



*Commonwealth of Massachusetts
Executive Office of Health and Human Services
Department of Transitional Assistance*


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**Online Guide Transmittal 2020-27A
March 18, 2020**

To: Department of Transitional Assistance Staff
From:  Sarah Stuart, Associate Commissioner for Change Management
Re: Cross Programs: Temporary Emergency Operations Due to COVID-19

Overview

On March 10, 2020 a State of Emergency was declared by Governor Baker to support the Commonwealth's response to the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19).

DTA is taking steps to ensure that active clients do not experience a disruption in benefits and prioritizes new applications.

Purpose

The purpose of this Online Guide Transmittal is to advise staff of temporary adjustments due to COVID-19. These changes include:

- procedural changes;
 - prioritization of certain case work;
 - systems enhancements;
 - modified front-end services; and
 - changes to staff schedules.
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Procedural Changes

Work related to pending SNAP, TAFDC and EAEDC applications are the priority. Due to these extraordinary circumstances, certain procedures are being temporarily revised to streamline and expedite the processing of cases.

All staff are to adhere to the following modified procedures until further notice:

Appointments

- Clients wishing to apply for TAFDC or EAEDC will be directed to contact the local office directly to initiate a telephonic application. It is no longer necessary to refer these clients to the Ombuds office.
- No appointments are to be scheduled except for application and recertification/reevaluation interviews. **A series of three cold calls must be made prior to scheduling an appointment.** All interviews are to be telephonic. If you have a client without a working phone number, with an in-office ADA accommodation, or with HLS please contact the Ombuds office.

Verifications

- Cases with only optional verification(s) outstanding are to be wrapped up without the optional factor(s) immediately.
 - Cases pending outstanding mandatory verification(s) must be reviewed to determine if other reasonable documentation or data source could be used to verify the outstanding element. If no such verification is available, **a series of three cold calls must be made** to attempt to advise the client to submit the necessary proofs as soon as possible, preferably through DTACConnect. **Collateral contact and self-declarations are to be used if traditional verifications are not immediately available.**
 - With widespread school closures the EDUC-1, CCE and Learnfare forms will be particularly difficult for clients to have completed. Collateral contact and self-declarations are to be used if traditional verifications are not immediately available. Clients may complete the form(s) themselves or submit a self-declaration that includes all relevant information from the form(s).
 - Proof of terminated income must not be requested. This applies to both earned and unearned income. A verbal self-declaration is to be taken.
 - Cases with pending unemployment must be put on without delay. Clients applying for cash assistance must not have their case delayed due to requiring that they file for unemployment.
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Verifications
(cont.)

- If a clients reporting a reduction of income, but not that they are out of work entirely, the Work Number is to be used regardless of their reporting type and where they are in their certification period.
- Many clients are hourly employees and have begun reporting that they are currently impacted by closures. If based on the information available in the client's ECF we know a client to be an hourly worker and that their place of employment is closed you must update their wages as \$0.00, do not terminate the employment. Staff must use the public facing information available about employers.

Do not request verification from the client unless there is no public facing information to confirm the closure. With permission, staff must be sure to explore collateral contacts to expedite the verification process as well. As always, encouraging clients to submit verifications via DTACConnect to ensure these verifications are processed as quickly as possible. Once you confirm that the client's place of employment has closed mark the \$0.00 income as verified, detail the circumstances in the narrative, and wrap the case up if there are no other mandatory verifications outstanding.

If it is a new application and this same information can reasonably be determined, proceed as above.

- Good cause for cooperation with child support due to domestic violence may be self-declared. Domestic Violence Specialists will follow up with clients.

SVES

- Direct Deposit requirement is to be waived for any clients who do not request for benefits to be deposited to their bank account.
- A SVES must be run for all new, unknown to DTA applications, or if there is significantly contradictory info. **If the client has previously been known and nothing appears to be questionable, an overnight must not be run.**

Batch updates will ensure that the information is updated accordingly.

Disability

- Clients applying for EAEDC as a disabled individual may self-declare that their disability is expected to last 60 days or more and that it substantially reduces or eliminates their ability to support himself or herself. A Disability Supplement is not required. TAFDC clients may also self-declare disability. Caretaker status both programs as well as the information on the DVEN form may also be self-declared as documentation from medical providers will be difficult at this time.
- The SSI application and appeal requirement for EAEDC clients is suspended.

