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REPORT TO THE LEGISLATURE

TO: Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services
FROM: Maine Department of Health and Human Services, Office for Family Independence
DATE: May 12, 2022
RE: Resolves 2021, Ch. 87, *Resolve, To Increase Collaboration between the Maine State Housing Authority and the Department of Health and Human Services*

Pursuant to Resolves 2021, Ch. 87, *Resolve, To Increase Collaboration between the Maine State Housing Authority and the Department of Health and Human Services*, the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) is reporting on collaboration between DHHS and the Maine State Housing Authority (MaineHousing) to seek, identify and implement initiatives in order to maximize access to housing assistance for recipients of services from DHHS and maximize access to assistance programs administered by DHHS for recipients of housing assistance, including students, from MaineHousing or its grantees.

Representatives from MaineHousing and DHHS met to discuss and clarify what each agency is capable of pursuing, from both statutory and capacity perspectives, regarding integration of operations and computer systems to improve access to housing and heating programs. MaineHousing facilitated meetings concluded there are a few options that exist that could be pursued towards integrating intake systems, some immediate, intermediate, and long-term. Each of these options has escalating levels of costs in time and resources, as well as operational and policy impacts.

Immediate Strategies (Implemented)

MaineHousing provides language and web links for posting on DHHS websites to inform clients of housing and heating resources. Telephonic messaging can also be run periodically on DHHS's call queue greeting for client awareness of these programs offered by MaineHousing. These are efforts that can be absorbed by current administrative staff and funding by DHHS and were implemented in 2021.

Intermediate Strategies for Consideration

MaineHousing and DHHS could pursue reviewing and developing a scope of work to include MaineHousing application questions to DHHS paper and online applications, with the initial changes taking place in DHHS's web service, My Maine Connection. The scope of work would include an initial gap analysis of what MaineHousing requires for collected data to what DHHS's online service already collects, and include anticipated costs and timeline to have additional authority application related questions added to the My Maine Connection online application, have data tables built for storage of the collected authority data, and develop interface data packages to send authority applications from My Maine Connection to MaineHousing's application system. Initial focus would be on heating assistance applications and could later evolve to housing assistance applications. The resulting changes to My

Maine Connection would require training of department staff to ensure client questions about authority program applications could be answered for successful completion.

While promising, this option is not without challenges. The first is timing, as My Maine Connection is in the middle of a legislatively approved, multi-year replacement. My Maine Connection is over a decade old and has been overdue for upgrades to user functionality. The first phase of the upgrade is nearing completion and is currently set for full implementation to the public in Summer 2022. At the time of the discussions related to this bill, the scope for Phase I of the My Maine Connection replacement had already been established, with design and development activities in process. The earliest opportunity for MaineHousing to work with DHHS on these online application changes for heating and housing assistance would need to be planned for a subsequent phase of My Maine Connection enhancements. The scope for Phase II is currently flexible and MaineHousing is offered the opportunity to work with DHHS to further explore this option.

Second, it is expected that this integration would require significant funding. MaineHousing and DHHS will still need to finalize a scope of work and develop a system design before identifying projected costs. DHHS provided the Legislature with a cost estimate for LD 1305, but that did not include any funding that would be needed for MaineHousing should this project move forward. The establishment the information sharing capability, system development, and ongoing maintenance and stewardship of the technology will have costs for and require buy-in by both agencies.

Long-term Strategies for Consideration

DHHS and MaineHousing discussed the feasibility of integrating client intake systems across multiple state agencies to increase efficiencies for households applying for certain services. The goal of integrating intake systems is to support households in more easily applying for programs and thereby increasing the number of households that participate in these programs. Data that is captured by one agency is shared with all others for the purpose of easing the burden on the client for having to fill out multiple individual agency applications and provide identical verifications like income for determination of eligibility.

A broad example of this concept is an individual in need of services walks into any state agency location and uses an online application, like DHHS's My Maine Connection, an authority online application tool, or any another department application tool, and when that individual enters some of their personal information, data that has been previously captured by any of those agencies the client has received services from is shared in real-time to assist in automatically completing the application for the requested service. The shared data is considered verified data for the purposes of the program eligibility determination.

To define the example further within the ask of LD 1305, an MaineCare individual who applies for housing assistance through MaineHousing's application tool would automatically have their income, address, and identity validated by DHHS's database information on the client's MaineCare case. MaineHousing would accept DHHS's information as valid and be able to process eligibility for housing or heating assistance much more quickly without making individual request of the client.

To realize this option, there are some key steps that need to be taken. First would need to be coalescence around individual federal regulations that define each agency's eligibility verification requirements.

What constitutes verified income or verified identity can vary and what is acceptable for one agency's program may not be for another. Sometimes, if not often, these requirements are outside of the State's control.

A second step after agency merger of federal program regulations would be the creation of a data sharing solution between the participating agencies. This could be a central database point accessed by multiple agency databases or it could be a data highway that connects multiple agency databases with real time interface activity. Client consent will be a key component to ensuring the client has authorized the sharing of their data for programs the state determines will be applicable and helpful to the individual, and therefore expectations for client usage should be considered when determining the scope and success of this solution.

A final step would be a coordinated statewide initiative to provide data governance oversight and ensure that individual online services are kept secure and that technology and policy is kept in sync across all participating departments and agencies.

Next Steps

DHHS and MaineHousing look forward to continuing these discussions to ensure state agencies are best serving Maine people by providing easy access to assistance for which they are eligible while also maintaining privacy and security of their data and alignment with federal program requirements.

The agencies will continue to work together to explore options for Phase II of the My Maine Connection enhancement effort.