

March 21, 2013  
SB 5529, Self-Sufficiency Programs

Co-Chairs Bates and Nathanson, and Members of the Committee, good afternoon, and thank you for your time today.

My name is Wayne Ground. I am an eligibility worker with DHS Self-Sufficiency Programs, a position I have held for a little more than ten years in a large urban field office, a small rural field office, and a district processing center.

You have heard from my coworkers today, and you'll be hearing from more of us, many aspects of what our job is like – workload, staff shortages and ratios, caseloads, support work, and so on. What I want to focus on briefly is the human cost of our work, what we have been asked to do that has gotten us to where we are today, and the realistic human cost of what this committee's budget will look like a year or two from now. I would like to present you with some rough back-of-the-envelope figures, based on assumptions I'll identify in a moment, from my own observations – I would emphasize that I'm not speaking for the Agency necessarily, and these aren't "official" numbers in any sense.

I'd like to offer a rough estimate of my current caseload of open SNAP cases. I do carry other programs, but I am focusing for simplicity's sake on the SNAP caseload because it's the most numerous, common, and universal program that Self-Sufficiency Programs administers. As of Monday afternoon of this week, my SNAP caseload was approximately 434 open cases. For the sake of assumptions, let us assume that my typical total of 172 hours of work time in a month with no unpaid furlough days equates to an average, giving me an anticipated total of 2064 hours per year. 434 cases, then, means that for each and every one of these families, I have approximately 4.75 hours of time **per year** to spend assisting them, determining their need level, administering the Agency's assistance programs, responding to phone calls, mail, email, and walk-in contact, and so on. If I get an hour to conduct an intake with this household – and that only happens when I have additional programs to determine eligibility for during that intake – that is the extent of the time I'm allowed before moving on to the next household.

Ladies and gentlemen, let that sink in for a moment, if you don't mind. Really think about that. The honest truth is that an hour is often far more than I can realistically give most households asking us for help. The truth is that my caseload is frequently higher than the number I just gave you. The truth is that I also administer TANF, for non-mandatory JOBS households, as well as Employment Related Daycare and Medicaid. The truth is that this is a drastic oversimplification of the workload my peers and I handle. The truth is that the tide of households in need is not stemming. The truth is that, the longer it takes for the economy of this country to right itself, the more profound the need of the households already at risk becomes. The truth is that we have transformed the business functions of Self-Sufficiency Programs over the last five years – and I'm sure you've heard, or will hear, much about our efforts – to do more with less, to constantly strive for greater efficiency, to reduce recidivism, and to provide the help that is needed for the minimum amount of time. We believe, as I'm sure you do as well, that the best form of assistance is employment. We named our program area Self-Sufficiency Programs for a reason – it's a mission that we believe strongly in.

The truth is, without adequate staffing levels, we are not able to perform adequately the task given us.

I was greatly encouraged to see the Governor's Recommended Budget some time ago, and it is with **great** concern that those investments in serving Oregon's most vulnerable population were not included in the Co-Chair's budget, and that DHS may face additional cuts. I am already at the point where I am forced to triage need daily – I often must take shortcuts, ask fewer questions, or make assumptions based on my own judgment because I simply do not have the time to do more.

Our current staffing levels are unsustainable – I am fortunate enough to work in an office that is staffed better than many at about 67% Full Time Equivalent, which means that unlike many of my coworkers, I'm "only" doing the work of 1.3 people. Many field offices are in much worse straits, where workers' caseloads are so high that the closest other field office 75 miles away takes on 500+ households, doing as much over the phone as possible, so that the local workers' jobs are manageable.

This is the current situation on the southern Oregon Coast. The Gold Beach office currently has two workers in my classification, and because they're unable to hire more people, their workloads are easily double mine because there is never any down time. The next closest field office in Coos Bay has taken a significant number of their cases, but consider the impact on a household that, for example, is already thirty-five miles up the Rogue River in Agness. If they want to see a worker, it's already nearly 45 minutes (in good weather) each way, and if the staff in Gold Beach are totally swamped as they are much of the time, the wait is not minutes, it could easily be hours or days.

We cannot honestly say that we are meeting the needs of the public, in keeping with our mission statement, or discharging our duty to the people we are charged with protecting. Realistically, we are not moving households out of our caseloads, and cannot do so unless there are additional investments in staffing.