



## **Barriers to Benefits**

**Communication and Customer Service Problems  
in Pennsylvania's Department of Public Welfare**



**October 2013**

# Acknowledgements

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Ken Regal, Executive Director  
Just Harvest  
October 2013

## About Just Harvest

Founded in 1986, Just Harvest educates, empowers and mobilizes people to eliminate hunger, poverty, and economic injustice in our communities by influencing public policy, engaging in advocacy, and connecting people to public benefits. We are guided by the understanding that hunger is a symptom of poverty and that poverty is a product of social and economic injustice. Rather than charity, public policies which respond to these conditions and to the needs of poor people are the best approaches to the elimination of hunger and poverty.

Under contracts with the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare for the past six years, Just Harvest Education Fund has provided Food Stamp (SNAP) application assistance to more than 6,880 households and has conducted pre-application eligibility screening to more than 2,100 additional households.

## JUST HARVEST'S CORE VALUES

- Everyone has a fundamental right to food. Hunger is unacceptable.
- All people, regardless of their economic circumstances, are entitled to dignity, rights, and a voice in policies that affect them.
- Hunger is political, and to end it requires collective political will.
- Sound public policy that promotes economic justice is the first and best line of defense against hunger and poverty.
- Just Harvest constituents' perspectives shape the organization's approach to addressing policy issues and providing services.

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## Executive Summary

Recipients of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly called the Food Stamp Program) frequently call Just Harvest for assistance with overcoming obstacles in obtaining and maintaining benefits through the Department of Public Welfare (DPW). To deepen our understanding of the frequency of the problems applicants face, two different approaches were taken to collect data: consumers of the SNAP program were surveyed about their experiences, and test calls were made to the publically available phone numbers of DPW's Customer Help Lines and County Assistance Offices located within Allegheny County.

The results of these surveys and test calls illustrate that the department is failing to provide consumers with basic service at a level that is necessary for obtaining and maintaining benefits.

### Paperwork Problems

Nearly 30% of survey participants reported that they had an experience where the paperwork they provided was not processed in time for their benefits to continue uninterrupted. One in four reported delays in changes taking effect – such as address or income changes – that significantly impacted their ability to receive their benefits or receive the correct amount. More than 1 in 5 reported experiencing a time where they were later told that paperwork they provided was not received.

“ 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

### Contacting Caseworkers

Clients have problems reaching workers by phone. When using the Change Center – a statewide toll-free number that clients use to report changes in address or income – 40% of survey participants reported encountering hold times of an hour or longer, 66% had experienced high call volume disconnections, and 28% reported that these disconnections happened more often than not. The majority of surveyed consumers (63%) said that their caseworker never responded to tickets issued by the Change Center within the prescribed three business day period.

When calling the local office, 82% of survey participants reported that they have experienced disconnections or full voicemails and 43% stated they were more likely to be disconnected than to be able to talk to someone. When they were able to leave a message, 48% reported never having their calls returned.

Test calls confirmed the high rate of automated messages, disconnections, and full voice mails. Half the time, callers heard a message about high call volumes, were directed to a full voicemail, or were given automated directions to another number – one that was just as likely to have the same problem.

These results show that the nature of these problems are not unique to an individual caseworker or office, nor are they phenomena related to unusual moments of peak call volume or crisis circumstances. They are widespread and systemic. The persistent inability of the CAO system to manage its workload – whether it be answering the phone, processing documents or returning voicemail messages – indicates that the department is understaffed and/or lacks the basic resources necessary to enable community members to access vital public benefits.

## **Recommendations**

In light of these results, Just Harvest recommends the following actions:

1. Revamp the Department of Public Welfare's phone system
2. Increase voice mail capacity on caseworkers' phones
3. Send out computer generated notices to consumers to confirm document receipt and/or requirements
4. Immediate document scanning and receipts for consumers delivering documents in person at CAO's
5. Caseworkers must treat all consumers with dignity and respect
6. Data on critical customer service indicators should be transparent and publicly reported
7. Secretary Mackareth should include substantially increased staffing of CAOs in the DPW's departmental budget request and fight for inclusion in the Governor's proposed budget for 2014-15

# **Barriers to Benefits**

## **Statement of Problem**

Recipients of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly called the Food Stamp Program) frequently call Just Harvest for assistance in handling obstacles to obtaining and maintaining benefits through the Department of Public Welfare (DPW). These calls make clear the existence of chronic problems in the food stamp application process - particularly, the inability to successfully reach caseworkers and to transmit documents. We wanted to measure more carefully how frequent these problems truly are.

## **Methods**

To gauge the frequency of customer service problems two different approaches were taken to collect data: 1) roughly 150 consumers of the SNAP program – primarily recent Just Harvest clients – were surveyed about their experiences, and 2) over 200 test calls were made in spring 2013 to the publicized phone numbers of Allegheny County’s Assistance Offices and Customer Help Lines. The survey asked questions concerning phone calls made to Department of Welfare offices, processing of paper work, suspension of benefits, and effects of obstacles of the application and validation process. (See Appendix A: Survey Questions and Results). Test calls were made to 14 different published numbers (see Appendix B: Test Call Results) and testers recorded whether they were put on hold, received a message about high call volume and were directed to call back, received no answer, put into a voicemail, were brought to a full voicemail, were able to talk to someone, or were disconnected. (To read more details about the methods, see Appendix C.)

## **Results**

The results of the surveys and test calls illustrate that the department is failing to provide consumers with basic service at a level that is necessary for obtaining and maintaining benefits. Survey participants reported frequent difficulty with having their documents processed and communicating with workers successfully.

## Paperwork Problems

Surveys results show that alarming numbers of clients have had difficulty with their paperwork being lost or not being processed. DPW requires food stamp recipients to follow semi-annual reporting, meaning that every six months they must complete a form and provide current information on their income and information about changes to their expenses, household composition, and assets. In addition to those reporting requirements, consumers are required to report any changes to their income within 30 days of the change occurring. When someone applies for food stamps, they are mailed a checklist, shown on the next page, and asked to supply documents verifying identity, income, expenses and savings.

Survey participants were asked how they provided documents to DPW (hand-delivering it to the County Assistance Office, by mail, by fax, or by scanning them into COMPASS) and if they had any issues with the documents being processed or were ever told that their documents were not received. As the table below shows, on average nearly 30% of clients reported that they had at least one experience where the paperwork they provided – either for an application or benefits review - was not processed in time for their benefits to continue uninterrupted.

Over 1 in 5 reported experiencing a time where they were later told that paperwork they provided was not received. Taking the time to deliver paperwork in person did not improve their chances of avoiding this problem; personal delivery of documents to a County Assistance Office had a higher failed receipt rate than any other method.

