

Transitions



A Publication of the Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance

this month in...

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From the Commissioner

Dear Colleagues,

Working at Central Office and visiting local TAOs over the past several weeks, I've been encouraged by the way so many of you perform on the job. Whether showing your abilities to grasp complex program information or keeping pace with the breadth of available client resources, the positive impact of your efforts is apparent and substantial.

To build upon these valuable contributions, I'd like us to begin finding ways to be even more effective at helping our clients achieve economic stability. Last month, we looked at the role quality customer service plays in meeting our Department's mission. Key to any solid customer service approach is clear and straightforward communication between our Department and the clients we serve.

Strong communication skills become even more critical when asking our clients to fulfill certain program requirements. For example, our TAFDC work program requirement is in place to help families get the jobs and training they need to become financially self-supporting, but for a variety of reasons these requirements are not always met.

As we work toward engaging our clients in work, I'd like us to first ensure that we have done our best to help families meet our participation requirements. This means that once a full explanation of our work program is presented, we need to ask our clients about any potential barriers they may have to participation. If a client is unable to participate in one of our ESP components, in addition to the available support services from us (child care, transportation, domestic violence) he or she may benefit from a referral to one of our partnering agencies (Department of Social Services,

Continued on Page 2

Department of Mental Health, Department of Public Health, Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission, F.O.R. Families, etc.).

Over the next few months, we will be taking a closer look at our work program requirements as well as the work program sanctions we have in place to determine whether there are ways to improve the process. In the meantime, as Department employees, we need to do all that we can to ensure that the sanctions currently in place are applied consistently, prudently and only as a last resort. We can best achieve this by maintaining a positive dialogue with our clients, providing them with a complete explanation of the work program and what it entails, helping individuals plan for any anticipated challenges through a careful assessment of their needs, providing support services, referring families to specialists and/or our partnering agencies and exploring good cause reasons for those unable to meet their obligations. Reducing the benefits available to already low income families is a drastic step that should only be made after we have taken all appropriate steps to support the family, and determined that there are no good cause reasons that explain the noncompliance.

At the same time that I am enlisting your support in this effort, I have also begun a review of our shelter noncompliance policies and practices. In a letter sent last month to our contracted shelter providers, I made a similar appeal for understanding, uniformity, intervention and fairness when implementing noncompliance procedures. We are asking shelter providers to only refer the most serious noncompliant situations, such as when a family member poses a danger to himself or others, engages in criminal behavior or uses illegal substances while residing in shelter.

Our objective is to ensure that shelter rules are uniform statewide, that clients have a complete understanding of the rules as well as the reasons these rules are in place, and that providers work with clients to develop environments that support problem solving through timely intervention. We want to minimize future instances of noncompliance by maximizing the amount of information, support and services given to shelter residents. In the future, we also plan to provide technical assistance and include “best practice” guidance on self-sufficiency and family stabilization.

When clients succeed in finding jobs or locating housing, we all succeed.

Quality Corner

This month we will discuss an earned income error that occurred in a Universal Semianual Reporting AU.

Earned Income and Travel Reimbursement AU

This was an NPA AU that was certified as a Universal Semianual Reporting AU. The client regularly received a travel allowance from her job because she used her own car to travel from one work location to another. One of the paystubs showed that she received a \$10 bonus as well as a travel allowance. When the recertification was processed, both the travel allowance and the bonus were included in the calculation. The inclusion of the bonus was correct; however, counting the travel allowance as part of her gross income caused an underissuance error for the review month.

What's an AU Manager to Do?

Reimbursements for past or future expenses are excluded income per 106 CMR 363.230(F). Since this payment was specifically designated as a travel reimbursement, it should not have been counted in the food stamp benefit calculation. At the time of application or

recertification, it is important for AU Managers to carefully review each paystub. The AU Manager must consult policy, his or her supervisor or have the hotline designee call if clarification is needed on how to treat reimbursements or variable line items, such as flexible credits, appearing on a paystub.

From the Forms File

Revised Forms

09-070-0607-05

09-079-0607-05 (S)

FSP-INFO (Rev. 6/2007)

How to Get Food Stamp Benefits

The Income Standard for households without children under 19 or without elderly or disabled household members has been revised to reflect the increased Maximum Gross Monthly Income Standard.

09-375-0607-05

09-376-0607-05 (S)

FS-USR-2 (Rev. 6/2007)

Universal Semiannual Reporting (USR) Income Guidelines Form

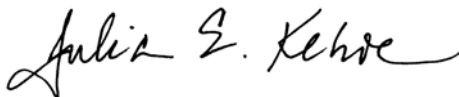
The Categorical Eligibility USR AU Gross Monthly Income Standards have been revised to reflect the increased Maximum Gross Monthly Income Standards.

