

T Transitions

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this month in...

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From the Commissioner

Dear Fellow Employees,

The initial months of 2003 have been tumultuous in state government and in the country as a whole. The state budget process continues to unfold with a variety of hearings being held to discuss the proposed reorganization of human service agencies as well as other budget-related issues. I will continue to keep you informed of developments as they relate to DTA. But I am concerned that we not be distracted from our day-to-day obligations by outside issues, no matter how important they may be. In some areas, we may have drifted from basics and we need to refocus our efforts. In particular, I want to be sure that TAFDC cases with a work program requirement are handled appropriately.

As most of you know, Local Office Quality Control (LOQC) has recently completed a review of work-required cases. The results of this review have been shared with each office. The review identified a number of areas requiring improvement or more research. For example, it appears that some individuals with a work requirement are not participating or are not participating a sufficient number of hours. This is an important issue for the whole agency and addressing it will be a priority for all of us. As a first step, the Regional Directors have contacted every office to discuss the LOQC findings and to identify possible improvements, training needs and suggestions for BEACON modifications. If you have ideas in any of these areas, please share them with your supervisor or manager.

The appropriate handling of these cases on BEACON is crucial. As you are aware, BEACON generates participation reports for those in

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From the Hotline

Q. I have a food stamp recipient who is up to date in his child support payments. He is required by a court order to pay \$200 monthly in child support. For the past nine months, he has also been providing an additional \$75 per month in child support payments and verified this with his cancelled checks. Can I include the additional \$75 monthly amount in his child support deduction when calculating his food stamp benefit amount?

A. Although child support is an acceptable food stamp benefit deduction, it must be “legally obligated” child support. This means it must be legally binding by court order or some other administrative process to be an acceptable deduction. Since the \$75 is not a legally enforceable payment or arrearage amount, the additional payment may not be deducted from his income. In addition to child support payments, remind your recipient that legally obligated health insurance and arrearage payments may be deducted as well. For more information on this topic, refer to 106 CMR 364.400 (G), *A User’s Guide*, pages XIV-G-1 and XIV-G-2, as well as Field Operations Memo 95-30. Effective March 24, 2003, the monthly amount of child support payments made by an AU member may also be excluded from the AU’s gross income test.

Q. I took a TAFDC application. The applicant completed all the information needed on the Child Support windows and signed the T-A34/36 form. Some verifications are outstanding and the AU can not yet be approved. Should I send the documents to DOR now?

A. No. The child support documents should not be sent to DOR until the AU has been authorized to receive TAFDC benefits. When DOR receives the documents, they match the information to the child support data that is sent nightly from BEACON. This data is not sent until the AU is authorized for benefits. Also, DOR cannot start child support procedures until the AU is an active TAFDC AU. Please refer to *A User’s Guide*, XIII-G-14 for more information.

Q. Yesterday, a food stamp recipient informed me that she was leaving for Florida to visit her sister on a six-week vacation. Can I close this food stamp AU?

A. Vacations are not an acceptable reason to terminate a food stamp AU. In this example, ask the client further questions to determine whether or not the family intends to return to Massachusetts once the vacation is over. Food stamp regulations concerning residency do not require the intent to permanently reside in the State. In addition, individuals vacationing in an area are not considered residents of that area. For more information on this topic, refer to 106 CMR 362.100.

Emergency Assistance Program

EA
EA User’s Guide: Emergency Assistance, SSI Special Benefits and BEACON Update 010

The *EA User’s Guide* has been revised to include the names of two new SSPS screens: the **EA Close - Entry** and the **EA Reactivate - Entry** screens. It also gives the name of a new contact person at TransActions Associates.

BEACON Todays Issued in March 2003

BT 102 BEACON Increment
2.1.2 (3/24/2003)

BT 103 Veterans’ Benefits
(3/26/2003)

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Increase in the Federal Poverty Guideline

TAFDC, EA and FS State Letter 1252

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has issued the increased Federal Poverty Guideline. This guideline is used in determining three eligibility standards:

- the TAFDC Monthly Income Standard for determining income to be deemed from the Parents of a Teen Parent (200% of the Federal Poverty Guideline);
- the Food Stamp Gross Monthly Categorical Eligibility Income Standard (200% of the Federal Poverty Guideline); and
- the EA Eligibility Standard (100% of the Federal Poverty Guideline).

