

Gov. Wolf: Access to Food Assistance, Healthcare through Safety-Net Programs Available During COVID-19

Harrisburg, PA – Governor Tom Wolf today reminded Pennsylvanians that public benefit programs are available to families and individuals who have lost jobs, income and health insurance as a result of the COVID-19 public health emergency. These programs include the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Medicaid, the Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP).

“The Department of Human Services held a briefing today to talk about how the department is supporting Pennsylvanians through this public health crisis and in the weeks and months of rebuilding our economy that will follow,” Gov. Wolf said. “These programs are important for so many Pennsylvanians every day, and now more than ever as we face this pandemic together.”

Since this crisis began in early March, the department’s Office of Income Maintenance (OIM) has taken many steps to ensure that Pennsylvanians who need help and who qualify for programs are able to access them as quickly as possible. Examples include lifting requirements for face-to-face interviews and temporarily suspending the closure of Medicaid cases except in certain circumstances.

DHS has also worked with its partners at the state and federal levels to implement policies that are responsive to the exceptional ways that all of our lives have changed in recent weeks, including extending certification periods for public assistance programs so participation can continue through the public health crisis. On Thursday, DHS began issuing emergency Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits in line with the federal government’s interpretation of the Families First Coronavirus Response Act. Payments include a supplemental increase for both March and April and will continue to be issued for current SNAP households through April 29. DHS is also advising Pennsylvanians in need of food assistance of local supports that can help meet essential needs during the public health crisis.

“These programs exist to help all of us in the moments we cannot plan for – the times that an injury or an accident changes our life and sense of security as individuals, and the times that a global pandemic alters our daily life as a society,” DHS Sec. Teresa Miller said. “These programs are needed for many in the best of times, and they are critical in the worst. We cannot forget this when this moment passes.”

County assistance offices located in every Pennsylvania county are staffed by OIM caseworkers who are skilled at connecting individuals to benefits they need while also maintaining program integrity and the responsible stewardship of taxpayer dollars. While CAO offices are currently closed to the public in observance of guidance from public health professionals to slow the spread of the COVID-19 virus, work processing applications, determining eligibility, and issuing benefits continues.

“At this critical moment, I want Pennsylvanians to know that we are doing everything we can to connect families and individuals who are struggling economically with the programs that, in many cases, they have been supporting with their labor and tax dollars for years,” Sec. Miller said. “The act of submitting an application for SNAP or Medicaid during a time of crisis is an act of advocacy for yourself and your family, and there should be no shame attached to it.”

DHS encourages the public to take advantage of the ability to submit applications for all of these programs online at www.compass.state.pa.us. Individuals with a smartphone can also download the mobile app, MYCOMPASS PA, which is available at the App Store or Google Play Store.

Applications by mail are also acceptable or they can be dropped off at any County Assistance Office, which are closed to the public but equipped with drop boxes for this purpose. Clients in Philadelphia with questions or information to report about their case should call the Philadelphia Customer Service Center at 215-560-7226. Clients in all other counties can call the Statewide Customer Service Center at 1-877-395-8930.

Pennsylvanians can also apply for Medical Assistance by phone by calling the Consumer Service Center at 1-866-550-4355.

EBT payments are still scheduled to occur during the closure and activated EBT cards can still be used as usual at ATMs and in stores at point-of-sale machines if the client has a balance. Balance and transaction inquiries, as well as EBT card replacement, can be requested from DHS's EBT contractor, Conduent, at 888-328-7366.