

Transitions

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this month in...

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From the Commissioner

Dear Fellow Employees,

The FY 2004 state budget contained a number of programmatic changes, many designed to help address the ongoing state fiscal situation. As you know, the EAEDC rent allowance and students as an EAEDC eligibility group are eliminated. We also anticipate changes in transportation reimbursement. As has been true in past years, there will be a clothing allowance paid to TAFDC families in September. But the change that I believe will have the most far-reaching and positive effect is the extension of the TAFDC work program requirement to those recipients whose youngest child is between two and school-age.

This group, which comprises almost 20 percent of the TAFDC caseload, has been subject to the time limit on benefits since we implemented that provision in 1996. But, unlike the 10 percent of the caseload with a current work program requirement, their work-related activities have been largely voluntary. The work program requirement for this group will be slightly different from the traditional work requirement. Those with children between two and school-age will be able to use certain education and training opportunities to meet some or all of the 20-hour weekly requirement. The important point is that this group will now have to do something, and that is a huge step forward.

Requiring some work-oriented activity is a critical step in ensuring that these families are ready when they reach the end of their time limit. While options have been available, not everyone took advantage of them. This is critical because studies have shown that employment-focused programs result in higher average earnings over five years than programs which are not employment-focused. But it is not necessary to look at studies to understand this. It is common

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From the Hotline

Q. I have a TAFDC AU with a 17-year-old child who has recently graduated from high school. The dependent child will be entering a local community college in September. He intends to work full-time throughout the summer months before attending college in the fall. He is earning almost \$8.00 per hour at a small business in the neighborhood. How do his wages affect the AU's grant amount?

A. Despite the fact that this employment is occurring over the summer break, this 17-year-old is an eligible dependent child and is considered a full-time student. He may have his earnings disregarded for a period not to exceed six months in the calendar year. The six-month period starts with the first month in a calendar year in which the dependent child has earned income. Once this dependent child reaches 18 years of age, he must be closed. Procedures for using the six-month Dependent Earnings Counter in BEACON can be accessed through BEACON Help. Regulations concerning full-time student earnings can be found at 106 CMR 204.260.

Q. How are these earnings treated in the Food Stamp Program?

A. In this situation, the earnings are countable. However, if the earnings were from a 17-year-old student attending secondary (or lower-level) school or a GED program at least half-time, then the income would be excluded. Refer to 106 CMR 363.230 (H) for more details on excluded income.

Q. During a recent recertification interview, a food stamp AU member reported to me that he had recently purchased an air conditioning unit. He was pleased that the landlord did not charge him additional rent for using the unit. He currently incurs only a monthly rent and telephone bill. Is this person entitled to the heating/cooling SUA because he uses an air conditioning unit?

A. No. Since this individual does not incur any extra charge for using the air conditioner, he is not entitled to the heating/cooling SUA. For more information on the SUA, refer to 106 CMR 364.400 (G) (2).

Q. A food stamp recipient lives in a subsidized housing unit. Currently, all of her expenses are included in the rent, and she has not had an SUA

deduction. However, her local housing authority recently began billing her an additional \$17.00 per month for use of the air conditioner. Is she eligible for the heating/cooling SUA during the summer months because she incurs an extra charge for the use of her air conditioner?

A. She is eligible for the heating/cooling SUA **not only** during the summer months, but throughout the year. SUAs are yearly amounts. Although this individual will not be paying cooling costs later in the year, it is appropriate to use the heating/cooling SUA as long as the cooling is a regular, recurring expense.

FYI

Changes to Policy Online

The Westfield TAO has closed. AUs that were serviced by the Westfield TAO have been reassigned to one of the following TAOs: Holyoke, Pittsfield or Springfield Liberty.

The following options listed on the Reference Documentation window have been updated to reflect these changes:

- Region Number/TAO Number/TAO Name Listing,
- Service Area Listing – City/Town, and
- Service Area Listing - TAO.

EAEDC Eliminating Rent Allowance and Eligibility Category of Student

EAEDC
State Letter 1257
Field Operations Memo
2003-15
Field Operations Memo
2003-15 A

As a result of legislative changes for FY 04:

(1) The Rental Allowance for EAEDC applicants and recipients living in private housing has been eliminated.

(2) The EAEDC eligibility category of student has been eliminated.

The State Letter transmitted these policy changes.

Field Operations Memo 2003-15 gave TAO staff procedures for processing applications impacted by the elimination of these factors.

Field Operations Memo 2003-15A described the actions taken by MIS to reduce or terminate active EAEDC AUs because of the elimination of the rent allowance or the eligibility category of student.

"All Discrimination Entails Harm To Dignity But Not All Harm To Dignity Entails Discrimination."