09-250-0707-05

09-251-0707-05 (S)

As we redouble our efforts towards reducing homelessness, increasing opportunities for economic self-sufficiency and improving customer service, I want to thank you all for your dedication to these priorities.

Sincerely,



Julia E. Kehoe, Commissioner

From the Forms File (con't)

RR-FSP-1B (Rev. 7/2007)

Notice of Rights, Responsibilities and Penalties

The RR-FSP-1B will now be called the *Notice of Rights, Responsibilities and Penalties* and will no longer contain a signature line. This form will be sent to the applicant with the BEACON application, with no requirement to sign and return the form to DTA. Refer to Field Operations Memo 2007-32 for more information. An initial supply of the revised RR/FSP-1B form has been sent to the TAOs. **Important:** These forms should be held and not used until Central Office confirms the Virtual Gateway implementation changes via e-mail on July 18, 2007.

09-510-0707-05

09-511-0707-05 (S)

FSP/SSA-1 (Rev. 7/2007)

Application for Food Stamp Benefits (For Pure SSI Households)

The FSP/SSA-1 is used by SSI households who apply for food stamp benefits at Social Security Administration (SSA) offices. It has been revised to include additional signature language. Refer to Field Operations Memo 2007-32 for more information.

The following Domestic Violence brochures are now available in the following languages.

02-616-0607-05 (Spanish)

02-650-0607-05 (Portuguese)

02-651-0607-05 (Russian)

02-652-0607-05 (Vietnamese)

02-654-0607-05 (Haitian Creole)

DVB (Rev. 6/2007)

Domestic Violence Brochure

From the Hotline

Q. A food stamp applicant reported that she is living at her friend's apartment. She has verified her portion of the rent and utilities through cancelled checks. In this situation, do I need to have a completed Shared Housing Verification form (VLA) (Rev. 10/2006) before approving the AU?

A. No. The Shared Housing Verification form can be a convenient method of verifying housing and shared living arrangements, but it is not required as the only method of verification. Shared shelter costs can be verified in a variety of ways, including a copy of the applicant's sublet agreement, rent receipts, cancelled checks, or other proof of the applicant's portion of the shelter costs.

Q. When a client who is living with a roommate states that she is purchasing and preparing her meals separately from her roommate, is any type of written verification necessary?

A. No. Unless you have reason to believe that the information your client is reporting is questionable, it is not necessary for a client to verify that he or she is purchasing and preparing separately from a roommate. The "purchase and prepare" rule only needs to be verified when the information provided by the household is questionable. Remember, however, to put a note on the BEACON Narratives Tab explaining the situation.

In accordance with 106 CMR 361.620, "questionable" information is information that is inconsistent with statements made by the applicant, with other information on the application or previous application, or with other information known to the Department.

EA - S2H Toolbox Relocation Initiative Clarification

EA

Field Operations Memo 2007-27A

This memo provides clarification that:

- the housing obtained through the S2H initiative is transitional housing that will lead to permanent housing at the end of the 12-month period;
- if the family is unable to maintain the S2H housing or loses the housing through no fault of its own, the family may still be

eligible for EA shelter benefits since the 12-month rule would not apply;

- an S2H payment for rent will not affect the food stamp benefits; any *S2H Toolbox Relocation Initiative* or *Toolbox* payment must be excluded as income; and food stamp benefits are based on the client's portion of the rent; and
- the family is responsible for maintaining its income after placement; they must notify the agency that is providing stabilization services if they begin having financial difficulties.

Food Stamp Heat and Eat (H-EAT) Fuel Assistance Program Initiative and Clean-Up

FS

Field Operations Memo

2007-31

2007-31A

Food Stamp Program rules at 106 CMR 364.400(G)(2) allow Assistance Units (AUs) receiving or anticipating receipt of Low Income Housing Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) fuel assistance payments to have food stamp benefits calculated using the maximum heating/

cooling Standard Utility Allowance (SUA). These AUs are considered to be paying utility expenses even if there is no separate charge for utilities. Receipt of a fuel assistance payment also entitles these AUs to public utility discounts administered through the Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD).

For the past year, DTA, DHCD and Massachusetts Law Reform Institute have collaborated to develop and implement a new fuel assistance program. This collaboration resulted in the H-EAT Fuel Assistance Program.