**Documents Provided Processed or Not Received, by Method of Delivery to DPW**

	<b>Total clients</b>	<b>Not processed in time</b>	<b>% not processed in time</b>	<b>Documents not received</b>	<b>% not received</b>
Personally	46	13	28.26%	12	26.09%
Mail	87	21	24.14%	20	22.99%
Fax	29	14	48.28%	5	17.24%
COMPASS	4	1	25.00%	0	0.00%
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>166</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>29.52%</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>22.29%</b>

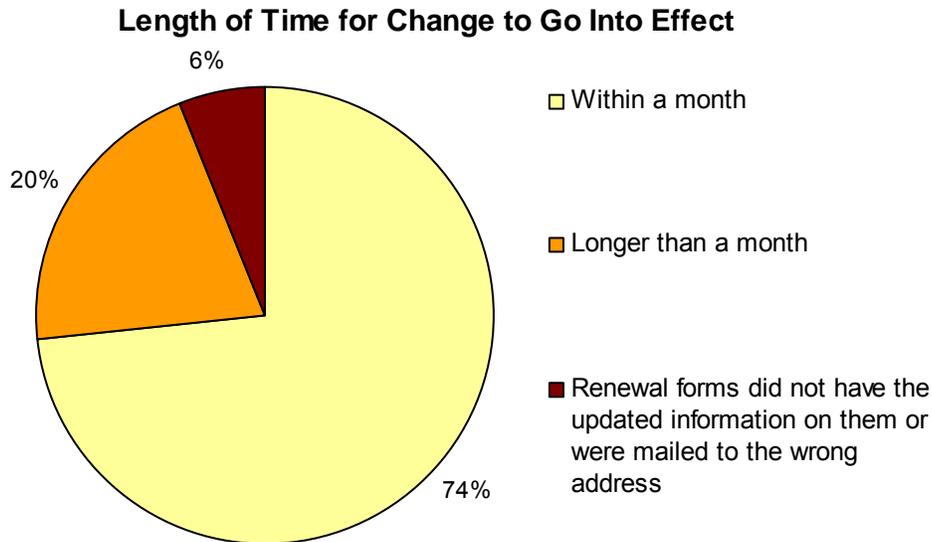
## VERIFICATION CHECKLIST

**IF YOU DO NOT UNDERSTAND ANY OF THE ITEMS LISTED BELOW OR WANT TO KNOW WHY THE INFORMATION OR PROOF IS NEEDED, WE WILL EXPLAIN IT TO YOU AT THE INTERVIEW.**

- Personal identification such as: driver's license, Social Security card, military discharge papers, or document showing your signature, photograph, or description. Acceptable for food stamps: A signed statement from someone who knows you and can tell us, in person or over the phone, who you are.
- Proof of your mailing address, if you have one, such as, rent or mortgage receipt, utility bill, driver's license, or other paper that shows where you live. If you have no papers with your address readily available, you can give us the name of a person who can tell us, in person or over the phone, where you live.
- If you do not have a home or a fixed mailing address, please give us an address where you can receive mail, and the name of a person who knows you and can tell us, in person or over the phone, that you live in Pennsylvania and are not in the state solely for vacation purposes.
- Social Security number for every household member who has one, or proof of application for a Social Security number.
- Birth verification for Beverly
- Medicare Cards (Part A and Part B)
- If anyone in the household is a veteran, or is now in the military service, bring any papers that show serial number, or Social Security number, date of enlistment and discharge, veteran's claim number, pension, disability compensation awards, or allotments.
- Proof such as current school documents or correspondence which shows that your children age 16 or older attend elementary or secondary school or an equivalent level vocational or technical school.
- Marriage License
- Proof of disability of any household member.
  - This must be on a form provided by the Department.
- Release Papers from any Penal or Corrections institution including the name and phone number of the corrections officer.
- Bills or receipts for medical services received in the past 4 months including cost of medical insurance, dental care, and prescriptions.
- The amount of support you are paying to your spouse or dependents who are residing in or out of your home.
- Proof of shelter and utility costs, such as lease, rent receipt, mortgage payment book, tax receipts, home insurance, telephone, electric, fuel oil, coal, gas, water, sewage, garbage, and utility installation bills or receipts.
- Other sign enclosed forms
- Citizenship papers or alien/refugee registration cards for any persons in the household who were not born in the United States.
- Name, address and proof of the income and resources of your sponsor if you are a sponsored alien.
- Names and addresses of certain relatives not living with you: your husband or wife, or parent of any child for whom you want assistance. Bring their Social Security numbers, and if these relatives are working, bring the names and addresses of the people or companies for whom they work.
- Divorce papers or other proof that your spouse or the parent of any child for whom you are applying is absent from your home (such as a written statement from a non-related third party.)
- We will want to know how much money or other help you get from relatives. If there are any court orders for support from relatives, bring your court order card or number.
  - Printout from the court to verify monthly payments.
- Information concerning medical insurance coverage of children for whom you are applying which is carried by the child's absent parent.
- Proof of pregnancy. We require a written statement from your doctor, clinic, or other medical source showing the expected delivery date.
- Registration cards for every motor vehicle owned by household members (car, truck, camper, boat, motorcycle, snowmobile) along with payment books or other documents showing balance owed, if any, and the value of the vehicles.
- Car Insurance Information.
- Proof of application for benefits as follows:
  - SSI  Sick Benefits/Disability
  - Social Security  Veterans' Benefits
  - Workers' Compensation  Unemployment Compensation
  - Other any that apply to you
- Proof of resources you own or own jointly such as:
  - Savings or checking accounts, Christmas or Vacation Club Accounts (Current Bank Statement and Passbooks).
  - Hospitalization, health or accident insurance policies
  - Federal or State Income Tax Refunds
  - Cash on Hand  Life Insurance Policies
  - Burial Funds  Burial Plots
  - Stocks or Bonds  IRAs
  - Credit Union accounts  Certificates
  - Trust Funds  Mutual Funds
  - Other \_\_\_\_\_
- Proof of earned income and work expenses of household members such as:
  - Name, address, and telephone number of employer for anyone who is employed.
  - Pay stubs for the last 30 days.
  - Pay stubs for the last 4 months.
  - Proof of expense for child care (babysitter) or for care of a disabled adult.
  - Transportation expenses for employment.
  - Name, address and telephone number of former employer.
  - Written statement from last employer verifying last day of work, date of last pay, and reason for termination.
- Proof of income from:
  - Training allowances  Rent or board
  - Dividends  Tips
  - Interest  Odd Jobs
  - Alimony or support  Other any that apply to you
- Latest income tax form or other reliable proof of income from self-employment and costs of producing self-employment.
- Proof of other income such as award letters of notices for:
  - Social Security  Pensions
  - Union Benefits  Veterans' Benefits
  - Unemployment Comp.  Workers' Compensation
  - Black Lung Benefits  Sick Benefits
  - Allotments  Railroad Retirement
  - Educational loans, grants, scholarships, and work study; and related expenses including tuition.
  - Other any that apply to you

### Reporting Changes

Consumers are required to report changes that occur in between benefits reviews, such as changes in income, address, rent, savings – anything that could affect their benefits. Survey respondents were asked about their experiences reporting changes. Of clients who reported making a change, 25% reported having difficulty getting DPW to process their updated information, and 26 % reported delays in changes taking effect.