Margaret Talbot

Continued from Page 1

sense that work experience —and all that that experience includes from arriving on time, to dressing appropriately, to interacting with others—is basic to building the confidence and background that will lead to greater success. Attachment to the labor force is key in helping families move into the economic mainstream.

While I view this change as good, I know that implementing it will require a concentrated effort. Central Office staff are working to determine an overall implementation plan and schedule and to identify any BEACON changes necessary to support this new requirement. You will be receiving detailed information on the implementation plan in the very near future.

Because this is a major change for these families, it is important that they have the opportunity to sit with their worker and understand what will be required of them. They need to understand that, before they have to formally meet the new requirement, they will have 60 days to find employment on their own. They need to understand about the availability of child care and perhaps have a discussion with their local Child Care Resource and Referral agency. And they will probably have many questions.

I recognize that the ultimate burden of implementing this change rests with those of you in our offices. The effort I know you will put into explaining the requirement and answering questions as thoroughly as possible is truly appreciated. This is an important change and one which will benefit the recipients impacted by it. Your efforts in its implementation are key to its success. Thank you for your continued hard work and dedication.

Sincerely,



John Wagner, Commissioner



COMMUNICATION is the KEY

Quality Corner

This month we will review three errors that could have been avoided. The AU Manager had varying amounts of control over what information was used by BEACON, but each error was preventable.

Unreported Unemployment Compensation

An intact family (father, mother, one child) applied in January 2003 for food stamp benefits. As reported at the application, the father was receiving Unemployment Compensation. Because their income was very low, they qualified for expedited benefits. In early February, the AU was converted to on-going food stamps with Universal Semiannual Reporting using the father's income.

Unfortunately, the mother also had been receiving Unemployment Compensation, and, on December 28, 2002, she had been notified that her UC benefits had been extended, resulting in no break in her benefits. Based on the combined household income, the AU was ineligible for food stamps. Moreover, since the benefits had been based on a very low income, the food stamp payment amount was more than \$400.

In mid-February, the UC match came in, but it was too late to correct the March issuance.

What can an AU Manager do?

First, do not assume that only one parent is (or was) working in an intact family. Many families have both parents employed. Verify that the second adult either is working or is receiving another type of income. Second, you can check the unemployment compensation screen online to see the status of an individual.

Reported Income Problems

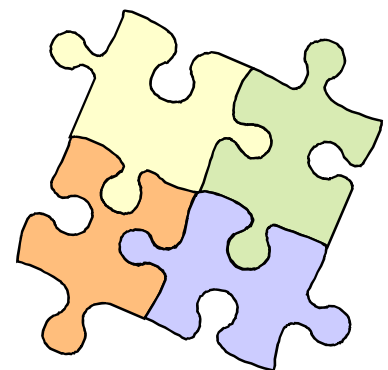
This error involves another intact family in which, according to BEACON, both parents were working. At the most recent certification, the husband's current income was entered correctly. His previous income, however, had been attributed to his wife, who has never worked. When the AU Manager correctly entered the wages under the husband's name, they were combined with the existing wages on the system that were mistakenly entered under the wife's name. This resulted in an underissuance since the AU was attributed two incomes instead of one.

What can an AU Manager do?

Be careful to enter wages and other information specific to an AU member under that AU member's name. Go to Member List and select the appropriate person, and then enter the information in the relevant window. If previous wages are showing, review them since they will be used in the EBC Calc to produce the next month's benefits.

Heating Assistance

The final error is very simple, and could be easily avoided. On her February certification, the recipient accurately stated that she had received fuel assistance. Nevertheless, she received the NON-heating SUA.



FYI

BEACON Help Revisions

The following is a list of Help windows that have been added and/or revised in BEACON.

Added:

Add a New Lump Sum Expense
Complete Signature Information
to Approve an Extension Plan
Designate and Arrange Activities
on the Activity Sequence
Edit or Add a Skill
Make and Save Reminders
About People and Appointments
That You Have Scheduled
Process a Reimbursement
Process Lump Sum Information
View, Modify or Clear Address
Information

Revised:

Activity Sequence List
Address
Client Skill Set
Extension Plan Approval
Lump Sum
Lump Sum Expenses
More on Lump Sum Expenses
Reminder



Food Stamp Program – Increased Availability of FS/ET Skills Training and Related Job Search Activities Component

FS

State Letter 1258

Field Operations Memo 2003-16

Federal monies for the Federal Fiscal Year (FFY) 2003 Food Stamp ET Program to date have been underutilized. These funds must be used and FS/ET slots filled by the end of FFY 03 (September 30, 2003).

