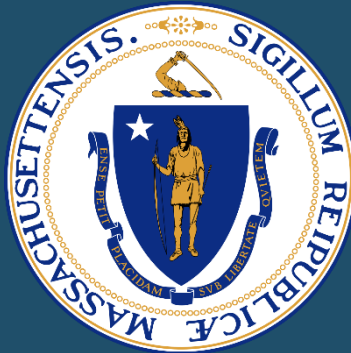


Charles D. Baker
Governor

Karyn Polito
Lieutenant Governor



Marylou Sudders
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Amy Kershaw
Commissioner

Transitional Aid to Families with Dependent Children Consolidated Report

January 2021



**DEPARTMENT OF TRANSITIONAL ASSISTANCE
TRANSITIONAL AID TO FAMILIES WITH DEPENDENT CHILDREN
CONSOLIDATED REPORT**

JANUARY 2021

OVERVIEW

The Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA) is pleased to submit this comprehensive report on the status of the Transitional Aid to Families with Dependent Children (TAFDC) program, as required by sections 2(B) and 5 of Chapter 18 and section 3C(d) of Chapter 118 of the Massachusetts General Laws.

DEPARTMENT OF TRANSITIONAL ASSISTANCE MISSION

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 mobility, including food and nutritional assistance, economic assistance, and employment supports. Currently, DTA serves one out of every eight people in the Commonwealth including working families, children, elders, and people with disabilities.

TAFDC PROGRAM OVERVIEW

TAFDC is a state and federally funded program that provides cash assistance and employment supports to families with children and pregnant women, with little or no income or assets. TAFDC is operated under the federal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) block grant.

In recent years, DTA has emphasized removing barriers to economic mobility and helping families find paths to success. Through policy innovations, the Department has continued to reduce barriers, enhance the Department's employment support programming, and explore new approaches to meaningfully engage with TAFDC families.

AGENCY RESPONSE TO COVID-19 PANDEMIC

In March 2020, DTA took steps to respond to the unfolding COVID-19 public health emergency to promote the safety and wellbeing of the Department's clients and staff. For the TAFDC program, this meant a focus on benefit access and stability through significant technological enhancements and modified temporary policies and procedures.

Early in the state's response to the public health emergency, DTA began to transition to fully remote operations, which necessitated technological innovations to continue providing core services. Most notably, the Department worked quickly to develop telephonic and online options for families to apply for TAFDC. Prior to the pandemic, the only way to apply for TAFDC,

with limited exceptions, was to visit a local office. Now, families can call or visit the DTA Connect web application to apply for TAFDC and the entire process can be completed remotely.

DTA implemented several temporary flexibilities to keep benefits stable for families during the pandemic. In March, in order to process applications faster and get critical benefits to families as soon as possible, the Department expanded the acceptable verifications for certain required information. In addition, the Department temporarily extended the reevaluation periods – effectively extending the length of time that benefits were authorized – for any TAFDC clients whose reevaluations were due before June 2020. This action prevented any cases from closing due to missed appointments or delayed verifications to help families meet their basic needs during the public health emergency. The Department also took steps to keep benefit levels steady when clients could not meet program requirements due to business and school closures in response to COVID-19.

