

Information re 2019 Federal Government Shutdown & Impact on Benefits Programs

The U.S. federal government shutdown went into effect on December 21, 2018. This has caused great hardship as well as concern and confusion for many people, particularly for individuals and families who receive federally-funded assistance programs. Massachusetts Law Reform Institute (MLRI) has compiled the following information on the federal government shutdown and specifically what is happening to low income residents who receive or are applying for food assistance, health care or cash assistance benefits. The following briefly summarizes the state of several core assistance programs in Massachusetts as of January 24, 2019 and includes resources and information for individuals affected.

Food Assistance – SNAP Benefits (updated 1/30/19):

Current status of SNAP Benefits: Massachusetts joined all states during the shutdown in issuing February benefits to SNAP households before January 20th, in accordance with an emergency USDA directive. The Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA) issued February SNAP benefits to roughly 93% of SNAP households between January 17th and 20th. DTA has continued processing pending cases and new applications under normal business procedures.

DTA is to be commended for its quick respond to the shutdown crisis and ensuring the vast majority of SNAP households were issued early benefits, especially given the dire consequences had the shutdown continued into February.

However, there continues to be widespread confusion about the early issuance of February SNAP benefits and the fact that many SNAP recipients spent their advance benefits quickly for fear that unspent SNAP benefits would be taken away in February. This concern was exacerbated by confusing media reports, the January 20 winter storm, and multiple “EBT outages” around January 18th at grocery stores across the Commonwealth that caused EBT transactions to stop for 30 to 60 minutes at a time.

It is important to stress to your constituents: *USDA will NOT take away any unused SNAP benefits in February. When possible, households can and should try to save their SNAP for February usage.* Nonetheless, civil legal aid, food banks and the anti-hunger community have already received many calls from SNAP recipients confused and worried about what is going on with their SNAP and what will happen in the future. Many food pantries are reporting a spike in emergency food requests.

Right now, the next SNAP benefit to be issued for the 93% who got their February benefits early will not be until an issuance day during the first two weeks in March.¹ This is an extraordinarily long time for families to wait, especially given February's week of school vacation where kids will be missing out on free breakfast and lunches. We anticipate an increased demand for emergency food at local food pantries and an uptick in SNAP recipients contacting DTA and other agencies to find out when they will get their next SNAP benefit. The average SNAP benefit is roughly \$124/month/person – even under normal circumstances, SNAP is never enough to cover a full month worth of food.

Unless the state can issue an additional state supplemental SNAP payment or can shift the dates for issuing March SNAP benefits, households will experience a gap between February's early issuance and March benefits of 40 to 56 days. 30% of MA SNAP households will experience a gap of 50 or more days, according to a [report from the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities \(dated 1/29/19\)](#).

If the shutdown resumes after February 15th, SNAP will still be funded for March benefits. If the shutdown resumes and continues into March, April benefits may need to be issued early (similar to the procedures used for February's SNAP). However, there is much unknown about how USDA and states will handle issuance after March should the shutdown proceed.

MLRI continues to work closely with DTA to get clear information out to low income SNAP recipients, and with the statewide and regional anti-hunger network about the residual impact of the shutdown and potential impact if the shutdown resumes after February 15th.

Materials and resources:

- Here's a [link to DTA's shutdown webpage](#), which includes a helpful Q &A for SNAP households and community groups. DTA will be regularly updating that webpage, as well as updating their recording on the main DTA Assistance Line: 1-877-382-2363.
- Project Bread's [Food Source Hotline](#) can also advise constituents and refer individuals to key emergency food resources.

Food Assistance – WIC, School Meals and TEFAP (updated 1/30/19):

Currently, Women Infant and Children's (WIC) nutritional program, school meals through the National School Lunch Program, and the Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) are funded and being administered as normal.

However, state MEFAP funds for emergency food may be insufficient to meet growing costs and demand connected to the gap between early issuance of SNAP and March benefits.

¹ Massachusetts issues SNAP benefits on a "staggered issuance" cycle over the first 14 days of each month, based on the last digit of the head of household's SSN. Many states stagger the dates SNAP is issued to help with case processing of cases and food stocking at stores.