In addition to Nonexempt FS/ET AU members who receive Emergency Assistance (EA) benefits only, the FS/ET Skills Training and Related Job Search Activities component is being made available to the following groups of recipients:

- (1) Nonexempt FS/ET AU members who are not receiving EA benefits now have the additional option of meeting the FS/ET Program requirements by complying with Skills Training and Related Job Search activities.
- (2) Exempt FS/ET AU members may volunteer to participate in Skills Training and Related Job Search activities, if a slot is available.
- (3) Nonexempt FS/WP AU members currently meeting their WP requirement may volunteer to participate in FS/ET Skills Training and Related Job Search activities, if a slot is available.

These changes were effective July 15, 2003.

The State Letter transmitted these policy changes.

The Field Operations Memo gave TAO staff procedures for processing recipients impacted by these component changes. The referral process is a manual one for these new groups.



FYI

Recipient Mailing for Summer Food Service Program

During July, the Department mailed a notice to all active TAFDC, EAEDC and NPA food stamp recipients who have a dependent child and live in a community participating in the Summer Food Service Program (approximately 49 communities statewide). The purpose of this mailing is to offer children age 18 and under food at no cost served at a designated community site during the summer. The letter lists the sites available in the area covered by the recipient's zip code. Recipients are encouraged to call Project Bread's toll-free number (1-800-645-8333) if they have questions, or to visit the website at www.meals4kids.org for information.

In addition to this mailing, the Department printed a second notice for Project Bread's distribution as part of their pilot project to reach recipients in rural Franklin County where access to the Summer Food Service Program is sometimes difficult. The notice describes the Summer Meals Home-Delivery Program that provides lunches for children, and includes a brief survey asking if the recipient would like to participate. This notice was printed for all active TAFDC and NPA food stamp recipients who have a dependent child and live in one of the following six zip codes in Franklin County: 01331, 01346, 01349, 01364, 01368 and 01376. Please refer interested recipients from this area to Project Bread's toll-free telephone number listed above for more information.

From the Forms File

Revised Forms

02-710-0703-05

02-711-0703-05 (S)

TAFDC-DS (Rev. 7/2003)

TAFDC Disability Supplement

04-200-0703-05

04-201-0703-05 (S)

EAEDC-DS (Rev. 7/2003)

EAEDC Disability Supplement

The Medical Records Release Form in the Disability Supplements have been revised to comply with the requirements of the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) which includes provisions

that mandate the adoption of federal privacy protections for individually identifiable health information. AU Managers must discard the old version and use the new revised Disability Supplements. Refer to Field Operations Memo 2003-17 for more information.

13-150-0803-05

EA-Plan/PT-1 (Rev. 8/2003) EA Self-Sufficiency Plan – Phase II – Part 1

13-160-0803-05

EA-15 (Rev. 8/2003)

EA Self-Sufficiency Plan/Agreement – Phase 1 GOAL: To Obtain Permanent Housing

These Emergency Assistance (EA) forms now include language regarding cooperating with the Child Support Enforcement Division of DOR, identifying possible ADA issues and applying for other benefits as part of the Self-Sufficiency Plan. A child's school information is recorded on the EA-Plan and is shared with the Department of Education (DOE) because it impacts issues of transportation and classroom size. The Spanish versions will soon be available.

Obsolete Form

16-017-0496-05

Image-3 (4/96)

IIS Card Problem Exception Log

As part of the Statewide EBT Plan, this form is now obsolete.

FYI

EBT Farmers' Market Pilot in New Bedford, Massachusetts

Farmers' markets generally have found it difficult to use EBT because they are not equipped for debit card transactions. Debit card systems require telephone and power service to operate Point of Sale (POS) terminals, and very few farmers' markets in Massachusetts have telephone and/or electric service available to their vendors.

The Federation of Massachusetts Farmers' Markets (FMFM), the Department of Transitional Assistance and the Massachusetts Department of Food and Agriculture received approval to pilot an EBT system at the Clasky Common Market. This market will be open every Sunday from July 12, 2003 through October 25, 2003 on Pleasant Street in Clasky Park, New Bedford. Instead of individual POS terminals, there will be a single, wired POS terminal from which the market manager will sell scrip (coupons) in \$2.50 denominations to EBT customers.

Scrip will be accepted for food sales at the Clasky Common Market throughout posted market days and hours for the 2003 market season. The scrip may be used to purchase only food items

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FYI

Narratives Tab

Prior to the implementation of BEACON, the case narrative was an effective tool in capturing details concerning pertinent case activity. Case narratives were essential in assisting other AU Managers, Supervisors and TAO Managers in understanding the circumstances of a family's situation.

Currently, the Narratives tab is being underutilized by many AU Managers. This has made it difficult for other TAOs and Department units to learn specific, detailed information about AU situations not otherwise captured in BEACON.

