

Transitions



A Publication of the Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance

this month in...

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From the Commissioner

Dear Fellow Employees,

A few years ago when we shortened the Food Stamp application to four pages, I commented that we had changed "an elephant into a gazelle." I am pleased to say that my optimistic comparison is now reflected in the swift improvements we've made in Food Stamp Program participation. Although there is more we can do, today the number of Massachusetts families putting food in their cupboards because of the Food Stamp Program has continued to rise.

As many of you know, in years past our participation rate was not as high as it is today. But concerted efforts by many of you have resulted in a tremendous turnaround. You have done an outstanding job in this fight against hunger. Today, almost 450,000 people in Massachusetts receive food stamp benefits each month. We are the only state with a double-digit percent increase in caseload over the last year. In all, Massachusetts is among the top states in the nation for the most improved participation in both one-year change and five-year change categories. And yet, at the same time we have not sacrificed payment accuracy or timeliness. We continue to have the best error rate in the Northeast Region. For FY'06 our error rate is 3.40 percent, about two percent lower than the national average. And we have processed almost 99 percent of food stamp applications on time, despite the large increase in those applying. This is a remarkable accomplishment.

In the midst of these major improvements, DTA is now facing a new challenge. USDA's Food and Nutrition Service has asked states to improve program administration through modernization. Just as we have improved program access and accuracy, we must now focus on building a strong foundation to address modernization for the future.

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Although we are not there yet, we are well positioned to begin meeting this new challenge. Two years ago, we leveraged technology and began accepting online applications. This spring, DTA will launch a Call Center in the Brockton TAO. This innovative project will provide applicants and recipients with a way to obtain answers to questions about food stamp eligibility, applications and follow-up. Call Center staff will screen for expedited benefits and waivers of the face-to-face interview. DTA is already being held up as a model nationwide in telephone interviewing, and Call Centers will support this effort as we move forward.

We are also working on a document imaging system to be implemented with BEACON 3. This cutting-edge technology will allow us to scan verification documents into an electronic case record for quicker case processing and more efficient record keeping. Ultimately, this benefits all of us, including the population we serve.

Also on the horizon is Farm Bill 2007, which will reauthorize the Food Stamp Program. While still only proposals, potential changes include renaming the Food Stamp Program; excluding certain retirement savings accounts from countable assets; and limiting food stamp categorical eligibility to recipients of TANF or SSI assistance only. Other proposed changes focus on the elderly and the working poor; program modernization; program integrity and improving health through nutrition education.

There are many challenges ahead and I am confident that DTA will rise to meet these new challenges just as we have in the past. In the weeks ahead, as I prepare to step aside in my duties as your Commissioner, I know that I am leaving the Food Stamp Program in good hands. You have laid a solid foundation in Massachusetts for transforming hunger into health among those in need.

I remain grateful for your hard work and dedication in this area.

Sincerely,



John Wagner, Commissioner

Quality Corner

This month we will discuss an error related to earned income and shelter expenses.

Unreported Earnings Case

The recipient was a 43-year-old single woman receiving EAEDC and FS. She reported no earned income. In June 06, BEACON showed an earned income match with a temp agency for a job she had started in January 2006. The AU was reevaluated in July 2006 but the earned income match was not addressed at the time of reevaluation, and the recipient was given a one-year FS certification period. Additionally, the AU record indicated rent of \$520.00 per month with no explanation as to how the client was able to pay monthly shelter expenses far in excess of her EAEDC grant of \$303.70 per month. QC determined that, in the review month, the recipient was working for two temp agencies earning over \$900.00 per month. This caused a large overpayment error for the AU.

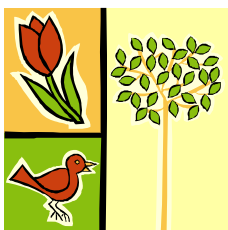
What's an AU Manager to Do?

