Mills Administration Acts to Ensure Basic Necessities for Maine People in the Face of COVID-19

April 3, 2020

Governor Mills bolsters General Assistance through Executive Order, DHHS improves program flexibility

AUGUSTA – Governor Janet Mills and Maine Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) Commissioner Jeanne Lambrew announced today that the Administration has taken further steps to ensure Maine people have access to basic necessities in response to COVID-19.

These steps include issuance of an Executive Order that bolsters the General Assistance program and swift action by DHHS to improve flexibility of several programs, which will help Maine families buy nutritious food and cover the costs of essentials such as housing and medications.

"These steps will help Maine people feed their families, pay their rent, and meet other basic needs in the face of this pandemic," **said Governor Mills.** "We will continue to take action and push the federal government for approval of strategies to support Maine people during these unprecedented times."

"In the face of COVID-19, it's critical now more than ever that Maine people can protect their families' health and wellbeing without risking their financial stability," **said DHHS Commissioner Jeanne Lambrew.**

These recent actions, which build on earlier steps announced (https://www.maine.gov/tools/whatsnew/index.php?topic=DHS+Press+Releases&id=2227379&v=article) on March 17, include:

Bolstering General Assistance

Under the Governor's March 31 Executive Order (https://www.maine.gov/governor/mills/sites/maine.gov.governor.mills/files/inline-files/EO%2029_0.pdf) , all applications for General Assistance will be processed as emergency applications for eligibility purposes, and certain other requirements are waived. The order also allows eligible individuals to reapply after 60 days rather than 30 days for ongoing assistance.

General Assistance is funded through communities, with DHHS reimbursing 70 percent of municipalities' costs. Under the Executive Order, DHHS will use existing funding to increase reimbursement to Maine Tribes to up to 100 percent.

General Assistance can be used for basic necessities including food, housing, electricity and medical expenses. Assistance is not provided directly to eligible individuals, but rather it is issued in the form of vouchers used to pay vendors who provide goods and services to eligible individuals.

Boosting Food Supplement Benefits (SNAP)

DHHS received federal approval to issue emergency benefits for the months of April and May to households that qualify for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). This means DHHS will issue an additional $11.5 million in SNAP benefits for the month of April, in addition to the typical monthly amount for April of $17.5 million. This change is primarily supported through federal funds. Maine's current SNAP participants will receive the maximum benefit allowed for their household size, as will new applicants who qualify for food supplement benefits during April and May. Benefits are typically issued between the 10th and 14th of the month.

DHHS also received federal approval to simplify and streamline the application process for SNAP benefits, such as accepting applications by phone without the need for a signature and lifting the requirement for an in-person or telephone interview.

DHHS has taken steps to ensure that Mainers receiving SNAP benefits continue to do so during this state of civil emergency, extending the recertification period and continuing benefits in cases where households did not complete reporting requirements during the months of March or April.

Strengthening Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)

Worker Supplement Benefits, a food benefit funded through TANF, will increase from $50 to $100 per month for March through July 2020, providing additional support to approximately 10,000 Maine households.

Additionally, DHHS now allows families who rely on TANF to request an emergency extension to continue receiving benefits beyond the 60-month lifetime limit and to reapply for TANF if their benefit previously ended due to reaching the limit. DHHS has also streamlined the application and recertification process, including conducting interviews by telephone rather than in person and lifting some documentation requirements.

TANF provides a temporary cash benefit to assist parents in meeting their families' basic needs.

If you're struggling to provide food, health care, or basic necessities for yourself or your family, please see Accessing Assistance Through Maine DHHS (PDF) (https://www.maine.gov/dhhs/documents/Accessing-Assistance-Through-Maine-DHHS.pdf)

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