Transitions

A Publication of the Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance

this month in…
Transitions

From the Commissioner

Dear Fellow Employees,

When I assumed the duties of Commissioner a little more than a year ago, I faced a number of challenges. A dismal food stamp participation rate was high on the list. To some it may seem odd that a "welfare" department would want more people to use its programs. But the only connection between food stamp benefits and the other programs we run is that the population served is low-income. Food stamp benefits are a nutrition program, designed to help individuals and families eat better and stay healthier. Food stamp benefits also bring revenue into the state by increasing the buying power of its citizens. I was distressed that Massachusetts ranked almost at the bottom of the states in food stamp participation rates. I committed myself, and you, to turning that around.

An important part of that turnaround was looking at what people had to do to get food stamp benefits. Recognizing that many potential food stamp users are employed, we put a high priority on waiving the face-to-face interview whenever appropriate. Last November, we intensified our efforts to improve participation and ease access by launching the shortened food stamp application and encouraging mail or fax applications. Central Office staff have worked to make the new application available in a variety of locations, but local office staff at all levels have truly outdone themselves. At Assistant Commissioner Cescia Derderian's quarterly food stamp participation meetings, the outreach efforts reported by directors are outstanding. From convincing supermarket managers to make applications available, to visiting elderly housing and senior centers, to appearing on local cable television shows, local office staff have taken this cause to heart!

I fully recognize that the impact of encouraging these applications is felt most directly by food stamp workers—and, again, the response has been superb. It is not easy to change the way anyone does their

From the Hotline

Q. An applicant came into the office yesterday and applied for food stamp benefits. When I asked for his social security number (SSN), he gave me what he thought was his number. I questioned him further, however, because he was stumbling over the final digit and couldn't seem to settle on whether the last digit was a "2" or a "3." I suggested he bring his card in with him so that we could both be certain of the number. In this example, is it acceptable to ask an applicant to give us his social security card for verification of the SSN?

A. No. It is not acceptable to ask any applicant or recipient for a social security card as verification of the SSN, *under any circumstances.* Instead, take down what the individual believes is his or her SSN. The Department will then verify that number by a computer match with the Social Security Administration (SSA). SSN Verification Matches are sent daily from SSA to DTA and are used to report name, SSN number and date of birth discrepancies.

Q. In the above example, what happens if the applicant gave the wrong SSN?

A. If the wrong SSN is given, a discrepancy will be received on the SSN Verification Match View. In this example, the AU Manager could call the applicant to double check the number or simply enter the other SSN given by the applicant. This *new* SSN would be verified overnight by SSA. If the SSN comes back again as discrepant, the applicant must provide verification of the SSN as it is now questionable. The applicant may choose to verify the SSN by providing his social security card or by getting written verification from the SSA. (The SSN could be verified by using the ENUM-2 form.) It is not acceptable, even in this situation, for an AU Manager to require the applicant to provide the social security card.

Q. During a routine application interview, the food stamp applicant repeated her social security number and I entered it onto the RFA. She then attempted to hand me her social security card, but I politely declined to see the card. Instead, I informed the applicant that the Department no longer requires an applicant to provide a copy of their social security card as verification of their social security number. Was my response correct?

A. Yes. As in the previous examples, the Department will verify this social security number through a computer match with the Social Security Administration. If multiple social security numbers are verified for the applicant, or if the number given to the Department cannot be verified by SSA, the applicant will be required to obtain written verification from SSA.

Regulations concerning SSN requirements and verifications in the Food Stamp Program can be found at 106 CMR 362.500.

Regulations concerning SSN requirements and verifications in the TAFDC and EAEDC Programs can be found at 106 CMR 701.230.

Procedures regarding SSN Verification Matches are in *A User's Guide*, pages II-A-27 through II-A-29.
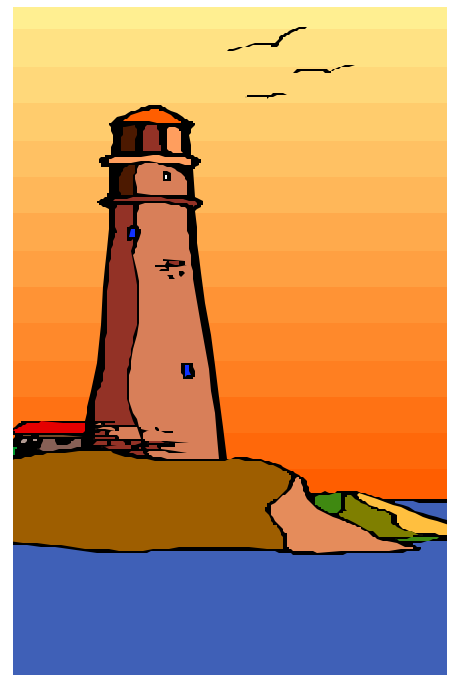
EAEDC Living Arrangement

EAEDC
State Letter 1256

This State Letter transmits the following changes:

- The references to Living Arrangement G: Detoxification Center in 106 CMR 321.410 and 321.420 are removed because detoxification services are processed by the Division of Medical Assistance (DMA).