### Effect of Paperwork Problems

The effect of lost paperwork is captured in the narratives that survey participants provided during the survey, e.g.:

“ I went back to work and called the DPW to suspend my food stamps. They didn't stop food stamps for 3 months. The extra money for food stamps was nice but I felt bad because I was employed at the time and didn't necessarily need the assistance.” – *Linda from Mt. Oliver*

“ She actually had to get an advocate because the case worker claimed that they never received the information and this caused the client's benefits to be terminated.” - *Tester's account of a 40 year old resident of Sheridan*

“ Hard to talk to someone, never call back, cut off because they said they didn't receive info” – Alberta from Munhall

## Contacting Caseworkers

Many survey participants reported that contacting the Department of Public Welfare by phone was difficult, with many disconnections or long wait times. This was confirmed by our test calls.

## Using the State-wide Change Center

We asked survey participants about their experience calling the state-wide customer service center, which is also called the change center. DPW encourages consumers to call this number to report changes in their income and address.

“ I waited on hold for 10 minutes. Then I was disconnected.” – Test caller’s account of calling the Change Center.

**Test it yourself!**

Call 1-877-395-8930

Only 55% of survey respondents reported having called this number. Those who had called this number reported frequent disconnection, hold times of an hour or more, and a lack of responses from caseworkers.

### *Disconnections*

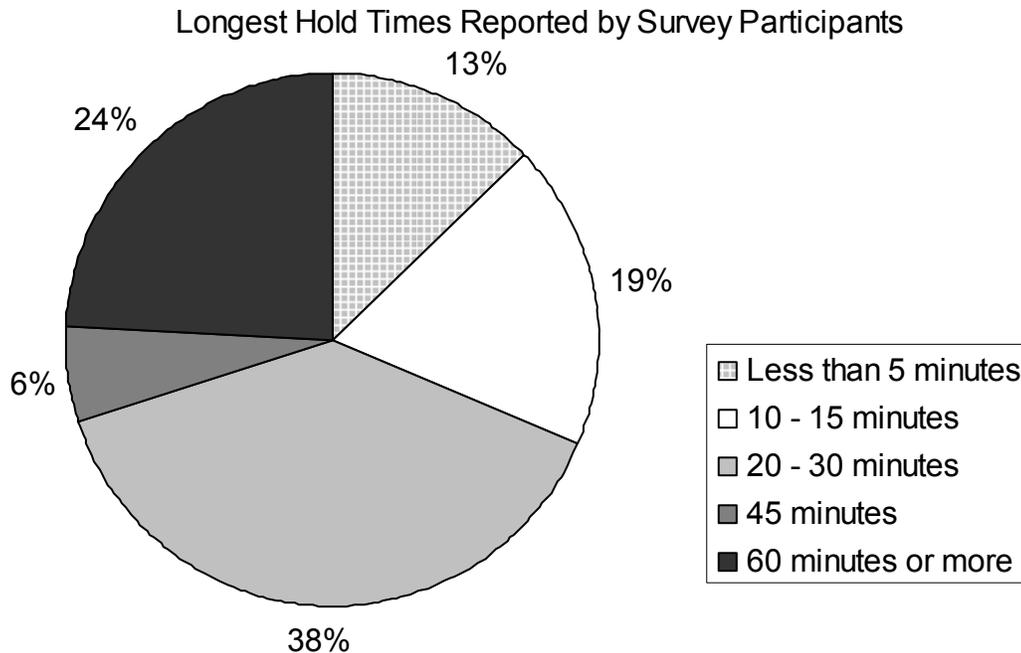
Often, the change center will play an automated message for consumers to call back later due to “high call volumes”. Clients were asked if they had encountered this message, and if so how often they had. 66% of clients had experienced this problem, and 28% reported that it happened more often than being able to talk to someone.

#### **Have you ever been disconnected or unable to reach someone at the Change Center?**

No, Never	<b>21</b>	34%
Yes, Rarely (it has happened but I can usually get through)	<b>9</b>	15%
Yes, Sometimes (about half of the time)	<b>14</b>	23%
Yes, Frequently – More often than not	<b>6</b>	10%
Yes, Almost Always	<b>11</b>	18%

### *Hold Times*

Clients were asked about how long they waited on hold before talking to someone – both the longest time they could recall as well as the shortest time they could recall. 24% reported that their longest time waiting on hold was an hour or longer.



*Response from Caseworkers*

The workers at the Change Center are not permitted to perform certain tasks themselves, such as processing a renewal or conducting interviews. When a client calls with issues where these actions must be taken, DPW issues a ticket – basically a tracked e-mail to the consumer’s caseworker, who is then supposed to respond within 3 business days. Survey participants were asked how often their change center calls were responded to within 3 business days. The majority of surveyed consumers (63%) said that their caseworker never responded to their ticket within the three business days.

<b>If you got a ticket number, did your caseworker respond by calling you within the allotted 3 business day timeframe?</b>		
No, Never	<b>35</b>	63%
Yes, Rarely (it has happened but usually doesn't)	<b>6</b>	11%
Yes, Sometimes (about half of the time)	<b>4</b>	7%
Yes, Frequently (more often than not)	<b>4</b>	7%
Yes, Almost Always	<b>7</b>	13%

## Contacting Local Offices

Survey participants were asked about their experience calling local offices or caseworker’s direct numbers, if they had them. Participants reported much more difficulty with contacting local offices than with the Change Center. 82% reported that they have experienced error messages, disconnections (they were on hold and then no longer connected) or full voicemails (compared to 66% at the Change Center). 43% stated that it was more likely to be the case than to be able to talk to someone (compared to 28% at the Change Center).

### Have you ever been disconnected, unable to reach anyone, or encountered a full voicemail?

Yes, Almost Always	<b>30</b>	28%
Yes, Frequently (more often than not)	<b>16</b>	15%
Yes, Sometimes (about half of the time)	<b>23</b>	22%
Yes, Rarely (it has happened but I can usually get through)	<b>18</b>	17%
No, Never	<b>19</b>	18%

## Response from Caseworkers

Survey participants were asked about getting returned calls from voicemails that they left. 48% reported never having their calls returned.

### If you have left messages were you responded back to?

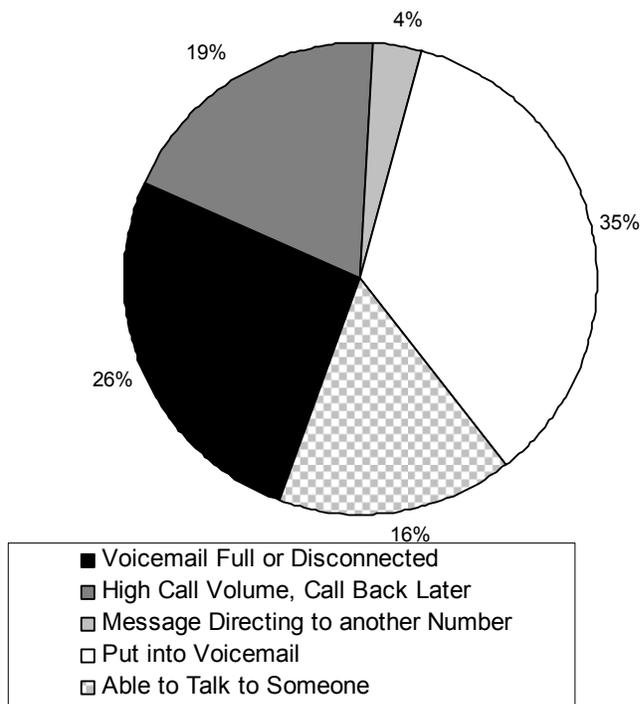
No, Never	<b>47</b>	48%
Yes, Rarely	<b>13</b>	13%
Yes, Sometimes (about half of the time)	<b>19</b>	19%
Yes, Frequently – More often than not	<b>7</b>	7%
Yes, Almost Always	<b>12</b>	12%

## Test Calls to Published Department of Public Welfare Numbers

Test calls to the offices confirm the survey results. As the chart below shows, disconnections and messages to call back later were common. 52% of the time, callers heard a message about high call volumes, were given automated directions to another number, or directed to a full voicemail.

