

# Massachusetts Law Reform Institute

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By Email and post

John Wagner, Commissioner  
Todd Maio, Deputy Commissioner  
Department of Transitional Assistance  
600 Washington Street  
Boston, MA 02111

Dear Commissioner Wagner and Deputy Commissioner Maio:

On behalf of the Food Stamp Improvement Coalition, we are writing to alert you to our grave concerns regarding the widespread denial of food stamps for procedural reasons, some of which have already been shared with Todd and Food Stamp Policy staff. At the April meeting, Coalition members shared significant frustration with the number of denied food stamp applications for procedural reasons, notably for lack of verification, lack of completing an interview or meeting some other procedural requirement. Last week, MLRI had the opportunity to review the Department's SA-30 BEACON FS Application Report for April 1, 2005 through April 30, 2005. We were stunned to find that many of the TAO local offices denied over 60% of food stamp applications with final dispositions! Since most community outreach groups do initial screening for financial eligibility before assisting with an application, this denial rate is stunning. We sent an information request to your staff for more detailed information on the nature of the denials and source of food stamp applications, but do note that a number of organizations that engage in food stamp outreach report the similar troubling results.

While we appreciate that some food stamp applicants may voluntarily abandon their applications for reasons beyond the Department's control, we believe that the majority of procedural denials are not due to low income households voluntarily abandoning their quest for benefits. In the experience of Food Stamp Coalition members, the major factors contributing to a breakdown in the food stamp application process for otherwise eligible households include:

- A) a chronic inability to reach workers through the TAO phone systems;
- B) applications mailed in or faxed by applicants and helping agencies getting lost at the local DTA office and/or delays in the application being input to BEACON (resulting in delayed notice of missing verifications or the ability confirm the application status);
- C) excessive or unnecessary verification demands, including persistent use of the landlord verification form by some offices as the sole source of verification of residence and shelter (especially problematic for applicants reluctant to advise landlords of their application for benefits, unable to get landlord cooperation, or reluctant to involve other individuals living in doubled up situations but not part of the food stamp household);
- D) local office failure to fully advise applicants of all alternative verifications;
- E) verifications getting lost at the local TAO which were mailed or faxed by the applicant or helping organization;

- F) worker failure to offer assistance to help secure required verifications or to offer to do collateral contacts for needed information;
- G) denials for failure to return the second signature form (the “blue sheet”) even though the household signed the original application;
- H) denial notices that fail to adequately inform the household of the specific verifications missing or alternatives acceptable; and
- I) worker insistence that a household reapply or appeal a denial when the food stamp application is denied for lack of verification, rather than reopening the case to review eligibility verification was received within 60 days of the original application.

Below are is a small sample of some of the problems reported at the April Coalition meeting or in recent calls to MLRI. This is not a complete list of all the cases that have come to our attention. We have not identified the clients in this letter because of the public nature of this communication but understand that DTA has received specific letters regarding two of these cases and MLRI has discussed others with Recipient Services.

Case A: Despite leaving several messages at the Malden office, “Anne” never received a call back from her caseworker so she could clarify what type of verification she needed from her employer. As time was running out, Anne submitted a verification from her employer to the local office. It was only at this point that Anne finally received a call from her worker, who rudely told her that the verification was inadequate. She went back to her employer again, obtained the additional information, and mailed it prior to the verification due date. Nonetheless, she was sent a denial notice for failure to verify. The local office refused to assess her eligibility for food stamps on the merits, even though they now had the requested verifications, all of which had been submitted well within 60 days of the date of her food stamps application. Instead, the local office insisted that she submit an entirely new application. At this point, Anne, faced with the prospect of once again obtaining a new set of verifications from third parties such as her landlord and employer and having been made to feel “worthless” by the worker’s comments, felt too discouraged to pursue food stamps any further.

Case B: “Dorothy” mailed all of her verifications to the Framingham office in one envelope. She then received a call from the local office, telling her in a very rude manner that she had not sent in all of the verifications. Dorothy tried to explain that since all of the verifications had been sent in one envelope, if the local office had received any (which they clearly did), they should have received all. Nonetheless, her application was denied for lack of verification. Dorothy, an elder, felt so shaken by her treatment from the worker that she felt sick to her stomach

Case C: “Marta” as well as her advocate tried multiple times – more than twenty -- to reach the Newmarket office to report an increase in her rent. On numerous occasions they were unable to leave messages at all because the voice boxes were full. Even when Marta was able to leave a message, the local office never returned Marta’s calls. Marta has not been receiving enough food stamps because her rent increase has never been taken into account. See redacted letter from Jennifer Turco of Northeastern Law School, attached.

Case D: “Sarah,” a pregnant single mother, was unable to obtain food stamps until a legal advocate intervened because she was unable to get verifications from third parties such as former employers and state agencies such as the Department of Revenue. The worker at the

New Bedford office never offered to help her obtain the needed verifications, nor did she ask for authorization to make a collateral contact. See redacted letter from Kathryn C. Enos of Legal Services for Cape Cod and the Islands, attached.

At the April Coalition, DTA and USDA staff reported on an upcoming state-exchange training for food stamp staff in mid-June and suggested that this would be an opportune time to review food stamp procedures on verifications and procedural eligibility issues. We wholeheartedly agree! As the Department moves ahead with significant outreach efforts through subway posters and on-line applications, it behooves you to ensure that these outreach efforts are not in vain and that community agencies have sufficient confidence in the food stamp application process to encourage their clients to apply. Coalition members also formed a working group to further research this issue and to come up with specific recommendations at our next meeting to address these concerns. Preliminarily, in addition to training workers on correct policy, we believe the state food stamp regulations may need to be revised where unclear or inconsistent with federal policy, the BEACON work flow should be revised to the extent it hampers reinstatement or reopening of cases and/or issuance of pending notices; detailed policy guidance need to be issued with clear examples of the verification process, alternative verifications, worker assistance, etc.; and the TAO communication and tracking systems should be evaluated to determine if there are better options for households to report changes to workers and to ensure verifications sent to TAOs arrive in the correct file.

As always, we appreciate your willingness to work with the advocacy and anti-hunger community to improve food stamp access and participation.

Sincerely

Pat Baker

Rochelle Hahn

cc. Cescia Derderian  
Phuoc Cao  
Lauren Arms  
Food Stamp Improvement Coalition