

Transitions

February 2001
Vol. XVI No. 2



A Publication of the Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance

this month in...

Transitions

From the Hotline	2
From the Forms File	2
BEACON Stress Test	3
Emergency Assistance and TAFDC Work Program	4
Emergency Hotel/Motel Placement	4
FYI - DTAonline	5
Change in EA Shelter Billing Process	5
Quality Corner	6
<i>A User's Guide: Transitional Assistance Programs and BEACON Update 001</i>	7
FYI - Earned Income Credit (EIC)	7
FYI - BEACON Today	7
Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission (MRC) Working with TAFDC Recipients	8
Young Parents Program (YPP)	8
FYI - Change Reporting Notice	8

From the Commissioner

Dear Fellow Employees,

During the coming months a number of changes will be implemented in the Emergency Assistance (EA) program. State Letter 1198 outlines certain regulatory changes and you will soon receive a revised *Emergency Assistance Reference Guide* which will detail how the changes are to be implemented. Over the past several months you have received information on the new Housing Assistance Program (HAP) and may also be aware that the Department is completing a reprourement process for the family shelters we fund. These activities make clear the importance of coordinating and reviewing the services we provide homeless families. One aspect of this coordination and review that I see as critically important is the introduction of a Self-Sufficiency Plan for all families receiving shelter services through the EA program.

The Self-Sufficiency Plan is critical from two vantage points. First, it outlines for homeless families the activities to which they must commit to achieve the goal of permanent housing. It is clear that the Department, HAP and the shelter are available to assist the family—but the ultimate responsibility is the family's. Second, it requires the involvement and commitment of Department staff, HAP staff and shelter staff. In the past, efforts of these three groups may sometimes have lacked coordination. This is unacceptable because the homeless family thus lacks the support and assistance they need. The Self-Sufficiency Plan puts in place the necessary coordination among the agencies involved and puts the responsibility for success in the hands of the family by offering the necessary supports.

From the Hotline

- Q. Do we count the first \$600.00 of a lump sum payment received by an EAEDC recipient?
- A. No. The first \$600 of lump sum income is noncountable in the month of receipt in the EAEDC program; any portion exceeding the \$600 amount is countable as lump sum income in the month of receipt. See 106 CMR 321.240.
- Q. Can we authorize child care for a teen parent's child if the teen parent is in foster care?
- A. Yes. A teen parent in foster care who receives TAFDC for his or her child(ren), and who needs child care to attend high school or a GED program full-time, is eligible for child care. See 106 CMR 207.210.
- Q. An applicant purchased a \$3,000.00 diamond ring just prior to application. Do we count the value of the ring as an asset?
- A. Yes. If cash or other assets are *converted* into different assets just prior to application and the applicant receives fair market value for them, then the applicant still has the asset and may be denied for excess countable assets. If an applicant converts cash into other assets just prior to application to achieve eligibility, his or her assets may not be considered exempt without evidence of personal significance or sentimental value.

There are three issues that should be considered in determining whether an asset is countable or noncountable as a personal belonging:

- (1) personal significance or sentimental value of the object,
- (2) monetary value, and
- (3) relationship of time of purchase to the time of application.



From the Forms File

Revised Forms

AU Managers are reminded to discard the older versions of any revised form and use the revised form.

13-220-0101-05

TES-EPR-1 (Rev. 1/2001)

Emergency Placement Request

The revised TES-EPR-1 now collects information about a hotel/motel placement beyond 15 miles from the EA AU's last permanent address. Refer to *EA Reference Guide*, Chapter 3 for more information.

The following two forms are now available in Spanish.

02-738-1200-05 (S)

24-EXAGR (S) (Rev. 12/2000)

Extension Agreement

18-054-1200-05 (S)

AL-1 (S) (Rev. 12/00)

Appointment Letter

Revised Flyers

18-300-0101-05

18-301-0101-05 (S)

18-302-0101-05

EIC-1

Give Your Paycheck a Boost!

These three Earned Income Credit (EIC) flyers have been updated to reflect the year 2000 tax information. They should be placed in TAO reception areas.

Continued on Page 3

Poster

Give Your Paycheck a Boost!

This poster explains the Earned Income Credit (EIC). Posters should be displayed in Transitional Assistance Office reception areas.