About 33% of the time, callers were directed to a voicemail where they could leave a message, and 15% of the time they could speak with someone. The results varied among phone numbers, with the Change Center having the highest rate of success in reaching a person. The full results are in Appendix B.

**Test Call Results: All Calls**



### Call testers' accounts of calling local offices:

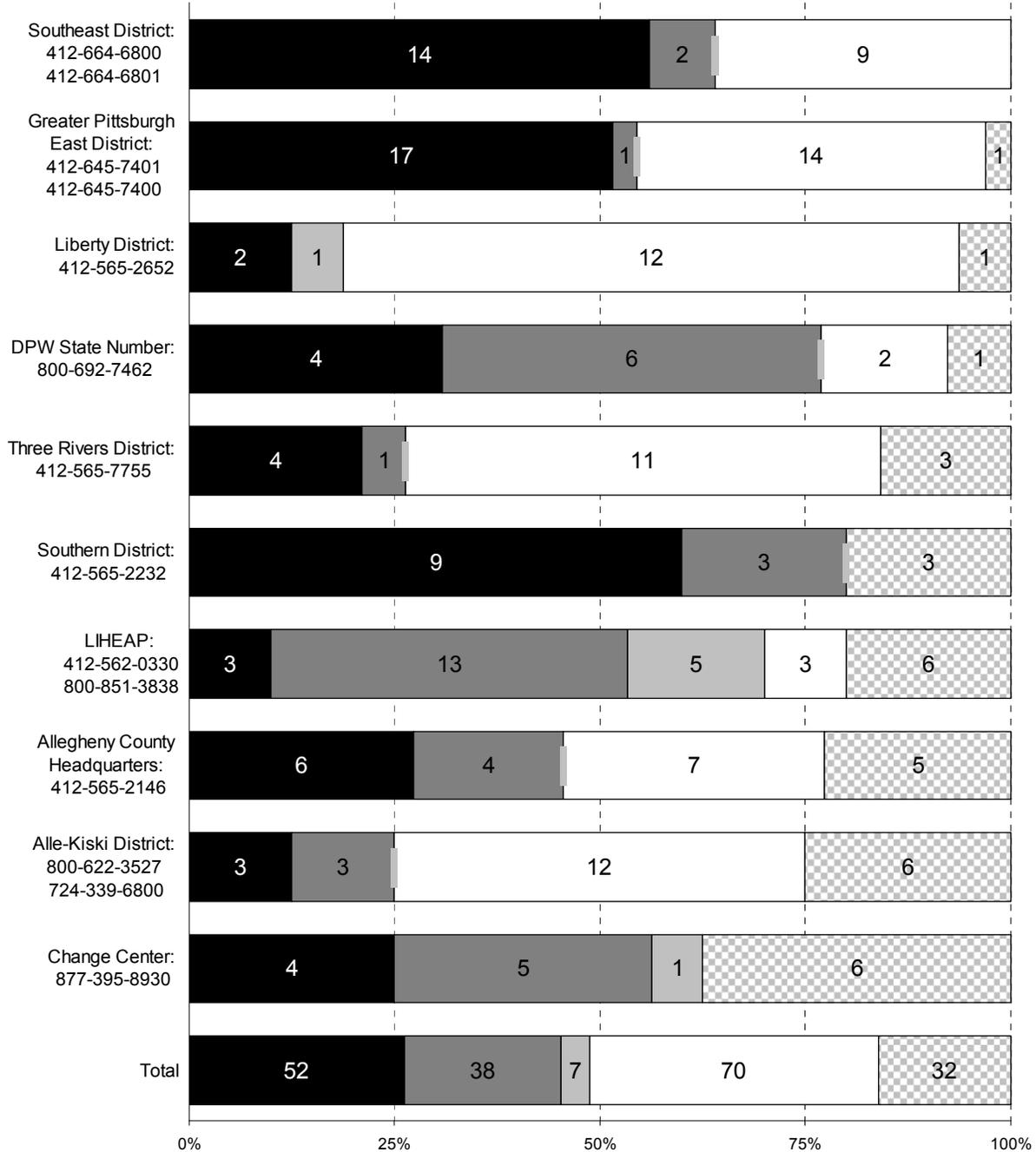
“ I waited on hold for 10 minutes. Then I was given a message about high call volumes and to call back later.”

“ Operator picked up then put me on hold for 10 minutes. When she came back she was rude and demanded that I gave her my name and Social Security number before proceeding, even though I just wanted to ask about how to apply. Then she told me to call another district area or to apply only through county assistance website .”

“Waited for the menu options to go through, then when connected to the operator, waited for less than a minute of music and then a computer voice said, ‘There was no reply from the back-up number, please call again later’ and I was then disconnected.”

“ I was put on hold for 15 minutes and then disconnected.”

## Call Results by Office



- Voicemail Full or Disconnected
- High Call Volume, Call Back Later
- Message Directing to another Number
- Put into Voicemail
- Able to Talk to Someone

**Test it yourself!**  
Try calling any of the numbers  
on this page.

## Visiting Offices

Survey participants were asked about wait times in the offices either with and without an appointment. In both cases, the majority of respondents indicated wait times of less than 30 minutes, but wait times of over 1.5 hours were reported by over 40% of clients.

	With Appointment: Longest Wait		With Appointment: Shortest Wait		Without Appointment: Longest Wait		Without Appointment: Shortest Wait	
<b>Less than 30 Minutes</b>	29	51.79%	25	46.30%	22	28.57%	27	45.00%
<b>30- 1 hour</b>	7	12.50%	10	18.52%	12	15.58%	12	20.00%
<b>1 hour – 1.5 hours</b>	5	8.93%	10	18.52%	12	15.58%	10	16.67%
<b>1.5 – 2 hours</b>	3	5.36%	5	9.26%	10	12.99%	5	8.33%
<b>2 – 3 hours</b>	6	10.71%	3	5.56%	9	11.69%	5	8.33%
<b>Over 3 hours</b>	6	10.71%	1	1.85%	12	15.58%	1	1.67%

Survey participants who indicated having taken their documents to the office reported a wide range of experiences ranging from “quick and efficient” to “had to wait a long time, couldn’t talk to anyone, told to leave paper work in mailbox.” One participant stated:

“ The first time, I brought paperwork, because they had told me they never received my documents which had been sent because I had had an interview date - which they never called for. I waited for 3 hours only to be told that I needed to go home and reapply because I was not in the system. The second time they were more helpful but I still had to wait a few hours.”

