



Media Release

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DHS Goes 'Mobile,' Increases Access to Public Programs

The Arkansas Department of Human Services (DHS) recently received eight high-tech vans that will be used as mobile enrollment offices as part of the agency's efforts to increase access to public assistance programs for people in rural and underserved parts of the state.

The vans – a first for the agency -- are equipped with five computer stations that will allow potential clients to apply for some services and check eligibility for others using the new DHS online application system at Access.Arkansas.gov from anywhere in the state.

"This outreach initiative is a significant step toward providing the elderly, children and other Arkansans in need greater access to services," said Joni Jones, director of the DHS Division of County Operations (DCO). "It also will help us promote DHS's paperless application system, which should make the process more efficient."

The division, which operates DHS county offices, expects employees to be using these mobile offices in rural communities, at health fair and other events by early spring. Jones said she hopes to reach potential clients who don't have computer access to apply for assistance or live in areas not easily accessible to a DHS office.

During emergencies and disasters, the vans also will be used to allow people to apply for DHS assistance programs and could serve as a DHS command center, if needed.

Two DHS eligibility specialists will man each van and serve as drivers. A satellite dish and onboard generator will allow employees to work in areas with no internet access or power.

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The vans were manufactured by Farber Specialty Vehicles of Columbus, Ohio. They cost about \$200,000 each and were paid for using federal money from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which funds the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP (formerly known as the food stamp program).

Eligibility specialists will not conduct one-on-one interviews with people applying for assistance to ensure privacy, but will help people navigate the Access Arkansas online system. Access Arkansas allows people to find out if they are eligible for more than a dozen different services from feeding programs at child care centers to assistance for people who are elderly or who have disabilities. People also can apply on the spot for SNAP, ARKids First children's health insurance, child care assistance, the Medicare Savings program, Transitional Employment Assistance and Transitional Employment Assistance Medicaid.

While Arkansas ranks well compared to other states in reaching potential clients, statistics show that thousands of our citizens who are at risk of hunger, uninsured or in need of other assistance are not accessing programs for which they are eligible.

In SNAP, for example, Arkansas reaches about 84 percent of the population that is eligible for food assistance, Jones said. The remaining 16 percent – or about 95,000 people, including children and the elderly – are at risk of hunger.

“Finding ways to reach out to this population is the right thing to do, and doing so is an investment in the future for all of our citizens,” Jones said.