The H-EAT Fuel Assistance Program will provide certain FS AUs with a \$1.00 H-EAT fuel assistance check each year. This is a one-time benefit for 12 months. In July 2007, the first H-EAT fuel assistance payments will be mailed to approximately 39,000 FS AUs. July 2007 FS benefits were recalculated using the heating/cooling SUA for recipients of the H-EAT Fuel Assistance Program.

Field Operations Memo 2007-31 identifies H-EAT Fuel Assistance Program criteria, explains the responsibilities of DTA and DHCD, discusses client benefits and describes the DHCD client brochure.

A delay in issuing Field Operations Memo 2007-31, resulted in the Heating/Cooling Standard Utility Allowance (SUA) being removed from approximately 600 H-EAT eligible FS AUs, as AU Managers were not informed of this change. Field Operations Memo 2007-31A provides instructions for correcting these AUs so that July 2007 benefits can be increased. In some instances, a supplemental payment for July must be calculated and issued. An FS H-EAT Clean-Up Report identifying the impacted AUs was transmitted along with this memo.

Virtual Gateway Enhancements and the Elimination of the Signature Page for Food Stamp Applications

FS

Field Operations Memo 2007-32

Currently scheduled for July 18, 2007, the Virtual Gateway online food stamp application will be modified to comply with the USDA minimal application requirements of name, address and signature.

It will also be enhanced to allow applicants to submit an electronic signature. This enhancement will streamline the application process and eliminate the need for a Web applicant to sign and return the Notice of Rights, Responsibilities and Penalty Warning (RR/FSP-1B). In addition, the one-page Application For Food Stamp Benefits (For Pure SSI Households) (FSP/SSA-1) has been modified to contain attestation language and eliminate the signature page for SSI applicants. The RR/FSP-1B has also been revised and reissued as a Notice of Rights, Responsibilities and Penalties form.

This memo informs TAO staff about:

- the minimum requirements change;
- the electronic signature functionality;
- the revised FSP/SSA-1 form; and
- the revised RR/FSP-1B form.

On July 18, 2007 Central Office will send TAOs an e-mail message to confirm the implementation of the Virtual Gateway changes.

“Try not to be a man of success, but rather to be a man of value.”
Albert Einstein

EA - Toolbox

EA

Field Operations Memo 2007-33

This memo informed TAO staff about Toolbox money that was available for prevention until June 30, 2007 as a Housing Assistance Program (HAP) service. The Housing & Homeless Services Unit provided lists to TAOs of potentially eligible families identified by HAP providers. To receive the Toolbox service an approved EA application was required.

Random Moment Sampling Email Survey System

TAFDC

Field Operations Memo 2007-34

Effective April 2, 2007 and continuing through June 30, 2007, the Department began testing a new email and Web-based RMS survey process in the Lowell, Milford and Taunton TAOs.

Effective July 2, 2007, the new RMS Web-based system was rolled out statewide. The RMS Web-based survey process randomly assigns survey moments to individual AUMs in a similar fashion as the current phone-based system. A key advantage of the Web-based email system is that it is more efficient and less burdensome to staff. It will allow AUMs to better manage their time by increasing the flexibility and ease in responding to the RMS surveys.

Prior to July 2, 2007, all appropriate staff were required to attend training sessions offered by the Central Office Random Moment Sampling Coordinators. The training demonstrated how to properly respond and complete the RMS survey using the Web-based system.

Client Survey - New Initiative

All

The *New Initiative: Client Survey Memo* tells TAO staff that the Department will be conducting a survey to measure client satisfaction with service delivery. The survey was developed with input from various groups within the Department. It will be mailed to randomly selected, current clients with a stamped, self-addressed envelope they may return to Central Office. It will also be available to walk-in clients in each TAO, with the option to mail the completed survey to Central Office or to leave it at the TAO for later

return to Central Office. The surveys will remain confidential and results will be measured Department-wide. When results have been collected and reviewed, they will be reported to DTA staff.

A supply of client surveys will be shipped to TAOs in coming weeks, as will specific instructions for survey distribution and collection in each office. The Department is also in the process of developing a survey for staff to identify additional areas where improvements with service delivery might be made. More information will be forthcoming as it becomes available.

Brockton Food Stamp Call Center - New Initiative

FS

To promote increased participation in the Food Stamp Program, the Department has established a pilot program, the "Brockton Food Stamp Call Center." This New Initiative Memo provides an overview of the Call Center's functions including:

- answering general food stamp questions about eligibility and the application process, and about the status of applications and ongoing cases;

- initiating Requests for Assistance (RFAs) on mailed, faxed, dropped off and Web applications received in the TAO;
- advising applicants/recipients of verification requirements; and
- advising applicants/recipients on the importance of reporting changes.