Although the recipient failed to report the earnings, there were two indicators that should have caused the AU Manager to examine the recipient's circumstances more closely. The first indicator was the earnings match,

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which came in a month prior to the reevaluation. AU Managers are reminded that prompt action on matches can prevent errors such as this one. The second indicator was the fact that the recipient's rent exceeded her EAEDC grant, the sole income on record. When expenses such as rent and utilities are higher than the reported monthly income, the AU Manager must discuss the discrepancy with the applicant/recipient, inquire as to how the expenses are being paid, and document the findings in the BEACON narrative. In general, an AU that reports expenses higher than monthly income either has unreported income or has an arrearage.



From the Hotline

- Q.** A mother who receives food stamp benefits recently reported that her income tax refund arrived in the mail. How do I treat this payment?
- A.** In the Food Stamp Program, tax refunds (state and federal) are considered nonrecurring lump sum payments and are therefore excluded income in accordance with 106 CMR 363.230(I).

However, in households that are not categorically eligible, lump sum payments are considered an asset in the month received, per 106 CMR 363.130(E).

Reminder: A categorically eligible food stamp assistance unit, as defined in 106 CMR 365.180, automatically satisfies the asset eligibility criteria for food stamp benefits.

- Q.** If the same woman described in the question above was also receiving TAFDC, how would I treat the payment in the TAFDC Program?
- A.** In both cash programs (TAFDC and EAEDC), tax refunds (state and federal) are not counted as income, but are treated as countable assets. Refer to 106 CMR 204.120(I) and 106 CMR 321.120(I) for more details.
- Q.** My food stamp recipient received an Earned Income Credit (EIC) from the Department of Revenue and an Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) from the Internal Revenue Service. How are these payments treated in each category of assistance?
- A.** For the TAFDC, EAEDC and Food Stamp Programs, the EIC and the EITC are considered noncountable income.

EIC and the EITC payments are also considered noncountable assets in the month of receipt and in the following month.

In the third month, any remaining portion of these payments is considered a countable asset. Refer to 106 CMR 204.120(I), 106 CMR 321.120(I) and 106 CMR 363.140(G) for more details.



From the Forms File

New Brochure

25-650-0207-05

25-651-0207-05(S)

EITC - B (2/2007)

File Your Tax. Get Cash Back. It's That Easy

This brochure has been developed to tell applicants/recipients about the Earned Income Tax Credit. Refer to Field Operations Memo 2007-6 for more information.

TAFDC, EA and Food Stamps - 2007 HHS Poverty Guidelines

All

Field Operations Memo 2007-4

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).

F.O.R. Families Staff Reassignment

EA

Field Operations Memo 2007-5

This memo notified AU Managers, Homeless Coordinators, ICMs, HAP Providers and shelter staff that as of January 16, 2007, F.O.R. Families staff have been reassigned to different TAOs and shelters. This memo identified their new TAOs and the shelters no longer covered by F.O.R. Families staff.



Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and Child Care Mailing

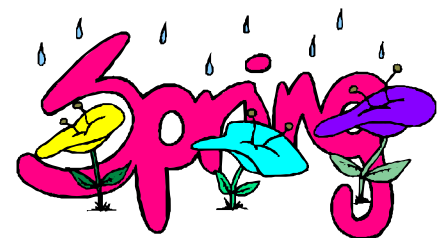
TAFDC, FSP

Field Operations Memo
2007-6

Each year, the Department sends a mailing to TAFDC and certain former TAFDC recipients, and to selected food stamp households to inform them about the federal Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), the Massachusetts Earned Income Credit (EIC), Child Care Tax Credit (CTC) and child care services. The mailing took place in February 2007, and began a yearlong EITC/EIC/CTC campaign to encourage recipients and former recipients to file taxes and take advantage of income tax credits and child care services.

This memo:

- informs TAO staff about the campaign mailing;
- describes the campaign and AU Managers' role in the campaign; and
- gives instructions for handling undelivered mail resulting from the mailing.