Another call tester recorded this:

“The participant expressed that it was always a very nonchalant experience in which the caseworkers would always tell her to make any necessary copies and to put the information into the mailbox and that she would be contacted.”

A possible explanation for the wide variation is that different offices have adopted different policies in prioritizing clients who are there to drop off documents. For example, one may have a policy stating that if you want to ask questions, you have to speak with a caseworker. Others may have greeters that assist with questions, making copies, or writing receipts.

## Conclusions

Our findings reveal that the nature of these basic customer service problems at the Department of Public Welfare are not unique to an individual caseworker or office – but are widespread and systemic:

- 85% of test calls could not reach a human being
- 66% of surveyed Food Stamp consumers reported disconnects and high call volume messages from the Call Center
- 63% said that their caseworker never responded to tickets issued by the Change Center within the mandated three business day period.
- 40% reported encountered wait times of over an hour and a half at the office.
- 35% reported hour long waits at County Assistance Offices even when they had an appointment.
- Nearly 30% of survey participants reported that they had an experience where the paperwork they provided was not processed in time for their benefits to continue uninterrupted.
- 26 % reported that they had delays in changes taking effect – such as address changes or income changes.
- 22% reported experiencing a time where they were told that paperwork they provided was not received

The inability of County Assistance Offices to properly respond to their workload – whether it be answering the phone, processing documents, serving people in their waiting room, returning voicemail messages, or responding to change center tickets – indicates that the department is severely understaffed and lacks the resources necessary to enable community members to access vital public benefits.

## **Recommendations**

In light of these results, Just Harvest recommends the following actions:

- 1) Revamp the Department of Public Welfare's phone system
  - Stop all dropped calls at the Change Center
  - Stop dropped calls and disconnects at the county assistance offices
  - Put functioning phone numbers that are answered by human beings on all notices
- 2) Increase voice mail capacity on caseworkers' phones
- 3) Send out computer generated notices to consumers to confirm their verification documents have been received and alert them to what documents are still needed
- 4) When consumers deliver documents in person at a CAO, staff should scan verification documents on site immediately and give receipt to consumers
- 5) Caseworkers must treat all consumers with dignity and respect
  - Consumers should have access to service surveys and Just Harvest and the public should have access to those survey results
- 6) Data should be transparent
  - The numbers of dropped calls, hold times, voice mail full frequency and lost verification documents should be reported regularly to the public
- 7) Secretary Mackareth should include substantially increased staffing of CAOs in the DPW's departmental budget request and fight for inclusion in the Governor's proposed budget for 2014-15

Additional steps can be taken by DPW to address some of the underlying procedural requirements that appear to result in these customer service problems. Just Harvest further recommends that DPW utilize any Federal options that can be taken to ease caseworker workloads and the burden on clients. The Asset Test is a key example; removing the asset test would save workers significant amounts of time in processing food stamp only applications Pennsylvania chose to opt out of the Asset Test from 2008 to 2012 without any harm to the program. Indeed, 39 states do not impose an asset test.

DPW should also continue to work to align and reduce benefit renewals. Currently, clients receive a Semi-Annual Review every six months and an Annual Recertification once a year. This means that once a year, they receive both forms: the Semi-Annual Review and the Recertification packet, which is redundant paperwork.

Similarly, benefit renewal periods should be aligned across benefits. For example, if a person receives both Medical Assistance and Food Stamps, in March they may receive a Recertification form for their medical benefits, in June they may receive a Semi- Annual Review for their food stamps, and then again in December receive both a Semi-Annual Review and a Recertification for their food stamps.

**If DPW fails to act promptly to implement these recommendations, Just Harvest urges that these further actions should be taken by state and federal officials to increase transparency and advance public accountability of DPW for any continuing failures of basic customer service:**

The Auditor General should investigate failures to process documents; the legislature should hold public hearings regarding issues related to service delivery; and the Department of Public Welfare should openly and routinely provide data to the public related to customer service issues such as average hold times, number of dropped calls, wait times in offices, and percentage of applications processed in a timely manner.

At the federal level, USDA's Food and Nutrition Service – which oversees the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program – should begin to monitor and collect data from states on the ability of consumers to contact caseworkers and county assistance offices by phone; such contact is required for interviews and for obtaining information about expedited food stamps.

## Appendix A: Survey Questions and Responses

### 1. Have you ever applied for or used any of the following benefits (if so, check which ones)

- LIHEAP (also known as Energy Assistance)
- Food Stamps (or SNAP)
- Cash Assistance (or TANF)

**Responses:**

LIHEAP (also known as Energy Assistance)	<b>56</b>	33%
Food Stamps (or SNAP)	<b>104</b>	60%
Cash Assistance (or TANF)	<b>21</b>	12%

People may select more than one checkbox, so percentages may add up to more than 100%.

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## CALLING THE DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC WELFARE

### 2. Have you ever tried calling the Department of Public Welfare? If so, how often do you try to contact them by phone?

- No, Never
- Yes, Rarely - Once or twice in my life.
- Yes, Sometimes – Every 6 months
- Yes, Frequently – Monthly

**Responses:**

No, Never	<b>42</b>	25%
Yes, Rarely - Once or twice in my life.	<b>54</b>	32%
Yes, Sometimes – Every 6 months	<b>32</b>	19%
Yes, Frequently - Monthly	<b>31</b>	18%

### 3. Have you ever tried calling the Department of Public Welfare Statewide Customer Service: 1-877-395-8930?

- No, Never
- Yes, Rarely - Once or twice in my life.
- Yes, A few times
- Yes, Many times – at least 10 times

**Responses:**

No, Never	<b>93</b>	55%
Yes, Rarely - Once or twice in my life.	<b>26</b>	15%
Yes, A few times	<b>23</b>	14%
Yes, Many times – at least 10 times	<b>17</b>	10%

3a. What is the longest you were ever on hold? *(see table on next page)*

3b. What was the shortest you were ever on hold? *(see table on next page)*

Amount of Time	Longest Hold Time	Shortest Hold Time	Total Responses
Less than 5 minutes	9	27	36
10 minutes	7	6	13
15 minutes	6	10	16
20 - 30 minutes	27	8	35
45 minutes	4	1	5
60 minutes or more	17	4	21
<b>Average:</b>	34.76811594	15.49122807	<b>26.04762</b>
<b>Median:</b>	20 minutes	9 minutes	<b>15 minutes</b>