The eligibility standards were increased in BEACON on March 3, 2003.

community service and Monthly Reports for those who are working. Based on the proper input of information from these reports, ongoing TAFDC eligibility may be impacted. Several offices have already requested and received additional training in this area. An assessment of statewide training needs in the area of work program issues has been done by the Training Unit and Field Operations. Offices were notified on March 14 that 44 training sessions are scheduled for the month of April. In addition to training, it is also possible that modifications to BEACON may expedite the process for handling work-required cases. MIS staff are aware that modifications may be requested and are committed to developing and implementing any necessary BEACON changes. BEACON Increment 2.1.2 contained changes to several views designed to help manage and identify activities for work-required cases. As we refocus on this important area, I have asked LOQC to schedule reviews of work-required cases every six months to measure improvement and identify continuing issues.

I know that there are many things happening in your offices. Some of you are welcoming colleagues from other agencies; some of our own offices are closing and staff from those offices are moving to new locations. We are all getting new PCs, and even an improvement such as this can be temporarily disruptive. The proposed state budget may result in significant changes for DTA. Despite these distractions, we must continue to focus on the task at hand.

The commencement of war with Iraq is, of course, on all of our minds. Some of our colleagues have been called to active duty. I am sure that many of you have friends and loved ones who are also serving our country at this difficult time. I know that you share my hope for their safety and for those stationed in the Gulf region, their quick return home.

Sincerely,



John Wagner
Commissioner

Quality Corner

As you know, in November and December 2002 all Quarterly Reporting AUs were converted to Semiannual Reporting. Because semiannual reporting eliminates many errors while reducing your workload, it is very important to make sure all AUs are correct at each certification. This month we will discuss three AUs reviewed by Quality Control in which the errors could have been avoided if previous information had been used correctly.

Noncitizen and Dependent Care Expenses

In the first AU, there were two errors. One household member who had been receiving state food stamps was incorrectly designated as eligible for federal benefits. Since she did not have sufficient work quarters, she was not eligible for federal benefits. The second error involved dependent care expenses. At her recertification in October, the recipient reported paying no day care expenses and had not paid any for about six months. The AU Manager correctly indicated on BEACON that the recipient paid no expenses, but failed to 'zero-out' the previous amount. Because of this, the food stamp amount was incorrect and an error occurred.

Changed Dependent Care Expenses

In a similar AU, the recipient reported at the recertification that she paid \$160 for dependent care every two weeks. The AU Manager entered the new amount into BEACON, and the system added the new amount to the previous amount listed, creating a deduction that was too high and resulting in an error. ***(It is crucial to remove previous amounts when changing the expenses allowed for an AU.)***

Wage Calculation and Child Support

A woman remarried her former husband who was not the father of any of her children. His wages were incorrectly calculated (the wrong weeks were used). In addition, she was receiving \$630 in child support each month. While she did not report it to her AU Manager, this information was available on the DOR screen and had been for months. While there were two errors in this AU, neither error was complicated policy and each was correctable with additional effort.

Since the new semiannual reporting process holds great potential to

reduce the error rate, we should make every effort to make it work. The single most effective thing we all can do is to be certain AUs are accurate at each recertification. This means checking all appropriate screens (including child support when there is an absent parent) and removing any previous amount when putting in a changed amount in allowed expenses. In this way, we can ensure that recipients receive the benefit amount for which they are eligible.



"Your thoughts become your words. Your words become your actions. Your actions become your habits. Your habits become your character. Your character becomes your destiny."

Unknown

FYI

BEACON Help Revisions

The following is a list of BEACON Help windows added, deleted or revised in Increment 2.1.2:

Added:

Clients With Facsimile/Dummy SSN

Most Recently Updated Households

Revised:

Absence

Active by Grantee Name

AU Composition Q & A Navigator

Check Post Birth Exemption

Clients with Sanctions

Eligibility Explorer

Employment Tab

Health Insurance

Job 139 FS Recertification

Tracking ACM Batch Weekly (Friday)

Location Tab

Marital Status Tab

Monitor Types

More on Time Limits

Narratives Tab

Nonfinancial Section Program

Abbreviations

Personal Tab

TAFDC Teen Parent Turns 20

Teen Parents Active TAFDC AUs

Time Limits Clocks Tab

VC-1 Print

Verifications Due

Youngest Child Turns 2

Youngest Child Turns 6

Deleted:

Determine Principal Earner

EA Shelter Information Now in BEACON

EA

Field Operations Memo 2003-10

- On March 23, 2003, shelter facility information, based on the last known placement location, was automatically updated to each active EA AU. For purposes of this memo, EA shelters include congregate shelters, scattered site shelters, transitional shelters, substance abuse shelters, domestic violence shelters, hotels and motels.
- AU Managers or Homeless Coordinators are responsible for entering the shelter data on new EA AUs placed in a shelter, maintaining the accuracy of the shelter information and ensuring that the transfer and termination information are accurately entered for each EA AU in BEACON.
- The *Residential Facility* window is used to enter information on an EA AU entering a shelter, exiting a shelter, and being transferred from one shelter to another.
- The *Resource Search* window is used to find the shelter where the EA AU is being placed. The address of the shelter will be added automatically to the Address window and the Residence Type will be changed automatically to "shelter."