TAFDC - Participation Tracking Actuate Report

TAFDC

Field Operations Memo
2007-7

To ensure that TAO staff are better able to track work program participation, a new Actuate Report has been created that will help AU Managers, Supervisors and TAO Managers monitor their caseloads. Having work program and ESP participation data located on one report will make it easier for TAO staff to monitor and track:

- work program participation;
- sanction actions needing action/authorization; and
- good cause/meets compliance end dates.

This report will ensure that all work program required recipients are meeting their work program participation requirements.

This memo provides TAO staff with:

- instructions to access the Actuate report; and
- a description of the new Actuate report.



TAFDC - Department Obligations Under the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA)

TAFDC

Field Operations Memo 2007-8

The Department has certain obligations towards applicants and recipients under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. Section 504 makes it illegal for public agencies receiving federal funds to discriminate against individuals with disabilities. Title II of the ADA prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability by states and government entities. Generally, the Department must provide an individual equal opportunity to participate in or benefit from its programs. The Department's ADA regulations can be found at 106 CMR 701.390 for the cash assistance and Emergency Assistance programs, and 106 CMR 360.250 for the Food Stamp Program.

The purpose of this memo is to remind TAO staff about:

- current ADA policies; and
- TAO Accommodation Teams used for handling and reviewing ADA-related issues including requests for ADA accommodations.

This memo should reinforce and add to information TAO staff have received in the mandatory ADA training.

BEACON TAFDC Work Requirements Window - Orientation Date Field

TAFDC

Field Operations Memo 2007-9

This Field Operations Memo informs TAO staff that, effective immediately, AU Managers must no longer enter dates in the "Orientation Date" field on the BEACON TAFDC Work Requirements window. After April 1, 2007, designated DTA staff will use this field to monitor and track Employment Services Program information for TAFDC applicants/reapplicants. Additionally, the memo tells AU Managers what to do when they receive a BEACON edit message when reopening a TAFDC AU that has a previously entered Orientation Date for any AU member.

Citizenship Verification for MassHealth Eligibility for TAFDC and EAEDC Citizen Applicants

TAFDC, EAEDC

Field Operations Memo 2007-10

This memo informs TAO staff that effective immediately, AU Managers should strongly encourage all TAFDC and EAEDC applicants to submit documents acceptable to MassHealth to verify citizenship. Food Stamp policy regarding verification of citizenship is unchanged.

Beginning in April, more detailed citizenship verifications submitted by applicants will be forwarded to MassHealth in a data exchange. MassHealth may deny benefits to those recipients who cannot provide verifications recognized by MassHealth. Therefore, it is important to make sure that all applicants provide verifications that will be accepted by MassHealth.

Field Operations Memo 2006-55: *Applicant Citizenship Verification for MassHealth Eligibility: TAFDC and EAEDC*, is now obsolete.

Update - Resource Team Program New Initiative: Supplemental Security Income (SSI) On-line Applications

TAFDC

In June 2006, the Department established a Resource Team in the Newmarket Square, Springfield Liberty and Worcester TAOs. Resource Team members in the Springfield Liberty and Worcester TAOs help certain TAFDC and EAEDC recipients complete the disability claim process.

This memo: informs TAO staff that, beginning February 12, 2007, Resource Team members located in the Springfield Liberty and Worcester TAOs will offer FREE assistance to certain TAFDC and EAEDC recipients in their area to apply on-line for SSI disability benefits.

“Though no one can go back and make a brand new start, anyone can start from now and make a brand - new ending.”

