

# Transitions

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## this month in...

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## From the Commissioner

Dear Fellow Employees,

As we continue to face the challenge in of not only providing emergency shelter to thousands of homeless families, but also moving them into permanent housing, I am reminded of how far we have come and I want to take this opportunity to commend all of you on the first-year anniversary of our Agency's "no hotel" achievement. Two years ago, our hotel population consisted of nearly six hundred homeless families. We set ourselves a goal of eliminating the need to shelter families in hotels within two years and through the efforts of many creative and dedicated staff both within DTA and some of our sister agencies, we were able to achieve that goal far sooner than anticipated — in August of 2005. Moreover, through your ongoing commitment, we are continuing one year later to find shelter for our homeless clients without a reliance on hotels.

Eliminating the use of hotels to house families not only saved money that could be reinvested in a more efficient and effective service delivery system, but also laid the foundation for several new and exciting housing initiatives. With the start of this new fiscal year, for example, our homelessness prevention plans include the design and implementation of a comprehensive intake, assessment and referral program for all homeless and at-risk families in each region of the Commonwealth. This Regional Collaborative Initiative which is in the early planning stages is based on the premise that given the flexibility to manage/leverage local resources and respond in creative ways, local communities can develop more effective and efficient systems for addressing the needs of local families who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. A housing first model, the Regional Collaborative focuses on providing services to each family in the most appropriate setting – which

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with very few exceptions, will be in housing rather than temporary emergency shelter. For those instances when temporary, emergency shelter cannot be avoided, the Regional Collaborative will be expected to demonstrate that it has a wide array of resources from which to choose — with an Emergency Assistance (EA) funded shelter as the last resort. For those families placed in an EA-funded shelter, the Regional Collaborative will be expected to move the family into permanent housing quickly. As the planning and development of this model continues to unfold, we will welcome your input on its design.

As we celebrate the one-year no hotel anniversary, we must remain mindful of the recent passage by the legislature of two changes which will increase eligibility for Emergency Assistance (EA). The increase in the eligibility standard from 100% of the poverty level to 130% and the requirement to place families in EA shelter for up to 30 days if they appear to meet all eligibility requirements but need time to obtain third-party verifications will undoubtedly lead to an increased demand for emergency shelter. Rest assured, here at Central Office we are doing our best to ensure we have adequate shelter capacity to meet the demand without the need to return to the use of hotels to shelter homeless families. With the expansion of preventive and housing stabilization services such as the Tool Box funding and the Residential Assistance for Families in Transition (RAFT) Program, pilot programs such as the one underway with local housing authorities, the development of housing first models such as the Regional Collaborative and your skilled case management, we will continue on our course to improve services and programs for homeless families.

Thanks for your continued commitment and all you do to help the Department achieve its ultimate goal — ending homelessness in Massachusetts.

Sincerely,



John Wagner, Commissioner

## From the Hotline

In addition to new material, this month's column also contains previously published questions concerning the heating/cooling SUA. These questions still reflect current policy and procedure and have been reprinted for your review. More information on the SUA is located in *A User's Guide: Transitional Assistance Programs and BEACON* Chapter XIV pages XIV-I-4 through XIV-I-6 as well as 106 CMR 364.400.

- Q.** My food stamp recipient has verified that she pays a mortgage on a single-family residence. Since she owns and lives in her own home, can I assume that she is eligible for the heating/cooling SUA as long as she confirms that she is paying her own heating bills?
- A.** Yes. If your recipient verifies that she owns a single-family home, you may assume that she is responsible for her own heating bills. This SUA would also be appropriate for a recipient who provides you with a rental agreement verifying that her rental amount does not include heat. Therefore, the heating/cooling SUA would be appropriate.

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- Q.** If I assume that the heating/cooling SUA is appropriate when my recipient either owns a single-family home or pays a rental amount that does not include heat, how do I verify that I have used the appropriate SUA? Do I still need to request utility bills or a written statement from the recipient?
- A.** To verify that you are using the appropriate SUA, confirm with the recipient that she is paying her own heating bills and request a copy of the recipient's mortgage agreement or rental/lease agreement stating that utilities are not included. This is sufficient verification for using the heating/cooling SUA.
- Q.** My food stamp recipient has verified that she pays rent and electricity only. She also has an air conditioner which she runs

during the summer months. Is she eligible for the heating/cooling SUA? If so, how do I verify this expense?