The Narratives tab should provide a cumulative record of all contacts/actions regarding a particular AU; therefore, staff are requested to comment in the Narratives tab each time a contact/action is made with regard to an AU. Entries need not be extensive, but should adequately describe the action taken. Remember that all information saved in BEACON, including written text in the narrative, becomes a permanent part of the BEACON record.

The Narratives tab is accessed through the Eligibility Explorer window and is used to enter additional information about any assessed person or AU that is not collected on previous windows contained within the Interview Explorer.

To add a narrative:

- Click on the Client dropdown box and select the appropriate member of the AU;
- Enter the new narrative at the blinking cursor in the bottom window;
- Remember, review and edit the narrative as needed; and
- Click on the SAVE button and the new narrative will appear in the top window.

(Once saved, deletions to the narrative may not be performed, although further additions/clarifications may be made.)

For more information on the Narratives tab, refer to *A User's Guide*, III-C-1 and the BEACON Help window entitled "Narratives Tab."

FYI

Teen Parents, Dependent Children and the MCAS

New Department of Education (DOE) standards require that high school students in Massachusetts pass the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) Examination to graduate and receive a high school diploma. The Department has made the following decisions regarding the MCAS and how it relates to our clients.

Teen Parents:

- A teen parent who has received a Certificate of Completion or can verify through a written statement from the high school that she has successfully completed her high school course work is considered to have received a diploma for purposes of teen parent eligibility.
- A teen parent who has received a Certificate of Completion or can verify through a written statement from the high school that she has successfully completed her high school course work, and who is pursuing an MCAS remedial program will maintain her work-program and time-limit exemptions until she takes the MCAS retest or for six months, whichever is sooner. The six-month period starts the month following the successful completion of high school course work.

Dependent children:

- A dependent child age 18 who has received a Certificate of Completion or can otherwise demonstrate that he or she has successfully completed the high school course work, and who is pursuing an MCAS remedial program will continue to be eligible for TAFDC until turning 19, taking the MCAS retest or for six months, whichever is sooner. The six-month period starts the month following the successful completion of high school course work.

For more information on dependent children who have turned 18, refer to 106 CMR 203.575. Teen parent school attendance requirements are found at 106 CMR 203.610.

Additional information on the MCAS may be found by visiting the DOE website at <http://www.doe.mass.edu/pathways>.

Continued from Page 7

that are eligible per USDA regulations. EBT customers may return unused scrip to the market manager who will then credit the amount to their EBT account or they may choose to use the scrip on another shopping day through October 25, 2003.

If this pilot is successful, the Clasky Common Market will operate using the same EBT system next year. DTA hopes this project will be expanded to farmers' markets across the state in future years.



Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA)

All Field Operations Memo 2003-17

This memo explains the impact of HIPAA to TAO staff.

- This federal privacy act protects patients' medical records and other health information and applies to health care providers, referred to as covered entities. DTA is not a covered entity and therefore not subject to the provisions of HIPAA.
- The TAFDC and EAEDC Disability Supplements were revised to make the Medical Records Release Form contained within the supplements HIPAA compliant. This is because the forms are used to obtain information from covered entities.



EA Self-Sufficiency Plan Changes

EA

EA User's Guide: Emergency Assistance, SSI Special Benefits and BEACON - Update No. 013

This update provides instructions on the following issues:

- The importance of accurate data collection is stressed as DTA shares information with Department of Education (DOE) and Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD).
- Lump sum payment will be treated as income in the month received and an asset in the following months.
- Transfer-in EA AUs require a review, an update of information and possibly an eligibility review.
- An EA AU placed in a substance abuse treatment program will have a Self-Sufficiency Plan, Parts I and III developed.
- AU Managers, Homeless Coordinators, HAP providers and shelter providers must inquire about health conditions, mental or physical, that make it difficult for the EA AU to follow through with the specific activities on their plan for self-sufficiency.
- The following activities are required of clients to meet the Self-Sufficiency Plan (EA-Plan):
 - Cooperating with the Child Support Enforcement Unit (CSEU) of DOR, unless there is good cause. Some AUs must apply for child support services by completing the *Application and Agreement for Child Support Enforcement Services* form from DOR. The completed application must be sent to DOR.
 - Applying for all potential monetary benefits, such as RSDI, SSI, TAFDC, UC benefits, Workers' Compensation, Veterans' Benefits and retirement benefits.
 - Resolving outstanding Massachusetts defaults or warrants. The EA AU must show that it is making an effort to resolve these issues to be compliant with its SSP.
 - Meeting program requirements of TAFDC or FSP. A member of the EA AU who is also a nonexempt FS/ET AU member must be referred to Skills Training and Related Job Search activities.
 - Collecting school information which is used to update the Education windows.
- The Self-Sufficiency Plan/Agreement (EA-15) form and the Self-Sufficiency Plan (EA-Plan), Part I, Part II and Part III have been revised.