

DHS Call Center Wait Times, SNAP Timeliness, and Agency Staffing: Presentation to House Oversight Committee 2.17.22

Current State, Actions Taken, & Recommendations for Improvement

Mission and Vision

DHS works hand-in-hand with community partners and resources throughout our great State to deliver critical benefits, supports and services to more than 300,000 families, adults, children, older adults, individuals with disabilities and veterans every year.

Vision



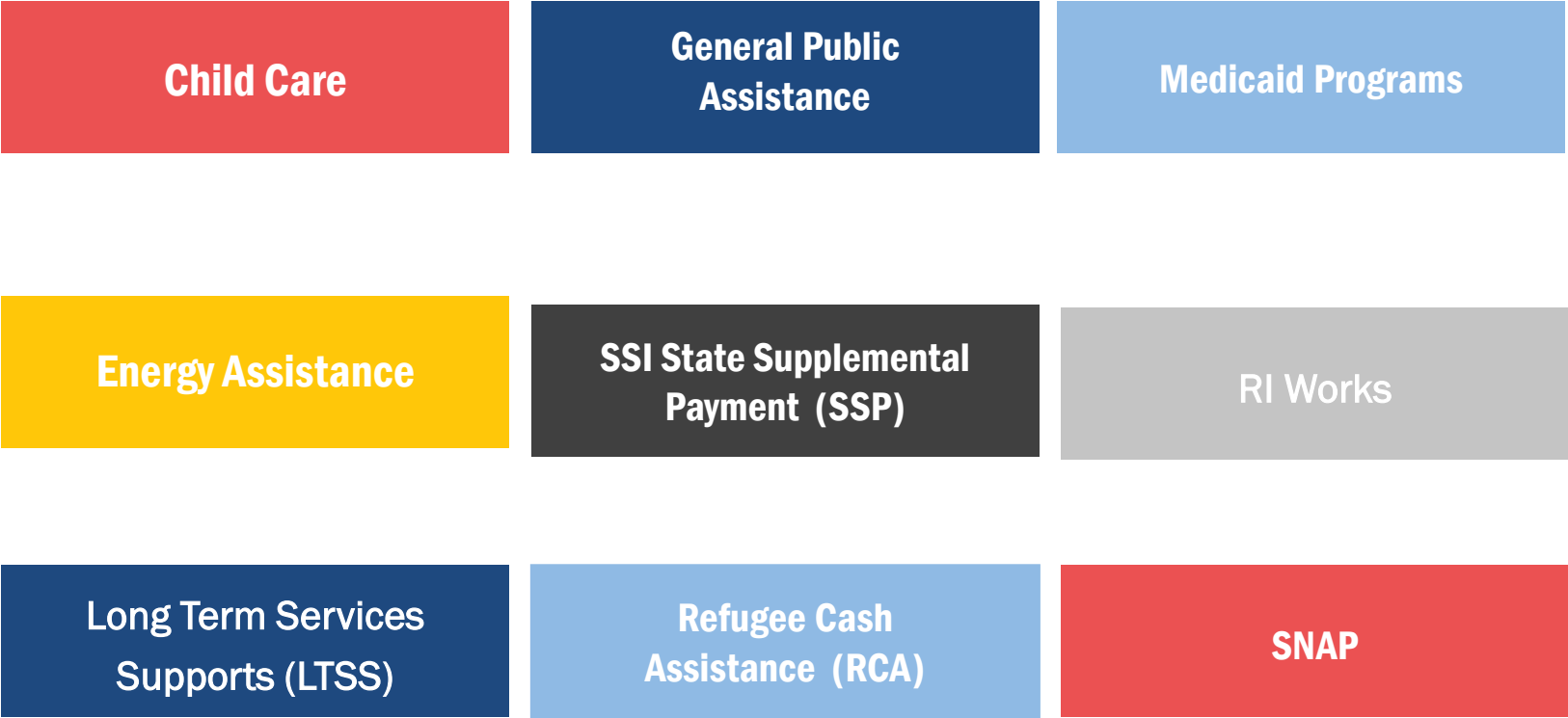
As an agency committed to access and achievement, the vision for the Rhode Island Department of Human Services (DHS) is that all Rhode Islanders have the opportunity to thrive at home, work and in the community.

Mission

DHS's programs and services are all designed to help families become strong, productive, healthy and independent; to help adults achieve their maximum potential; to ensure that children are safe, healthy, ready to learn, and able to reach their maximum potential; to honor, employ, and care for our state's veterans; and to assist elderly and persons with disabilities to enhance their quality of life, and to sustain their independence.

Overview: Benefit Programs Offered

DHS’ benefit programs and services, collectively serve more than 300,000 Rhode Island families, adults, children, older Rhode Islanders, individuals with disabilities, and veterans each year. Each have their own eligibility requirements.



