HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES

State may be playing its own role in unfolding SNAP benefit crisis

Alison Kuznitz • Jul 14, 2026

STATE HOUSE, BOSTON, July 14, 2026.....Days after Gov. Maura Healey signed the new state budget, food security advocates are already asking for supplemental funding to shore up the workforce that helps vulnerable residents access SNAP benefits.

In their budgets, both Healey and the Senate sought about $148 million for caseworkers at the Department of Transitional Assistance. But the compromise budget that Healey signed Thursday incorporated a lower funding level, about $122 million, supported in the House budget.

"To be honest, we're still not sure what happened in the final budget," Leran Minc, Project Bread's director of public policy, said. "It was very surprising."

Nearly one in seven Massachusetts residents receive SNAP benefits, including children, older adults, people with disabilities and veterans. But despite rising food insecurity, advocates say DTA is serving fewer residents due to stiffening federal eligibility parameters — plus a strained state workforce that cannot keep up with the paperwork and phone calls to certify households eligible for SNAP benefits.

Marking a record high, around 40% of Massachusetts households last year experienced food insecurity, according to a report from the Greater Boston Food Bank and Mass General Brigham.

The Massachusetts Law Reform Institute and the Massachusetts Budget and Policy Center have warned approximately 150 DTA caseworkers could be laid off at the $122 million funding level, creating greater turmoil for residents whose calls to seek SNAP benefits or update personal information have gone largely unanswered.

DTA spokesperson Cecille Avila said Friday there are no plans to terminate staff. The department has hired 78 new employees in the past six months and is working to backfill 42 vacancies, Avila said.

But advocates said the hiring push is inadequate when it comes to growing the workforce, bolstering access to benefits, and ensuring Massachusetts can lower its SNAP benefit error rate that measures how accurately state agencies determine household eligibility and benefit amounts. Starting in October 2027, the state could lose hundreds of millions of dollars for posting a high error rate under the federal One Big Beautiful Bill Act.

Vicky Negus, senior economic justice advocate at MLRI, said she is "relieved and really glad" to hear there will be no layoffs. But conversations around potential layoffs are "really besides the point," she said.

"The point here is that in Massachusetts, residents have not been able to and today cannot get the help that they need when they need it the vast majority of the time because there are not enough staff to do the work," Negus said. "That's the bottom line, and the FY '27 budget did not make investments to address that. And as of today, there is no plan to systemically address the largest SNAP crisis we have had in over a decade in Massachusetts."

Negus said the overwhelming majority of SNAP recipients who need to talk to a caseworker are automatically disconnected. She estimates the DTA needs to hire another 100 to 200 caseworkers to keep up with demand and process expanded eligibility criteria and work requirements, though she added that "there's a lot of variables that go into that answer, like how much is the workload that each worker has to carry."

The Legislature routinely underfunds accounts in the annual budget and injects more money through supplemental packages. The fiscal 2026 budget allocated just over $101 million for DTA caseworkers, with the account receiving an extra $41.7 million from the supplemental budget Healey signed in June.

"I think that if the administration is committed to not laying anyone off, the pathway that we see where that's most fruitful is for some sort of supplemental budget that's passed for FY '27 sometime in the next few months," said Adam Jones, a senior policy analyst at MassBudget. He added, "I think that the baseline needs to be somewhere in the $26 million range and then above that to actually kind of get our call success rate higher than it currently is."

Minc said the new cohort of nearly 80 DTA caseworkers took about four months to be fully integrated into the agency.

"Let's say very ideally, if the governor was to propose something next week, unfortunately we know the Legislature moves slowly," Minc said. "So a few months go by before that passes, and then we're talking about another four or five months before all those new caseworkers are on the phone line. That makes it a lot harder for us to bring down that payment error rate for that federal cost, and it continues to have more people suffering this access crisis and dropping off the program."

A spokesperson for the Executive Office of Health and Human Services did not directly answer a News Service question about whether the governor intends to file a supplemental budget for DTA caseworkers.

"The Healey-Driscoll Administration is committed to ensuring DTA has the resources and staff needed to serve the people of Massachusetts, particularly as the Trump Administration is trying to kick hundreds of thousands of people off of SNAP," the spokesperson said Tuesday. "We will continue to assess the Department's needs."

The House Ways and Means Committee felt the $122 million allocation for fiscal 2027 was "appropriate given the fiscal constraints the Commonwealth is under," spokesperson Blake Webber said. Should Healey file a supp, Webber said the panel "will evaluate and entertain that request."

Senate Ways and Means Committee spokesperson Sean Fitzgerald also pointed to "resource constraints" in fiscal 2027, saying, "[W]e remain committed to partnering with the Administration to continue supporting DTA and its caseworkers as we work collectively to protect access to SNAP for our most vulnerable residents and households."

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