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Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) FY16 Participation Report

**December 4,
2015**

Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance



**SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM (SNAP)
PROGRESS REPORT
December 2015**

OVERVIEW

Line-item 4400-1001 of the Fiscal Year 2016 state budget requires the Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA) to report the status of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) client outreach to the House and Senate Committees on Ways and Means.¹ The following report is respectfully submitted in response to this requirement.

BACKGROUND

DTA's mission is to assist low-income individuals and families meet their basic needs, increase their incomes, and improve their quality of life. DTA offers a comprehensive system of programs and supports to help individuals and families achieve greater economic self-sufficiency, including food and nutritional assistance, cash assistance, and employment supports.

DTA serves one out of every nine people in the Commonwealth including working families, children, elders, and people with disabilities.

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)

SNAP is a federally-funded program that provides critical nutritional support to low-income households by helping families and individuals purchase healthy food. DTA administers SNAP on behalf of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the program serves as the first line of defense against hunger in the Commonwealth.

For many years, DTA made significant progress in increasing SNAP participation and access to the program, while striving to maintain a high standard of program integrity. However, during the downturn in the economy between 2008 and 2011, DTA saw an astronomical increase in SNAP caseload levels.

With caseloads of 1,000 households or more, local office staff struggled to keep up with case processing activities. In addition, DTA lacked the data to make comprehensive, agency-wide

¹For programs to increase the commonwealth's participation rate in the supplemental nutrition assistance program and other federal nutrition programs; provided, that funds shall be expended for a grant to Project Bread – The Walk for Hunger, Inc.; provided further, that the work of DTA employees paid for from this item shall be restricted to processing supplemental nutrition assistance program applications; provided further, that DTA shall not require supplemental nutrition assistance program applicants to provide re-verification of eligibility factors previously verified and not subject to change; provided further, that notwithstanding any general or special law to the contrary, DTA shall require only 1 signature from supplemental nutrition assistance program applicants; provided further, that DTA shall fund a unit staffed by DTA employees to respond to supplemental nutrition assistance program inquiries, and arrange and conduct telephone interviews for initial supplemental nutrition assistance program applications from this item; provided further, that DTA shall fund a system to image and catalogue eligibility documents electronically from this item; provided further, that funds may be expended for supplemental nutrition assistance program outreach; and provided further, that DTA shall report to the House and Senate Committee on Ways and Means not later than December 4, 2015 on the status of these programs.

analytical decisions regarding day-to-day case processing. Documents would be sent to individual case managers as these staff “owned” such cases. Many clients and advocates reported having been told that necessary paperwork was lost in the mail, or that DTA had not received it. This proved frustrating for clients and unmanageable for DTA. During this time, clients and advocates also encountered difficulties when trying to access case managers by telephone. Voicemail was often full, and clients could not leave messages. This led to clients escalating their issues, and DTA responding to cases in a one-off manner that was not conducive to effective benefit delivery for either the client or DTA.

To improve service delivery and meet timeliness requirements, DTA underwent comprehensive Business Process Redesign (BPR) starting in 2013 and culminating on October 27, 2014. BPR introduced a major move from physical case records to an electronic document management system, converted the caseload-based system to a “first available worker” model and introduced one central phone number to respond to many calls with an Interactive Voice Response (IVR) system or by triaging a call to a case manager. DTA established a schedule for all SNAP staff to rotate between three work queues: Assistance Line, Processing and In-Person.