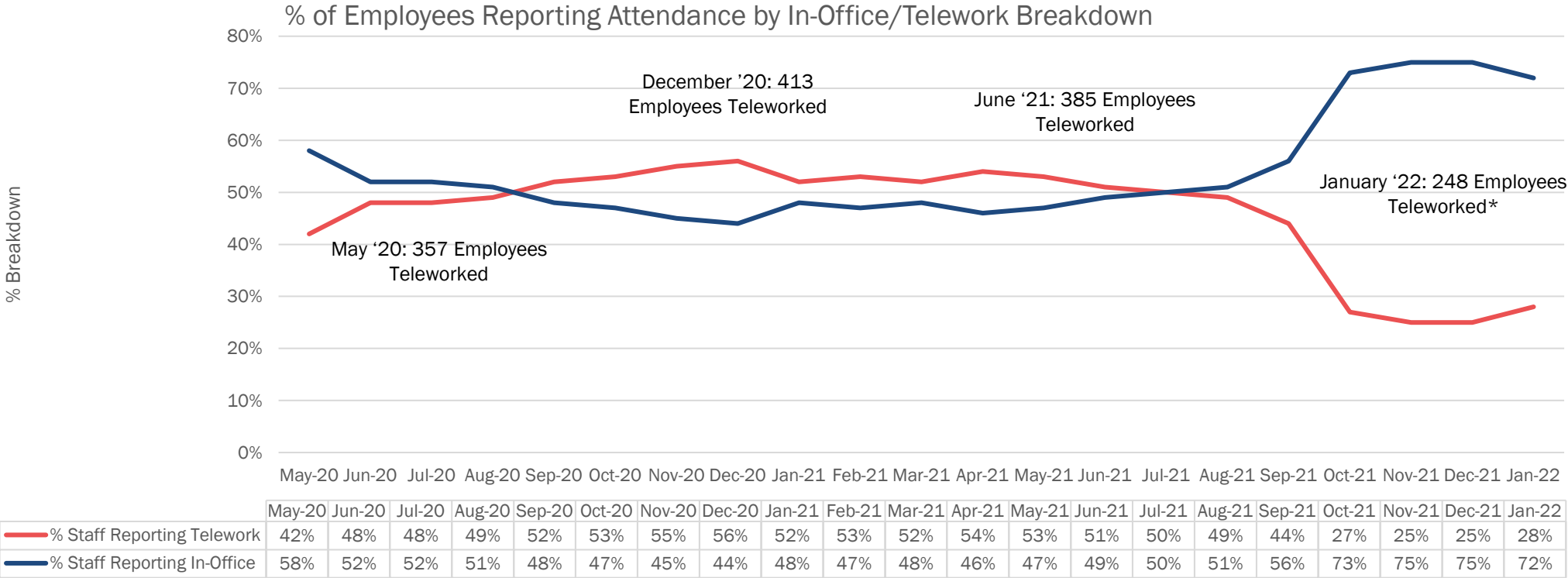
Current State



Navigating the impacts of COVID-19

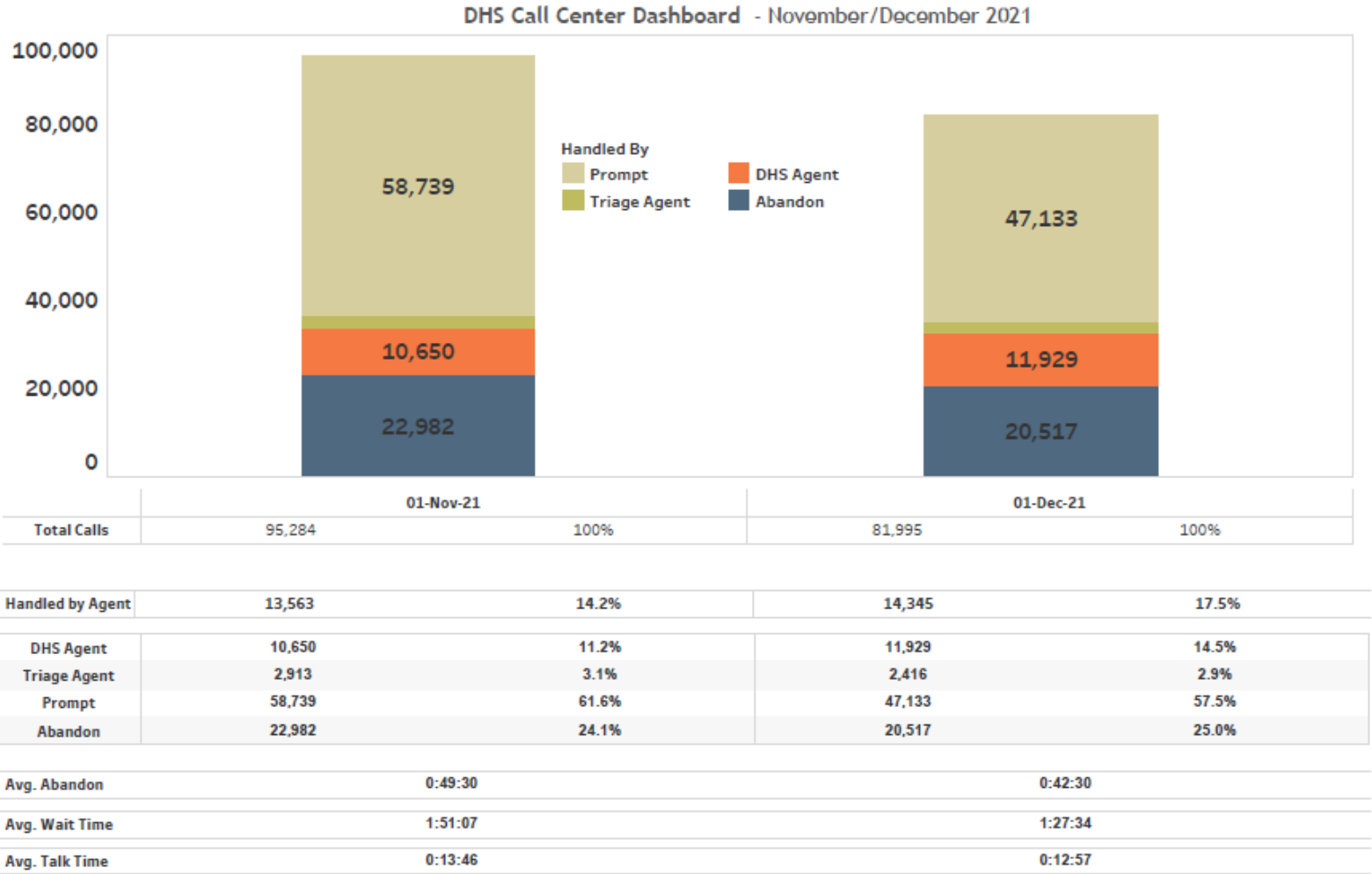
Telework Overview

Due to COVID-19, DHS closed customer facing lobbies in March 2020. The Department shifted its customer facing eligibility workforce to a remote customer service model to continue to provide access to benefits during the public health emergency. We began to shift employees back to in-person in September 2021.

