

Texas Leaders Must Invest in Our State Agencies

We Deserve Effective State Health Care and Food Security Programs

When Texas leaders don't invest in our people and the programs that keep us fed and healthy, Texans and our families suffer.

Mary and her family of four live and work in El Paso. Like many of their neighbors, Mary's family is experiencing money trouble during an ongoing pandemic and unprecedented inflation. Mary made the decision in July 2022, when times were really tough, to help her family by applying for food benefits for the first time. Mary did everything right — she went to a local community food bank, met with an enrollment assister, and provided documentation alongside her application. Then, as her bills kept piling up, she waited... and waited... and kept waiting. While waiting, she called 211 to get updates on her application and offered to provide more documentation if it was needed, but she was told they were working as fast as they could and given no further updates. Many of her neighbors experienced the same thing.

Families throughout the Lone Star State face delays in getting the help they need.

It's not just El Paso — families throughout the Lone Star State face delays in getting the help they need.¹ In July 2022, a single mother in North Texas waited on her SNAP benefits for nearly two months after submitting her application.² East Texans are reaching out to their local news stations with their concerns.³ At one point in July 2022, more than 300,000 SNAP applications were waiting to be processed.⁴ Though the system is now slowly catching up, state workers themselves have accessed food banks while waiting for their own SNAP applications to go through.⁵ That's right — ***some state workers make such low wages that they qualify for the same benefits they work to process.*** It's not just SNAP. Texans applying for Medicaid also face delays. Health clinic staff members report trying to assist a pregnant woman who waited two months for her Medicaid application to be approved, delaying her access to prenatal care. The backlog is causing families to go without food and health benefits while they wait for their applications and renewals to go through the system.

1 <https://kfoxtv.com/news/kfox14-investigates/texas-el-paso-snap-benefits-interview-requirement-now-waived-as-applications-increase-cause-delays-inflation-pandemic-cost-food-economy>

2 <https://www.wfaa.com/article/money/business/right-on-the-money/texas-snap-food-assistance-applications-backlog/287-3c710ccf-0f30-4b06-94ba-9b7f671a18be>

3 <https://www.ketk.com/news/local-news/snap-benefits-are-delayed-for-some-heres-why/>

4 <https://finance.yahoo.com/news/snap-struggles-texas-expect-300-150147476.html>

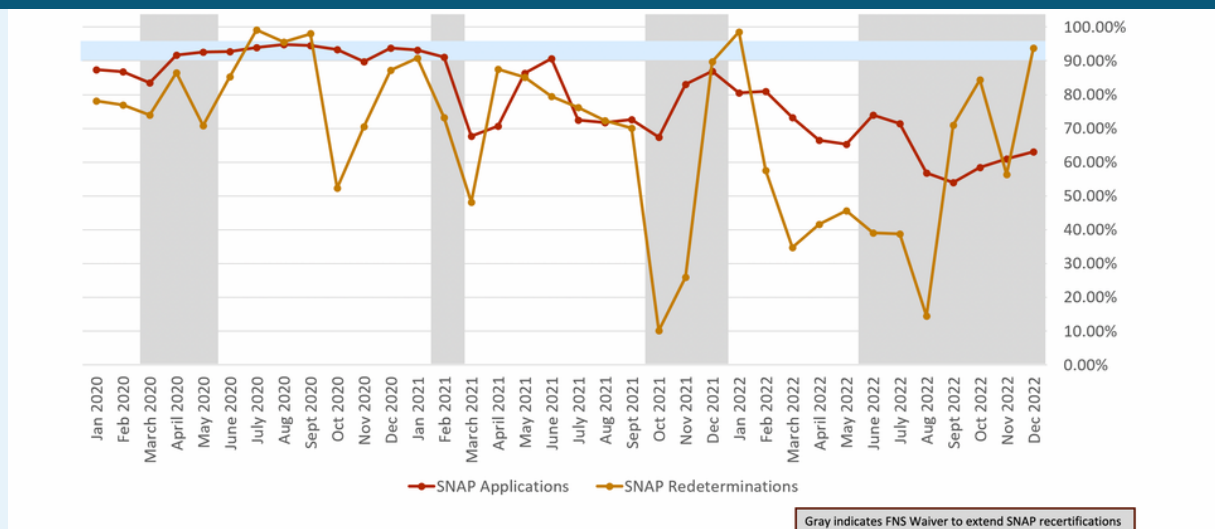
5 <https://www.kxan.com/investigations/snap-benefits-backlog-continues-state-workers-say-they-need-help-too/>