- A.** She is entitled to the heating/cooling SUA for the entire year based on her self-declaration. Be sure to note in the case narrative that the heating/cooling SUA has been given based on the recipient's statement that she owns and operates an air conditioner in the summer months.
- 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.
- Q.** A food stamp recipient lives in a subsidized housing unit. Currently, all of his expenses are included in the rent and he has not had an SUA deduction. However, our local housing authority recently began billing him an additional \$17.00 per month for use of the air conditioner. Is he eligible for the heating/cooling SUA during the summer months because he incurs an extra charge for the use of his air conditioner?
- A.** He 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.
- Q.** If my TAFDC applicant is unable to identify the name of her child's father, how should I proceed on the BEACON Absence window?
- A.** Once you have explained the importance of cooperating with child support enforcement efforts, **if the applicant is still unable to identify a potential father, remember to indicate this on BEACON by entering "unknown," on the Absence window under "Parent Identification."** Do not leave any fields blank. (For more details, refer to *A User's Guide: Transitional Assistance Programs and BEACON* Chapter XIII-G.)

## **TAFDC - Education/Training Counter: Vocational Proficiency Indicator**

TAFDC

Field Operations Memo 2005-29

The purpose of this memo is to inform AU Managers about the use of the “Vocational Proficiency” indicator located on the ESP Activity window. When enrolling a recipient in a non-degree education or training program at a two-year College, AU Managers must click on the Vocational Proficiency Indicator to ensure that the Ed/Training Counter on the Monitor Participation and TAFDC tab of the Work Requirements windows accretes properly.

## **TAFDC, EAEDC and FS - Changes to the Non-Fraudulent Overpayment Recalculation Process**

TAFDC, EAEDC and FS

Field Operations Memo 2005-30

This Field Operations Memo informs TAO staff that the Fraud and Overpayment Referral Screening Unit manually recalculates non-fraudulent overpayment amounts based on appeal decisions for Unintentional Program Violations (UPVs).

## **EBT Vendor Conversion**

ALL

*A User’s Guide: Transitional Assistance Programs and BEACON - Update 059*

Field Operations Memo 2005-31

Conversion from the current EBT vendor, J.P. Morgan (eFunds as subcontractor), to Affiliated Computer Services, Inc. State and Local Solutions (ACS) is scheduled to take place on Sunday August 21, 2005. The EBT system will be down and recipients unable to access their benefits from approximately 12:00 a.m. to 5:00 a.m. on Sunday August 21, 2005 while the database conversion takes place.

New PIN terminals will replace the current terminals on Monday morning August 22, 2005.

This User’s Guide Update and Field Operations Memo:

- provides information about the conversion from the current EBT vendor to the new one, (which will include the appropriate change of vendor name);

- explains what changes will and will not occur as a result of this conversion;
- explains that recipients will be unable to access their benefits from 12:00 a.m. to 5:00 a.m. on the day of conversion; and
- includes a new section to the User’s Guide that explains the guidelines that EBT retailers will use to process a retailer misdispense claim.

Please note: The Transmittal Page of Update 059 was reissued to correct the page numbers listed in sections titled: Material Issued and Material Replaced.

## **P.O. Box Address for Child Support Checks**

TAFDC

Field Operations Memo 2005-32

This memo notifies TAO staff to mail child support payments that are received in error by the TAFDC recipient to:

Child Support Finance  
PO Box 9562  
Boston, MA 02144-9562  
Attn: Accounts Payable

“Character is doing what’s right when nobody’s looking.” J.C. Watts, Jr.

## **Bay State CAP – Additional Questions and Answers**

FS  
Field Operations Memo  
2005-33

This memo transmits additional Bay State CAP process information as well as Phase One outreach issues. The format is a series of questions and answers, and is divided into two sections: ongoing process issues and outreach issues.

### **Interpreter Services**

ALL  
Field Operations Memo  
2005-34

This Field Operations Memo reminds TAO staff that, in compliance with federal law, DTA is required to advise applicants/recipients of their right to interpreter services and provide interpreters to applicants/recipients whose primary language is not English or who use American Sign Language (ASL). The memo further advises that all timeliness issues associated with the Department's effort to provide an interpreter must be considered and the date of contact preserved for the applicant/recipient.