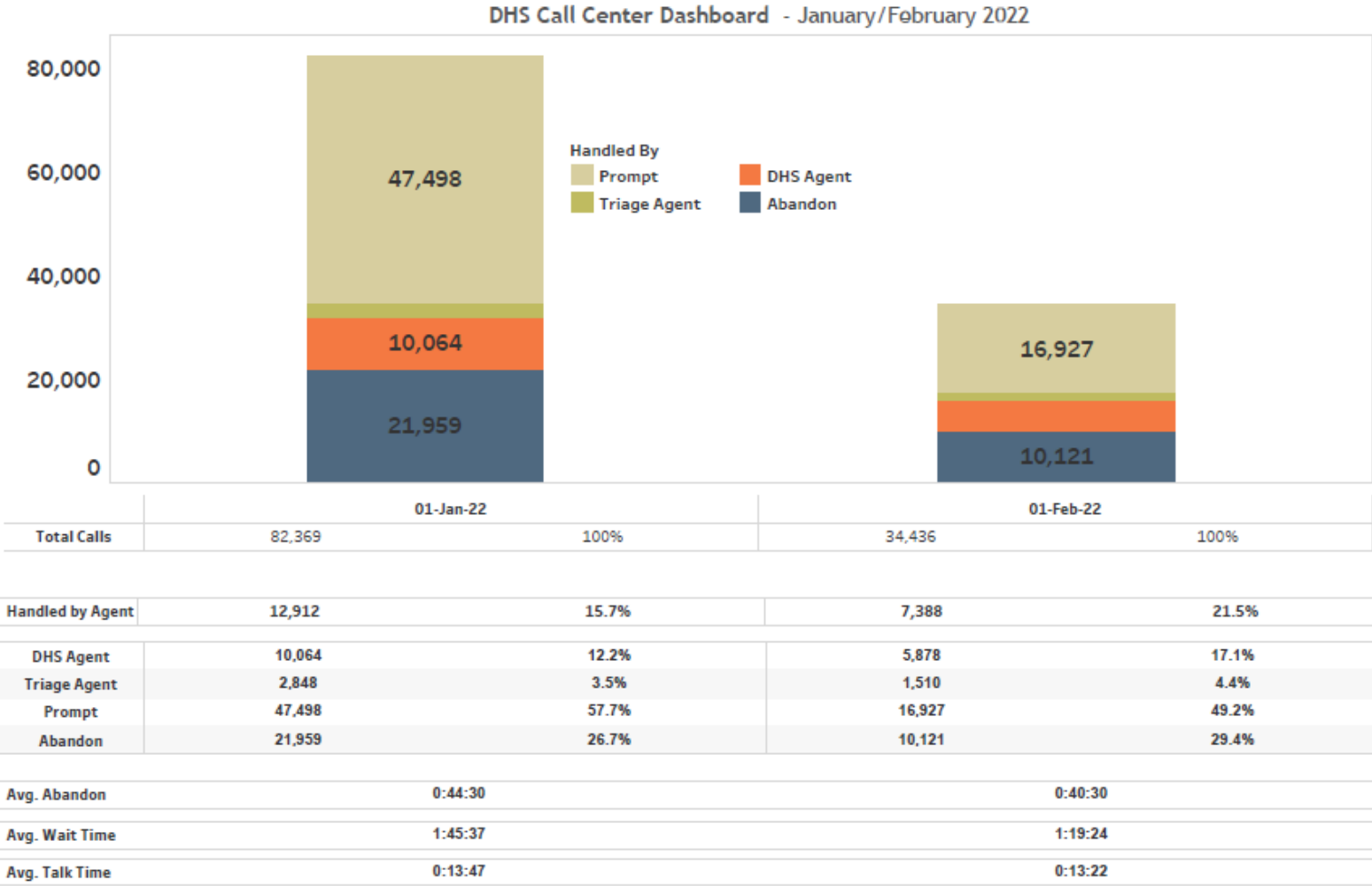


*All customer facing employees returned to the office in January 2022.