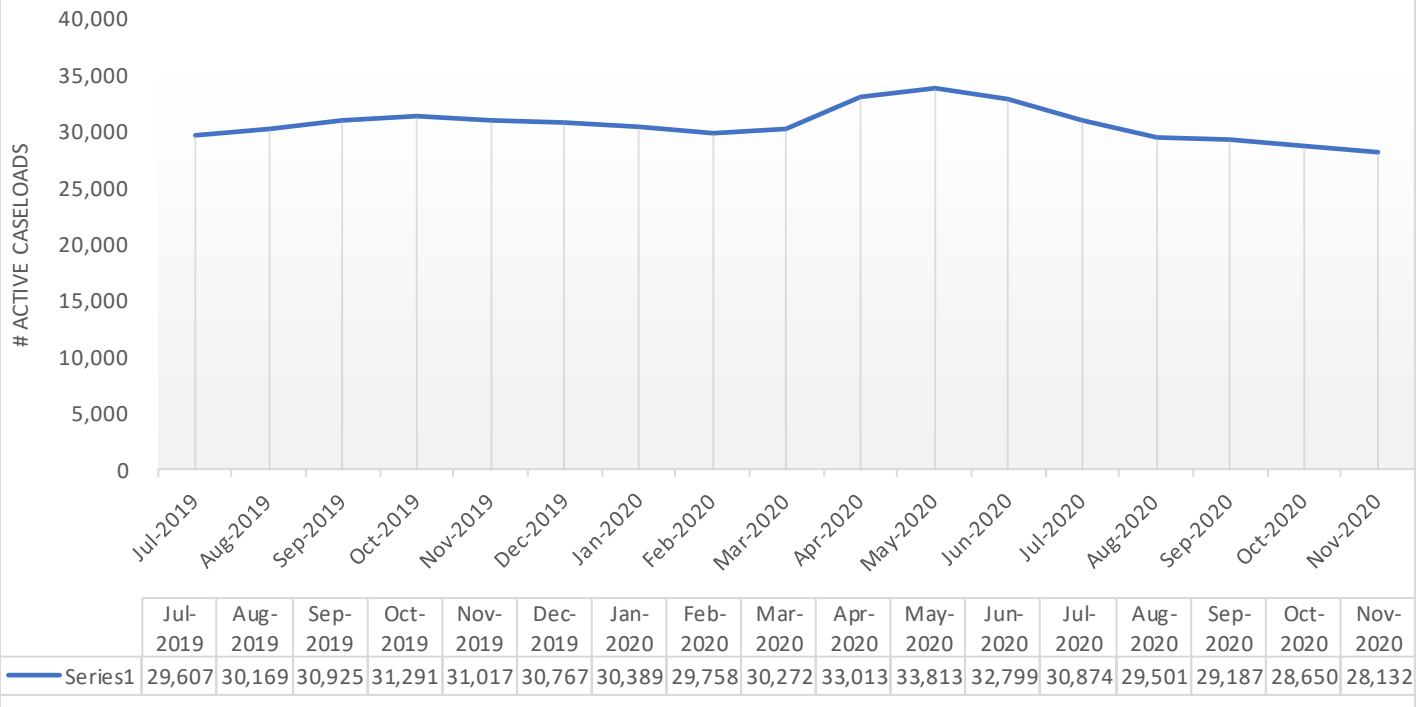
Prior to the economic impact of the public health crisis, the Massachusetts economy was the strongest it had been in a generation. DTA entered this year with strong partnerships in the workforce system and a continued commitment to providing TAFDC clients with the opportunity to participate in the strong labor market by connecting them to employers who had a critical need for skilled labor. During the COVID-19 pandemic, DTA has strategically pivoted the focus of our workforce partnerships to create access to remote employment supports and virtual skills training that can continue to increase the skills and employability of TAFDC clients as jobs become available.

CASELOAD & BENEFITS INFORMATION

As of November 2020, the total TAFDC caseload was 28,132 households, a slight decrease from 31,017 in November 2019. There was a large increase in applications in April 2020, which resulted in a peak caseload of 33,813 in May 2020. This was due to the number of low-income families who suddenly lost their jobs as businesses across the state shut down during to the public health emergency. After the peak in May, the caseload began to fall as people were able to access unemployment benefits. In a sample month, October 2020, 25% of TAFDC case closings were due to unearned income.

The chart below shows the TAFDC caseload over time.

MASSACHUSETTS DEPARTMENT OF TRANSITIONAL ASSISTANCE
TAFDC ACTIVE CASELOAD TRENDS
From JULY 2019 - NOVEMBER 2020



During this unprecedented year, the average time a family remains on benefits has increased to 36 months, from 34 months a year ago.

In response to COVID-19, the state’s FY2021 General Appropriations Act includes a 10% increase to the TAFDC payment standards. This increase to TAFDC grants comes at a critical time for families served by DTA and offers some amount of additional supports to families who are navigating an unprecedented public health crisis and the significant economic impact associated with the crisis. Prior to this increase and aside from a 2.75% increase for non-exempt grants in FY2019, grant levels had not been adjusted since 2001. The current grant structure, effective January 1, 2021, is depicted in the below table.

TAFDC PAYMENT STANDARD MATRIX		
Household size	Public or subsidized housing	Private housing
1	\$427	\$467
2	\$540	\$580
3	\$652	\$692
4	\$760	\$800
5	\$871	\$911
6	\$986	\$1026
7	\$1097	\$1,137
8	\$1207	\$1247
9	\$1317	\$1357
10	\$1428	\$1468
Each additional household member	+\$116	+\$116

TAFDC WORK PROGRAM

TAFDC recipients are required to participate in work-related activities as a condition of eligibility, unless specifically exempted. Each year, the Massachusetts Legislature appropriates funding for employment services for TAFDC clients through the Employment Service Program (ESP). The primary goals of the ESP are to assist TAFDC clients to prepare and set meaningful goals on their path to economic stability, connect participants to career pathways and resolve barriers to continued employment.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the ESP continues to be an integral part of DTA’s efforts to support TAFDC clients who are currently able to work or increase their economic mobility through virtual work-related activities. While local DTA offices remain closed to in person employment services, Full Engagement Workers (FEWs) continue to play an important role in connecting DTA clients to virtual employment and training opportunities. Through telephonic assessments, FEWs help families set goals and identify programs that are a good match for their unique experience, strengths, and needs and provide referrals for enrollment in appropriate programs. ESP providers assist participants in resolving barriers to employment, enrolling in training, education or certification programs, and finding a job. When the public health emergency began, ESP providers pivoted quickly to continue providing remote services to support enrolled TAFDC clients. All ESP providers are currently operating in remote or partially remote models to ensure the safety and health of all participants. In partnership with our providers, DTA is exploring new opportunities to conduct virtual orientations and strategies for targeted outreach to TAFDC clients to encourage increased engagement. In FY2020, DTA was able to fund ESP slots to help approximately 4,122 clients. This is a slight increase from last year despite the public health emergency.