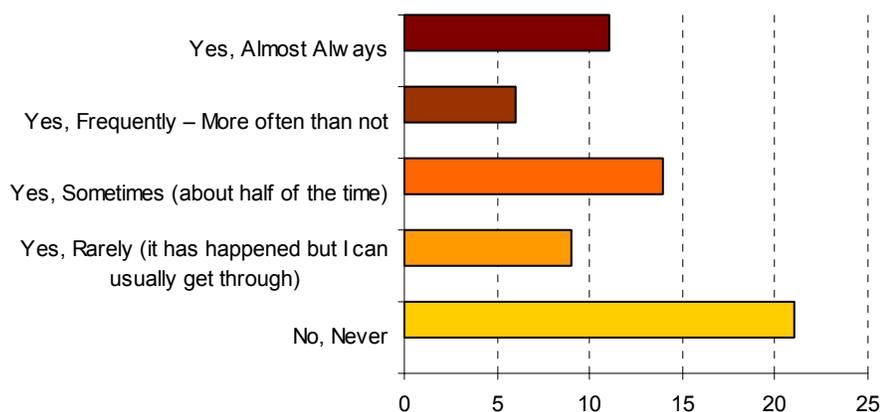
3c. How long would you plan to be on hold if you were going to call them?  
*(these responses varied widely and closely mirrored their experiences, but did not illustrate anything very useful)*

3d. Have you ever been disconnected or unable to reach anyone?

- No, Never
- Yes, Rarely (it has happened but I can usually get through)
- Yes, Sometimes (about half of the time)
- Yes, Frequently – More often than not
- Yes, Almost Always

**Responses:**

No, Never	<b>21</b>	34%
Yes, Rarely (it has happened but I can usually get through)	<b>9</b>	15%
Yes, Sometimes (about half of the time)	<b>14</b>	23%
Yes, Frequently – More often than not	<b>6</b>	10%
Yes, Almost Always	<b>11</b>	18%

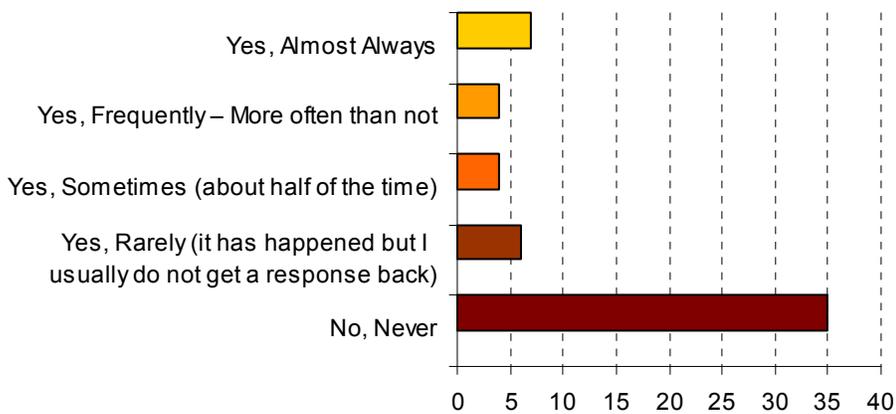


3e. If you got a ticket number, did your caseworker respond by calling you within the allotted 3 business day timeframe?

- No, Never
- Yes, Rarely (it has happened but I usually do not get a response back)
- Yes, Sometimes (about half of the time)
- Yes, Frequently – More often than not
- Yes, Almost Always

**Responses:**

No, Never	<b>35</b>	63%
Yes, Rarely (it has happened but I usually do not get a response back)	<b>6</b>	11%
Yes, Sometimes (about half of the time)	<b>4</b>	7%
Yes, Frequently – More often than not	<b>4</b>	7%
Yes, Almost Always	<b>7</b>	13%



4. Have you ever tried calling the Department of Public Welfare’s local offices or direct caseworker numbers?

- No, Never
- Yes, Rarely - Once or twice in my life.
- Yes, A few times
- Yes, Many times – at least 10 times

**Responses:**

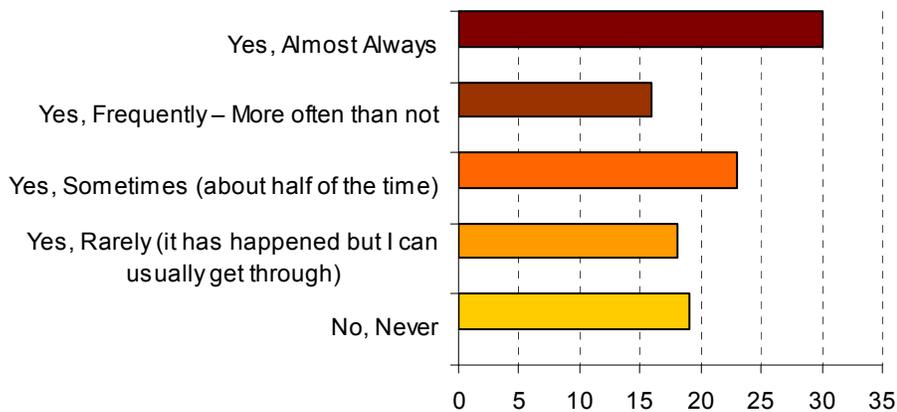
No, Never	<b>42</b>	27%
Yes, Rarely - Once or twice in my life.	<b>24</b>	16%
Yes, A few times	<b>57</b>	37%
Yes, Many times – at least 10 times	<b>21</b>	14%

4a. Have you ever been disconnected, unable to reach anyone, or encountered a full voicemail?

- No, Never
- Yes, Rarely (it has happened but I can usually get through)
- Yes, Sometimes (about half of the time)
- Yes, Frequently – More often than not
- Yes, Almost Always

**Have you ever been disconnected, unable to reach anyone, or encountered a full voicemail?**

No, Never	<b>19</b>	18%
Yes, Rarely (it has happened but I can usually get through)	<b>18</b>	17%
Yes, Sometimes (about half of the time)	<b>23</b>	22%
Yes, Frequently – More often than not	<b>16</b>	15%
Yes, Almost Always	<b>30</b>	28%

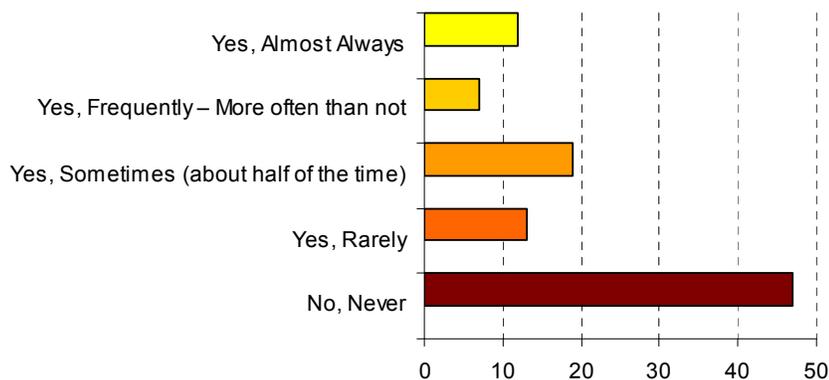


4b. If you have left messages were you responded back to?