TAFDC, EA and Food Stamps - 2007 HHS Poverty Guidelines

All
State Letter 1324

Effective February 1, 2007, BEACON was updated with the increased eligibility standards based on the 2007 HHS Poverty Guidelines. These guidelines are used to calculate the eligibility standards in the following programs:

1. TAFDC: *Income from the Parent(s) of a Teen Parent Under Age 18* (200 percent of poverty guideline);
2. EA: *EA Eligibility Standard* (130 percent of poverty guideline); and
3. Food Stamps: *Gross Monthly Categorical Eligibility Income Standards* (200 percent of poverty guideline).

State Letter 1324 transmits changes to TAFDC, Food Stamp and EA regulations due to the increase in the HHS Poverty Guidelines.

Termination of Temporary Emergency Shelter Benefits Based on Criminal Activity

EA

State Letter 1325

This State Letter clarifies the regulation for terminating shelter benefits for criminal activity.

EA - Right to a Fair Hearing

EA

State Letter 1326

This State Letter clarifies that an EA family unit has the right to a fair hearing regarding whether the Department has placed the family within 20 miles of the family's home community, has transferred the family to an emergency shelter placement within 20 miles of its home community at the earliest possible date, or has made every effort to ensure that a child receiving emergency shelter continues attending school in the community in which he or she lived prior to receiving EA, unless requested otherwise.

FYI

BEACON Online Help Update Issued in June 2007

BEACON Online Help Update Issue # 10 (06/22/07)

FYI

Changes to DTA Online

This month you will see the following changes to DTA Online:

Administration and Finance

The list of available options includes the link entitled *Interpreter Services*. When selected the following links appear:

- *DTA Telephonic Interpreters' Services Memo* - displays the memo issued by Assistant Commissioner for Administration and Finance Carin Kale;
- *How to Use TeleInterpreters' Language Services* - displays the instructional aid for using the TeleInterpreters' Language Services;

Continued from Page 7

- *TAO Interpreter List* - displays the list of interpreters by language; and
- *Interpreter Request Form* - displays the Interpreter Request Form also available from the Policy Online/*Online Forms* option.

Diversity - Events

The Diversity Event for June 2007 was entitled *Gay and Lesbian Pride Month*. Selecting the *Events* option displays a summary of *Gay and Lesbian Pride Month*.

FYI

Changes to the EOHHS mass.gov DTA Home Page

This month you will see the following changes to the EOHHS mass.gov /DTA home page.

News and Updates

The News and Updates section contains a new link entitled *DTA Moves Dorchester to Dudley Square*. When selected, the press release announcing the Dorchester TAO move to Dudley Square is displayed.

Research and Statistics

The link entitled *DTA Facts and Figures* displays caseload information, grant level, eligibility standards and FY07 appropriations for June.



FYI

Changes to Policy Online

The Dorchester TAO is now the Dudley Square TAO. The Boston Family Housing TAO, previously located at the Dorchester TAO, is now located at the Dudley Square TAO.

The following tables in Policy Online have been revised to reflect these changes.

Related Systems Information

- Service Area Listing - City/Town
- Service Area Listing - TAO
- TAO Informational Listing

BB Options

- Financial History Report Codes



FYI

Legal Permanent Resident Noncitizen Requirements

Policy states that EAEDC applicants who are Legal Permanent Resident (LPR) noncitizens must be working towards becoming citizens (See 106 CMR 320.620 (B)(1)(b)) if they are eligible for citizenship within the next three years. AU Managers must assist these applicants by referring them to agencies that will help them become citizens. Generally, noncitizens who get their LPR status through marriage may apply for citizenship two years after getting their LPR status. Noncitizens who get their LPR status through a way other than marriage may apply for citizenship four years after getting their LPR status.

While applicants should be working towards becoming citizens if possible, failing to do so should not prevent their applications from being approved. Therefore, when generating a VC-1, do not list “Effort to Become a Citizen” as required verification at initial application. If otherwise eligible, these Noncitizens must be approved for EAEDC following established procedures. An LPR who is eligible to apply for citizenship but refuses to cooperate, without good cause, may face termination of benefits. Remember, good cause exceptions to this requirement may include financial hardship (i.e., inability to afford citizenship application fee) or unavailability of community resources to assist with the citizenship application.

If you have any questions about this policy, please have your hotline designee call the Policy Hotline.

