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Field Operations Memo 2004-40
October 22, 2004

To: Transitional Assistance Office Staff
From:  Cescia Derderian, Assistant Commissioner for Field Operations
Re: Annual Program Access Review

Overview

The Department of Transitional Assistance and the United States Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service (USDA-FNS) have a mutual goal of increasing food stamp participation rates for eligible households while maintaining a low error rate. In the last year, Massachusetts's food stamp participation rate has increased by 24 percent while the food stamp error rate has decreased by 50 percent which is a great achievement.

**USDA
Program
Access
Review
Findings**

USDA-FNS conducted an annual Program Access Review at two TAOs in August 2003. The review included:

- an analysis of 264 new, closed and denied PA and NPA food stamp AUs for the sample month of June 2003;
- interviews with several TAO staff members and food stamp applicants/recipients; and
- observations of daily operations in the TAO's reception/waiting areas.

In a letter to the Commissioner, USDA concluded: "There has been a dramatic increase in program participation over the past year, as a direct result of your Agency's hard work, dedication, and your personal commitment." DTA was also commended for best practices that increased the quality of service to applicants and recipients. The best practices cited were:

- The organized outreach effort at the TAO level: both TAOs in the sample had staff dedicated to food stamp outreach at select community sites. This has greatly contributed to the State's overall improvement in participation rate.
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**USDA Program
Access Review
Findings
(Continued)**

- The prompt handling of mail-in applications: specifically the tracking of the applications on the Actuate Report and the follow-up notice acknowledging receipt of the applications received by mail-in, drop-off, fax and Internet (*Dorchester, Greenfield, Hyannis, Newmarket, and Worcester TAOs only*).
 - The Client Phone in the reception area: applicants/recipients in one of the TAOs reviewed are able to talk with their AU Manager on the *Client Phone* provided in the reception area. This eliminates the need to see the receptionist and reduces the number of persons in the reception area at a given time.
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**Purpose of
Memo**

Although USDA had commendations for the Department, they also cited areas where DTA could make changes to improve the overall service to applicants and recipients. The purpose of this memo is to inform TAO staff of USDA-FNS's findings in the Program Access Review and reinforce TAO staff responsibilities regarding food stamp policy and procedures for the specific areas requiring improvement. The memo will discuss the following:

1. denial of food stamp application within the 30-day timeframe; and
 2. generating correct notices.
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**Denial of Food
Stamp
Application
Within 30-day
Timeframe**

The USDA reviewers identified several denied AUs that had not been denied within the required 30-calendar day processing standard.

After reviewing the sample cases, the Department has determined that two causes have contributed to the untimely denial findings: cases being processed late and identified system issues have contributed to the untimely denial findings. The Tompkins Actuate Report incorrectly shows applications as being processed beyond the 30 day time frame in two instances:

- Pending applications that were correctly denied on Day-30 but were later reinstated on BEACON once outstanding verifications were provided were being counted as late on the Tompkins Actuate Report. This was fixed in the last increment so it is anticipated that there will be a decrease in the number of untimely applications on the Tompkins Actuate Report.
 - Pending applications that were issued a Special Expedited (combined allotment), which normally covers two certification periods are being counted as untimely on the Tompkins Actuate Report, even when the AU is processed before Day-30. In a future increment, system updates will allow BEACON to more accurately track food stamp applications, including AUs that receive Special Expedited benefits.
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**Generating
Correct Notices**

The reviewers found that some system-generated notices were inaccurate. This is the second consecutive year that USDA has cited the Department for incorrect notices. This section contains reminders for generating accurate notices.

Inaccurate Content: When multiple transactions are done on the same day, notices with inaccurate content are produced. To generate accurate notices, AU Managers must complete all windows correctly. Some AU actions require a two-day process. This two-day process will not only ensure that the correct benefit amount is released, but will also produce the correct notice for each transaction. Failure to comply with the processing requirements for AU actions requiring a two-day process will cause BEACON to default to the notice hierarchy producing a notice that does not match the transaction. For more information on notices and transactions requiring a two-day processing, see a *User's Guide: Transitional Assistance Programs and BEACON*, Chapter XVII and XVIII.

Late Notices: Late notices are produced when an AU is denied or approved after Day-30. To avoid late notices, AU Managers must approve or deny the application by Day-30 on BEACON. When an eligibility determination cannot be made within thirty days due to a **Department-caused delay** as outlined at 106 CMR 361.920, the AU Manager must also send an FSNL-2 allowing 30 additional days from the date of application for the AU to provide verifications or complete the food stamp application process.

Questions

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