

Massachusetts Law Reform Institute

99 Chauncy Street, Suite 500, Boston, MA 02111-1722

(617) 357-0700 ■ FAX (617) 357-0777

TO: Food Stamp Improvement Coalition Members
Elder and Disability Advocates

FR: Pat Baker, MLRI; Andrea Bopp Stark, MVLS

DT: May 11, 2005

RE: Thousands of SSI Recipients To Receive Food Stamps this Summer !!!

In the summer and fall of 2005, over 67,000 Massachusetts recipients of Supplemental Security Income (SSI) will receive special food stamp cards in the mail that provide monthly nutritional benefits - without ever having to go to a food stamp office to apply! The amount of the monthly food benefit - depending on income and shelter costs - will be between \$38/month and \$149/month. Food stamp cards will be mailed to 67,000 SSI recipients NOT currently getting food stamps. Supplemental food assistance can be vital in toward meeting the nutritional needs of this population!

How did this happen? Federal law requires Social Security Administration (SSA) offices to take food stamp applicants for elders and persons with disabilities who apply for SSI. For many years, the SSA local offices failed to comply with this mandate and many SSI recipients did not receive food stamps. Further, Massachusetts has one of the lowest food stamp participation rates in the United States, including low participation of low income seniors and persons with disabilities. In response to advocacy by the Mass Law Reform Institute and the Food Stamp Improvement Coalition, the Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA) and the SSA agreed to petition the U.S. Department of Agriculture to create a special food stamp project. This special project is now called the Bay State CAP (Combined Application Project). Bay State CAP was created as a simplified and fast way for many SSI applicants and recipients to get basic food stamp benefits without going through the longer application process!

After months of work by advocates and state officials, major efforts are now underway to implement this project: In February of 2005, DTA provided Bay State CAP benefits to thousands of SSI recipients already getting food stamps but at a lower benefit amount than Bay State CAP. In February, SSA started taking Bay State CAP applications for new SSI applicants and for SSI recipients whose cases were scheduled for regular SSI case review. The end of June 2005, DTA will send letters and food stamp cards to 33,000 SSI recipients (not already on food stamps) advising them they have been approved for Bay State CAP and benefits are waiting in an account for them - without requiring the SSI recipient to apply. Another 34,000 SSI recipients will get a similar letter and food card in the fall. This will be a major conversion of thousands of cases to Bay State CAP so that SSI recipients don't have to wait for their SSA case reviews to get this benefit. Finally, SSA local offices will continue to offer Bay State CAP benefits or regular food stamps to future SSI applicants and recipients whose SSI cases are up for review!

Attached is some preliminary information to help you advise your clients about what to expect in the next few months, and how you can help low income seniors and persons with disabilities get the nutrition benefits they deserve!

IF YOU RECEIVE SSI BENEFITS, HERE'S IMPORTANT INFORMATION ABOUT A NEW WAY TO GET FOOD STAMPS

Massachusetts has a new program to provides food stamps to SSI applicants and recipients called "Bay State CAP" (CAP is the Consolidated Application Project). Bay State CAP is a simplified and fast way to get basic food stamp benefits without going through the long application process!

If you are an SSI applicant or recipient, you may be eligible for Bay State CAP benefits. You do not need to fill out a long food stamp application or even contact a DTA office. You do not need to send in proofs (verifications) to qualify nor be interviewed by DTA. The benefit is based on the information you already provided to the Social Security local office.

If you meet the Bay State CAP criteria, you will get benefits for 36 months at a time. In many cases you may be eligible for more benefits under Bay State CAP than the regular food stamp program. Many SSI recipients in public or subsidized housing frequently get just the \$10 minimum benefit. Bay State CAP provides higher benefits. Depending on your income and shelter costs, you may receive at least \$38/month (minimum) up to \$149/month (max).

To be eligible for Bay State CAP, you must be receiving SSI (or SSA says you will get SSI within 30 days) and you must live alone. You may also qualify if you live with others and you buy and prepare more than half of your weekly meals separate from them. However, you are not eligible for Bay State CAP if you are married and live with your spouse, or if you live with your children who are under age 22. You are also not eligible for Bay State CAP if you have regular earned income. In these cases, you can still apply for regular food stamps

By the end of June of 2005, DTA will send letters and EBT (electronic benefits) cards to thousands of SSI recipients. They will send another set of letters in the fall to more SSI recipients. If you get these mailings, this means that you are eligible for Bay State CAP based on information DTA received from SSA. It also means that DTA has deposited food stamps benefits in an account just for you. The EBT card is like a bank debit or credit card, but can only be used to buy food. The EBT card you will receive will be attached to a food stamp account with money already in it. As you use the card, benefits will be deducted from the account.

You should expect THREE pieces of mail from DTA:

1. First, you will receive a letter telling you that you are automatically eligible for benefits through Bay State CAP and will be receiving an EBT card with the benefits already in the account. You will also receive an outreach packet with the letter detailing the benefits and how to use the EBT card. The amount of your Bay State CAP benefit assumes you have low shelter costs. You need to contact your SSA District Office if your shelter costs are above \$450/month.
2. The second mailing will include your very own EBT card. This is the card you will use to purchase food at local food stores.
3. The third mailing will then be sent out with your PIN number needed to activate and use the card (this is sent separately for security reasons). BE SURE to check your mail!!

If you get this Bay State CAP letter, you will then have only **45 Days** to access the benefit by

purchasing food at your food market. If you do not use the EBT card within 45 days, the benefits in the account will be taken back (you can still apply at any time in the future, but this first deposit will be gone). If you do use your EBT card within 45 days, your benefits will be automatically extended for another 34 months. The first deposit of benefits will include two months worth of benefits. From then on, however, you will only have one month's benefits at a time in your account.

It is very important that you follow the instructions on the letters you receive from DTA, including how to report higher shelter costs. It is very important that you activate your EBT card within 45 days of receiving it. If you receive an EBT card and do not know how to use it, you may contact the number on the reverse side of the card for assistance. You may also contact your local elder services or legal services office for assistance.

Two more points:

First, if you do not get a mailing in June or July about Bay State CAP, do not panic! Some SSI recipients who live with others are scheduled to get their letters and cards in the fall. Others may not meet the criteria but can still apply for regular Food Stamps. Remember, the SSA has an obligation under federal law to take food stamp applications of households where all members are SSI applicants or recipients. If you do not get the mailing, contact your SSA Claims Representative and ask about Bay State CAP. If you are applying for SSI and it will take some time to approve your application, you may be better off applying for regular food stamps.

Second, in some cases, you might get more food stamps under the regular Food Stamp program. This may be true if you are not getting the maximum \$149/month in food stamps but you have high shelter expenses, or you pay child support for a minor child or you have out-of-pocket medical costs. A legal services, elder services or anti-hunger advocate can help you figure out which program is better.

More Information:

If you have any questions about the food stamp programs available through Bay State CAP or the regular food stamp program, you can call Food Stamp Program Hotline at 1-866-950-FOOD or Project Bread's Food Source Hotline at 1-800-645-8333. You can also call your local Legal Services office for legal advice and possible representation if needed.

Prepared by the Mass Law Reform Institute and Merrimack Valley Legal Services
May 11, 2005