



State of Missouri Team:

The Department of Social Services (DSS) exists to help Missourians build capacity to live safe, healthy, and productive lives. In the face of COVID-19 this mission is more critical and daunting than ever. Many Missourians are struggling with basic needs. This includes food, a safe place to live, child care, or help getting employment. They may need a hand up to make their way through this pandemic.

Many of us have seen how our own families, friends, neighbors and communities struggle with unprecedented financial hardships. DSS is invested in connecting citizens in need with services and support, as well as finding new ways to continue helping citizens. As the largest workforce team in the state, we know these citizens and together we can all work to raise awareness and make a difference in their lives.

### **Accessing Services**

DSS is finding new opportunities to offer more virtual services including:

- Extending call center operations to 6:00 a.m. to 6:30 p.m. weekdays and 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Saturdays.
- Adding a Chatbot to answer the most frequently asked questions. Since April, the DSS Chatbot has answered over 137,000 questions.
- Offering options for citizens to apply for services online or by telephone. This includes an online application for Food Stamps, Child Care assistance, Temporary cash assistance, and certain health care assistance; an online energy assistance application, and the option to apply for medical assistance for families online or by phone.

### **Services to support Missourians' basic needs**

- **Food assistance**

- Since March, Missourians with Food Stamp benefits are receiving the maximum allowable monthly amount. This can mean extra dollars for families to spend on groceries.
- As of May, Missourians receiving Food Stamp benefits are able to purchase groceries online at Wal-Mart and Amazon. This allows some of the most vulnerable citizens to further social distance and avoid crowded public places.
- In partnership with the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, DSS distributed \$83.4 million in food benefits to families eligible for free-and-reduced-priced school meals for children learning virtually during the last months of the 2019-2020 school year. Today, the DSS and DESE partnership continues to help school districts and families access local feeding options.
- DSS joined forces with fellow departments, the Missouri Food Bank Association, and stakeholders committed to the well-being of Missouri citizens. They found new ways to support Missourians in need of food. As a result, the Department of Corrections and Lincoln University grew gardens to distribute produce to food banks and food pantries. From these efforts, an estimated 37,000 pounds of fresh produce will be available to Missourians in need.
- **Home energy assistance**
  - DSS recently launched an online application to simplify and expedite the application process for utility assistance.
  - Federal funds are available through the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP). It extends the cooling assistance program through September and doubles the maximum benefit amount to \$600.
- **Child care assistance**
  - DSS continues to extend child care subsidy benefits to working families and families seeking employment through the fall months.
  - DSS provided payments to child care providers remaining open since March and caring for the children of first responders.
  - DSS increased payments to subsidized child care providers from April through July. The goal was to help businesses sustain operations and navigate a new normal with COVID-19.
- **Employment assistance**
  - DSS is supporting the “Show Me Recovery” plan. It connects employers seeking job applicants with Missouri citizens receiving Food Stamp or TANF cash assistance benefits. DSS partners with community agencies to provide training and support to help ensure a successful connection between employer and employee.
  - The SkillUP and Missouri Work Assistance Program have remained open to connect Missourians receiving Food Stamp and TANF cash assistance with education and training services to help them increase their earning potential.

Over the last six months, two things remain constant and show what we, as state employees, can accomplish:

1. We are better together. State agencies have come together through formal opportunities and informal relationships to problem solve, share resources, and learn from each other. Missouri citizens relying on our services have a better experience because we are working together.
2. We have accomplished things we never realized were possible as we started 2020. We have found new ways to serve Missouri citizens. Many of us have moved home to work. And we continue to keep our commitment to public service and Missourians who rely on us every day.

Our service continues. I encourage you to reflect on what opportunities you have today to serve Missourians. Refer a citizen in need to DSS. If you suspect child abuse and neglect, call the 24/7 Child Abuse and Neglect Hotline at 800-392-3738 (you have the option to remain anonymous). Or, take a minute to reflect on the work you do every day or connect with a team member to think about how we can better serve Missouri.

Jennifer Tidball

Acting Director Department of Social Services

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