



Transitions

A Publication of the Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance

this month in...

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From the Commissioner

Dear Fellow Employees,

This month, my focus continues to be on the food stamp error rate. As I wrote to you in June, we must take immediate action to reverse the current trend of the error rate and to return our food stamp program actions to their former high level of accuracy. A variety of steps are being taken to move us in the right direction.

During June, you received Field Operations Memo 2000-18, *Food Stamp Case (PA and NPA) Desk Review Project*. This review must be done on the majority of federal and combination state and federal food stamp cases. The desk review form is designed to focus attention on a number of key error-prone areas and also highlights hints and regulatory citations to help the reviewer determine and correct errors. I recognize that a review of this magnitude is a major undertaking. I also believe that requiring this review highlights both my level of concern and the high degree of importance I give to correcting the food stamp error rate problem.

A number of other activities are underway to support efforts to rein in the food stamp error rate. Program Assessment staff have compiled a list of corrective actions developed by other states. These actions are being reviewed with an eye to their usefulness in Massachusetts and I anticipate several of them will be utilized. In addition, Program Assessment staff, as I mentioned last month, will develop a monthly column in *Transitions* which will highlight particular errors and how to avoid them. The Training Unit has videotaped the very successful noncitizen training session, which they have been offering for several months, and will make the video available to all offices.

From the Forms File

New Forms

09-140-0500-05

FSDR (5/2000)

Food Stamp Desk Review Guide

Transitional Assistance Workers use this guide when reviewing cases in the *Food Stamp Desk Review* report. Refer to Field Operations Memo 2000-18 for more information.

09-141-0500-05

FSDR-2 (5/2000)

Food Stamp Desk Review Summary Sheet

TAO Directors use this form to notify Regional Directors of the results of case reviews on the *Food Stamp Desk Review* report. Refer to Field Operations Memo 2000-18 for more information.

Revised Forms

16-015-0600-05

Image-1 (Rev. 6/2000)

Request for Mass EBT Card

This form has been revised to include the date of birth for the authorized representative/payee and to be consistent with the IIS screen.

Systems User's Guide Update 146

All

Volume 5: *Subsystems User's Guide*

Chapter VI: SVES

The user registration procedures for the State Verification Eligibility System (SVES) have been revised, streamlining the user registration process.

Food Stamp Case (PA and NPA) Desk Review Project

FS

Field Operations

Memo 2000-18

Food stamp error rate is a top priority with the Department. To reduce the error rate in the final quarters of Federal Fiscal Year 2000 and avoid possible sanction, desk reviews must be completed on all food stamp cases listed on the *Food Stamp Desk Review* report.

This Field Operations Memo provides instructions and information on the scope of the food stamp desk review project, identifies TAO staff responsibilities in completing the project and transmits two new forms.



FYI

Curing Sanctions and Child Care

This is a reminder that sanctioned TAFDC individuals are eligible to receive child care to comply with ESP participation requirements. If an individual has been sanctioned, Transitional Assistance Workers can authorize child care if the individual is unable to cure the sanction without receiving child care.

For example, if a teen parent sanctioned for failure to meet the school attendance requirements cannot return to school without receiving child care, child care should be authorized for this teen parent.

FYI

Online Food Stamp Household Composition Desk Guide

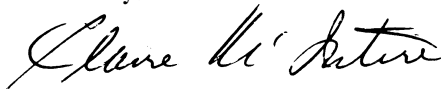
The Food Stamp Household Composition Desk Guide is now available online. To access this guide select Desk Guides from the Policy Online Menu. Then click on Food Stamp Household Composition Desk Guide. This guide is a useful tool for determining the correct household composition in a food stamp case.

Continued from Page 1

This will allow staff to experience the training at a convenient time and to replay those areas which may be of particular concern. Policy and Procedure will make an online version of the Food Stamp Household Composition Desk Guide available to you this month. They are also finalizing an online proration calculation worksheet which will determine the correct prorated amounts in a number of situations. These include combination state and federal food stamp households which contain: both TAFDC and EAEDC recipients, a family cap child, or an undocumented noncitizen with income. Field Operations continues monthly meetings with local office directors to review each and every error and is working with individual offices to refine their specific error reduction strategies and determine what will work best in their particular circumstances.

These Central Office efforts are important and are critical to our success in lowering the error rate. But as in so much that we do, it is you who do the actual day-to-day case work who will make us succeed. I know that many of the food stamp program rules are complicated and are sometimes difficult to follow. I also know that you have succeeded at equally complicated and difficult things and I expect no less in this effort. Thank you for your professionalism and commitment to this important undertaking.

