



# Transitions

A Publication of the Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance

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## From the Commissioner

Dear Fellow Employees,

One year ago I wrote to you about my concern about the food stamp error rate. Unfortunately, since that time the error rate has not improved and my concern has grown. Only a few years ago we received bonus checks from the Department of Agriculture because we issued food stamps accurately. Now, we are approaching a time that, if the error rate does not improve quickly, we may face fiscal sanctions. Things need to be done, and they need to be done now. Reviewing recent errors and ways to correct them was a regular part of "Transitions" and its predecessor, Monthly Issuance. Now I am reviving that discussion, and am writing to express my concern to all of you.

Several things have me especially concerned. First, there has been a steady increase in the error rate for the past few years. This pattern has continued and gotten worse since October 1999. That is a problem.

Second, most of the error rate, and all of the increase, is the result of agency-caused errors. These errors could have been prevented. We all know that it is difficult to get recipients to tell us about changes in their circumstances. But once we have the information, we **MUST** act on it both accurately and timely.

This month I would like to discuss three recent Quality Control (QC) errors that demonstrate three problems that are arising too often, each related to household composition – that is, who belongs in the food stamp household. For the first part of this year, household

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composition errors were the single largest problem in the food stamp error rate. A big part of the problem is proper treatment of noncitizens, but that will be discussed in the future. Among other household composition errors in the current year, the agency is responsible for the vast majority of the errors. The QC errors I will talk about involve improper exclusion of an adult, improper exclusion of a dependent (and her children) and improper treatment of a family cap child.

### 1. **Improper Exclusion of an Adult**

**Error Circumstances:** A grandmother was an ineligible grantee receiving TAFDC for her grandchildren, ages 11 and 13. Only the grandchildren were included in the food stamp household.

**Solution:** Whenever a grantee is exercising parental control over children younger than 18, they must be included in the food stamp household. The grandmother in this case can be excluded from the TAFDC grant but must be included in the food stamp household. That also means that whatever income and assets the grantee has must also be considered in the food stamp determination. (See 106 CMR 361.200 (A)(2).)

### 2. **Improper Exclusion of a Dependent**

**Error Circumstances:** An individual receives TAFDC for herself and four grandchildren. Also living with her are her daughter, age 19, and the daughter's son. There are two TAFDC cases and two food stamp cases.

**Solution:** If the grantee's natural, adopted or stepchild is under age 22 and living in the same house, there can be only ONE food stamp household. In this case, the daughter can have her own TAFDC case, but the daughter and her son MUST be included in the same food stamp case with her mother until she (the daughter) is 22 years old. Likewise, her income and assets must be considered in determining the proper amount of food stamps for the single household. (See 106 CMR 361.200 (A)(3).)

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## **From the Forms File**

### **New Desk Guide**

*17-003-0500-05*

*ESP-RG (5/2000)*

*Quick Reference Guide for ESP  
Component Activity Referral and  
Enrollment*

This reference guide provides step-by-step instructions for: ESP referrals and updates; referral and activity dispositions; entered employments and 30-day follow-ups. This information can also be found in BEACON Bulletin #22 and BEACON Online Help.

### **FYI**

#### **Food Stamp Household Composition Desk Guide**

Many of the errors being found in food stamp cases are the result of incorrect household composition. The *Food Stamp Household Composition Desk Guide* (Rev. 12/96) is a useful tool for determining the correct household composition in a food stamp case. Work is underway to make the guide available online. Until that time, Schrafft's Printing and Distribution will send each office an additional 30 copies of the desk guide.

# FYI

## Domestic Violence Victims and the Legal Change of Names and SSNs

In some instances, victims of Domestic Violence find it necessary to legally change their names and social security numbers to help prevent abusers from being able to locate them. If you become aware of such a situation, please have your Hotline Designees call the Policy Hotline for guidance on how the case should be handled on PACES and also how the actual case record should be maintained. In addition, please make sure the recipient is aware that the Department has Domestic Violence services and specialists available and that a referral is made to the specialist if the recipient requests one.

Detailed procedures for handling Domestic Violence cases are currently being developed and this information will be included in those procedures.

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### 3. Family Cap Children

**Error Circumstances:** A family cap child was properly excluded from the TAFDC grant. She was also excluded from the food stamp household. In addition, the child was receiving child support of \$100 per month with the first \$90 disregarded from both TAFDC and food stamp benefits.

**Solution:** Family cap children, while not part of the TAFDC grant, must be included in the same food stamp household with parents. That also means that their income and assets, if any, must also be included and counted. Also, since NO child support income is disregarded for food stamp benefits, the entire \$100 is countable.

Each of these errors reflects a misunderstanding or misapplication of policy. They have been made at the most recent certification. Each can be fixed and must be a focus of the household composition portion of the food stamp certification or when you look at the case for some other reason, such as case maintenance. If the proper people are not included or excluded correctly, most other calculations about income, assets and shelter expenses cannot be accurate.

Remember to assess the food stamp household based on Food Stamp Program rules, not on TAFDC rules!

In the coming months 'Transitions' will include a monthly feature much like this has been, with descriptions of actual errors and their solutions. I hope you will learn something from these and, together, we will turn our error rate problem around again. You have done it before and I am confident you will do it again.

Sincerely,



Claire McIntire  
Commissioner