

OFFICE OF THE SPECIAL MASTER

Gemmell v. Hawkins – C. A. No. 16-350 WES

Report (#2) to the Court (Corrected)

This Report is filed pursuant to Section IV.A.4 of the Order Appointing Special Master.

As noted in my Report #1, the parties and counsel have been cooperative and have continued to supply me with necessary information. I continue to have free access to interview those involved with the SNAP program in some fashion. I have engaged Anthony S. Ruocco, Ph.D., P.E. as my technical consultant and plan to have him attend the next meeting with Deloitte Consulting, which is scheduled for January 10, 2018. During the past month, I have met twice with the parties, have met with Deloitte on two occasions, have visited the call center in Pawtucket, and have held regular conferences with the Director of the Department of Human Services (“DHS”) about steps being taken to come into compliance with the Stipulation and Order. I also met with Andrew Schiff of the Food Bank. A specific account of my doings is attached hereto.¹

My principal focus has been the six critical areas identified in my initial Report (pp. 3-5). Some of these require technological fixes; some involve additional and better-qualified staffing; some a mixture of both.

Short-term Issue

¹ From time to time I have received calls directly from persons having problems with DHS programs, including SNAP. I have referred these persons to the Director who has had staff members resolve the problems successfully to my knowledge.

In my prior Report, I indicated that the SNAP backlog of applications (some 1800) had been eliminated. The ACLU agrees that the backlog was substantially reduced but does not agree that the backlog was entirely eliminated. I am in the process of resolving this issue so we are all on the same wave length as to reporting of results achieved. Related to this issue, DHS reported that 82% of the applications made in November were processed in a timely fashion against the ultimate standard set forth in the Stipulation and Order of 96%, □14). The ACLU questions this calculation as well, and I am in the process of resolving this disagreement.

Long-Term Issues

I note at the outset that DHS plans to fill 110 positions in the next two months, of which some 80 will be “ETs” (eligibility technicians) who will be trained to process all applications for the five social services, including SNAP applications. Some of these will be assigned to the call center (see below). Also, certain temporary positions relating to the processing of applications have been converted to full-time positions.

With respect to the six areas that need to be addressed, here are the actions being taken or to be taken:

1. Customer portal. I have addressed this important element with Deloitte. There is a major upgrade of the RIBridges system that is scheduled for early March² (postponed from late February), and improvements to the customer portal will be part of that upgrade. This is critical because one of the principal reasons for the delay in processing is that the customer portal has not worked properly and applicants were more dependent on paper applications that were scanned into the system, with the scanning process having its own problems.

² There is a second major upgrade due in June. Minor fixes to the system are implemented on a weekly basis.

2. Call Center (Pawtucket). DHS is developing a plan to address the deficiencies in the Call Center, especially the long wait times of 2 hours or more. The Call Center currently has 24 persons answering phones, many of whom are entry-level employees. The phone calls number 10-12,000 per week. The Call Center handles calls for all the five programs in the RIBridges system, not just SNAP benefits, and most of the calls relating to SNAP involve changes in the levels of benefits, not the initial applications. However, it is important that the SNAP applicants have their questions answered as soon as possible. DHS's plan includes adding 10 ET positions to the call center and upgrading the experience level of employees handling phone calls.
3. Long lines at DHS offices. In Providence, DHS has installed a separate office in the building on Elmwood Avenue (the busiest DHS office) that is devoted solely to the processing of SNAP applications, both expedited and non-expedited. This appears to be successful for the SNAP applicants and also has reduced the lines for applicants for other benefits. DHS is also examining its other offices to determine whether something similar is possible; however, this may be more difficult because of the configurations of these offices.³ Also, DHS is hiring a "business process redesign" consultant to help improve the flow of the processing of SNAP applications and, therefore, improve the timeliness of such processing.
4. Scanning Center (Warwick). While overall the scanning function has been performing better, there remain problems with the "registering" of data that is scanned into the system. The business process redesign consultant will be examining

³ Long term, the Director has a vision to upgrade all DHS offices to be more professional in appearance and function.

this process as well. The mistakes that happen now are typically the result of human error, not the scanning software. It appears that may be that more skilled personnel will be required to insure that the registration of data is accurate.

5. Worker Inbox. As previously reported, the processing of applications also has been delayed because the worker inbox (which is the entrance of SNAP workers into the system) has not worked properly. This is a priority and has been a subject of my discussions with Deloitte. The worker inbox also will be part the system upgrade due in March. Assuming the upgrade is successful, the number of “red tickets” that delay processing should be substantially reduced. Further, some of the additional staff to be hired will be assigned to this function as well.
6. Incorrect Notices. Deloitte and DHS need to prepare a plan to address the problem with incorrect notices.

In addition, there is a seventh area that will be addressed, namely improvement in the accuracy of timeliness reporting. Right now, there are some differences among DHS, FNS (the federal agency) and the ACLU about how the timeliness data is reported. I will work with the parties to assure consistency so there will be no discrepancies.

In the next month, I will be meeting further with DHS and with Deloitte at least twice in the next month. I will continue to meet with the parties on a bi-weekly basis and with other

personnel as appropriate.

Respectfully submitted,

/s/ Deming E. Sherman

Special Master

January 3, 2018

cc Counsel of Record (by email)