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Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) FY17 Participation Report

January, 2017

Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance



**SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM (SNAP)
PROGRESS REPORT
*January 2017***

OVERVIEW

Line-item 4400-1001 of the Fiscal Year 2017 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 and empower low-income individuals and families to meet their basic needs, improve their quality of life, and achieve long-term economic self-sufficiency. 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.

One in every nine people in the Commonwealth including working families, children, elders, and people with disabilities receive SNAP benefits.

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.

¹ For 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.

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

One in every nine Massachusetts residents receives SNAP benefits. As of November 2016, DTA’s caseload was 447,221 households consisting of 772,604 recipients. 147,415 recipients are 60 or over, 273,475 have a disability, and 279,177 are age 18 or under. Of all SNAP households, 72% have a gross countable income of less than 100% of the Federal Poverty Level – that is \$24,300 for a household of four.

DTA issued a total of \$1.2 billion in SNAP benefits in calendar year 2015. This represents about \$2.14 billion per year in economic activity for the Commonwealth as each dollar in SNAP benefits generates an equivalent of \$1.79 in economic activity for the state. DTA will sustain this economic benefit, and the essential food assistance for approximately 448,000 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 2017, DTA again funded the Project Bread/Food Source Hotline². 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/

² Funded from line item 4400-1001

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 2016, UMass contracted with 41 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 \$601,258 in payments for SNAP outreach services. For FFY 2017, USDA approved an expansion of the SNAP Outreach Partner Reimbursement Project and reimbursement of up to \$1,107,762.

Additional SNAP outreach has included:

- Close coordination with the Social Security Administration (SSA) continues to reinvigorate the Bay State Combined Application Project (Bay State CAP). This project allows Supplemental Security Income (SSI) clients to apply for food assistance at SSA, reduces administrative burdens on DTA staff, and offers a three-year certification period for the Bay State CAP households. DTA and SSA conducted a joint training of all SSA case managers in January 2016 which resulted in an increase in Bay State CAP applications across the Commonwealth.
- The partnership with the Massachusetts Executive Office of Elder Affairs and a working group of advocates remains in place with a focus on initiatives to help elders access and maximize SNAP benefits.
- Efforts to reduce the *SNAP Gap* became a priority of the Department and MassHealth in FY 2017. Targeted outreach projects are currently being discussed and streamlined SNAP application assistance processes developed.
- The Virtual Gateway SNAP application was updated and simplified in September 2016.

IMPROVING ACCESS AND CUSTOMER SERVICE

Document Management Improvements

Each month, the EDMC in Taunton processes approximately 185,000 documents 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 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.
- 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.

- Multifunction scanning devices are in procurement. These devices will be installed in all DTA local office waiting areas for use by visitors scanning documents to EDMC. This service will provide the opportunity for direct scanning of critical documents by clients.

Assistance Line Improvements

DTA is committed to improving client access on the phones while ensuring day-to-day work that in turn lessens the need for calls is completed. DTA has deployed the Courtesy Call Back feature, which 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.

DTA is committed to continuous improvement on the Assistance Line to cut down on wait times and ensure concerns are addressed comprehensively.

Mobile Application

At the end of August 2016 DTA introduced a mobile application – DTA Connect – for clients to access information about their case, receive alerts and reminders, and answer basic questions without needing to call or visit a local office. Successful roll-out of the mobile applications features has been very well received by the public, advocates and DTA staff. Next generation upgrade planned for December 2016 include features that allow DTA clients to update contact information and request documents critical to ongoing eligibility determination. Most importantly, a feature to upload verification documents will be provided thereby reducing the time it takes for DTA staff to receive documents necessary to complete the application or recertification process. Early 2017 enhancements will provide access to a provider portal to support services to clients via community partners.

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.

DTA 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. DTA's Ombudsman's Unit is a robust unit tasked with solving issue brought to the agency's attention from clients, advocates, and elected officials.

DTA Scorecard/Baseline Report

Ensuring the public has a way to measure DTA's performance is vital to the success of the agency. In 2015 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. The scorecard was enhanced in August 2016 to include several on-page links to detailed data reported in summary on the scorecard. 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 July 2013, DTA entered into a State Law Enforcement Bureau (SLEB) agreement with the USDA, allowing DTA to partner with local law enforcement to investigate SNAP Trafficking. DTA has entered into 112 sub-SLEB agreements with local law enforcement to partner to investigate SNAP trafficking. DTA's efforts augment the federal government's program integrity arm, which only has three investigators for the northeast region.