Call Center Details: November & December 2022

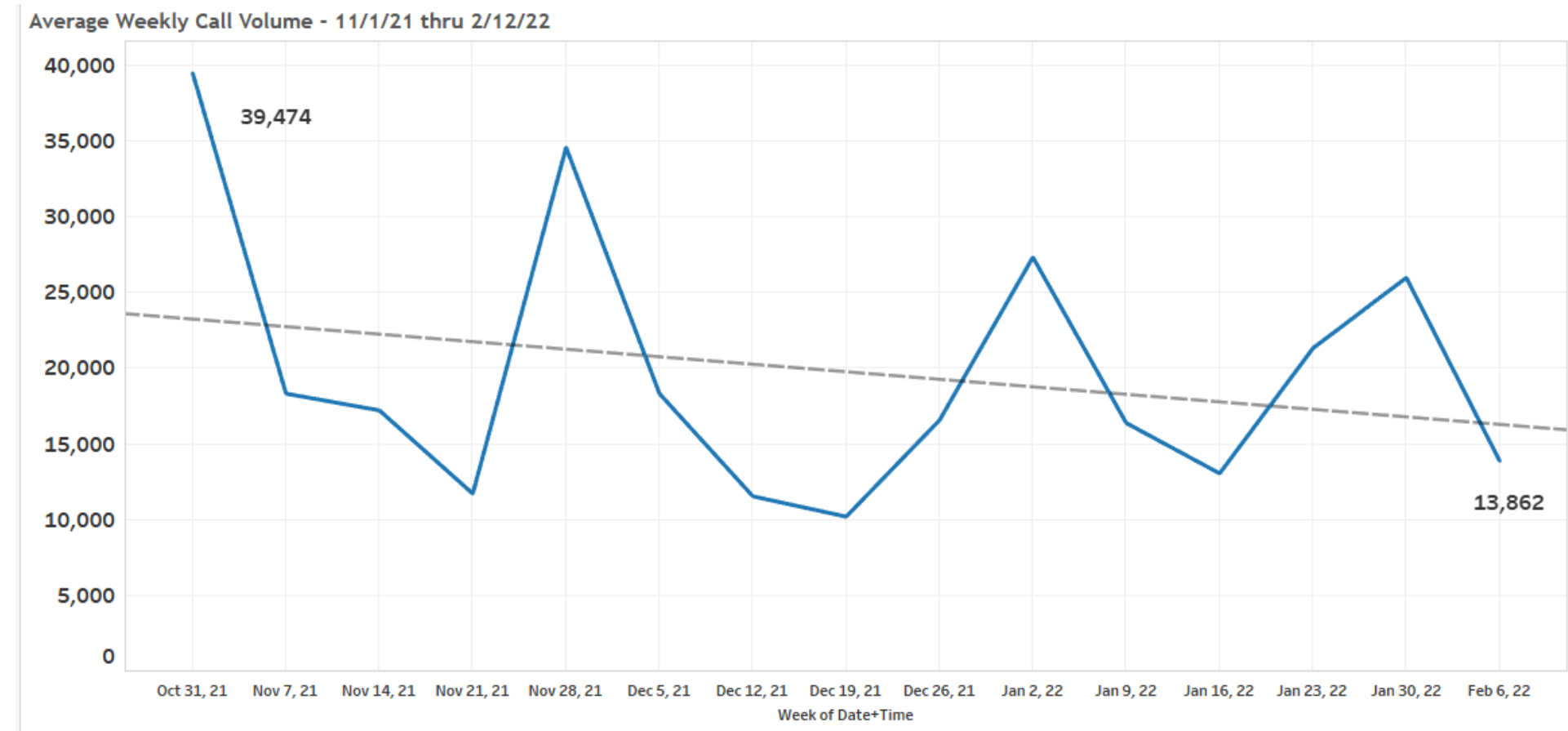


Call Center Details: Jan/Feb 2022 Average Wait Times



Call Center Details

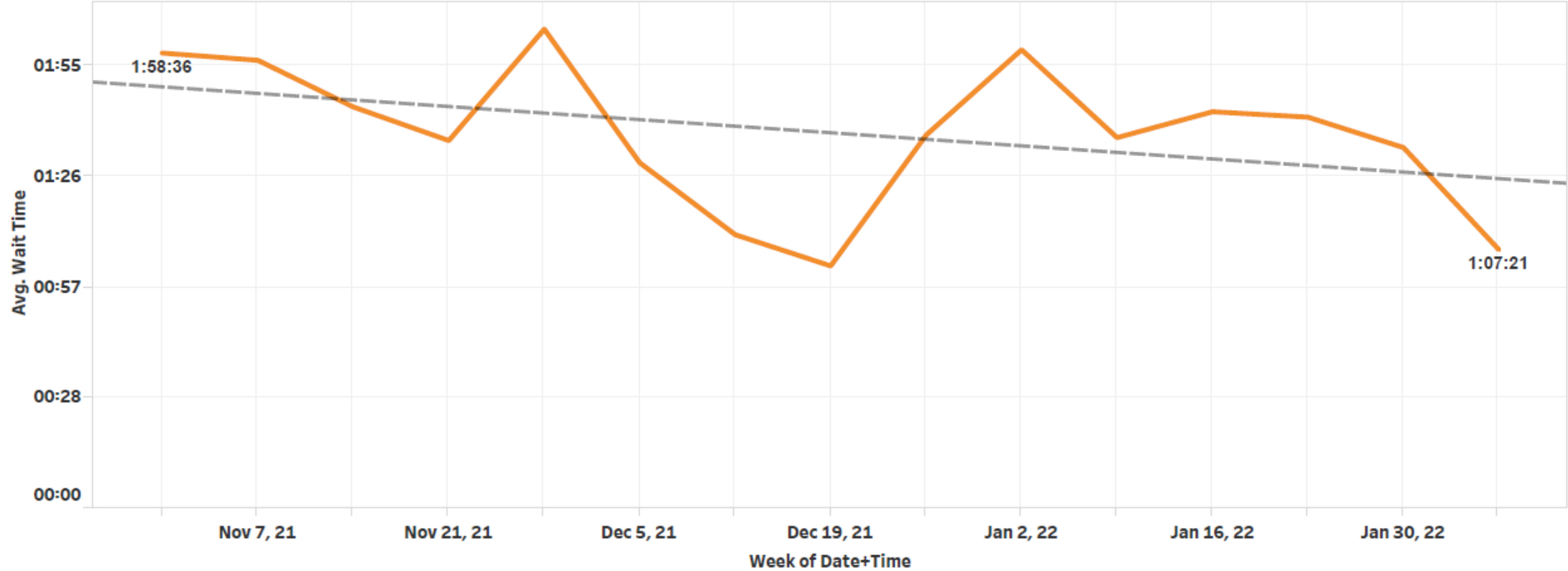
Since November, average weekly call volume has decreased by 65%, or 25,612 calls.



Call Center Details

Since November, average call wait time has decreased by 32%, or 51 minutes.

Average Weekly Call Wait Times - 11/1/21 thru 2/12/22