From the Forms File

New Form

09-375-0403-05

FS-SAR-2 (4/2003)

Semiannual Reporting (SAR) Income Change Form

This form informs the recipient on Semiannual Reporting about the applicable gross income limit for the AU. If during the certification period the income exceeds the limit it must be reported to the AU Manager. The Spanish version will soon be available.

Revised Form

13-250-0303-05

EA-TRANS (Rev. 3/2003)

Homeless Transportation Request Form

The fax and telephone numbers have been updated on this form.

Elimination of Funding for Employment Services Program (ESP): Massachusetts One Stop Career Center

TAFDC

Field Operations Memo 2003-6B

The Massachusetts One Stop Career Center is designed to be a self-guided job search center. As such, recipients who participate, after attending the initial orientation, must use the resources of the One Stop Career Center (newspapers, computers) to look for employment.

This Field Operations Memo gives further instructions regarding the Massachusetts One Stop Career Center and recipients' responsibilities while participating in the One Stop Career Center.

Reinstatement of the Young Parent Program (YPP) Component

TAFDC

Field Operations Memo 2003-6C

YPP is an ESP educational component that meets Basic and Secondary Education requirements for teen parents. This Field Operations Memo informs TAO staff about the reinstatement of the Young Parent Program (YPP) component.

Change to Basic MassHealth

EAEDC

Field Operations Memo 2003-8

Effective April 1, 2003, Basic MassHealth for long-term unemployed adults ends. This termination impacts approximately 42,000 MassHealth recipients.

On Monday, March 17, these recipients were mailed a notice telling them about the termination and other ways to get MassHealth.

This termination does not impact EAEDC recipients. EAEDC recipients will continue to receive Basic MassHealth Coverage.

This Field Operations Memo informed TAO Staff about the mailing and the impact on EAEDC recipients and potential applicants.

Food Stamp Program – Changes to the Universal Semiannual Reporting Process

FS

State Letter 1251

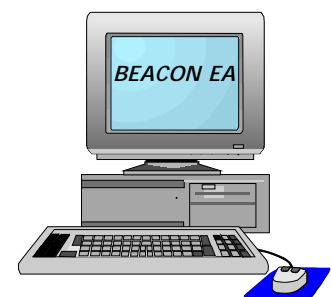
This State Letter adds two groups of recipients exempted from the Universal Semiannual Reporting process, specifically, self-employed recipients and recipients receiving rental income.

Also, only positive FS benefit changes are to be acted on during the recertification period. The exception to this is if the household's income exceeds the Maximum Gross Monthly Income Standards.

FYI

EA In-Kind Deduction

When reevaluating the eligibility of an EA AU, the in-kind deduction of \$148.50 for free shelter for a TAFDC AU will not be used in determining the EA financial eligibility. Be sure the "No" radio button is selected in the Countable EA field on the Other Income Status window.



MEDEX Premium Rate Changes

FS
Field Operations Memo
2003-9

Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Massachusetts has announced Medex premium rate changes to six non-group plans: Basic, Bronze, Gold, Standard, Core and Silver. These changes were effective on March 17, 2003.

This memo:

- identifies the non-group plans that have changed and the corresponding rate changes;
- identifies the date of the changes and the effect these changes will have on the amount of food stamp benefits;
- transmits information for the Medex Premium Rate - Update Report; and
- provides information on updates to food stamp benefits and the Medex premium amounts.



FYI

Changes to Policy Online

This month you will see the following changes to Policy Online.

Reference Documentation Window

- The Haverhill TAO and the Wareham TAO have closed.
- The Lawrence TAO is now responsible for the AUs previously assigned to the Haverhill TAO.
- The New Bedford TAO is now responsible for the AUs previously assigned to the Wareham TAO.

The following options listed on the Reference Documentation window have been updated to reflect these changes:

- Region Number/TAO Number/TAO Name Listing
- Service Area Listing – City/Town
- Service Area Listing – TAO

Related Systems Information Window

A new option BA has been added to the Related Systems Information window.

BA Window

The BA window displays the following options:

- BENDEX – which has information regarding the BENDEX process;
- SDX – which has information regarding the SDX process;
- SSA Claim Number– which has SSA Claim Number information; and
- Timing of Batch Recalculations - which explains the BENDEX and SDX recalculation processes.

BB Window

The SSA Claim Number has been deleted and appears as an option on the BA window.