- No, Never
- Yes, Rarely
- Yes, Sometimes (about half of the time)
- Yes, Frequently – More often than not
- Yes, Almost Always

**If you have left messages were you responded back to?**

No, Never	<b>47</b>	48%
Yes, Rarely	<b>13</b>	13%
Yes, Sometimes (about half of the time)	<b>19</b>	19%
Yes, Frequently – More often than not	<b>7</b>	7%
Yes, Almost Always	<b>12</b>	12%



## VISITING THE DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC WELFARE

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### 5. Have you ever gone to the welfare office to:

- Renew your benefits
- Do an application
- Change your benefits
- See your caseworker

*This question was not analyzed. Many participants had gone to the office for many reasons, some had never gone at all.*

### 5b. Which office do you currently go to?

*This question was not analyzed. Many participants did not know which office they were based out of or said "downtown" but there are three offices based downtown.*

### 6. If you went to the office with an appointment:

#### 6a. What is the longest you ever waited for an appointment?

<input type="checkbox"/> Less than 30 Minutes	<b>Responses:</b>		
<input type="checkbox"/> 30- 1 hour	Less than 30 Minutes	<b>29</b>	43%
<input type="checkbox"/> 1 hour – 1.5 hours	30- 1 hour	<b>7</b>	10%
<input type="checkbox"/> 1.5 – 2 hours	1 hour – 1.5 hours	<b>5</b>	7%
<input type="checkbox"/> 2 – 3 hours	1.5 – 2 hours	<b>3</b>	4%
<input type="checkbox"/> Over 3 hours	2 – 3 hours	<b>6</b>	9%
	Over 3 hours	<b>6</b>	9%

#### 6b. What was the shortest you ever waited for an appointment?

<input type="checkbox"/> Less than 30 Minutes	<b>Responses:</b>		
<input type="checkbox"/> 30- 1 hour	Less than 30 Minutes	<b>25</b>	38%
<input type="checkbox"/> 1 hour – 1.5 hours	30- 1 hour	<b>10</b>	15%
<input type="checkbox"/> 1.5 – 2 hours	1 hour – 1.5 hours	<b>10</b>	15%
<input type="checkbox"/> 2 – 3 hours	1.5 – 2 hours	<b>5</b>	8%
<input type="checkbox"/> Over 3 hours	2 – 3 hours	<b>3</b>	5%
	Over 3 hours	<b>1</b>	2%

#### 6c. If you were planning to go to the office for an appointment, how much time would you plan on for your wait time?

<input type="checkbox"/> Less than 30 Minutes	<b>Responses:</b>		
<input type="checkbox"/> 30- 1 hour	Less than 30 Minutes	<b>18</b>	25%
<input type="checkbox"/> 1 hour – 1.5 hours	30- 1 hour	<b>20</b>	28%
<input type="checkbox"/> 1.5 – 2 hours	1 hour – 1.5 hours	<b>11</b>	15%
<input type="checkbox"/> 2 – 3 hours	1.5 – 2 hours	<b>7</b>	10%
<input type="checkbox"/> Over 3 hours	2 – 3 hours	<b>2</b>	3%
	Over 3 hours	<b>3</b>	4%

**7. If you went to the office without an appointment:**

7a. What is the longest you ever waited without an appointment?

<input type="checkbox"/> Less than 30 Minutes	<b>Responses:</b>		
<input type="checkbox"/> 30- 1 hour	Less than 30 Minutes	<b>22</b>	24%
<input type="checkbox"/> 1 hour – 1.5 hours	30- 1 hour	<b>12</b>	13%
<input type="checkbox"/> 1.5 – 2 hours	1 hour – 1.5 hours	<b>12</b>	13%
<input type="checkbox"/> 2 – 3 hours	1.5 – 2 hours	<b>10</b>	11%
<input type="checkbox"/> Over 3 hours	2 – 3 hours	<b>9</b>	10%
	Over 3 hours	<b>12</b>	13%

7b. What was the shortest you ever waited without an appointment?

<input type="checkbox"/> Less than 30 Minutes	<b>Responses:</b>		
<input type="checkbox"/> 30- 1 hour	Less than 30 Minutes	<b>27</b>	37%
<input type="checkbox"/> 1 hour – 1.5 hours	30- 1 hour	<b>12</b>	16%
<input type="checkbox"/> 1.5 – 2 hours	1 hour – 1.5 hours	<b>10</b>	14%
<input type="checkbox"/> 2 – 3 hours	1.5 – 2 hours	<b>5</b>	7%
<input type="checkbox"/> Over 3 hours	2 – 3 hours	<b>5</b>	7%
	Over 3 hours	<b>1</b>	1%

7c. If you were planning to go to the office without an appointment, how much time would you plan for your wait time?

<input type="checkbox"/> Less than 30 Minutes	<b>Responses:</b>		
<input type="checkbox"/> 30- 1 hour	Less than 30 Minutes	<b>13</b>	17%
<input type="checkbox"/> 1 hour – 1.5 hours	30- 1 hour	<b>26</b>	33%
<input type="checkbox"/> 1.5 – 2 hours	1 hour – 1.5 hours	<b>9</b>	12%
<input type="checkbox"/> 2 – 3 hours		<b>8</b>	10%
<input type="checkbox"/> Over 3 hours	1.5 – 2 hours		
	2 – 3 hours	<b>4</b>	5%
	Over 3 hours	<b>10</b>	13%

**REPORTING A CHANGE**

**8. Have you ever reported a change to DPW – such as a change of address or income? If so, how long did it take for the change to take effect?**

- No, I have never reported a change
- Yes, Change went into place before my next benefits were issued
- Yes, Change went into place within a month
- Yes, it took longer than a month for the change to go into effect, but went into effect before my renewal.
- Yes, it was not in effect when I received my renewal forms – renewal forms did not have the updated information on them or were mailed to the wrong address.

**Responses:**

No, I have never reported a change	<b>8</b>	<b>5</b>
Yes, Change went into place before my next benefits were issued	<b>6</b>	<b>5%</b>
Yes, Change went into place within a month	<b>3</b>	<b>1</b>
	<b>0</b>	<b>9%</b>
	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>
	<b>7</b>	<b>1%</b>
Yes, it took longer than a month for the change to go into effect, but went into effect before my renewal.	<b>1</b>	<b>8</b>
	<b>3</b>	<b>%</b>

Yes, it was not in effect when I received my renewal forms – renewal forms did not have the updated information on them or were mailed to the wrong address.

4 3  
%



## BENEFITS AFFECTED?

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**14. Have your benefits ever been suspended or stopped? If so, what was the cause? How did it affect your ability to access basic needs such as food?**

<input type="checkbox"/> No	<b>Responses:</b>		
<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	Yes	<b>67</b>	42%
	No	<b>82</b>	52%

**If yes, please describe:**

Narratives fall into most of these categories:

Client was told that their documents were “not received”	11
Missed their interview for renewal	4
Client was late in providing paperwork	13
Disqualified - Income	33
Client could not acquire documents	2
Client decided not to turn in paperwork	2

*Examples:*

“He is legally blind so he is unable to keep up on paper mail very well and they had been trying to communicate with him through mail only and since there was no communication, his benefits were suspended. Because of this, there was some major budgeting that had to be done. Also, it is important to note that when he had a scheduled phone interview they did not call.”