Sincerely,



Claire McIntire
Commissioner



COMMUNICATION is the KEY

From the Hotline

Q. I have an NPA food stamp case with the family living in subsidized housing. The total rent is \$836.00, though the family has to pay only \$248.00 a month. The grantee's out-of-state parent has begun paying the \$248.00 directly to the landlord to help the family out. What can I allow as a shelter expense?

A. The assistance unit's shelter expense is reduced to zero. Both the subsidized portion of the rent paid by the government and the direct payment of the balance by the parents are forms of vendor payments. As such, they are not countable as income. Any expense covered by an excluded vendor payment (except energy assistance under LIHEAA) cannot be allowed as a deduction. See 106 CMR 364.410 (B)(2).

Q. Can a food stamp benefit recipient qualify for the full unheated standard utility allowance (\$199.00) even though she pays only \$36.00 a month for electricity?

A. Yes. The appropriate standard utility allowance is always used when the actual expenses are the same as, or less than, the standard amount. You only use actual verified expenses when they exceed the standard amount and would result in a benefit increase. Be careful not to give the full standard allowance to a household sharing utility expenses with another household or households. You must prorate the appropriate standard utility allowance equally among the households even if the other households are not receiving food stamp benefits. See 106 CMR 364.400.

Q. An applicant is living in a battered women's shelter, which provides two meals per day to its residents. Is this woman eligible for food stamp benefits?

A. Yes, under an exception to the residents of institutions rule, residents of shelters for battered women and their children are eligible for food stamp benefits even if the shelter provides meals. See 106 CMR 361.240 for other exceptions to the residents of institution rule.

Q. I sanctioned a teen parent for failure to go to school and am now ready to close the case. Do I enter Type FS income for both the teen parent and her child?

A. No, enter \$86.00 for the sanctioned teen parent only. The type FS income follows the sanctioned household member(s) so that the food stamp allotment does not increase as a result of the cash program penalty. The entry of this income is not intended to decrease the food stamp benefits.

Q. If an assistance unit member is unemployed due to a voluntarily quit during the 60 days before applying for food stamp benefits, does the disqualification penalty (*first violation*: 3 months; *second violation*: 6 months; *third violation*: 12 months) begin from date of application or date of voluntary quit?

A. The penalty is imposed from the date of quit. For example, if an assistance unit member is unemployed and voluntarily quit a job 30 days before applying, the household would be ineligible for 60 days. See 106 CMR 362.340 and 106 CMR 367.800.

Q. I have an applicant requesting Emergency Assistance (EA) who received EA in another state within the past 12 months. How does this affect her current EA request?

Continued on Page 5

- A. Receipt of EA in another state within the past 12 months does not affect her eligibility for EA in Massachusetts.
- Q. Are the months counted in determining the 24 months of time-limited eligibility calendar months or cyclical months?
- A. They are always **calendar** months. For example, Susan Smith, whose social security number ends in 3, is being changed from exempt to nonexempt. The change will take place on the day she receives her first July benefit, which is July 5. The first month which will count toward her 24 months of time-limited benefits is August because it is the first full calendar month.

See *PRISM User's Guide*, Chapter 5



FYI

EBT Purged Records

When a TAFDC, EAEDC or FS case has been **closed for a year or more**, there is a behind-the-scenes sweep process which purges the EBT records. Once the EBT records are purged, a "P" will be posted to the EBT field. The "P" means that there are **no** EBT records for the former recipient. Therefore, if the former recipient reapplies: (1) he or she must be treated as a new EBT case, (2) a new EBT card must be issued, and (3) a PIN must be selected.

The behind-the-scenes sweep process, which will occur on or about the 25th of each month, will ensure that the EBT records are not purged without creating a proper audit trail.

No action is required by TAO staff to purge EBT records.

For additional information, see:

- *Systems User's Guide*, Volume 1: *PACES User's Guide*, page III-20, and
- *Electronic Benefit Transfer*, page III-2.

FYI

BEACON Online

The BEACON Online segment of Policy Online is being changed to make needed information easier to access. Until now, this segment has contained the *BEACON Index* (which listed topics linked to the Bulletin(s) in which the topic was discussed), *BEACON Bulletins* (online copies of all Bulletins) and the *BEACON Online Help* (which contained by topic all the information contained in the Bulletins). *BEACON Online Help* will continue to be available and will be updated monthly with any new information which has been issued through a *BEACON Bulletin*. Additionally, information no longer current will be removed from *BEACON Online Help*.

If you have ideas of other ways that Policy Online could be made more useful for you, we welcome your input. Send your ideas and suggestions by ccMail. Our address is *Unit, Policy*.

Quality Corner

This month the focus of *Quality Corner* is three recent Food Stamp program errors. Each was caused by the agency, each was caused by a PA worker, and each was preventable.

