado, 1,200 to 2,400 residents who applied for food stamps in the state's 10 largest counties are waiting too long for their papers to be processed, according to the Colorado Department of Human Services.

County welfare agencies continue to violate federal protocols - a problem that dates back almost two years - because of funding shortages and staffing problems, including high caseloads, high turnover and workers' resistance to changing procedures.

The state's notorious computer system - the Colorado Benefits Management System - compounds the problems because of errors and a complex network of screens that take a long time to navigate.

CBMS also is sending out erroneous rejection letters to food stamp applicants, causing unnecessary panic.

It's sending out scores of letters saying applicants are denied food stamps because their cases weren't processed within 60 days. In fact, the cases are still being worked.

"It's a huge problem involving thousands of people," said Ed Kahn, a lawyer with the Colorado Center on Law

& Policy who sued the state in 2004 because CBMS was restricting public benefits for low-income residents.

The vast majority of overdue cases are in El Paso, Denver, Arapahoe, Adams and Jefferson counties.

Liz McDonough, spokeswoman for state DHS, which oversees the county welfare agencies, said the processing delays were better than they were a year or two ago.

"We have an issue with timely processing, still," she said. "We're doing everything we can with those counties to get those time frames down."

The feds can sanction a state for lateness, but they have not. Nor have they set a deadline for compliance, McDonough said.

More people are resorting to court appeals to protest benefit cutoffs or reductions.

The state Office of Administrative Courts said it handled 549 appeals regarding food stamps between December 2006 and December 2007, although some of those cases might involve other programs. In the year earlier, 415 such appeals were filed.

To get food stamps, residents must fill out a 21-page application, and show ID, proof of income, and housing and utility costs. They also must interview with a county caseworker.

Jeffco DHS is taking two months or more to process regular applications, and about a month for emergency cases, said Mary Boland, the county's new director of community assistance. The county has seen applications rise from 4,406 in the first 11 months of 2006 to 6,648 in the same period this year.

Playing catch-up

Boland has instituted several measures to address backlogs.

She said two workers at the main office in Golden are processing only food stamp applications instead of other benefits such as Medicaid. She's trying to get the office's 18 intake workers to conduct interviews by phone instead of in person.

To reduce turnover, Boland removed a bachelor's degree requirement for intake workers. People with degrees often leave the intake department for other jobs as soon as they're available, which increases backlogs.

Jeffco DHS also just got a grant to pay for a worker who will process applications at the Jeffco Action Center, a Lakewood social service agency, Boland said.

Boland said she's trying to change the culture at her office. Intake workers are very careful to weed out fraud, so they're asking for more documents than are necessary, she said.

"They're trying to be very conscientious, but they're being overly conscientious," Boland said.

Barbara Drake, director of the El Paso County Department of Human Services, which has the most late cases, said she's hiring temp workers and bringing workers in on Saturdays to do interviews. Workers also give food boxes to applicants.

"We know this is a difficult time of year," she said. "When people are hungry, you want to get their food stamps as soon as possible."

Kahn said CBMS is making matters worse.

The \$223 million computer system was designed to coordinate and streamline welfare benefits. Instead, the system is creating headaches for government workers and hardships for residents who are losing services when they shouldn't be, he said.

Colorado Legal Services and other aid agencies say many low-income residents are getting CBMS-generated letters that say they have lost benefits when they should be getting services.

The 60-day food stamp denial letter automatically goes to anyone whose application exceeds that time, McDonough said.

McDonough said the letters must be sent out to follow federal rules. She said her office might change the wording and suggested that people call their caseworker if they get the letter.

She disputes criticism of CBMS.

"There is nothing inherent in CBMS that is causing applications to go beyond processing guidelines," she said.

Letters cause panic

Clay Smaine was hired earlier this year through a federal grant given to the Jeffco Action Center to help clients access food stamps and improve the low participation rate. He said 75 percent of the people he helps hit unnecessary roadblocks and delays. He said clients were panicked about the 60-day rejection letters.

He said he has seen about 50 such letters in the past two months and hundreds over the summer.

Stearns, the Lakewood woman who was cut off in March, had been on and off food stamps since 2000 after she became addicted to pain killers, went to jail, became homeless and was hit by a bus.

She moved from Denver to Lakewood in the summer and didn't get a notice that Denver DHS needed bank statements. Frustrated, Stearns put in a new application with Smaine on Oct. 12 - to no avail until Thursday.

Barbra Castro also went to Smaine for help. She applied for food stamps in Jeffco on Sept. 17. She was scheduled for an interview Nov. 28. Castro told an intake worker by phone that morning that she couldn't get a ride.

She was supposed to do the interview by phone later that day, but the worker didn't call, Castro said. Then she got the letter saying she was ineligible because she was past the 60 days.

Castro, 48, is on Medicaid and suffers from seizures and heart and thyroid problems. She has no income and said she was upset about the food stamp problems.

"It's just really depressing."

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Food stamps in Colorado

* **250,700** people statewide are getting food stamps.

* **10,000 to 11,000** people apply for food stamps every month.

* **2,181*** applications statewide are taking more than 30 days to process in the 10 largest counties.

* **632*** late applications in El Paso County

* **479*** late applications in Denver County

* **293*** late applications in Adams County

* **288*** late applications in Jefferson County

* **241*** late applications in Arapahoe County

* **549** appeals protesting food stamp cutoffs or reductions were filed between Dec. 1, 2006, and Dec. 1, 2007.

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