“Yes, got a job so I didn't really qualify and did not reapply.”

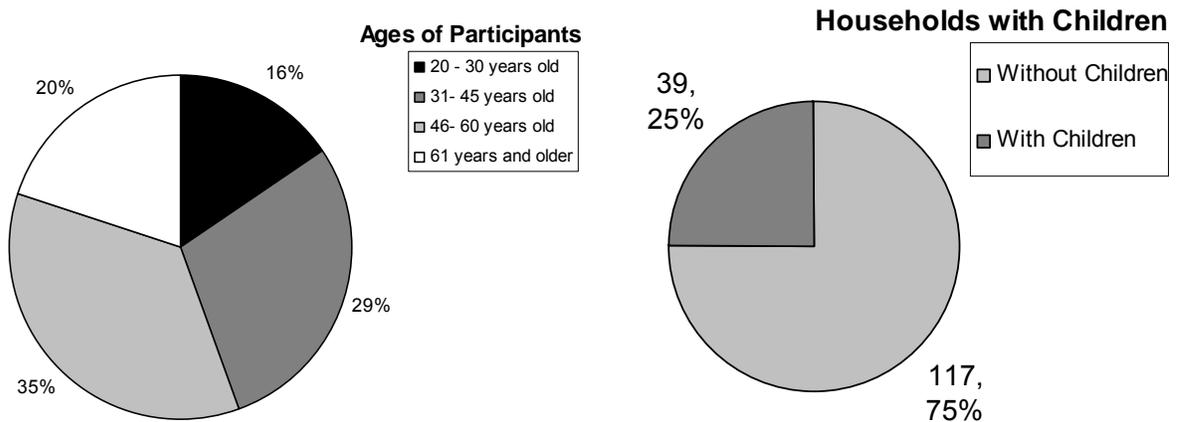
## DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

### *Ages of Participants:*

20 - 30 years old  
 31- 45 years old  
 46- 60 years old  
 61 years and older

### *Households with Children:*

Without Children	117
With Children	39
	21
	39
	48
	27



### *Employment Status:*

Employment Status	Number of Participants
<b>Disabled</b>	<b>5, 4%</b>
<b>Retired</b>	<b>4, 3%</b>
<b>Student</b>	<b>2, 2%</b>
<b>Unemployed</b>	<b>60, 50%</b>
<b>Employed</b>	<b>49, 41%</b>

### *Neighborhood:*

Emsworth	1
Brentwood, White Hall, Pleasant Hills	5
Hill District, Downtown, Strip	3
East Pittsburgh	2
New Kensington, Plum	3
Sheraden, West End, Crafton	3
Bridgeville, Castle Shannon, Ingram	4
Etna, Millvale, Cheswick, Blawnox	6
South Side, Slopes	4
Swissvale, Braddock, Braddock Hills	6
Mckeesport, Port Vue, Clairton, Elizabeth	6
North Side	6
Bloomfield, Garfield	7
Duquesne, West Mifflin, Munhall	11
Hill top: Beltzhoover, Allentown, Mt. Washington, Mt. Oliver, Knoxville	8
Highland Park, Homewood, Wilkinsburg, East Liberty	11
Oakland, Squirrel Hill, Hazelwood	10
North Hills, McCandless, Wexford, Gibsonia, Hampton	14
Beechview, Brookline, Dormont, Carrick	13

### *Participant Source*

Participant Source	Number of Participants
<b>Previous Just Harvest client</b>	<b>144, 81%</b>
<b>Other Community Member</b>	<b>33, 19%</b>

## Appendix B: Test Call Results

### Phone Numbers Called:

Allegheny County Assistance Office Headquarters - 412-565-2146	<b>22</b> 9%
LIHEAP - Cash: 412-562-0330	<b>17</b> 7%
LIHEAP Crisis - 800-851-3838	<b>10</b> 4%
Alle-Kiski District: 1-800-622-3527	<b>11</b> 5%
Alle-Kiski District: 724-339-6800	<b>15</b> 6%
Liberty District: 412-565-2652	<b>21</b> 9%
Three Rivers District: 412-565-7755	<b>20</b> 8%
Southeast District: 412-664-6800	<b>17</b> 7%
Southeast District: 412-664-6801	<b>10</b> 4%
Southern District: 412-565-2232	<b>16</b> 7%
Greater Pittsburgh East District: 412-645-7400	<b>19</b> 8%
Greater Pittsburgh East District: 412-645-7401	<b>15</b> 6%
DPW State Number on Website: 1-800-692-7462	<b>15</b> 6%
Change Center/ Customer Service: 1-877-395-8930	

### Results:

	<b>Total</b>	Alle-Kiski District	Allegheny Head Quarters	Change Center	DPW Number : 1-800- 692-7462	Greater Pittsburgh East	Liberty District	LIHEAP	Southeast District	Southern District	Three Rivers District
Able to Talk to Someone	<b>32</b>	6	5	6	1	1	1	6		3	3
Put into Voicemail	<b>70</b>	12	7		2	14	12	3	9		11
High Call Volume, Call Back Later	<b>38</b>	3	4	5	6	1		13	2	3	1
Voicemail Full or Disconnected	<b>66</b>	3	6	4	4	17	2	3	14	9	4
Message Directing to another Number	<b>7</b>			1			1	5			
Total Calls	<b>213</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>19</b>

## **Appendix C: Methods**

To gauge an understanding of the frequency of problems two different approaches were taken to collect data: consumers of the SNAP program were surveyed about their experiences, and test calls were made to the publicized phone numbers of Department of Public Welfare's Allegheny County Assistance Offices and Customer Help Lines. Both test calls and surveys were conducted by volunteers from the University of Pittsburgh School of Social Work.

### *Survey*

Testers approached clients to participate in the survey. The survey began upon consent of the participators, and participation was optional. Some participants were surveyed via phone and some surveys were conducted in person by testers at food distribution events.

Survey participants were taken from two pools: 925 previous clients that Just Harvest had assisted through their food stamp application during the 2012 calendar year were called by phone to participate in the survey; participants at food distributions – such as the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank's Produce to People program – were asked to participate in the survey. 81% of the surveyed population were Just Harvest clients.

The survey asked questions concerning phone calls made to Department of Welfare offices, processing of paper work, suspension of benefits, and effects of obstacles of the application and validation process. (See Appendix B: Survey Questions and Results)

### *Test Calls*

Students placed phone calls to 14 different numbers that were listed on the Department of Public Welfare's website (see Appendix B: Test Call Results). Offices were not informed that the purpose of the phone call was to record information. All phone calls were made Monday through Friday between the hours of 9am and 5pm during February and March of 2013. Testers recorded whether they were put on hold, received a message about high call volume and were directed to call back, received no answer, put into a voicemail, were brought to a full voicemail, were able to talk to someone, or were disconnected. The hold time was recorded for each call. If a

surveyor was able to speak with a person they were directed to ask for simple information about how to apply for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, previously known as food stamps.

# Notes