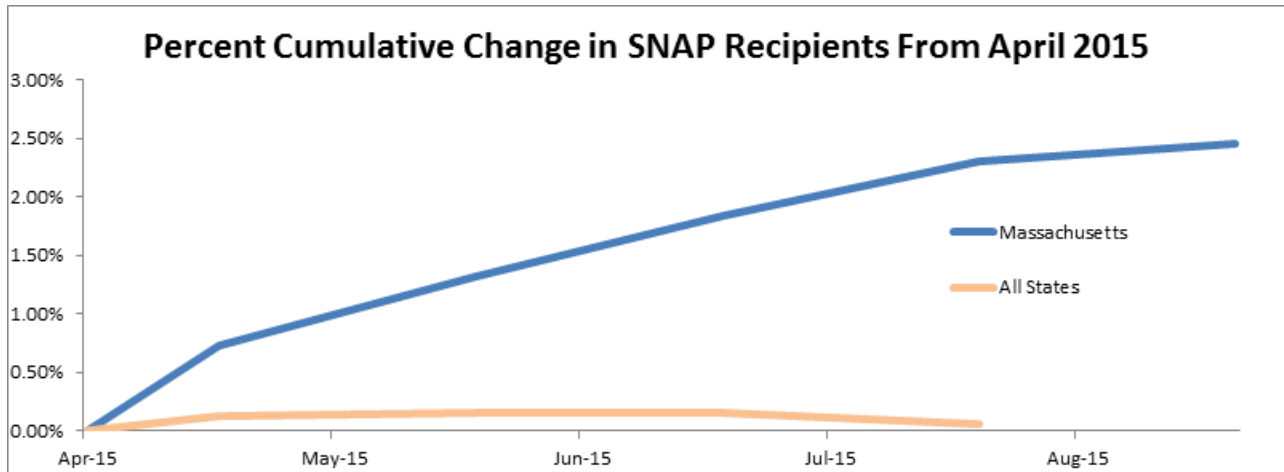
The centralized Electronic Document Management Center (EDMC) for scanning and downloading all mailed and faxed documents into DTA’s eligibility system, BEACON, has resulted in a nearly paperless system. The “first available worker” model has made it possible for any SNAP case manager state-wide who was assigned to the Assistance Line queue to respond to an incoming phone call, and for any SNAP case manager state-wide assigned to the Processing queue to process any document (application, recertification or verification).

Massachusetts SNAP Caseload

September 2013 marks the month DTA served the highest number of Massachusetts households (501,905) receiving SNAP benefits. The following year the number of SNAP cases began to decrease, consistent with the national trend, due in large part to the economic recovery and a lower unemployment rate in the state. By September 2014, there were 470,248 households (826,707 individuals) receiving SNAP benefits, a decrease of over 31,000 households. The SNAP caseload decreased further to 438,953 households (766,820 individuals) in April 2015. This decrease in caseload resulted from start-up issues with the BPR implementation.

DTA has learned many lessons since BPR implementation, and these lessons have been reflected in modifications that have fixed deficiencies, improved on successes, and serve our clients better. BPR has provided DTA with an abundance of data, and this data allows a level of transparency not seen prior to BPR.

DTA recognizes there is still much work ahead and will continue to improve, but the enhancements made to date have brought us a long way in very short time. As is the case with most major automated business solutions of this scale, a period of stabilization was engaged, which has promoted enhanced service delivery. Improvements already implemented have resulted in increases in the SNAP caseload in every month since April 2015.



DTA issued a total of \$1.25 billion in SNAP benefits in calendar year 2014. This represents about \$2.3 billion per year in economic activity for the Commonwealth as each dollar in SNAP benefits generates an equivalent of \$1.84 in economic activity for the state.² DTA will sustain this economic benefit, and the essential food assistance for more than 450,000 households with its outreach efforts, improved program access, streamlined case processing, and program integrity to ensure the continued success of the program.

SNAP OUTREACH

DTA is dedicated to ensuring SNAP benefits and related services are available to all eligible Massachusetts households. In state fiscal year 2015, DTA again funded the Project Bread/Food Source Hotline³. This program performs SNAP eligibility screenings and provides application assistance. Project Bread also assists needy families seeking resources to address their immediate food needs.