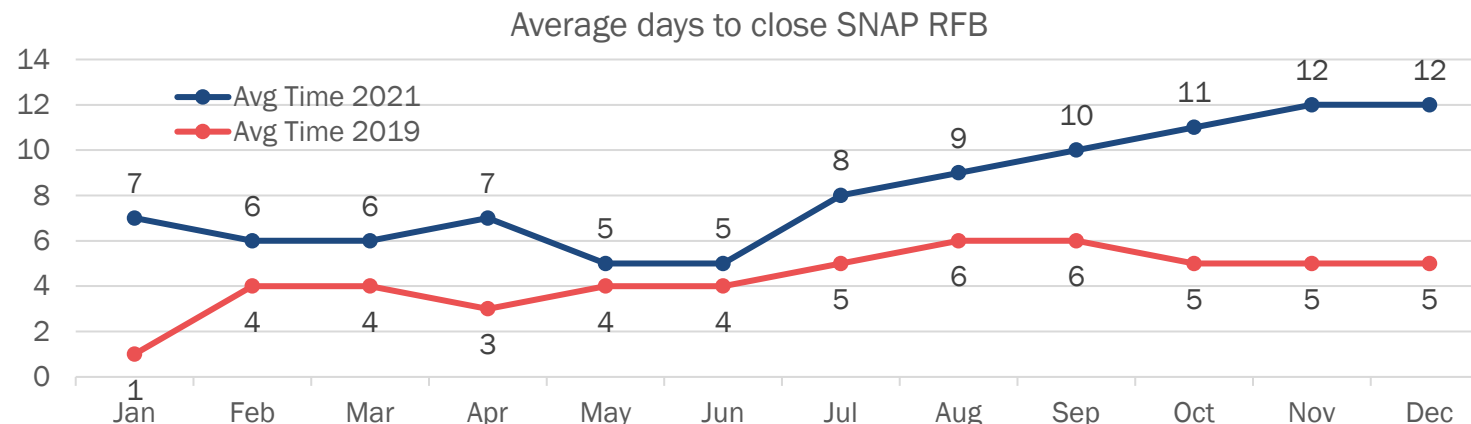


Overview of SNAP Timeliness

95% timeliness target

SNAP Timeliness is a direct measure of the time taken to process an application from the time it is submitted (date received) until the time a decision is made (approved or denied). For non-expedited SNAP applications, states have 30 days to process an application. For expedited-SNAP applications, states must process an application within 7 days.