## **FYI**

### **Alternate Verifications**

Requests for verification should not be limited to any one type of document and may be obtained from a household member or some other source (106 CMR 361.640 (A) and 702.340).

For example, for verification of earned income, an applicant's pay stub is usually requested, but a letter from the employer on company letterhead with a contact name and telephone number that states the last four weeks' gross pay, or a payroll print-out from the employer may also serve as alternate forms of verification. For residence or shelter expenses, the landlord verification form, current rent receipt or a copy of the lease may all be acceptable forms of verification.

Reminder: In the "Verifications" tab in BEACON, a list of acceptable verifications appears for each item to be verified.

In instances when documentary evidence cannot be obtained, AU Managers should explore possible collateral contacts with the applicant or recipient. See 106 CMR 361.640 (B) and 702.340 (B) for details. If collateral contact is the means of verification, note this in the "Narratives" tab in BEACON.

## **FYI**

### **BEACON Help Revisions**

The following is a list of Help windows that have been updated.

The list reflects updates made to both the primary and secondary windows.

- Name Clearance
  - Fields & Buttons
  - Warnings, Edits and Messages
  - Conduct Name Clearance ("How To")
- Cross Reference Search
  - Fields & Buttons
  - Conduct a Cross Search ("How To")
- Name Clearance Discrepancies
- Name Clearance Guidelines
- Name Clearance Error Cross Reference

- Fields & Buttons
- Capture a New Cross Reference (“How To”)
- Name Clearance Processing for Bay State CAP
- Standard Utility Allowance
  - Fields & Buttons
  - Warnings, Edits and Messages
- Program Administration
- SDX Cap Inquiry
  - Warnings, Edits and Messages

## **FYI**

### **Becoming Homeless for the Purpose of Receiving EA**

Advocates have raised concerns that EA regulation 106 CMR 309.040(B)(1) is being applied incorrectly, resulting in inappropriate shelter denials. This regulation requires denial of an EA shelter application if the AU became homeless for the purpose of making itself eligible for EA. The rationale behind this regulation is to prevent fraud by individuals who render themselves homeless to receive cost-free housing or (more commonly, some believe they will receive preference for housing subsidies if they are considered “homeless”).

For this regulation to apply, you must show two things:

- 1) the AU became homeless (i.e., has no feasible alternative housing); and
- 2) the AU did so for the purpose of receiving EA shelter benefits.

Because the subjective intent of the applicant is at issue (i.e., did the AU “purposefully” become homeless to receive shelter benefits), it is often hard to prove that the regulation applies. If you suspect that the regulation may apply, you must first be able to show that the applicant knew about EA. Always ask how an applicant found out about the EA program. If he or she did not know about the program prior to becoming homeless, this regulation simply will not apply.

If you can show that the applicant did know about EA, then you must determine whether the AU became homeless for the specific purpose of receiving EA shelter. A parent who voluntarily left a housing arrangement because of domestic violence, poor conditions, medical issues or a rent increase has not rendered themselves

homeless for the purpose of receiving EA, even if they knew about the EA program. If you think that these alleged motivations are merely a pretext, however, you should ask for supporting documentation/verification.

Moreover, if an individual appears to have shown extremely poor judgment by leaving a previously available living arrangement to move to Massachusetts (or even by leaving previously available housing within Massachusetts) without a sufficient plan for housing, this situation would not fall under this regulation, if you are unable to show that the intention to reside in EA shelter motivated the AU to leave its previous housing.

It should be recognized, however, that a caseworker can draw inferences from a person’s behavior. For example, a former EA recipient (who therefore knew about EA) applies for shelter immediately after leaving her New York apartment and claims that the only reason she left was that she was behind in rent. You call the landlord and find out that there was, in fact, no rent arrearage. Thus, it could logically be inferred that she left her apartment for the specific reason of becoming eligible for EA. In drawing inferences, you

should look at the individual's past shelter history, the timing of the application (the closer the EA application is to when they became homeless, the more likely the regulation would apply) and determine if there is support for the individual's stated rationale.

