



National Senior Network®
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March 5, 2015

Mr. Kurt Messner
Deputy Regional Administrator
USDA FNS
10 Causeway Street Room 501
Boston, MA 02222

Dear Mr. Messner,

I am writing to ask your help for vulnerable seniors in Massachusetts who are trying to hang onto their food stamps/SNAP nutrition benefits. These are seniors who in fact are eligible for SNAP benefits, but who have had their SNAP benefits threatened or eliminated because of a glitch in the wage match system for the Commonwealth of MA.

For several months now, many of our participants in the Senior Community Service Employment Program (SCSEP) through National Senior Network have been sent notices from the Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA) threatening them with closure of their SNAP cases, or, in many circumstances, notices that the SNAP benefit has indeed been stopped.

SCSEP participants with our agency, as well as with other agencies in the Commonwealth, are participating in a federally funded "back to work" program. In order to be eligible for the program, applicants must be unemployed, low income, and be interested and committed to returning to the workforce. We place them in "community service assignments" with community partners where they receive on the job training and current work experience, as well as job search help, in order to return to competitive employment. Participants are paid by National Able Network/National Senior Network for between 14 and 18 hours a week at the minimum wage rate.

The Senior Community Service Employment Program income, under Title V of the Older Workers Act, is non-countable income for SNAP and does and has no impact on SNAP benefits. Please see the attached TEGl from the Department of Labor.

Our standard protocol for many years has been to provide our participant and DTA a letter from us stating that the income the individual receives from National Able/National Senior Network is non countable/excludable for consideration of SNAP benefits. We also send along a copy of the TEGl referenced in the preceding paragraph. This has worked out very well for a long time, but now apparently a new system DTA has in place does not recognize this exemption. As a result, our participants are suffering.

DTA sends our participants, who have already told DTA they participate in SCSEP, letters asking for pay stubs or a letter of termination. SCSEP participants come to us confused and worried when, even after responding to this notice, DTA still sometimes sends them letters saying their SNAP will end. In many cases, our seniors have lost their SNAP and have to fight the system to get the SNAP back.

Below are descriptions of three SCSEP participants who recently lost SNAP. We had to reach out to the Massachusetts Law Reform Institute (MLRI) to ask how to help our participants. Without their direct advocacy in these cases, our participants may have gone without SNAP for much longer.

1. Ms. T is elderly, lives in Dracut and has been working in a SCSEP program since September 2014, after being laid off from a job she had held for the past 17 years. She got a wage match notice for her SCSEP earnings and submitted a letter from us in response to DTA on November 10. DTA's system said the document was received. But, she still did not receive her December SNAP. When trying to reopen her case, a DTA worker told her that the letter we sent was not accurate enough and she needed to submit additional verification. So, she had us write her another letter. She got her SNAP a week late, after MLRI intervened.
2. Mr. D has been working with us since May 2014. He received DOR wage match notices and subsequent termination notices three times—in July, August and November (despite informing DTA each time via a letter from us that SCSEP is non countable). The third time, his case actually closed and he did not get his January SNAP until MLRI intervened.
3. Ms. M has responded to multiple wage matches regarding her SCSEP income. Most recently, she sent a letter to DTA in response to a wage match notice. DTA got the letter on 12/9, but still closed her case and she did not get her January benefits on time. She did not get her SNAP back until 1/16, when MLRI intervened.

National Senior Network is part of National Able Network, a Chicago based national grantee of federal SCSEP funds. Our participants are apparently matched as National Able Network as the employer and with National Able Network's FEIN.

Currently National Able/National Senior Network issues approximately 175 stipend paychecks every two weeks and all but five of these payments are issued to SCSEP program participants, and their income should not be counted for SNAP eligibility and benefit purposes.

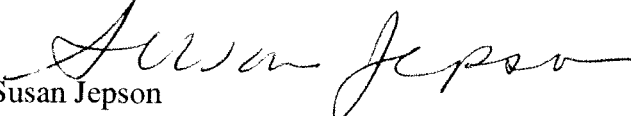
In addition to the loss of benefits, hours of time are being spent by SCSEP program providers, DTA staff and our participants trying to right something that seems preventable. SCSEP participants are worried their work with our program is threatening their ability to buy food, and some have expressed they worry they may need to leave the program. This is not acceptable.

Hunger and nutritional needs cannot wait while bureaucracy and paperwork incorrectly shut people off from SNAP benefits or reduce the amount of benefits provided.

How can we fix this? We are willing, ready and able to provide whatever documentation might be needed.

Thank you for your interest in putting this behind us.

Sincerely,


Susan Jepson
Director, National Senior Network

Cc: The Honorable Rodney Elliott
Mayor of Lowell

Cc: Marylou Sudders

Cc: Congresswoman Niki Tsongas

Cc: The Honorable Daniel Rivera
Mayor of Lawrence

Cc: Sue Thomson, Acting Secretary
Executive Office of Elder Affairs