- Prior to the pandemic (2019), the average processing time for SNAP applications was 4 days.
- Our current average processing time is now 10-12 days. This means, most non-expedited SNAP applications are processed timely. However, expedited SNAP applications would fall outside the timeliness window (7 days) affecting SNAP timeliness, however customers benefits are processed within the next 3 -5 days.



Application Processing

The below indicates the average number of days from when an application is received by DHS to the date when the application is authorized for eligibility. For context, the required timeliness standard is also included.

Average Days to Authorization

- CCAP: 18 days
- RIW: 19 days
- GPA: 20 days
- MAGI: 16 days
- Complex Medicaid: 38 days
- SNAP: 12 days

Mandatory Timeliness Standard

- CCAP: 30 days
- RIW: 30 days
- GPA: 30 days
- MAGI: 30 days
- Complex Medicaid: 45-90 days
- SNAP: 30 days (for non-expedited applicants)

*Data reflects November and December 2021

Application Processing

DHS' timely authorization of benefits has decreased since September 2021. The most significant decline has been to Expedited SNAP timeliness. This slide provides an overview of the challenges/barriers that have impacted timeliness.

- ❑ Work Volume Increase: SNAP recertifications workload increased and interim reports resumed, resulting in 2 – 3 times the volume of work.
- ❑ Staff Training Issue: Some of the processing procedure guidelines are not consistently being followed.
- ❑ Workforce:
 - Absenteeism/key vacancies - on average 75% of planned staff report to work. Current challenges include high rates of COVID-positive staff quarantining or experiencing COVID symptoms, higher rate of staff on FMLA and filling vacant positions.
 - Coverage disruption: Timely processing is done by back-office staff. Back-office staff are being reassigned to cover call center calls due to the increased volume.

SNAP & RIW Issuances 2021

In 2021, DHS issued more than \$516 million in SNAP benefits, and more than 14 million in RIW benefits.

Ongoing SNAP: \$295,579,808

RIW Benefit: \$13,215,030

P-EBT: \$80,817,750

Transportation: \$526,104

P-SNAP: \$140,511,342

Other: \$928,916

Total: \$516,908,801

Total: \$14,670,050

DHS Staffing SFY 2021 & SFY 2022

In 2021, the Department filled approximately 80 positions through a combination of promotional opportunities, lateral transfers, and new hires from outside the agency, however we did see a high number of employees who opted to take the voluntary retirement initiative (VRI).

DHS Filled vs. Budgeted Positions SFY21 to January 2022

SFY 21 (Jun 2020 - Jul 2021)

Programs	Total FTEs Budgeted	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC	JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN
Central Management	46	48	49	45	45	45	45	46	46	45	45	44	44
Child Support Enforcement	60	57	57	57	57	58	57	57	56	56	56	57	52
Health Care Eligibility	75	69	67	64	64	64	65	62	60	59	58	58	54
Individual and Family Support	562	514	510	504	508	506	508	514	507	507	504	501	491
Office of Healthy Aging	31	26	28	27	27	27	29	28	28	29	28	28	28
Veterans' Affairs	264	233	236	229	230	226	233	236	233	230	231	232	226
	1038*	947	947	926	931	926	937	943	930	926	922	920	895

* Budget only supported hiring 974 positions

SFY 22 (Jun 2021 - Jul 2022)

Programs	Total FTEs Budgeted	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC	JAN
Central Management	45	41	40	39	37	37	37	37
Child Support Enforcement	61	57	59	58	58	57	57	56
Health Care Eligibility	76	52	58	60	60	60	60	59
Individual and Family Support	571	488	483	483	482	482	481	476
Office of Healthy Aging	31	29	29	28	28	28	27	27
Veterans' Affairs	263	230	221	214	219	214	216	220
	1047*	897	890	882	884	878	878	875

* Budget only supports hiring 978 positions

How did we get here?



Navigating the impacts of COVID-19

Responding to COVID-19: Shift to Remote Model in March 2020

- ❑ DHS closed our lobbies to in-person services on March 16, 2020, in response to COVID-19.
- ❑ We notified the public about the closure of customer facing lobbies through our website, social media, and through email communication to our community partners.
- ❑ Customers had access to benefits via the Customer Portal (healthyrhode.ri.gov), Call Center (1-855-697-4347), and the ability to drop off applications and supporting materials at all our regional office locations.
- ❑ While lobbies were closed, DHS staff continued to process applications and distribute benefits to our customers. We implemented new technology solutions, such as text messaging services, to expand remote access to our customers and increase capacity in the Call Center.
- ❑ DHS provided updates via our website, social media, and email communication throughout the pandemic to our customers and community about ways to connect with the Department.