Anonymous

Former Davis Square Shelter Placements TAFDC - New Initiative

TAFDC

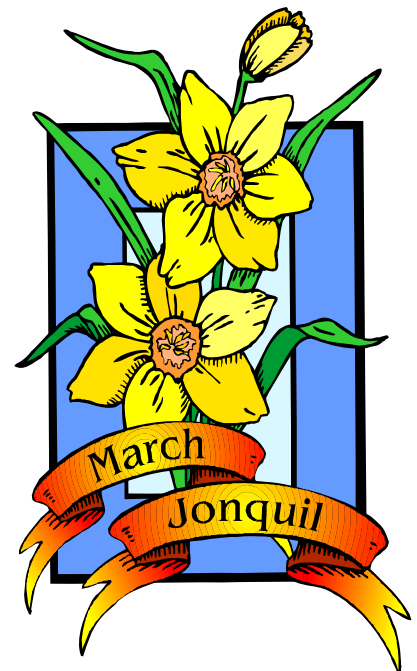
Effective February 12, 2007, Boston Family Housing TAO assumed responsibility for homeless shelter AUs that were previously covered by the Former Davis Square TAO. As a result, all shelter placements from the Former Davis Square TAO will now be transferred to the Boston Family Housing TAO.

Bay State CAP Standard Utility Allowance

FS

State Letter 1322

State Letter 1322 increased the Standard Utility Allowance (SUA) for Bay State CAP food stamp benefits to \$297, effective February 1, 2007.



FYI

Bay State Access Card Issuance (MASS EBT Card)

AU Managers are reminded that current procedures mandate that an EBT card be issued for cash and FS applications as soon as possible. Issuing an EBT card to an applicant whose AU is in a pending status ensures the timely delivery and access to benefits once the AU is approved.

EBT cards must be requested by the AU Manager on the date of application and issued on that day, if the applicant provides proof of identity. If the applicant does not provide proof of identity on the date of application, on the following day the AU Manager must check SVES to ensure the SSN is validated and issue the EBT card.

For detailed instructions on issuing an EBT card, refer to Field Operations Memo 2006-30, page 6.

FYI

BEACON Online Help Updates Issued in February 2007

BEACON Online Help Update Issue # 6 (02/20/07)

FYI

Changes to DTA Online

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

The banner displayed on the top of the DTA Online home page displays DTA's new logo and positioning line - "Believing you can." Both the logo and the positioning line will eventually be added to the banner on all the DTA Online pages. In addition, the logo directly links to the EOHHS mass.gov/dta homepage.

Diversity

The list of available options includes a new link entitled Newsletter. When selected, the Diversity Newsletter will be displayed.

FYI

Changes to the EOHHS Mass.gov Homepage

This month you will see the following changes to the EOHHS mass.gov DTA homepage.

Research and Statistics:

The link to DTA Facts and Figures has been updated with January 2007 Grant Levels, Eligibility Standards and FY'07 Appropriations.

The program links (Emergency Aid to the Elderly, Disabled and Children; Food Stamps; Homeless; Supplemental Security Income; and Transitional Aid to Families with Dependent Children), when selected, display updated caseload information.

For Consumers Tab - Basic Needs - Housing and Shelter

The Housing and Shelter page includes a link to the February 2007 issue of the *Statewide Homeless Operations Research Environment (SHORE)* newsletter.



FYI

Changes to Policy Online

This month you will see the following changes to Policy Online.

The Former Davis Square TAO has merged with the Revere TAO. The following tables have been updated to reflect this change.

Related Systems Information:

- BB Options

Financial History Report Codes

- Reference Documentation

TAO Information Listing

Service Area Listing by Transitional Assistance Office

Service Area Listing by City/Town

FYI

Child Care Services

The Department of Early Education and Care (EEC) (formerly the Office of Child Care Services (OCCS)) has increased the number of child-care slots available to homeless EA families. EA families who need childcare services should be referred to the CCR&Rs. Follow the procedures in Field Operations Memo 2004-21 for referring the family to the CCR&R or modifying an existing childcare authorization.

FYI

The Entry Level Employee Competency Training (ELECT) Program

The Massachusetts League of Community Health Centers (MLCHC) is conducting a training program called: "Entry Level Employee Competency Training" or "ELECT" (located in Boston at 40 Court Street). TAOs may have already received information about the ELECT Program from MLCHC. Since the training program has already started and is full, no further referrals should be made. Funding exists for the current training cycle only.

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