BEACON Stress Test

All Field Operations Memo 2000-36

This Field Operations Memo informed TAO Staff about the BEACON Stress Test that took place on January 4, 2001. The Stress Test was used to evaluate response time, user capacity and time needed to complete various activities on BEACON.

I am not naive, nor do I think the introduction of the Self-Sufficiency Plan will resolve all the issues faced by the homeless families we serve. But I do believe it is a huge step in the right direction. The plan, of course, is just a piece of paper; but the process surrounding the plan is much more. A family confronted by homelessness is in crisis. And as with many life crises it is sometimes difficult at first to see a way out. An important first step in that process is sitting down and identifying what can, and frequently must, be done to move forward and overcome barriers. Equally important is figuring out what help may be needed and where that help can be found. The self-sufficiency process assists the homeless family in both these areas. The exact plan will be tailored to each family but will, in general, require a commitment on the family's part to do housing search and attend regular meetings with the HAP provider, and will include such things as a regular savings plan, job search or education and training and cooperation with appropriate services. In turn, the HAP provider will assist the family in a variety of ways to locate and maintain permanent housing. The shelter provider will proactively work with HAP, DTA and the family to monitor and assess the progress being made toward achieving the family's ultimate goal of self-sufficiency.

Homeless families, by definition homeless children, need help and support. Homeless families, like all families, must assume responsibility along with that help and support for taking steps to end their homelessness and provide their children with a permanent home. I firmly believe the Self-Sufficiency Plan is an important step in the right direction. Thank you for your support in implementing this important initiative.

Sincerely,



Claire McIntire
Commissioner



COMMUNICATION is the KEY

Emergency Assistance and TAFDC Work Program

TAFDC, EA State Letter 1198

This State Letter transmits changes and clarifications to the Emergency Assistance Program:

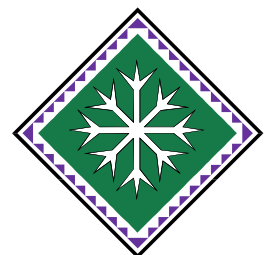
- an AU is ineligible for EA if it received EA within the past 12 months, except for specific situations;
- the Housing Assistance Program and Self-Sufficiency Plan requirements are explained;
- an AU that rejects a shelter placement, whether a family shelter or a hotel/motel, is ineligible for EA benefits;
- an AU that abandons a shelter placement without notifying the Department will have its shelter benefits terminated;
- with the approval of the Department, an AU may leave shelter placement for temporary housing and receive shelter again when the temporary housing ends;
- shelter termination notices will be sent 15 calendar days before the termination when the address of the AU is unknown and the notice is being sent to the last shelter address;
- an AU will be found noncompliant when it rejects one opportunity for safe housing;
- shelter placement pending an appeal decision will be in a shelter designated by the Department; and
- the AU must reimburse the Department for an amount claimed by a landlord when a security deposit is redeemed.

Also, meeting housing search requirements during the first 120 days in a shelter no longer fulfills the TAFDC work program requirement.

Emergency Hotel/Motel Placement

EA *Emergency Assistance Reference Guide* Update 005

- The Department must keep statistics of an EA AU placed in a hotel/motel beyond 15 miles from its last permanent address. The AU Manager completes the TES-EPR-1 form with the last permanent address of the EA AU; Central Office Housing Division determines if the hotel/motel placement is beyond the 15 miles and annotates the form.
- The TES-EPR-1 form has been revised to capture the last permanent address of the EA AU, the address of the hotel/motel and whether the distance is greater than 15 miles. Also, the time for requesting continued placement or notifying of a hotel/motel exit has been changed to 10:30 a.m.



FYI

DTAonline

DTAonline, the Department's intranet site, is now available to all Department employees. To access **DTAonline**:

- Open your web browser (Internet Explorer).
- Type **http://DTAonline** in the address bar and hit Enter.
- Right click on the page and click "Create Shortcut" for future reference.

If you need assistance, ask your EDP Coordinator.

This is a web-based application that provides employees with information on:

- Training:
 - Obtaining a transcript
 - Directions to sites
 - Training registration forms
 - Course descriptions
 - Calendar of Events
- Employee Information
 - Leave policies
 - Employee benefits
 - Personnel forms
 - Information on the Extended Illness Leave Bank (EILB)

- DTA Interactive
 - Send feedback about **DTAonline** to Central Office
 - Policy Online

Remember, if you have any feedback (comments, ideas, suggestions), please use the feedback form, accessible under DTA Interactive.