Resuming In-Person Services

- ❑ On Jan. 18, 2022, DHS resumed in-person services at all regional offices due to increasing customer demand.
- ❑ Prior to this update, customer facing lobbies were open beginning November 2021 at four regional offices for Rhode Island Works (RIW) customers who needed to recertify their benefits and chose to complete their interview in-person.
- ❑ The Department notified the public about the resumption of in-person lobby services at our regional offices via our website, social media, and through email communication to our community partners.

Key Operational Facts

- ❑ The RI Department of Human Services (DHS) customer facing regional offices resumed in-person services on January 18, 2022.
- ❑ DHS hours of operation are 8:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday through Friday, except holidays.
- ❑ DHS staff are available at each regional office to provide a range of services for all programs.
- ❑ Reservoir Ave Providence Regional Office will be open on February 28th (all 7 locations will now up and running)

Key Operational Facts Continued

In addition to the services available at reopened regional offices, customers continue to have access to:

- ☐ The Call Center (1-855-697-4347) Hours: 8:30 AM - 3:00 PM*
- ☐ The Customer Portal (healthyrhode.ri.gov)
- ☐ The HealthyRhode mobile app and text messaging
- ☐ Community partners and vendors listed in the Customer Resource Guide available at dhs.ri.gov in English, Spanish and Portuguese.

These resources offer different tools to the customer, including application assistance, application submission, checking benefits, uploading documents, seeing notices, conducting interviews, getting general and case-specific information.

*The Call Center is staffed until 4 p.m. to ensure all calls in queue are addressed. Any calls received before 3 p.m. are addressed in the order the call was received.

How did we get here?

Changes to the SNAP Recertification cycle during the pandemic have resulted in a doubling of our workload

- ❑ Changes to the normally consistent SNAP recertification distribution cycles extending food access to low-income Rhode Islanders resulted in much higher than usual recertification volume while new SNAP applications increased due to the loss of other federal public health emergency supports.
- ❑ Pre-pandemic between 3,000-6,000 customers were due to recertify each month. Due to the changes made to the SNAP recertification redistribution cycle during the pandemic, the number of customers due to recertify each month has increased two-fold to 6,000 - 9,000 a month over the 7 months.
- ❑ Most SNAP customers complete an interim report at the 6-month-mark of their one-year certification. Interim reports were suspended for most of the public health emergency, these reports were once again sent to customers in September 2021, increasing employee workload during the fall of 2021 when customers returned their reports.

How did we get here?

Other pandemic factors have affected our agency and the customers we serve.

- ❑ Increased assistance options during the height of the pandemic have since ended, increasing demand for SNAP benefits.

Pandemic unemployment benefits: Ended September 2021

Stimulus checks: Last issued in Spring 2021

Federal eviction moratorium: Ended August 2021

- ❑ DHS is experiencing workforce challenges like many other industries. We recognize that our staff are experiencing the impact of the pandemic which effects our overall staffing levels. To help our workforce cope with the impact of the pandemic, we have provided and will continue to offer Covid-19 workshops facilitated by our employee assistance program. In addition, DHS facilitates a weekly Health and Safety Committee with labor leadership to address questions and concerns.

How did we get here?

Ongoing workforce challenges

- ❑ DHS recognizes that vacancies have also impacted our staffing levels. We are working on positions across all regional offices to ensure all Rhode Islanders have access to the benefits and services they need.
- ❑ Systemic challenges in filling vacant positions due to lateral movements, has resulted in the hiring process taking 3 to 6 months to fill most positions.

What actions have we taken to address our challenges & what are our recommendations for continuous improvement?



Navigating the impacts of COVID-19

Filling Vacant Positions

Primary focus on recruiting 71 front line & support staff for Field Ops./Regional Offices working closely with DOA/HR

11 positions filled as of 2/16:

- 2 Supervising Eligibility Technicians
- 2 Clinical Training Specialists
- 1 Employment and Career Advisor
- 1 Customer Service Aide
- 4 Eligibility Technician I's
- 1 Assistant Administrator

❑ Target of 55 positions filled by the end of March 2022

❑ Remaining 16 positions to be filled by the end of April 2022

❑ Promotional Opportunities - 35 ET II Call Center Positions were posted in November/December 2021, only 12 positions were filled as we did not receive enough qualified applicants. We are working with Council 94 leadership on a Special Purpose Agreement (SPA) to provide greater flexibility in assigning non-Call Center staff to support the Call Center. Appropriate training will be provided.

Implementing Federal Policy Waivers

Worked with our federal partners to implement new & continued COVID waivers approved 1/1/22 through 3/31/22.

