

# BARRIERS TO BENEFITS

Improving the Department of Public Welfare and connecting Pennsylvania residents to public benefits



More than 200,000 residents of Allegheny County rely upon services processed by DPW County Assistance Offices.

Just Harvest is committed to eliminating hunger and poverty in Allegheny County. Towards that end, we are working with Pennsylvania's Department of Public Welfare (DPW) to ensure that those eligible for public benefits – such as food stamps and cash assistance – are able to receive them without delay or unnecessary interruption due to numerous communication and customer service issues at the DPW's County Assistance Offices.

In October 2013, Just Harvest released a report, *Barriers to Benefits*, to research how systemic these problems truly are (see sidebar). By demonstrating the problems people face at the DPW and by engaging the community, Just Harvest has been able to make important policy improvements to help those in need.

**"I tried to report a change and my paperwork was lost and they cut off my benefits because of it."**  
– 56 year old resident of Wilkinsburg

**"Despite telling them that they had the wrong address listed for 3 years, they continue to use it."**  
– 66 year old resident of Beechview

**"Hard to talk to someone ... never call back ... cut off because they said they didn't receive info."**  
– Alberta from Munhall

## Apparent Disconnect

In 2013, Just Harvest conducted a survey and made calls with the help of the University of Pittsburgh School of Social Work to test the effectiveness of the DPW. Here's what we found:

**85%** of test calls could not reach any human employee or caseworker at the DPW.

**35%** of survey participants reported hour-long waits at County Assistance Offices – even when they had an appointment.

**30%** of survey participants reported they experienced a time where the paperwork they provided was not processed in time for their benefits to continue.

**26%** reported processing delays – such as address changes or income changes – that interrupted their benefits.

**22%** reported experiencing a time when they were told that paperwork they had provided was not received.

## What does Just Harvest's research show?

The DPW is failing to provide customers with the basic services necessary to access and maintain benefits. The County Assistance Offices' inability to respond to their workload adequately – whether it be answering calls, processing forms, addressing crowded waiting rooms, returning voicemail messages, or responding to change center tickets – indicates that it is not only severely understaffed but it lacks the resources to allow recipients' access to vital benefits such as food assistance.

In October, 2013, DPW Secretary Beverly Mackereth along with a list of specific demands and recommendations to improve DPW customer service. Since then – with the help of Just Harvest and dedicated community members – we have won several key changes.

## A Progress Report on our *Barriers to Benefits* recommendations

### LIST OF DEMANDS

- 1. Revamp the DPW's phone system:**
  - stop all dropped calls at the Department's Change Center;
  - stop dropped calls and disconnects at the County Assistance Offices;
  - increase voicemail capacity on caseworkers' phones.
- 2. Send out computer-generated notices to consumers to confirm their verification documents have been received and alert those to what documents are still needed.**
- 3. When consumers deliver documents in person at a CAO, staff should scan verification documents on site immediately and give receipt to consumers.**
- 4. DPW should adopt a customer-service friendly model:**
  - caseworkers should be given ongoing customer service training to ensure all consumers with dignity and respect;
  - customer satisfaction surveys should be handed to all clients after every visit;
  - Just Harvest and the public should have access to those survey results.
- 5. Data should be transparent.**
  - The number of dropped calls, hold times, voice mail full frequency and lost verification documents should be reported regularly to the public.
- 6. The state should include substantially increased staffing of CAOs in the DPW's departmental budget for 2015-16.**

 New call center implemented for Allegheny County

 Continuing discussions underway

 Onsite scanning implemented as pilot, expansion underway

 Survey tracking improved, discussions underway about training

 DPW improving data tracking and access

 Staffing increases related to Healthy PA, effects still uncertain

## Help make a difference

If fully met, these recommendations will transform DPW into a government agency that can truly meet the needs of vulnerable Pennsylvanians while treating them with dignity and respect. We need your help! Together we can remove these barriers to benefits so that Pennsylvanians can access vital services in their time of need.