Participants in work-related activities, including paid employment, are eligible to receive child care and transportation supports. After a three month pause due to the public health emergency, DTA has resumed making referrals to child care providers for participants in work-related activities. All ESP-eligible DTA clients can request a childcare referral to support

participation in an activity or employment. To support childcare stability, most referrals are being extended even if the parent is not currently participating due to health and safety concerns. In some geographic areas, families have had trouble finding childcare providers that match their current needs and many are choosing to not send their children back to care yet.

Enrolled parents are also given an \$80 per month stipend to assist with transportation costs associated with getting to work or an employment program. Many child care providers have reported a reduced capacity to provide transportation as they have reopened and this stipend provides additional support to families who have had to make alternative transportation arrangements to physically report to work or participate in work-related activities.

State law requires TAFDC recipients who meet certain criteria to be exempted from the work program requirement, including if:

- Their youngest child is less than two
- They have a verified disability
- They are in their 33rd week or third trimester of pregnancy
- They are a teen parent attending school full time
- They are over age sixty, or
- They are caring for a disabled household member.

Clients who are exempt from the work program are still given the option to participate in employment and training programs, though they do not experience negative consequences if they are not able to participate. Throughout the public health crisis, DTA has continued outreach to both exempt and non-exempt families to let them know what resources programs are providing and how parents can participate safely.

Non-parental relative caregivers, such as grandparents or other extended family members, have the option to receive TAFDC assistance for the children in their care. In this situation, the relative caregiver is not considered a recipient of assistance and the work program rules are not applicable.

EMPLOYMENT PARTNERSHIPS AND PROGRAMS: RESPONSE TO COVID-19

DTA is an essential partner in the State's plan to achieve the goals and vision of the federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). WIOA seeks to integrate states' workforce systems to better serve employers and jobseekers. WIOA reauthorized the nation's employment, training, adult education, and vocational rehabilitation programs for the first time in 16 years. The emphasis is on targeting low-income adults and youth with limited training and skills as well as individuals with disabilities to help them overcome barriers to economic success.

Since the passage of WIOA, DTA has worked closely with the Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development (EOLWD) to implement a new, more integrated system of workforce

development for DTA clients and others with significant barriers to work. The aim of this collaboration is to:

- Develop meaningful pathways to work and economic self-sufficiency for low-income, disabled and chronically un/underemployed individuals/families; and
- Ensure that DTA individuals and families with significant barriers can access the workforce system with the support needed to attain and sustain employment.

In March 2020, the Commonwealth submitted the 2020-2024 WIOA Combined State Plan, which built upon the successes of the first-ever WIOA Combined State Plan developed in 2016. Through this partnership, each MassHire Career Center provides services to DTA clients through the Work Participant Program (WPP), a dedicated career pathway model for participants in receipt of public benefits. In FY2020, DTA invested \$1,000,000 in career services for our clients through this program. Since the execution of the preliminary ISA in FY17, this partnership has resulted in significant progress. Just prior to the pandemic, the percent of the MassHire customer base who were also TAFDC and SNAP clients doubled from 6% to more than 12%.

In response to the public health crisis, DTA is working closely with the MassHire Career Centers to expand and diversify the number of virtual services available to shared clients enrolled in the WPP and connect TAFDC participants to new online skills training platforms. Through our WIOA partnerships, DTA is also working to identify new technological tools to market available programming and conduct strategic outreach to TAFDC families to increase engagement in employment-related activities and place our shared customers in a better position to engage in the post-COVID economy.

CONCLUSION

The public health emergency highlighted the critical role of the TAFDC program to stabilize low-income families during times of crisis and to support families as they prepare to reenter the workforce. In order to provide these critical services during the COVID-19 public health emergency, DTA made a number of adjustments that allowed the TAFDC program to operate safely for both clients and staff including technological advancements, temporary policy shifts, and a pivot to remote employment services. As we continue to navigate the public health crisis and the economy begins to recover, DTA will take advantage of the additional technological avenues that have been developed to continue reaching families that find it difficult to visit a local office or get to an ESP program. DTA will continue to identify and implement program improvements to better meet the needs of individual families, including goal setting and engagement for all families so they can have access to the supports they need as they start down their path to economic mobility.