- The explanation for the Standard of Assistance (grant calculation) for Living Arrangement E: Licensed Rest Homes in 106 CMR 321.420 (E) is clarified.

> "You gain strength, courage, and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face. You must do the thing which you think you cannot do."
>
> Eleanor Roosevelt

does their job, but I continually hear that the food stamp staff have been open, adaptable and eager to figure out how to do their job in a new environment. From developing phone interviewing skills, to using headsets, to developing informational packets to be sent to applicants, food stamp workers have joined this effort with enthusiasm.

Beyond the application, there are a variety of efforts to get the word out about food stamp benefits. Newly printed Verizon phone books list the Department's Application Information phone number in the Government section under "Food Stamps" (and since November, Application Information has sent out over 5,200 food stamp applications in response to phone requests!); in Boston, public service posters with food stamp information are running on the "T" during June; plans are underway to have convenience stores provide informational fliers to their customers. No idea is too big or too small to not at least receive consideration.

The Department has also taken advantage of many options offered by the federal Farm Bill, including the implementation of Semiannual Reporting and Transitional Benefits Alternative (TBA). These options support our goals of increasing participation and easing access.

And, of course, each office has been given a food stamp participation goal. I also set a Department-wide goal to increase statewide food stamp participation to 50 percent by September 2003.

The result of all these efforts is incredible. In April, five months ahead of goal, our participation rate exceeded 53 percent! From February 2002 through February 2003, Massachusetts ranked second in the nation in increased food stamp participation, increasing our participation by 20 percent. This means 50,000 additional citizens are receiving this important nutritional benefit with a resultant economic benefit to the Commonwealth of over $80 million. These are phenomenal improvements, even more impressive when the impact of last fall's layoffs and the ongoing office closings are factored in. I knew when we set out that we would figure out how to turn ourselves around and bring food stamp benefits to every eligible person in the Commonwealth. But even I am impressed by how quickly and strongly we have moved in the right direction. Thank you for a job truly well done.

Sincerely,

John Wagner, Commissioner

P.S. And we did all this while also continuing to lower the error rate!

FYI

## The Impact of the BENDEX and SDX Matches on Change Reporting

At a recent Program Accuracy meeting, TAO directors raised concern about Department automated computer matches and their impact on various food stamp reporting requirements, particularly the impact of the BENDEX/SDX match on the client's responsibility to report changes in Social Security/SSI income.

AUs subject to Transitional Benefits Alternative (TBA) **are not** required to report any changes during the TBA period. However, the Department has opted to automatically make changes as a result of BENDEX/SDX match information. See 106 CMR 366.110(B).

AUs subject to Universal Semiannual Reporting (USR) are **only** required to report changes that would cause the AU's income to exceed the appropriate gross income limit for their AU size. *If the change is received through the BENDEX/SDX match before the AU reports the change*, BEACON will automatically make the appropriate AU change(s). See *A User's Guide,* pages IV-C-16 through IV-C-19 and 106 CMR 366.110(C).

If the AU is not subject to TBA or USR, it is the responsibility of the AU to report changes in a timely manner unless exempt. These AUs are required to report changes in accordance with 106 CMR 366.110(A). *If the change is received through the BENDEX/SDX match before the AU reports the change,* BEACON will automatically make the appropriate AU change(s).

