



**Testimony for the Department of Human Services, Budget Oversight Committee (Councilman Jim Graham, Chair)**

**Susannah Plocher, Patient Relations Coordinator, Mary's Center**

Good Morning Chairman Graham and members of the committee, my name is Susannah Plocher, Patient Relations Coordinator at Mary's Center. First, our CEO Maria Gomez and our team want to thank you for your support of the healthy lunch program at the Bernice Fonteneau Senior Wellness Center. Today, however, I want to speak to you as the staff that helps participants navigate the city's benefits system. Mary's Center believes that access to vital resources such as TANF, health insurance and food stamps during one's most vulnerable times is essential to keep families motivated to end the cycle of poverty in their generation.

Our team is spread throughout the city thanks to the funding we receive from the Office on Latino Affairs that comes via DHS. We have bilingual health access workers assigned at the Taylor Street and H Street ESA service centers, and those that see clients in our health clinics. With the changes to ESA regulations in September 2011, our team is now limited in its ability to facilitate the application process. Apart from helping participants fill out the application, we are prohibited from further involvement in our clients' cases. They are left on their own to navigate the service centers, track the status of their application, and advocate for its successful resolution.

As committed advocates, Mary's Center believes that with the right path, participants are their own best advocate. Unfortunately, the persistent lack of interpreters in the service centers demands our involvement as a lack of proper interpretation leads to miscommunication. Many participants report hostility by caseworkers, when often it is a matter of confusion, and others do not recertify in a timely manner simply because they did not understand the notice that came to them. For those that do go to the service center, often they must wait upwards of six hours. With childcare or work constraints, this is a reality in which they must either forgo their benefits or forgo their job.

Mary's Center therefore requests that ESA expand its network within the community, allowing community caseworkers to take a more active role in facilitating public benefits applications. The sheer number of applicants far outpaces the capacity of the current ESA staff; however there are caseworkers ready and able to help relieve that burden. Community based organizations can help DHS by using their relationships with the community to support its residents and the agencies that serve them. This includes the TANF program which helps



recipients gain their desired independence. While we believe that in a strong economy 60 months should be sufficient to get families back to work, we feel this kind of policy prematurely decreases an essential resource and makes the search for work even harder for those for whom a roof over their head is not guaranteed. We caution the policy moving forward without the close consultation of CBOs that know these families well.

In summary, we urge you to look at housing, jobs and healthcare benefits as one safety net that supports families lifting themselves out of poverty. We at Mary's Center and my colleagues in the CBO are ready to further strengthen our partnership with Mr. David Burns, to ensure that we truly are a ONE CITY! Thank you very much for your time and consideration.