

HOUSE BILL REPORT

E2SHB 2075

As Amended by the Senate

Title: An act relating to establishing service requirements for the department of social and health services.

Brief Description: Establishing service requirements for the department of social and health services.

Sponsors: House Committee on Appropriations (originally sponsored by Representatives Peterson, Fitzgibbon, Simmons, Morgan, Chopp, Walen, Macri and Sutherland).

Brief History:

Committee Activity:

Housing, Human Services & Veterans: 2/1/22, 2/3/22 [DPS];
Appropriations: 2/5/22, 2/7/22 [DP2S(w/o sub HHSV)].

Floor Activity:

Passed House: 2/15/22, 97-1.
Senate Amended.
Passed Senate: 3/3/22, 48-0.

Brief Summary of Engrossed Second Substitute Bill

- Establishes minimum service expectations and requirements for the Department of Social and Health Services Economic Services Administration's Community Services Division.

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON HOUSING, HUMAN SERVICES & VETERANS

Majority Report: The substitute bill be substituted therefor and the substitute bill do pass. Signed by 9 members: Representatives Peterson, Chair; Taylor, Vice Chair; Gilday, Ranking Minority Member; Barkis, Assistant Ranking Minority Member; Bateman, Chopp, Donaghy, Jacobsen and Leavitt.

This analysis was prepared by non-partisan legislative staff for the use of legislative members in their deliberations. This analysis is not part of the legislation nor does it constitute a statement of legislative intent.

Staff: Lena Langer (786-7192).

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS

Majority Report: The second substitute bill be substituted therefor and the second substitute bill do pass and do not pass the substitute bill by Committee on Housing, Human Services & Veterans. Signed by 33 members: Representatives Ormsby, Chair; Bergquist, Vice Chair; Gregerson, Vice Chair; Macri, Vice Chair; Stokesbary, Ranking Minority Member; Chambers, Assistant Ranking Minority Member; Corry, Assistant Ranking Minority Member; MacEwen, Assistant Ranking Minority Member; Boehnke, Caldier, Chandler, Chopp, Cody, Dolan, Dye, Fitzgibbon, Frame, Hansen, Harris, Hoff, Jacobsen, Johnson, J., Lekanoff, Pollet, Rude, Ryu, Schmick, Senn, Springer, Steele, Stonier, Sullivan and Tharinger.

Staff: Linda Merelle (786-7092).

Background:

The Department of Social and Health Services.

The Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) was established in 1970 and was created by merging the former Department of Health, Department of Public Assistance, Department of Institutions, Veterans' Rehabilitation Council, and Division of Vocational Rehabilitation of the Coordinating Council on Occupational Education. The DSHS was intended to "integrate and coordinate all those activities involving the provision of care for individuals who, as a result of their economic, social, or health condition, require financial assistance, institutional care, rehabilitation, or other social and health services." The DSHS consists of seven program area administrations including:

- the Aging and Long-Term Support Administration;
- the Behavioral Health Administration;
- the Children's Administration;
- the Developmental Disabilities Administration;
- the Economic Services Administration (ESA);
- the Financial Services Administration; and
- the Rehabilitation Administration.

The DSHS ESA administers a number of public assistance programs, including housing and essential needs services, medical care, cash grants, and food assistance. The DSHS ESA services are available in community services offices (CSO), online, and via telephone. As of November 15, 2021, CSO lobbies are open for limited services.

Summary of Engrossed Second Substitute Bill:

Minimum Service Requirements.

Minimum service expectations and requirements for the DSHS ESA's Community Services

Division (CSD) are established. The CSD must ensure that clients may apply for and receive services in a reasonable and accessible manner that is suited to the clients' needs, including but not limited to, technology, language, and ability.

Community Services Offices.

The CSOs must be open for walk-in and in-person services during normal business hours. The CSD may not limit which clients are able to utilize walk-in and in-person services or limit which services may be accessed in CSOs. The DSHS retains the right to close an office for emergency, health, safety and welfare issues.

Telephone Access to Services.

The CSD must maintain telephonic access to services. The CSD must strive to ensure that clients do not experience total call wait time that exceed 30 minutes. The CSD must monitor the average wait time for client telephone calls per week, and include a measurement of all incoming calls, including dropped calls. Beginning November 1, 2022, the DSHS must report annually to the Legislature and the Governor, on the average wait time for client telephone calls per week, the measurement of all incoming calls, the number of dropped calls, and the methodology the DSHS utilizes to monitor calls for the purposes of their reporting.

By November 1, 2022, the DSHS must provide recommendations to the Legislature on achieving the goal of 30-minute call wait times, including recommendations on staffing, technology, and other infrastructure needed to efficiently serve clients.

Where a cash and food assistance applicant or recipient is negatively affected by excessive call wait times, dropped calls, or CSD office closures during normal business hours, the DSHS must prioritize the processing of their application and must not take negative action, to the extent allowed under state and federal law.

EFFECT OF SENATE AMENDMENT(S):

Language is removed providing that where a cash and food assistance applicant or recipient is negatively affected by excessive call wait times, dropped calls, or community services division offices closures during normal business hours, the Department of Social and Health Services (Department) may not take negative action, and language is added providing that, to the extent allowed under state and federal law, an applicant or recipient may not be terminated or sanctioned by the Department or have their application for assistance denied based on an applicant's or recipient's inability to contact the community services division. The null and void clause is struck.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

Effective Date: The bill takes effect 90 days after adjournment of the session in which the bill is passed. However, the bill is null and void unless funded in the budget.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony (Housing, Human Services & Veterans):

(In support) When CSOs closed due to COVID-19, people accessing benefits were left behind. As CSOs remain closed to many services, call times have become unreasonable. Clients often experience three hour wait times on telephone calls, often followed by dropped calls. It is important to ensure that there are in-person services at the DSHS, as well as accessible call centers. The DSHS has been tasked with providing services to people who need it most, and they are simply not providing the services needed. This bill holds the DSHS to their commitment to serve. Offering in-person services is absolutely necessary.

(Opposed) None.

(Other) The DSHS always intends to provide excellent customer service. The DSHS has taken action recently to examine the problems the bill addresses, brainstorm solutions, and form an action plan. The DSHS needs adequate infrastructure and sufficient staffing levels in place, and it currently does not have them. The State Auditor is unable to provide the monitoring required in the bill.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony (Appropriations):

(In support) Public assistance has been critical during the pandemic. When the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) closed its Community Service Offices, they never fully reopened. A huge and unnecessarily difficult part of the work of organizations that serve those experiencing homelessness is trying to reach the DSHS. The DSHS is the lynchpin in public assistance, and when that lynchpin failed, many people were stranded. Social services are needed by people least likely to have phone and computer services, and they are unable to access those services. Service levels should be returned to where they were in February 2020.

(Opposed) None.

Persons Testifying (Housing, Human Services & Veterans): (In support) Representative Strom Peterson, prime sponsor; Sara Robbins, Seattle and King County Coalition on Homelessness; Dawn Shepard, REACH; and Dan Wise, Catholic Community Services.

(Other) Scott Nelson, Office of the Washington State Auditor; and Babs Roberts, Department of Social and Health Services, Economic Services Administration.

Persons Testifying (Appropriations): Melanie Smith, Seattle and King County Coalition on Homelessness; and Tyler Simpson.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying (Housing, Human Services & Veterans): None.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying (Appropriations): None.