## FYI

### Changes to DTA Online

DTA Online has been updated with the following changes:

- The "Latest News" option on the first page displays current information that is of interest and importance to Department staff. Check this option for updated information. Two memos have been added:
- *Memo from Commissioner Wagner: Governor Romney's Welfare Reform Legislation;* and
- *Memo from Commissioner Wagner: Jim Reen Announcement.*
- A new Job Aide has been added to Training Online: *Helpful Hints for Telephone Interviews* was developed by Food Stamp trainers to help AU Managers prepare for and conduct telephone interviews.

## FYI

### Updates to the EOHHS mass.gov DTA Homepage

The EOHHS mass.gov DTA Homepage (*DTA Internet Site*) has been updated with the following changes:

#### NEWS AND UPDATES

- A link to the press release entitled *Romney Files Legislation to Lift Families from Poverty* has been added to the page.
- A link entitled "*Commissioner Wagner's Remarks and Pictures*" has been added to the press release entitled *Pioneer Institute Recognizes State's Work for the Homeless*. When the link is selected, the text of Commissioner Wagner's statement and pictures taken at the presentation will be displayed.

#### RELATED LINKS – WELFARE REFORM

The link titled: *Governor Romney's Welfare Reform Press Release and Proposal* displays links to the Welfare Reform Press Release and an updated PowerPoint Presentation on Governor Romney's Welfare Reform Proposal.

- *Governor Romney's Welfare Reform Press Conference*

The text of the Press Conference and a picture taken at the Press Conference will be displayed.

- *Governor Romney's Welfare Reform Proposal*

The details of Governor Romney's Welfare Reform Proposal will be displayed. The proposal compares the proposed policy changes to current policy.

## FYI

### Recipient Mailings for the Summer Food Service Program

In July, the Department sent 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 50 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 will list the sites available in the area covered by the recipient's ZIP code. Recipients will be encouraged to call Project Bread's toll-free number (1-800-645-8333) if they have questions, or to visit the web site at [www.meals4kids.org](http://www.meals4kids.org) for information.

## FYI

### Continued Media Campaign for Food Stamp Outreach

USDA will provide poster displays in fifteen locations in low-income neighborhoods in Springfield and Holyoke during August and September to supplement its national food stamp media campaign. The poster will resemble the MBTA poster produced jointly by USDA and DTA this year. It will be in English and Spanish and will encourage people to call DTA's Centralized Eligibility Operations (CEO) unit at 1-866-950-FOOD or Project Bread at 1-800-645-8333. CEO and Project Bread staff will provide information about food stamp eligibility and send an application to those interested. A copy of the poster displayed is shown below.



A message from USDA Food and Nutrition Service and the Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA)  
DTA and USDA are equal opportunity providers and employers

## Good Food Good Health

**Food Stamps  
There When You Need Them**

Call the Food Stamp Program (toll free) at

**1-866-950-FOOD**  
or Project Bread at 1-800-645-8333.

to find out if you qualify and how to apply



Un mensaje de USDA y Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA)  
DTA y USDA son promotores y empleadores que ofrecen igualdad igual para todos

## Tener Buenos Alimentos Es Tener Buena Salud

**Los Cupones para Alimentos  
Estan Ahí Cuando Usted Los Necesite**

Llame gratis al Programa de Cupones para Alimentos al

**1-866-950-3663**  
o Project Bread al 1-800-645-8333.

para averiguar si usted califica y saber como usted puede aplicar

## FYI

### Statewide Data Exchange for Automatic Enrollment in School Meals/Milk Programs

In August, the second statewide data exchange with DOE will take place to automatically enroll school children (ages 4 – 18) who are recipients of TAFDC, FS or both for school meals/milk. DOE will use the data file provided by DTA to match students on its statewide student identification system.

DOE will send a letter to the families of matched students telling them that their child(ren) is eligible for free or reduced school meals/milk programs for the coming school year. **No additional application or verification is needed from the families of a child(ren) certified through this process.**

DOE will send back to DTA a data file of unmatched names. These children most likely attend private or charter schools and are not part of the DOE student identification system. In September, DTA will send a mailing to these families. The September mailing will include a notice and system-generated verification of eligibility for TAFDC and/or FS so that the families can apply for the school meals/milk programs.

In addition, the USDA food stamp radio spots played earlier this year will be rebroadcast during August and September in the Boston area on WBZ-AM, WJMN-FM, WMJX-FM, WODS-FM and WXKS-FM. They will give CEO's 1-866-950-FOOD number to call for information or an application.