Change in EA Shelter Billing Process

EA Field Operations Memo 2001-4

Department-contracted shelters converted to a unit-rate billing process effective January 2001. Shelters have been instructed to make sure they get an SSPS invoice for any family placed in their shelter and not to accept a family unless the TAO contacts them.

This memo addresses both the shelters' and the TAOs' responsibilities in this new billing process.

- Having the EA-1 and SSPS invoice accurately entered on SSPS will help ensure an accurate monthly shelter log.
- The SSPS invoice will be given to the EA AU to take to the shelter, faxed to the shelter or the TAO will telephone the shelter with the invoice information.
- The shelter must have the control number from the SSPS invoice to submit the shelter bill.
- Any discrepancy on the monthly shelter log must be resolved for payment to be made. New shelter families, which enter the shelter after the 25th of the previous month, must be manually added to the log. The log must show the tally of monthly billable units and be signed by the shelter's director or billing officer.
- Shelters and TAOs are responsible for resolving discrepant information and ensuring that accurate information is submitted on the monthly shelter log.

Quality Corner

Rather than discuss specific error cases this month, we will look at the trends seen during the most recent QC “year” (October 1, 1999-September 30, 2000).

Quarterly Error Rates

The error-rate for the entire QC year was 8.4 percent. Because we measured errors slightly differently this year, the error rate was about the same as the previous year.

Over the course of the year the error rate varied quarter to quarter. The highest quarter (April to June 2000) was 11.1 percent. This was followed by the lowest quarter (July to September 2000) which was 4.2 percent. Some of this improvement surely resulted from the extensive case record review conducted by AU Managers last summer.

Agency- and Recipient-Caused Errors

Agency caused errors represented 62 percent of all errors throughout the year. To put that into perspective, if we could eliminate half the agency-caused errors, we would have an error rate of about 6 percent and would be among the lowest error-rate states in the country. That is certainly an achievable goal.

Thirty seven percent of all agency errors were household composition. These errors typically occur when someone is included in the federal food stamp assistance unit who did not belong, often someone who should have been receiving State Supplemental Food Stamp Program benefits. The second most common problem was treatment of unearned income, representing about a third of all agency-caused error payments. Counting child support was a primary problem last year. Issues with information received from DOR-CSEU last year have been corrected and DOR-CSEU information is now accurate and should be used.

Recipient errors were largely focused in earned income (50 percent of all recipient-caused errors, typically an unreported job) and shelter (18 percent, typically moving and not notifying the AU Manager). Recipient errors have traditionally been the most difficult to control because we rely on recipients telling us their circumstances in a timely manner. In Massachusetts, recipient errors represent less than four percent of the payments made, better than in most other states.

PA/NPA Cases

Most (60 percent) of the error payments were in cases handled by PA staff. Among those cases most errors were agency-caused (74 percent) with errors typically in household composition or unearned income. Among cases carried by NPA workers, less than half of the errors were agency caused (45 percent) with the errors largely occurring in earned income (41 percent, typically unreported jobs) and unearned income.

As we have seen in previous months, there remains much room for improvement in determining eligibility for food stamp benefits. Until the final quarter of the year we were in danger of facing penalties for an error rate above the national average. By continued focus on agency-caused errors, in particular, we should be able to better meet our goal of delivering food stamp benefits more accurately in Massachusetts.

**A User's Guide:
Transitional Assistance
Programs and BEACON
Update 001**

**TAFDC
Chapter XIII: Assessed
Person Nonfinancial
Statement**

This update transmitted two corrections to *A User's Guide: Transitional Assistance Programs and BEACON*.

Section H: Disability

- If the TAFDC applicant or recipient fails to return a completed Disability Supplement, the TAFDC applicant or recipient may still be eligible as a non-exempt person or eligible as exempt for another reason.


Section L: Immunization

- The reference in Chapter XIII, Section L for obtaining more information on verification has been changed to Chapter III, Section D, Verification Tab.

