



The Pulse: Double-header, with a tennis visionary and the state's public benefits system

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A CLOSER LOOK AT RI's PUBLIC BENEFITS

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In a nearly 20% jump from this time last year, the number of Rhode Islanders using food stamps has passed 100,000 for the first time in the state's history.

That means one in 10 Rhode Islanders now receive the benefit.

Three months after that statistic was released by the state's Department of Human Services, the agency found itself subject to a lawsuit – one that sheds some light on Rhode Island's public benefits programs.

On Monday, the Rhode Island chapter of the American civil liberties union filed a federal lawsuit against the DHS over food stamps. In the suit, the ACLU cited lengthy application processing times, which they said were leaving many qualified Rhode Islanders hungry.

Federal guidelines call for a 30-day deadline to process food stamp applications, and a 7-day deadline to provide food stamps to households that qualify.

“Our named client in the lawsuit was, in our view, entitled to expedited food stamps. And yet her appointment scheduled to have something dealt with was two months away from when she first filed her application.”

That's ACLU Executive Director Steven Brown, speaking of Warwick resident Shalonda Spruill, who was named in the lawsuit.

And while Friday's Providence Journal reported that the state agreed to give Spruill's application immediate attention, the matter at the heart of the suit remains unresolved.

Linda Katz is Policy Director for The Poverty Institute, at Rhode Island College.

“Well, we've been concerned for a long time about the state's inability to process not only food stamp applications, but other applications for public benefits in a timely fashion.”

There are also, though, inefficiencies for working families to access the range of benefits that can help them make ends meet. So, for example, a family that might need health insurance or childcare assistance, as well as SNAP or food stamp benefits, has to file three separate applications. And that's an inefficiency that really should be addressed. It's not something that will be addressed by this lawsuit, but it's an issue that the state should be looking at."

And Katz doesn't seem to find it shocking that one in 10 Rhode Islanders now receive food stamps.

"The reason that we've seen such an increase in participation in the food stamp program is not only because some of the procedures have been amended so that working families in particular and seniors who can participate in the program, but the economy has led many people who were able to make ends meet with what they earned, and may now be relying on unemployment benefits, now become eligible for the food stamp program."

Katz says there have been positive changes, in terms of making food stamps more accessible to the Rhode Islanders who need them.

These include making food stamp applications available online, and allowing applicants to interview by phone, if they're working during state agency hours.

But it appears that steps still need to be taken by the state – and the community – to make sure that qualified Rhode Islanders get the help they need, when they need it.

"Rhode Island has seen a significant decline in the number of staff at state agencies to administer these programs, and what we really need now is quality leadership from the state, along with members of the public, to figure out how we have the right number of people to deliver benefits that a large number of Rhode Islanders rely on – whether that's for health care, for childcare assistance, or for food stamps. And I'm hopeful that this lawsuit can shed some light on that issue, and that there can be a community effort to help resolve this."