- ❑ Waive face to face interview requirements for SNAP Recerts and Quality Control appointments. Maintain phone appointment model.
 - *This will keep the current model in place for three more months to ensure we are servicing customers with the greatest need. This will also reduce office traffic to ensure fast and efficient service for customers who choose to come in for an in-person appointment. This does not prevent customers who chose to schedule an in-person appointment from doing so.*
- ❑ Postpone interview requirement for SNAP Expedited households.
 - *Ensure those in most need receive approval ASAP. Customers can receive benefits on an expedited timeline (within 7 days) and complete their required interview in a subsequent month.*
- ❑ Extend SNAP Recert date by 1 month for households who have timely returned their documentation for review and processing.
 - *Ensure customers who have timely returned their documentation do not lose their benefits. Reduce call volume and lobby traffic by reducing frequently asked questions related to loss of benefits or “check-in” questions to see if applications/documents were received*

Partnerships & Operations

Continually evaluate and shift resources and priorities as required to address most pressing customer needs.

- ☐ Further community partner engagement and the development of new partnerships. (e.g., Providence Public Library, United Way 211, Dorcas International, Amos House)
- ☐ Daily report of cases being shared with eligibility staff to work on priority cases.
- ☐ Utilizing additional staff internally to address customer portal password resets or troubleshooting.
- ☐ Continue to re-issue training materials and review with staff.
- ☐ Staff overtime (OT) with targeted work.

Current Overtime Schedule: Monday-Friday 4:00 p.m. to 6:30 p.m. and Saturday: 8:30 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.

Technology Solutions

Implementing technology changes to improve customer experience and processing efficiencies.

- ☐ Update and expand Interactive Voice Recognition (IVR) Call Center system flow and scripts. Offer enhanced customer self-service options (future; call back feature).
- ☐ Introduce additional Check Box/Radio Button to better capture response from customers during initial application screening to accurately determine their expedited/non-expedited status.
- ☐ Enhance existing tools/workflow for our clerical staff to assist improved screening.
- ☐ Enhance screening for SNAP expedited application identification.

Increase usage of mobile application

Partnered with United Way 211, Social media outreach and engaging community partners to spread the word about helpful tools, reminders and other information

SIGN UP FOR DHS ALERTS TODAY





By signing up for HealthyRhode | DHS Alerts you'll receive timely SNAP related text message notifications on:

- Interviews Scheduled
- Interview Reminders
- Recertifications or Interims Mailed/Due
- Documents Due
- And more. . .

Ask a DHS worker to sign you up for text messaging during YOUR recertification interview. Customer Portal account holders can sign up for text messages on the "My Profile" screen at: healthyrhode.ri.gov




DHS CUSTOMER REMINDER



- 1) Please **RETURN** any forms or information requests from the RI Department of Human Services.
- 2) Recertification packets and interim report forms—requirements that were waived during the pandemic—for SNAP and other programs are **NOW required**.
- 3) Submitting these documents are **ESSENTIAL** for the timely processing of benefits.

SAVE TIME

with the **Customer Portal** or **HealthyRhode** mobile app **TODAY!**




The **Customer Portal** and **HealthyRhode Mobile app** provide fast, easy and convenient access:

- **HealthyRhode Mobile App**
 - Checking Your EBT Balance
 - Submitting Requested Documents
 - Seeing Enrolled Balances
- **Customer Portal**
 - Applying For Benefits
 - Seeing Your Benefits/Notices
 - Updating Your Information
 - Uploading Documents

*A Customer Portal account is needed to access the mobile app

healthyrhode.ri.gov | dhs.ri.gov



Recommendations for Continued Improvement

Utilizing the model of: People, Process, Technology and Policies

- ❑ Address workforce challenges - Systemic challenges with filling vacant positions
 - Special Purpose Agreement to freeze lateral movements – reassess in 1 year (limited movements going forward or 2 bid days per year)
- ❑ Infusion of Staff - In order to address increased workload (9,000*/month) in a timely manner (bring 10-day average down to 7 days), we will need to hire an additional 70 eligibility staff & 20 call center staff*.
- ❑ Expand non merit staff option allowed by FNS.
- ❑ Add 1 FTE for DOA/HR to maintain 24-48 hours turn around time

*A combination of technology enhancements, FTE & supporting non merit staff & expansion of community partners with access, policy changes could mitigate this number

Recommendations for Continued Improvement

Utilizing the model of: People, Process, Technology and Policies

☐ Continued technology improvements

- Continued expansion of IVR (call back feature, self service – expand to more programs)
- Continued expansion of mobile application
- BOTS for increased efficiency in processing

☐ Seek permanent waivers to address volume and capacity (working with congressional delegation)

☐ Implement CT/ME processing model – (1 day per week the agency focuses all staff on processing)

In Summary

- ❑ RI DHS is navigating the impacts of COVID- 19 as many other states and industries; dealing with increased work volume and workforce challenges, other DHS agencies are experiencing the same challenges.
- ❑ FNS had a roundtable on Monday where many states were sharing these concerns and requested additional waivers, communications support and other considerations.
- ❑ Lessons learned
 - We needed longer period of time to ramp up; operational readiness, improved communications and to give customers more time to adjust back to a pre-pandemic state.
 - We needed an infusion of funding for staffing and technology improvements