

March 24, 2020

Via E-mail

Mr. Richard Howze, CIO
Office of Technology Services
Louisiana Division of Administration
1201 N. Third St., Ste. 7-210
Baton Rouge, LA 70802

Dear Mr. Howze:

The undersigned organizations write to request that the Office of Technology Services (OTS) remove the requirement that clients supply an email address in order to register an account at my.la.gov, and that OTS take this action as quickly as possible.

In our experience, many Louisianans who apply for public benefits do not have an existing email address. This applies both to clients who apply online and to clients who submit paper applications. Unfortunately, those clients without email access, including many of the state's seniors, are often among the least likely to have high computer literacy. For these reasons, the email requirement has proven to be a significant barrier to access for many Louisianans.

The experience of the DCFS's call center and of our state's SNAP application assisters bears this out. The call center has reported a high volume of calls from clients who have trouble verifying their email addresses. Application assisters also report that many of their clients do not have email accounts at the time they apply for SNAP, and that this hinders them from accessing the program.

The solution that many assisters employ—applying for benefits “as a guest”—leaves clients less able to access information about their benefits. When application assisters opt instead to create email addresses for their clients, as they do for many homeless Louisianans among others, the assister will frequently give the client their credentials on a slip of paper. Unfortunately, many applicants lose that paper leaving them no better off than clients who applied as a guest and potentially worse off, to the extent that the system relies upon verification links sent via email. This also places an additional burden on assisters and undermines the value of the rest of the online benefits management system for those clients.

The closure of statewide offices in response to the coronavirus makes online benefit applications a critical resource and makes it all the more necessary that barriers to access be removed.

We appreciate the improvements in application access and integration that OTS has achieved through its efforts to implement an integrated eligibility system for Medicaid, SNAP and other benefits programs. We also recognize that the coronavirus outbreak is placing additional strains on the state's information technology resources, as state agencies implement work from home policies and as the state's clients transition to online-first interactions with state agencies. We are grateful for your agency's essential work in this area.

In this tumultuous context, we ask that OTS prioritize this change to the benefits application system in order to make sure that as need for public assistance increases, no Louisianan is left unable to access food simply because they don't have an email account.

We ask that you respond to Daniel Mintz at the Louisiana Budget Project (danny@labudget.org) in response to this request.

Sincerely,

A Place 4 Me

Abolition Apostles Jail & Prison Ministry

Acadiana VOAD

Allen Council on Aging, Inc

Avodah Jewish Service Corps

Avoyelles Council on Aging

Caldwell Council on Aging

Cenla Area Agency on Aging, Inc.

Claiborne Council on Aging

Delgado Community College

Feeding Louisiana

Foodbank of Northwest Louisiana

I.C.O.N.S., Inc. Foodbank

Lafourche Council on Aging, Inc.

Lincoln Council on Aging

Louisiana Association of United Ways

Louisiana Budget Project

Louisiana Partnership for Children and Families

Recirculating Farms Coalition

Southeast Community Health Systems

Southeast Louisiana Legal Services

St Landry Evangeline United Way

St. Mary Council on Aging, Inc.

Terrebonne Council on Aging

The First 72 Plus

United Way of Southeast Louisiana

Cc: The Honorable Governor John Bel Edwards (via staff)