A follow up reminder must be set to revisit such cases in 60 days. No forms are to be sent to DES at this time.

- Proof of up to date immunizations for TAFDC are not required for the first 60 days. Any cases where there is not immediate proof on file must have a reminder set for follow up in another 60 days. Like all other medical documentation clients should not, be visiting doctors' offices at this time, cases for which immunization verification is due now should be given good cause and revisited in 60 days.
- **All work program required clients, including ABAWDs, will be granted a temporary exemption. No new referrals to contracted DTA employment vendors are to be made.**

School & Work Activities

- No new referrals to Child Care Resource & Referral agencies are to be made.
- Participation in employment service and training activities that were countable prior to any program operational changes remain countable activities for work participation purposes across all programs. For example, a TAFDC client who was meeting their work program requirement by attending college whose school has moved to online classes due to COVID-19 will still be able to meet participation with those online classes. No new online schools are being approved at this time.
- TAFDC pre-benefit activities are suspended. This includes both PBJS and Orientation attendance.

Important: In all cases, a detailed narrative summarizing the action taken must be entered. If client contact is made, staff must take the opportunity to explain that we are attempting to ensure that benefits are available to them given the spread of COVID-19 in the Commonwealth.

**Data
Matches**

If there is an active FIDM Unit match that is preventing the wrap up of a case, the override must be used. This will require a 3rd level authorization: AU Manager, TAO Supervisor and TAO Director. The Override reason of “FIDM Match” must be selected in the Authorization page.

FIDM Unit staff will continue to monitor and process matches and will conduct additional reviews to ensure program integrity.

**Systems
Changes**

To ensure that active clients do not experience a disruption in benefits and do not receive notices that may be confusing, modifications to BEACON are being made.

A batch narrative of: “COVID: An eligibility benefit calculation was done on {DATE} that resulted in an adverse action which has been postponed. All notices of adverse action have been suppressed.” is being entered on each case.

Changes are underway to extend certification dates and suspend program time limits. Certain adverse actions will still proceed including closing and reductions due to death or imprisonment.

Actions for FAW are being reprioritized. Regardless of the Action type staff must evaluate where the client is in the application/reinstatement/review process and take the appropriate steps to conduct the interview or follow the verifications related instructions on the previous page.

**TAO
Operations**

Effective Wednesday, March 18, 2020 all TAOs will be closed to the public. This change is being made as a safety measure for all and to expedite case processing.

**Hours & Local
Office Coverage**

TAO office hours for core staff are 8:00 a.m. to 6:00p.m. Monday through Friday. Staff will be assigned to rotating shifts of a minimum of 7.5 hours to comport to social distancing recommendations. Some overtime has also been authorized to respond to the significant increase in requests for assistance.

It is critical, with the change in public access, that each TAO's main number is staffed at all times and that staff are being responsive to client's phone calls.

EBT

Clients requesting a new or replacement EBT card must be issued centrally. Case managers are to explore with clients whether or not they need a card. Staff are to consult with their local office manager if there are extenuating circumstances which require an EBT card to be issued locally. Secure document drop off options for clients are in process of being developed for those who cannot use DTACConnect or mail to the Document Processing Center.

Communication

DTA is using many available means to efficiently communicate with clients and stakeholders to mitigate as much confusion as possible.

Information will be communicated via:

- DTA Connect mobile app push notification;
- Automated text messaging;
- Updates to DTA's website including the removal of office hours and directing clients to contact their local office main number to apply for TAFDC or EAEDC;
- Message on DTA Assistance Line, SAO, CCMO, Ombuds and local office lines.
- Posters at local offices;
- Banner message on DTA Connect portal for applicants or those accessing case information;
- Social media; and
- Correspondence with community partners, legislators and sister agencies.

Clients should be encouraged to check DTA's website for updates as we expect high call volume during this time.

Questions

If you have any policy or procedural questions, after conferring with the appropriate TAO personnel, please have your Systems Information Specialists or TAO management email them to DTA.Procedural Issues.

Systems issues should be directed to the Systems Support Help Desk.
