

# **VLIAC** Vermont Low Income Advocacy Council

*“Celebrating 42 years of representing low income Vermonters”*

The Vermont Low Income Advocacy Council supports the efforts of Hunger Free VT and other advocates to hold harmless those individuals and families that received overpayments of food benefits as a result of errors that the Department of Children and Families made processing applications during the years the State has been sanctioned.

We further support the intent of H.620 that asks the State to assume responsibility on behalf of the Vermonters affected, and to negotiate with the federal Food and Nutrition Service to reduce the liability to the State for the over issuance of Supplemental Food and Nutrition Assistance Program (3SquaresVT) benefits.

VLIAC believes that this is simply an issue of fairness. It would seem that struggling Vermont families who have reached out for food assistance and been given the wrong amount, through no fault of their own, should not be held responsible for paying it back. If they had not received the assistance they may very well have not bought the food, or those amounts, or maybe they may have gone to the food shelf a few more times.

Having requested and received assistance from the State, according to the current process, these families are now expected to be the responsible party and be the ones who must ask for a reduction in the amount owed, when they most likely know nothing about it, and have not been told what would be required to get this reduction.

The State's error rate has been exceptionally high – double the national average - which in and of itself seems to present an even stronger argument for recipient forgiveness. There may be a number of legitimate reasons that can be attributed to the high error rate (staffing cuts, problems with modernization, poor training), but again, none of these problems can attribute to the recipients.

But beyond what is fair, and who is responsible, we are talking about people who got offered assistance in their struggle to put food on the table, received a bill after the fact for an average of \$900 dollars plus, for food that's already been eaten. Most likely these families probably had a tough time making ends meet, even with that assistance.

It also seems like it's a matter of practicality. If the overpayment was under \$400 they are not required to pay it back, and if it's over \$400 they are. Most people at lower incomes *thankfully* are being allowed to pay a small monthly fee (maybe \$5- \$20) to reimburse the State for the overpayments, but someone must keep track of that, and \$900 dollars, at that rate, will take many years to pay.

The situation is burdensome and stressful for low income families, or persons who are elderly or those with disabilities to have a "mistake" like that hanging over their household for that length of time.

H.620 addresses the concern that the State renegotiate a plan with the federal administration to reduce payments, and for the State to assume the responsibility for the overpayment in the years that the State has been sanctioned.

The legislation requires the state to inform all Vermont households that received an excess of benefits that they were eligible for, that they have the right to compromise the claim and instruction on how to request the reduction.

The bill further requires the State report to appropriate committees during the session and to the Healthcare Oversight committee when out of session, data, on the errors made, sanctions, and reinvestment plans to improve error rates.

VLIAC Supports passage of H.620

Respectfully submitted by Karen Lafayette, Legislative Liaison, VLIAC  
[kmlafayette@aol.com](mailto:kmlafayette@aol.com)