With the exception of TBA AUs, Quality Control will record a recipient error if the *BENDEX/SDX* match is late or fails to run in a given month **AND** the AU fails to report the same change.
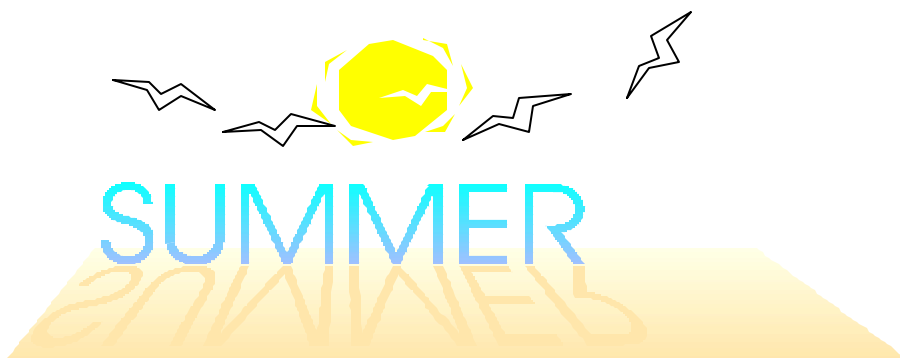
FYI

Changes to Policy Online

This month you will see the following changes to Policy Online:

BA OPTION WINDOW

The BA Option window now displays the following options:

- BENDEX,

- SDX, and

- Timing of Batch Recalculations.

When **BENDEX** is selected, the following options will be displayed:

- Overview (moved from the BENDEX Option window),

- Communications Codes,*

- Payment Status Codes,*

- SSA Claim Number (moved from the BA window),

- State/Territory/Commonwealth/Postal and BENDEX Codes,* and

- Status Codes.*

When **SDX** is selected, the following option will be selected:

- Overview (moved from the BA window), and

- SSI Payment Status Codes.*

*This information was previously documented as appendices in the *FMCS User's Guide.*

Systems User's Guide
Update 154

**All
Volume 2: *FMCS User's Guide***

The following appendices in the *User's Guide* are obsolete because they can now be accessed from Policy Online:

Appendix A: SSI Payment Status Codes

Appendix B: BENDEX Payment Status Codes

Appendix C: BENDEX File Communication Codes

Appendix D: BENDEX Status Codes

Appendix E: State/ Territory/ Commonwealth BENDEX Codes

For more information, please refer to the FYI in this month's *Transitions* titled: *Changes to Policy Online.*

Program Access Review

FS
Field Operations Memo 2003-14

This Field Operations memo:

- informs TAO staff of USDA-FNS findings in the Program Access review; and

- reinforces TAO staff responsibilities regarding food stamp policy and procedures.

From the Forms File

Revised Forms

AU Managers are reminded to discard the old version of any form and use the new form.

*13-030-0603-05
EAN-1 (Rev. 6/2003)
EA Noncompliance Referral*

This form has been revised to provide clearer choices for noncompliance reasons. A seventh reason has been added to the form. "Criminal activity that threatens health, safety or security." Although it is not a noncompliance reason but a termination reason, it is a reason that is referred to the noncompliance committee for review.

*02-710-0603-05
02-711-0603-05 (S)
TAFDC-DS (Rev. 6/2003)
TAFDC Disability Supplement*

*04-200-0603-05
04-201-0603-05 (S)
EAEDC- DS (Rev. 6/2003)
EAEDC Disability Supplement*

Medical Releases 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.

FYI

BEACON Help Revisions

The following is a list of Help Windows which have been added and/or revised.

Added:

Add, Modify or Remove Household Member Information
Add a New Asset
Add a New Related Benefit
Add Countable Income from a Terminated Source
Add Income Information for a Subsequent Time
Add Income Information for the First Time
Add Pending or Ongoing Income Information
Answer a Question on the Nonfinancial Q&A Navigator
Answer Questions on the AU Composition Q&A Navigator
Cancel an Incorrectly Entered Benefit
Change a Particular Gross Income Amount
Change Asset Information
Complete an RFA
Create a Sanction for an Assessed Person Already Sanctioned for Another Reason
Process a Request for Assistance
Remove a Sanction for a Good Cause Reason
Remove a Sanction for an Assessed Person
Select a Denial or Closing Reason for an AU and an AU Member
Select an AU Member from the AU Members List
Update an Existing Benefit
Update the Asset Start Date

Revised:

Application
Assisting Person
Apply for Assistance
AU Composition Good Cause Tab
AU Composition Results
AU Composition Results Tab
AU Composition Sanctions Tab
Household
Household Member Query List

Insurance
More on Applying for Assistance
More on Employment Status
More on Sanctions
More on Time Limits
Narratives Tab
Nonfinancial Q&A Navigator
Other Income Status
Other Income Status Tab
Pregnancy
Related Benefits
Results Tab
Time Limits Clocks Tab
What if
Work Requirements
Work Requirements AU Exemption Tab
Work Requirements Food Stamps Tab
Work Requirements TAFDC Tab