ERROR 1

A woman was receiving TAFDC for herself while her young son was on SSI. Her rent was \$295 per month and she was responsible for utilities. Based on this information, she was correctly treated as a PA food stamp household of two. She received \$40 each month.

In addition, however, she had been receiving child support of \$71 per week paid through the Department of Revenue. The combination of TAFDC, her son's SSI and the child support meant she was only eligible for \$10 in food stamp benefits in the month her case was reviewed.

Her worker, perhaps forgetting that the SSI child's child support income counts for food stamps, failed to check the DOR child support screens. When a child is on TAFDC, the child support is deemed to DOR and only the \$50 passthrough is countable. Food stamp rules are different from cash assistance rules, and all income to the household should be checked at each certification.

ERROR 2

A TAFDC and food stamp applicant was sharing an apartment. Since she had just moved in, she was uncertain of the cost of the utilities. The TAFDC worker projected her expenses to be \$60 per month, and used that as her utility cost. When Quality Control reviewed the case, the reviewer determined that she had been eligible for the standard utility allowance (SUA), prorated for her half of the household.

Workers should **ONLY** use the actual expenses when they exceed the SUA. When the expected expenses are less than the SUA, **YOU MUST ALLOW THE SUA**. Recent reviews have shown that many workers use actual expenses even if they are lower than the SUA. That will almost always result in an underissuance error in the food stamp benefits. Using the SUA is not only easier (since you don't have to keep track of changes), but more accurate.

ERROR 3

The third error case involves a noncitizen, one of the most error-prone areas in the food stamp program at this time. The recipient, a legal permanent resident, was receiving state food stamp benefits. She had applied for a TAFDC disability exemption and it was granted. She remained on the state food stamp program.

As noted in the April 2000 *Transitions*, if the Disability Determination Tracking Form for either TAFDC or EAEDC includes a code of 100 or 110 (meets or equals appropriate disability criteria) in the SSI block, the recipient is considered disabled for food stamp purposes and therefore eligible for federal food stamps. When the worker failed to change the recipient from state to federal, she committed an error. **ALWAYS LOOK AT FEDERAL ELIGIBILITY FIRST**. If someone is eligible for federal food stamps and we issue them state benefits, a federal underissuance error occurs, even if the family receives the proper benefits overall. It is vital to get the federal benefits correct first.

Also be aware that being found disabled can also affect other aspects of the case, such as the gross income exception, uncapped shelter deduction, excess medical deduction and others. (See Food Stamps Manual 361.210 (A).)

The Online Update 033

ALL

Volume 1: *PACES User's Guide*

Appendix D: Service Area Listing

Appendix D: Service Area Listing in the *PACES User's Guide* has been revised to include corrections to the following TAOs:

Davis Square (278),
Framingham (102) and
Malden (168)

Request for Mass EBT Card (Image-1)

All

Electronic Benefit Transfer - Issuance 007

The Image Identification System (IIS) screen requests the date of birth for the authorized representative or authorized payee. The Image-1 form was revised to make requested information consistent with the IIS screen.



Minnefield v. McIntire Lawsuit

TAFDC

Field Operations Memo 99-26 C

This Field Operations Memo informs Transitional Assistance Office staff about the settlement agreement reached in the *Minnefield v. McIntire* lawsuit. The Department must take action on these cases by July 12, 2000. Local Office Quality Control and Systems will be responsible for most case activities, with Transitional Assistance Workers responsible for answering questions from recipients impacted by this action.

FYI

TAFDC COLA and EAEDC PNA Increase

When it is finalized, the State FY2001 Budget may contain language for a 10 percent cost of living increase for all TAFDC recipients effective July 1, 2000. Because the budget will not be finalized before July 1, 2000, the increase will be instituted retroactively. When the budget is passed, if the cost of living language is included, all active and closed TAFDC cases closed on or after July 1, 2000 will have their retroactive TAFDC payments calculated automatically by Systems. All TAFDC cases denied for income-related reasons on or after July 1, 2000 until the date of implementation of the COLA will need to be reviewed by TAO Staff. Lists of these denied cases will be provided to TAOs. Therefore, TAO Staff are reminded that ALL TAFDC applications must be established on PACES in an "03" status as soon as the application is taken to track denied applications.

Additionally, TAO Staff are asked to keep a log of all EA applications, except temporary emergency shelter applications, denied for financial reasons on or after July 1. Once the budget is passed, these cases will need to be reviewed for eligibility under the new standards.

The State FY2001 Budget may also contain language for an increase in the EAEDC Personal Needs Allowance (PNA).

When the budget is finalized, procedures will be issued detailing the processing of the cost of living increase, including the effect of the TAFDC COLA on food stamp benefits. Changes to the allowable amount for the EAEDC PNA will also be issued.