

# Hotline Focus



To assist you in achieving the Department's error rate reduction goals, this month's Hotline Focus deals with food stamp error rate issues.

*q* Let's be realistic. I know there are many things I can do more accurately or carefully to keep down the error rate, but simply put - what can be my best strategy?

*a* In fact, the vast majority of errors are discovered by QC reviewers through fairly simple means. The two primary sources of errors found by QC reviewers were through **Case Record Review** and the **Recipient Interview** process.

Making sure that you ask about all circumstances that might possibly change is essential. Also ask questions that cannot be simply answered yes or no. Do not assume that circumstances are the same from one recertification to the next. Then be sure you accurately and timely complete the PACES TDs and Worksheets to maximize your chances that the case will be correct if selected by QC.

Careful, thorough and probing interview techniques can effectively lead to an accurate representation of household circumstances and an accurate benefit determination.

*q* In trying to obtain four consecutive paystubs, the household is missing the second or third week stub. What should I do?

*a* Often, the missing stub includes a non-representative week's pay due to overtime, bonus, etc. Failure to include this missing week results in an inaccurate average used to issue food stamp benefits.

Check the paystubs and if year-to-date (YTD) entries are made, you can recreate the missing pay and deduction figures. Otherwise, insist on a statement from the employer or other source for the missing information.

*q* One of my recipients called to tell me that she had started a job a week before. Her certification period is up in two months anyway and I'm overloaded. Is it all right to wait for the recertification?

*a* When a recipient notifies you of a change in circumstances, you **must** act on that information as quickly as you can or you will have an error. You have 10 days to act upon the change, but waiting any longer greatly increases your chances that QC or LOQC will select the case and identify the error. Both QC and LOQC regularly find errors caused by the worker taking the correct action too late to affect the benefits received by the recipient.

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**q** I spend a lot of time reviewing CIP information that is already known. Do CIPs really help keep the error rate down?

**a** CIP information is now more current and more comprehensive than in the past, based on a combination of local office feedback and constant fine tuning of CIP data. Additionally, the quarterly DOR/DET CIP Management Report provides local offices with feedback on statewide match results as well as office-specific statistics.

Although we cannot predict when individual CIP information will result in preventing an error, we do know that failure to act on CIP information has contributed significantly to the error rate.

You've done a good job recently processing CIPs! Continued effort in completing all CIP activity will result in taking full advantage of CIP error prevention capability. Unreported jobs are one of the hardest errors to detect, but CIPs can be effective in helping you.

**q** What can I do to prevent some types of shelter and/or utility errors in my food stamp caseload?

**a** Some things you can do include the following.

- Only allow that portion of rent or mortgage incurred as an expense. Be sure to ask if there are any rental subsidies being paid or

applied for, such as Section 8 or the Massachusetts Rental Voucher Program (MRVP).

- Determine if the housing includes heat or not and allow the appropriate Standard Utility Allowance (SUA). Often this information is contained in the casefile and is not accurately represented on the PACES TD.
- Prorate shelter and/or utility costs when appropriate.
- Be alert for receipt of LIHEAA-based fuel assistance for proper allowance of the heating SUA.

**q** My food stamp household contains a disabled member who qualifies for the medical expense deduction. This disabled member maintains a family health insurance plan at considerable monthly cost. Can the entire cost of the health insurance plan be added to other allowable medical costs in determining the excess medical deduction?

**a** No, the entire premium may not be allowed since other household members are not eligible for the medical deduction in their own right and may not claim their medical costs. Only that portion of the medical insurance premium assigned to the qualifying member(s) may be allowed. If it is not possible to specifically determine how much of the



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premium is for the qualifying member(s), the premium may be prorated to determine the allowable amount to use in calculating the medical deduction in excess of the \$35 threshold.

*q* Many of my food stamp recipients are unemployed and collecting Unemployment Compensation Benefits. Is there anything I should be particularly careful of?

*a* Yes, you should be particularly concerned about verifying and appropriately counting any dependent allowance your client may be collecting or eligible to collect as part of their Unemployment Compensation Benefit. Failure to count this frequently included dependent allowance amount has contributed to the food stamp error rate.

*q* U.S. Savings Bonds cannot be cashed in for a period of time after they are bought, unless there is an emergency. Are the bonds considered countable during this initial period?

*a* U.S. Savings Bonds must be counted as an asset unless they are determined to be inaccessible.

A person is allowed to cash U.S. Savings Bonds during the initial period (for example, the

initial six-month period for Series EE bonds) once in a lifetime for a medical or financial emergency. If it appears that a bond may be accessible to a food stamp household, it is counted as an asset unless the household can show that it has attempted to cash the bond and been unsuccessful.

The redeemable value of the bond is the amount that is counted.

*q* My food stamp household contains a man who is under a court-ordered wage assignment for a child support obligation for children by a prior marriage. His gross weekly pay is \$700 and \$125 net per week is automatically deducted for his child support obligation. What do we count as income for food stamps?

*a* The entire \$700 weekly gross pay is counted for food stamp purposes. Child support payments are **not** an allowable food stamp deduction.

It doesn't matter if the child support payments are paid voluntarily or deducted by court order. They are not deductible for Food Stamp Program purposes.