FYI

Earned Income Credit (EIC)

The notices shown below are being mailed to all active TAFDC, EAEDC and FS recipients during the month of February. The purpose of the mailing is to inform recipients of both the federal EIC and the Massachusetts EIC for earnings during the year 2000. In addition to the notices, federal EIC posters and flyers were sent to the Transitional Assistance Offices to be placed in the reception areas.



Give Your Paycheck a Boost! Claim Your Earned Income Credit

You could be eligible!
Did you work in 2000? You may be eligible for the Earned Income Credit. If so, you'll owe less in taxes and you could get cash back. Even if you don't owe income tax, you can get the EIC!

- Were you raising one child in your home in 2000? Did your family earn less than \$27,413? You can get up to \$2,353.
- Were you raising more than one child in your home in 2000? Did your family earn less than \$31,152? You can get up to \$3,888.
- If you weren't raising a child, did you earn less than \$10,380 in 2000? Were you between the ages 25 and 64? You can get up to \$353.


Here's how you get it:

- If you were raising children in 2000, file federal tax return Forms 1040 or 1040A, not Form 1040EZ. Be sure to attach Schedule EIC.
- If you weren't raising children in 2000, just file any federal tax return.

Boost your take-home pay! Eligible workers with children can get Advance EIC in their paycheck. Get Form W-5 from your employer, or call 1-800-TAX-FORM.

Want more information? Want to find out how you can get your tax forms filled out for free? Call the IRS toll-free at 1-800-829-1040.

A Tax Benefit for People Who Work



**Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance
Massachusetts Earned Income Credit**

A refundable Massachusetts Earned Income Credit is available to certain taxpayers who have earned income for 2000 and meet the requirements of the federal Earned Income Credit (EIC). The Massachusetts Earned Income Credit is equal to 10 percent of the federal EIC.

To qualify for the Massachusetts Earned Income Credit: (1) You must qualify for and claim the federal EIC for 2000; (2) You must file a Massachusetts tax return even if you do not owe any tax; (3) Your total taxable and nontaxable earned income must exceed \$1; and (4) Your total taxable and nontaxable income must be less than \$10,380 if you do not have a qualifying child, less than \$27,413 if you have a qualifying child, or less than \$31,152 if you have more than one qualifying child. There are some other rules you must meet to get the Massachusetts Earned Income Credit.

If you need information or have any questions about the Massachusetts Earned Income Credit or need other assistance on your state tax filing, please call the Massachusetts Department of Revenue (DOR) at (617) 887-MDOR or toll-free in Massachusetts 1-800-392-6089. MEIC (2001)

FYI

BEACON Today

All issues of "BEACON Today" have been added to Policy Online. This allows direct access to the information transmitted by the issues of "BEACON Today" and makes them readily available. Future issues of "BEACON Today" will continue to be issued electronically and will also be added to Policy Online.

Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission (MRC) Working with TAFDC Recipients

TAFDC

Field Operations Memo 2001-2

- DTA and MRC are working together to help TAFDC recipients with a mental and/or physical disability transition to economic self-sufficiency. The services provided by MRC will help TAFDC recipients wanting to prepare for work find and maintain employment of at least 20 hours per week. The interagency agreement is focused on job placement, short-term skills training and employment support programs. MRC will also provide job support services for a minimum of 90 days after job placement.
- Candidates for the program are TAFDC recipients determined disabled by Disability Evaluation Services (DES) and TAFDC recipients who, while not meeting the Department's disability standards, may have some impairment hindering their ability to work. Participation is voluntary and there is no sanction for recipients who decide not to complete the program.
- DTA will make every effort to refer a minimum of 200 recipients statewide and MRC will make every effort to place at least 50 TAFDC recipients referred by DTA into employment.

Young Parents Program (YPP)

TAFDC

Field Operations Memo 2001-3

This Field Operations Memo informs TAO staff about changes to the Young Parents Program (YPP). The YPP provider will review and reassess the progress of participants after five months of active YPP participation. The YPP provider may review the participant's progress before five months if the YPP provider determines it is in the participant's best interests.

FYI

Change Reporting Notice

A Change Reporting Notice is being mailed to SSI recipients (Category 9 - Program Code D) during the month of February. The purpose of this mailing is to remind them to report any changes which may affect eligibility or the amount of their benefits.



**Every
Job
is
a
Good
Job**