



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
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### Press Release

The Seattle / King County Coalition on Homelessness is extremely disappointed by the Governor's decision to veto HB 2075, a bill that would have ensured everyone in Washington can access crucial state and federal public benefits through the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS).

Sara Robbins, Senior Policy Manager for the Coalition on Homelessness, said: "We hope that DSHS continues to offer accessible and in person services to all who ask for them, without restriction. We are eager to take the Governor up on his offer to create a decision package that will continue to improve services for our community, and make it easier to enroll in public benefits than to be cut off from them."

On March 19, 2020, Washington state's DSHS offices closed the doors to the Community Service Offices (CSOs) across the state. This decision effectively deprived thousands of Washingtonians of the ability to access food and disability benefits, and housing. For almost two years, the state did nothing to help individuals without access to phones or the internet get the help they needed and the services and benefits to which they were entitled. In the middle of a pandemic and a homelessness crisis, this was an extraordinary act by the State of Washington.

Many community-based non-profit organizations found ways to keep their doors open, to staff essential services, adapt to the pandemic, and help people access DSHS by phone when possible. However, non-profit community services cannot replace critical state services. Washington residents who did not have phones, power to charge them, or minutes to wait on hold, or who lacked access to computers and the internet (especially with public libraries closed) could not access help, enroll in services, or replace lost cards. Clients and staff at service organizations, health clinics, and other non-profits reported wait times of three or four hours or longer to reach the DSHS Call Center.

An outreach worker described her experience attempting to help someone navigate DSHS services:

"He had given up completely during the pandemic. Without the \$5 ID voucher he couldn't establish work. He didn't have income to pay for his phone bill to stay on hold with DSHS to renew his food benefits. He'd tried with a government phone but was unable to stay connected to WiFi long enough to complete his call, and with libraries and public offices closed, he couldn't maintain enough charge on his phone to withstand the full two hour wait plus interview."

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Seattle/King County Coalition on Homelessness mobilizes our community to challenge systemic causes of homelessness and advocate for housing justice. [www.homelessinfo.org](http://www.homelessinfo.org)

To rectify this situation, following months of attempts to problem solve with senior DSHS staff, HB 2075 was introduced to require that DSHS fulfill its obligations to Washington residents. We are profoundly grateful to Rep. Strom Peterson (D-21), the sponsor of HB 2075, for his steadfast leadership to re-open the Community Services Offices and ensure access for all. We were honored to work with member and partner organizations, and hundreds of people who shared their personal and direct difficulties in accessing benefits and explained why this legislation mattered in emails, voice mails, and in public testimony to lawmakers.

“The power of this bill was to bring everyone – advocates, service providers, and legislators – together to ensure that people in poverty could connect to state and federal benefits, resources that are truly only available to people through DSHS,” said Dan Wise, Deputy Director for Catholic Community Services of Western Washington.

Rep. Strom Peterson, 21<sup>st</sup> District said about the veto: “I am grateful that the introduction of HB 2075 brought a sense of urgency to the restoration of these critical services, but I am both disappointed and puzzled by the governor’s veto. Disappointed because it was the frontline workers who help our most vulnerable Washingtonians navigate a complicated system that brought this legislation to me and we should always encourage that kind of citizen participation. Puzzled because I worked in collaboration with Secretary Meneses and DSHS staff to ensure the bill did not impose a cost burden to the department, but created an opportunity to work collaboratively to find solutions. HB2075 passed both chambers with nearly unanimous, bipartisan support because it identified appropriate metrics and goals to best utilize already available resources while acknowledging the need for future investments.”

The Coalition is deeply grateful to the members of the Washington State Legislature for their work. In a short and remote 60-day session, they recognized the critical importance of ensuring DSHS was responsive to the needs of vulnerable and isolated community members. We thank the many legislators who voted for this bill (48-1-1 in the Senate, 97-1 in the House), and spoke out in support of HB 2075. They recognized that cutting access to services makes it much harder to help people without homes and address homelessness in our state.

Alison Eisinger, Executive Director of the Coalition on Homelessness, said: “We wish we had not had to advocate so forcefully to get the CSOs to reopen, and that the governor had not vetoed this commonsense bill. Together with our service and advocacy partners across Washington, we look forward to working with the governor, DSHS Secretary Meneses, and the legislature in 2023 to guarantee that never again will the state lock its doors on people in need of services, especially in an emergency.”

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