Legislation in 2010 made it possible for DTA to engage the University of Massachusetts Medical School/Commonwealth Medicine (UMass) to administer a federal reimbursement project to enhance provider outreach activities. DTA and UMass jointly developed a performance-based system that allows UMass to sub-contract with providers to assist clients with applying/recertifying for SNAP benefits. In turn, DTA verifies that provider client information matches approved SNAP applicants/recipients in the system and secures the federal reimbursement funds. UMass then distributes 95 percent of the reimbursement monies to the providers.

In FFY 2015, UMass contracted with 35 providers that were responsible for client outreach and application / recertification assistance. As in previous years, preliminary information shows that most providers reached their annual application goals, and a majority of providers met or exceeded the fifty percent application approval standard. These providers received \$565,952 in

² Hanson, K. (2010 October). The Food Assistance National Input-Output Multiplier (FANIOM) Model and Stimulus Effects of SNAP. The website is: <http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/err-economic-research-report/err103.aspx>.

³ Funded at \$250,000 from line item 4400-1001

payments for SNAP outreach services. For FFY2016, USDA approved an expansion of the SNAP Outreach Partner Reimbursement Project and reimbursement of up to \$1,089,424.

Additional SNAP outreach has included:

- Close coordination with the Social Security Administration (SSA) to reinvigorate and even expand the Bay State Combined Application Project (Bay State CAP). This project allows Supplemental Security Income (SSI) clients to apply for food assistance at SSA, less administrative work for DTA staff, and a three-year certification period for the households. DTA and SSA already converted 16,000 current clients to Bay State CAP and will periodically sweep the SNAP caseload to ensure vulnerable SSI clients receive this important nutrition benefit.
- Collaborating with the Massachusetts Executive Office of Elder Affairs to begin a series of initiatives focused on helping elderly individuals access and maximize SNAP benefits.
- A renewal of partnerships with sister agencies, in particular the Department of Mental Health and the Department of Developmental Services to assist clients of these agencies to access and maintain SNAP benefits. Talks are also underway with DTA of Elementary and Secondary Education as well as with MassHealth to develop data sharing agreements to streamline benefit access for our common clients.

IMPROVING ACCESS AND CUSTOMER SERVICE

Document Management Improvements

From July 2014 through July 2015, the EDMC in Taunton processed approximately 185,000 documents each month including mail, faxes, and scanned documents. Within 48 hours, 95% of all documents received at the EDMC are scanned and entered into BEACON. The EDMC has made consistent and impactful improvements since its launch. These improvements include:

- All DTA offices are now able to scan documents received locally, such as SNAP Applications/Urgent Documents, to the EDMC for indexing.
- DTA uses a document error report to identify and resolve current and newfound issues.
- Daily communication between EDMC and DTA works well, as it strengthens and maintains a positive working relationship and limits potential gaps in communication regarding policy, process, notice and volume changes.
- A video was developed as an effective, practical way to educate and train DTA staff on processes at EDMC. The video is an alternative to an in-person visit.
- An additional resource tool was added to aid EDMC staff in accurately indexing documents to the correct individual when insufficient information is provided on a document. The most frequent use of the tool is when EDMC indexers encounter common names and additional details such as household information is needed to index the document to the correct individual.

Assistance Line Improvements

DTA has implemented enhancements to the centralized Assistance Line in FY2015. Additional phone licenses and greater system capacity were added, as well as a Courtesy Call Back feature. The feature allows callers who choose not to wait to speak to a staff person to provide a phone number for a call back at a later time.

Additionally, DTA has been working with a vendor to design and implement further improvements over the next few months. The improvements include automation that simplifies the process to choose a phone option or speak to a staff person; ability for DTA to make automatic calls to clients to provide important benefit information; screen pop-ups for Assistance Line staff to see immediate information about the caller; and eventually telephone SNAP applications and mobile phone integration.

These enhancements are a direct response to clients and advocates who experienced long wait times and other difficulties with the new Assistance Line. DTA expects to remedy these issues with the improvements described above.