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When Texas leaders don't invest in our people and the programs that keep us fed and healthy, Texans and our families suffer. The Texas Health and Human Services Commission, which processes and distributes Medicaid and SNAP, runs the eligibility system well, but our state's history with streamlining enrollment in public benefits has been a roller coaster of ups and downs.⁶ Before 2020, Texas consistently met federal guidelines for timely processing applications for Medicaid and SNAP. However, a surge of new applicants through the pandemic and very high turnover of eligibility workers led to significant delays in processing applications.

Percentage of SNAP Applications and Redeterminations Processed Timely, January 2020 to December 2022



Source: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/about/records-statistics/data-statistics/supplemental-nutritional-assistance-program-snap-statistics>

The number of applications processed within the established time frame for the program is an accurate indicator of how well the eligibility system is functioning. SNAP benefits must be issued within 30 days of an application for eligible households, and Medicaid determinations must be issued within 45 days to meet federal rule requirements for timeliness. New SNAP applications have not met this standard since June 2021, meaning thousands of families waited longer than 30 days to feed hungry children. Even when eligible families get help, current state policy makes it hard to keep that help. Unlike in most states, Texas requires most people to renew their SNAP enrollment every six months. Texas has periodically used federal waivers available during the pandemic to keep people enrolled for an additional six months, most recently ongoing since June 2022. Using these administrative flexibilities for renewals has freed staff capacity to focus on new applications, and we're seeing improvement in how long it takes for families to get their food benefits. Administrative sleights of hand and one-time emergency support, however, do not fix the underlying causes of enrollment delays.

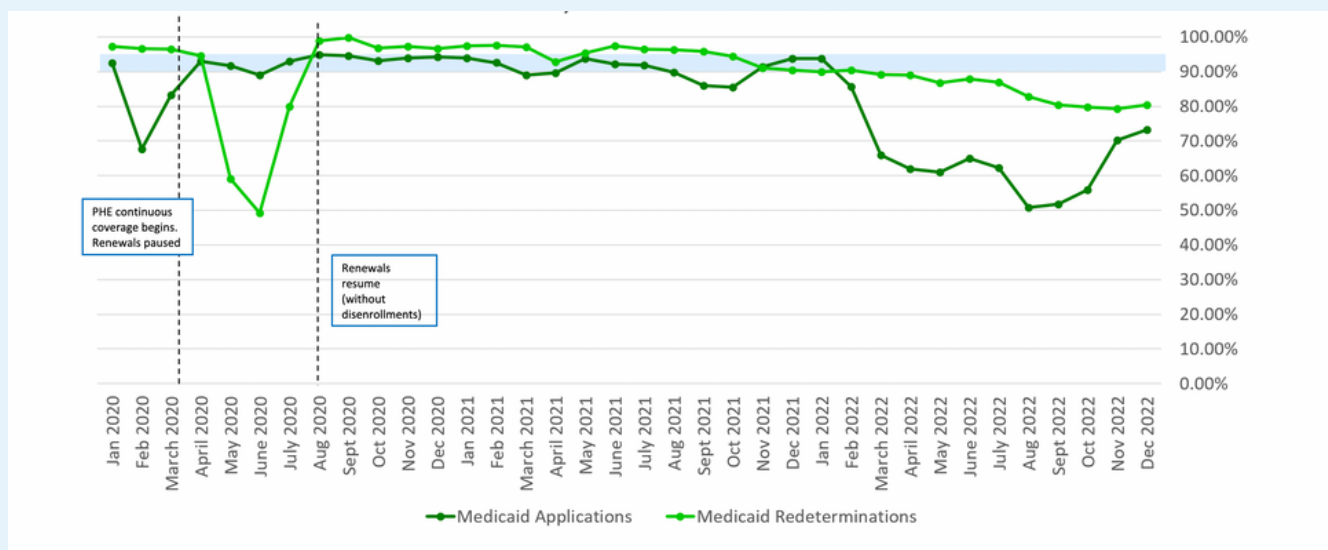
⁶ <https://www.governing.com/archive/the-struggle-to-streamline.html>