Food Stamp Program Eligible Noncitizen Statuses and Deeming of Income and Assets for a Sponsored Noncitizen

FS and TAFDC

State Letter 1254

Field Operations Memo 2003-7A

Field Operations Memo 2003-7B

A User's Guide: Transitional Assistance Programs and BEACON Update 042

Effective April 1, 2003, the Farm Bill restores food stamp eligibility to qualified noncitizens as defined in 106 CMR 362.240 who have lived in the U.S. for five years or longer.

- A noncitizen present in the U.S. as a legal permanent resident is eligible for food stamp benefits after residing as a qualified noncitizen in the U.S. for five years. The seven-year eligibility limit has been removed.
- The regulations have expired regarding the three-year limit on deeming for noncitizens with an affidavit of support effective before December 19, 1997, and the TAFDC and Food Stamp regulations on this topic have been removed.
- The Food Stamp regulations for determining the amount of sponsor income and assets available to a noncitizen with an affidavit of support effective on or after December 19, 1997 have been revised.
- Field Operations Memo 2003-7A informs TAO staff that certain noncitizens who appear eligible under the Farm Bill of 2002 Noncitizen Restoration may be subject to noncitizen sponsor deeming rules. This memo discusses noncitizen sponsor deeming and provides instructions for calculating the income and/or assets to be deemed from the sponsor.
- Field Operations Memo 2003-7B notifies TAO staff that, based on BEACON noncitizen information, 4214 noncitizens (former SSFSP recipients) were automatically opened on federal food stamps effective April 1, 2003. These noncitizens were APs in existing FS AUs who appeared eligible for federal food stamp benefits under the noncitizen restoration rule. ***No AU Manager action is required to open these APs.***

- The Citizenship chapter in Update 042 includes information on legal noncitizens ineligible for federal food stamp benefits and on the benefit calculation that will be performed. It also includes the revised calculation for determining the income deemed to a sponsored noncitizen with an affidavit of support dated after December 19, 1997. References to SSFSP have been removed.

Food Stamp Farm Bill of 2002 Options

FS

State Letter 1255

State Letter 1255 transmits the following. The Farm Bill of 2002:

- mandates the use of an SUA if the Food Stamp AU incurs utility costs separate and apart from rent or mortgage expenses;
- eliminates actual utility expenses in excess of the SUA, and
- requires AUs that share utility costs to each receive the full SUA applicable to the AU.

Also, legally obligated child support payments will now be excluded from income for the purpose of applying the appropriate gross income test for the FS AU.

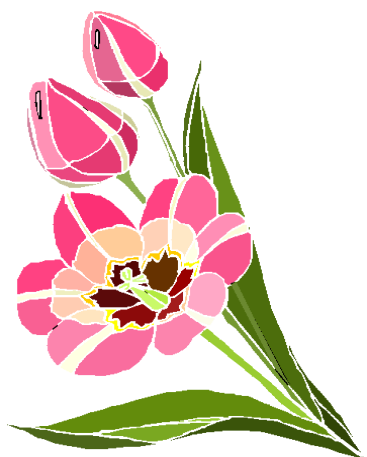
Social Security Number Verification Changes

All

State Letter 1253

A User's Guide: Transitional Assistance Programs and BEACON Update 041

- This State Letter changes regulations to allow applicants and recipients to provide verification of an SSN either orally or in writing. They no longer have to provide a Social Security card or other SSN verification. The Department will verify the number by computer match. This State Letter also eliminates the separate TAFDC and EAEDC SSN Regulations and combines them in 106 CMR 701.230. This material is effective April 14, 2003.
- The SSN Verification Matches documentation has been revised in Chapter II of *A User's Guide* to reflect the above change.



Food Stamp Changes

FS

A User's Guide: Transitional Assistance Programs and BEACON Update 041

Update 041 transmits food stamp changes as follows.

Chapter XIV: The Department has implemented Farm Bill of 2002 options which:

- Mandate the use of an SUA if the food stamp AU incurs utility costs separate and apart from rent or mortgage expenses. Note: BEACON automatically recalculated AUs meeting the following criteria:
 - if the *No. of AUs Sharing* field had a value greater than "1," the AU was recalculated using the full applicable SUA;
 - if *No SUA* was indicated and actual utility expenses were greater than \$0.00, the AU was recalculated using the full applicable SUA.
- Exclude legally obligated child support payments for the purpose of applying the appropriate gross income test for food stamp eligibility.

In addition, Update 041 transmits changes to semiannual reporting rules and categorical eligibility processing.

Chapter IV: The Department has modified Semiannual Reporting under the Farm Bill of 2002 option so that only positive changes are to be acted on when reported during the Semiannual Reporting period or at recertification.

Chapters IX, X and XV: Categorical eligibility processing changes were made so that AU Managers no longer have to make a preliminary determination of categorical eligibility or answer "No" to the Asset Q & A Navigator questions.