If the shutdown goes back into effect after February 15th, we will update this document with any impact on WIC, School Meals, and TEFAP.

Cash Assistance and Other Benefits and Services Funded with the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Block Grant (updated 1/29/19)

In December, Congress extended the authorization for states to draw down TANF funding, but that extension expired on January 21. Massachusetts gets \$458 million a year in federal TANF funds – more than \$1 million a day. The state uses more than half the funds for child care. About a third is applied to college scholarships. Ten percent goes to child welfare. A small amount is used for cash assistance (welfare) grants for families.

In Massachusetts, the programs are technically paid for with state appropriations so they would not have been at immediate risk, but a continued shortfall in TANF funding would have wreaked havoc on the state's budget and could have led the Governor to exercise his powers to reduce the appropriations. Fortunately, on January 10, 2019, Congressman Richard Neal (D. Springfield), the new Chair of the House Ways and Means Committee, introduced a bill ([H.R. 430](#)) to extend TANF funding through June 30, 2019. The bill passed the House on January 14, 2019; the Senate passed it on January 22, 2019. The President [signed it](#) on January 24, 2019, the day before he agreed to the three-week hiatus in the shutdown.

EAEDC, Veterans Services, SSI, SSI state supplement:

The Emergency Aid to Elders, Disabled and Children (EAEDC) and the Supplemental Security Income state supplement are not currently at risk. Both of these programs are paid for by state appropriations. Veterans Services Chapter 115 Program benefits – which are local and state-funded – are also not at risk. See the [Chpt 115 Self Help Guide](#). Federal Veterans benefits are also not affected by the shutdown, though support and assistance could be limited. Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits are fully funded through September.

Medical Assistance – MassHealth , Medicare, etc:

Federal Health and Human Services (HHS) is funded through Sept 2019. That means MassHealth recipients should not need to worry about the effect of the federal government partial shut-down on MassHealth, Medicare and most other government-funded health programs (except for the Indian Health Service, which is not funded by HHS, for example in [Mashpee](#)). We will send you updates as they become available.

Federally Subsidized Housing:

Low income families and elder/disabled tenants that receive federal rental assistance are facing severe hardship now, which will worsen if the shutdown extends into February or March. Under the shutdown, nationwide HUD cannot renew up to 1,150 rental assistance

contracts with private landlords, contracts that expired in December or will expire in January or February. In Massachusetts, 56 privately-owned HUD subsidized developments in Massachusetts are liable to lose their funding which will affect the safety and security of 1,650 low income households.

Materials and resources:

- [Fact sheet from The Campaign for Housing & Community Development](#) showing which Massachusetts developments are in peril
- The Center for Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP) also has a useful [detailed memo \(1/10/19\)](#) on HUD guidance and potential impact around the country
- [WBUR article](#) January 16, 2019

Other HUD programs losing or at risk of losing funding include:

202 Housing for the Elderly
Disaster Recovery Funding (& Merrimack Valley Gas Investigation on hold)
Public Housing
Rural Housing
Local grants including CDBG and HOME

For details - See [Fact sheet from The Campaign for Housing & Community Development](#)

Unemployment Insurance:

Approximately 25,000 federal workers are employed in Massachusetts. Federal employees who are not working because of the shutdown furlough may be eligible for UI benefits (federal employees who are working but not getting paid during the shutdown period are not be eligible for unemployment benefits because a person who is working, even if unpaid, is not “unemployed” under UI law). If Congress approves retroactive pay for furloughed employees, employees who have received UI will have to pay those benefits back. Here is a link to more information from the [Department of Unemployment Assistance](#) about UI eligibility for furloughed federal employees.

Efforts are underway in some states to find a way to provide UI benefits to furloughed federal workers who are nevertheless required to report to work, but the Department of Labor is cautioning states that doing so may place the states out of compliance with current federal law. Here is a link to additional information on that issue, together with steps that states can take to help facilitate the UI application process of those federal workers who are eligible: <https://tcf.org/content/commentary/unemployment-help-reach-furloughed-federal-workers/?session=1>

MLRI will continue to provide new updates, resources and information for the duration of the shutdown.

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