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The Medicaid continuous coverage provision during the Public Health Emergency prevented the state from kicking Texans off the program,⁷ but new Medicaid applicants started experiencing the impact of the significant delays in January 2022. Newly pregnant moms and newborn babies aren't receiving the health care they need because of applications piling up and taking longer than the federal standard of 45 days to process.

Percentage of Medicaid Applications and Redeterminations Processed Timely January 2020 to December 2022



Source: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/about/records-statistics/data-statistics/healthcare-statistics>

Starting in April 2023, Texas will start disenrolling people from Medicaid again. When this happens, children with Medicaid in Texas — particularly Black and Latino children⁸ — face a heightened risk of losing health insurance coverage, despite remaining eligible for Medicaid and/or the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP).⁹ Families also stopped receiving extra SNAP benefits in February, meaning they will have less help to pay for food. Texas HHSC is not ready for the massive undertaking of reviewing eligibility for 5.4 million Texans with Medicaid and keeping up with the continuation of new applications.¹⁰

⁷ <https://everytexan.org/2022/10/21/extension-of-the-public-health-emergency-gives-texas-needed-time-to-prepare/>

⁸ <https://ccf.georgetown.edu/2022/08/22/millions-of-eligible-children-could-lose-medicaid-due-to-administrative-churn-during-the-unwinding/>

⁹ <https://ccf.georgetown.edu/2022/02/17/millions-of-children-may-lose-medicaid-what-can-be-done-to-help-prevent-them-from-becoming-uninsured/#heading-9>

¹⁰ <https://everytexan.org/2022/10/21/extension-of-the-public-health-emergency-gives-texas-needed-time-to-prepare/>

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Like other state agencies,¹¹ Texas HHSC is critically understaffed as a result of the Texas Legislature continuously underinvesting in state programs, particularly in the area of wages. There were four times as many eligibility worker vacancies in February 2022 as there were at the beginning of the pandemic.¹² Continued budget cuts,¹³ starting salaries of only \$2,300 a month,¹⁴ and no pension plan options for new employees¹⁵ have hobbled HHSC's efforts to compete for employees in the current labor market. HHSC has implemented new incentives for promotions and pay increases to recruit and retain eligibility staff, which has helped reduce staff shortages,¹⁶ but the Legislature must take more action to fully fund state agencies.¹⁷ In recent requests, Texas HHSC has laid out its need for additional funding to fill current vacancies.¹⁸

When Texas leaders invest in the people that make our state healthcare and food security programs work, Texans can get the help they need when they need it.

Families like Mary's can know where their next meal is coming from. Pregnant moms can get the critical access to the care they need. Newborn babies can get access to check-ups to make sure they stay healthy. Texans deserve state agencies that are fully staffed and funded, and workers deserve to be compensated fairly.

***Every Texan, regardless of race or zip code, deserves to receive and keep their health care and food benefits.
That requires an investment in our state workforce.***

11 <https://www.texastribune.org/2022/09/29/texas-state-employee-pay-raise/>

12 <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2022/04/04/1089753555/medicaid-labor-crisis>

13 <https://www.houstonchronicle.com/politics/texas/article/Texas-cut-Medicaid-staffing-during-the-pandemic-16803350.php>

14 <https://salaries.texastribune.org/departments/health-and-human-services-commission/positions/texas-works-advisor-i/>

15 <https://www.texastribune.org/2021/05/26/texas-government-employee-retirement-system/>

16 <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/presentation-health-care-reform-oct-2022.pdf>

17 <https://www.texastribune.org/2022/09/29/texas-state-employee-pay-raise/>

18 <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/hhsc-legislative-appropriations-request-2024-2025.pdf>