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Field Operations Memo 2003-14
July 1, 2003

To: Transitional Assistance Office Staff

From: *cd* Cescia Derderian, Assistant Commissioner for Field Operations

Re: Program Access Review

Overview

Food stamp outreach is a priority for the Department and the United States Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service (USDA-FNS). TAOs have been very successful in increasing Food Stamp Program (FSP) participation rates while keeping error rates low. In the last year FSP participation increased by 25%, while at the same time the error rate decreased by 25%.

To ensure increased FSP participation, USDA-FNS performed a Program Access review in June 2002 at two TAO's. The review included:

- an analysis of 296 new, closed and denied PA and NPA food stamp AUs for the sample month of March 2002;
- interviews with several TAO staff members and food stamp applicants/recipients; and
- observations of daily operations in the TAO's reception/waiting areas.

As stated by USDA-FSN, "the review determined that, overall; DTA staff adheres to FSP rules and provides clients with appropriate access to benefits in a pleasant, organized environment. USDA-FNS reviewers found that, generally, the TAOs comply with the rules and regulations governing both customer service and access to the FSP." However, a few important things to keep in mind were identified and are addressed in this memo.

Purpose of Memo

The purpose of this memo is to inform TAO staff of USDA-FNS findings in the Program Access review and reinforce TAO staff responsibilities regarding food stamp policy and procedures. Below are a few important things that TAOs must keep in mind when processing AUs.

- Be aware of the minimum information necessary to consider an FSP application filed.
- Approve FSP applications within application timeframes, including mail-in applications.
- Deny FSP applications within application timeframes.
- Issue the correct food stamp benefit for reinstated AUs.
- Generate correct notices.

Minimum Application Information Needed to Consider an FSP Application Filed

The reviewers found that some AU Managers were unaware of the minimum information needed to consider an FSP application filed. An FSP application is considered filed the day the TAO receives an application containing the following information:

- applicant's name;
- applicant's address; and
- applicant's signature or the signature of the AU's authorized representative in accordance with 106 CMR 361.120.

Important: Reviewers found that, in some instances, food stamp applications were not signed. **To consider an application filed, it must be signed.**

See 106 CMR 361.100 for more information on filing an FSP application.

Approve FSP Applications Within Application Timeframes, Including Mail-in Applications

The reviewers found that some FSP applicants were not issued food stamp benefits according to the required 30-calendar-day processing standard. AU Managers are reminded that eligible AUs must be provided food stamp benefits within 30 calendar days following the date of application. See 106 CMR 361.700 for further details on Timeliness Standards for Processing.

This 30-calendar-day processing standard also applies to mail-in FSP applications. The reviewers found that, in some instances, mail-in FSP applications did not get entered in BEACON timely. This caused the applicant to miss a month of benefits which then had to be restored by the AU Manager. See 106 CMR 361.140 for more information on Mailing Applications to Households.

FSP applicants who are eligible for expedited service must be provided expedited service within seven days. See 106 CMR 365.800 et seq for more information.

Deny FSP Applications According to Application Timeframes

The reviewers found that some FSP applications were improperly denied before the 30th day following the application for failure to appear for an interview.

If the applicant fails to appear for the scheduled application interview, the AU Manager must send a Notice of Pending/Denial. This notice notifies the applicant that he or she missed the application interview and that it is the applicant's responsibility to reschedule the interview.

- If the applicant reschedules the interview and is determined eligible within the initial 30-day period, food stamp benefits must be issued from the original date of the application.
- If the applicant does not contact the TAO to reschedule, the FSP application must be denied on day 30 and the Notice of Denial must be sent. **The application cannot be denied prior to the 30th day.**

Remember: If an applicant applies for cash and food stamp benefits together and the cash is denied for failure to appear for the scheduled application interview before day 30, the food stamp AU must continue to pend and not be denied prior to the 30th day.

See 106 CMR 361.700 for further details on Timeliness Standards for Processing.

**Issue the
Correct Food
Stamp Benefit
For Reinstated
AUs**

The reviewers found that some AU Managers reinstated full food stamp benefits rather than prorated food stamp benefits.

An AU that fails to submit a timely recertification, appear for a mandatory interview or provide required verification by the last day of its current certification period loses its right to uninterrupted benefits. See 106 CMR 366.300 for more information.

**Generate
Correct Notices**

The reviewers found that some system-generated notices were inaccurate. Some notice errors included incorrect language, wrong certification periods, incomplete notices or no notices.

To ensure the correct English or Spanish notice is generated, the AU Manager must select the correct language on the Assessed Person window.

Reminder: AU Managers must remember to enclose a multilingual card whenever a manual notice, such as the NFL-5, is sent to an applicant or a recipient.

To generate accurate and detailed notices, the AU Manager must complete all windows correctly without conflicting information. If conflicting information is entered, an accurate EBC notice will not be generated.

Also, some AU actions require a two-day process. This two-day process will not only ensure that the correct benefit is released but will also produce correct notices for each transaction. If two-day transactions are not selected on separate days and are both selected at the same time, the notice will default to the notice hierarchy and inform the recipient of that one transaction only. For more information on two-day transactions see *A User's Guide*, Chapter XVII.

For more information on FSP notices see 106 CMR 364.810 et seq.

Questions

If you have any questions, please have your Hotline designee call the Policy Hotline at 617-348-8478.