Data Analytics and Targeted Actions

DTA is using the abundance of data available as a result of BPR to manage how staff addresses essential work. Being able to centrally manage all facets of work that flows to the local offices is critical to DTA's success. By targeting actions by priority, availability of staff, specific time or date allows for the ability to efficiently manage workloads regardless of staffing resources.

At the end of a day, actions that require a short amount of time to complete are delivered to staff. Short actions may include Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) card requests, voluntary case closing requests and scheduling interview appointments. Additionally, a Special Case Processing business group has been developed to target specific urgent items, including recertifications requiring same-day processing, and aging case maintenance documents. This group is comprised of approximately 50 staff members and consistently processes 1,000 targeted tasks daily.

When a specific type of time sensitive case processing is needed management must assign certain staff to the Special Case Processing group. This approach prevents document processing backlogs and increases statewide efficiency.

Expanded Ombudsman's Unit

DTA is dedicated to customer service to ensure that all of those seeking service from or interacting with DTA have a positive experience. For some time, DTA has employed an Ombudsman whose role is to respond to questions, concerns, and complaints from a wide variety of stakeholders. In May 2015 the Ombudsman's Unit was expanded to include more staff, and advocate and client feedback has included appreciation of the effectiveness of Unit staff in resolving their concerns.

Springfield Processing Center

In August 2015, DTA established a ‘processing center’ at the Springfield State local office. Management identified staff that were not only skilled at document processing but were willing to exclusively work in the Processing queue during regular business hours. In addition, the management analytics team sends special projects to the processing center for the formulation of best practices which may then be expanded across all DTA offices. Finally, the processing center serves as a regional training hub for newly hired DTA staff.

DTA Scorecard/Baseline Report

Ensuring the public has a way to measure DTA’s performance is vital to the success of the agency. This summer DTA developed a “scorecard” to measure success and identify deficiencies. The scorecard is published the second Wednesday of every month on DTA’s public website and has been met with a positive reaction from our partners. DTA’s current performance scorecard is included as a separate attachment.

IMPROVING PROGRAM INTEGRITY

DTA continues to work to improve program integrity and takes instances of fraud, waste, or abuse seriously. DTA’s program integrity unit works with members of law enforcement and other state and federal agencies to monitor and address any reports of abuse, whether identified through its public tip line, audits, or internal controls. While the vast majority of clients use their benefits as intended, and instances of misuse represent a very small portion of the total benefits administered, DTA has a zero tolerance policy for fraud, waste, or abuse.

DTA maintains a strong partnership with the state auditor to protect the integrity of public assistance programs. Through this partnership, DTA identifies cases of potential public benefits fraud and refers them to the auditor’s Bureau of Special Investigation for further collaborative action. Results from the program integrity partnership show that more than 99 percent of benefits are being used as intended to meet basic needs. DTA has launched aggressive program integrity initiatives to stop fraud on the front end and protect benefits for those who truly need them.

In March 2014, the Program Integrity (PI) Checklist was introduced to reengineer how matches were processed in BEACON. The matches provide income, asset and household composition information from external sources, including deaths, corrections, employment and wages, child support, lottery winnings, and receiving benefits in other states. The PI Checklist is designed to ensure that only eligible individuals receive benefits and that the benefit amounts issued are accurate.

CONCLUSION

This summary report reflects DTA’s efforts to ensure needy families receive assistance and demonstrates DTA’s commitment to excellence in administering SNAP. DTA is focused on continuing to identify improvements to programs to ensure that taxpayer dollars are used for their intended purpose. DTA’s work emphasizes transparency, accountability, and strong

regulatory compliance, while also focusing on removing barriers and increasing access for those who are eligible but not yet participating in the program. DTA intends to build on the initiatives described above and looks forward to continuing to work with the Legislature, municipalities, and community organizations to develop many more innovative strategies to increase participation in the program and maximize benefits for clients, while continuing to improve program integrity.