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**United States
Department of
Agriculture**

Food and
Nutrition
Service

Northeast Region

10 Causeway St.
Room 501
Boston, MA 02222

Cescia Derderian, Assistant Commissioner
Department of Transitional Assistance
600 Washington Street, 6th Floor
Boston, MA 02111

Dear Ms. Derderian:

Enclosed is the report of findings from the Program Access Review of Food Stamp Program (FSP) operations conducted November 8-17, 2005, at the Dorchester, Lawrence, Malden, and Somerville Offices. The review, which focused on the certification and application process, was prompted by high rates of application denials reported by the local offices selected for the review. In addition, the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) chose to visit the Dorchester office to review Internet applications since that site receives the largest number of applications via the State's Virtual Gateway pilot project. FNS acknowledges MA's innovative efforts to implement an online application process, and the review presented the first opportunity for FNS to closely examine the process. During the review, the team identified several findings that require immediate corrective action. Specifically, these findings include: (1) Missing Records; (2) Not Meeting Application Processing Timeframes; (3) Failure to Schedule Interviews; (4) Missing Notices.

As you know, we met on December 14, 2005, to review the case findings and application policy/procedure concerns identified in each of the four local offices. In addition, the team presented systems and process problems identified during the review of Internet applications and during an interview with the Web Application Liaison at the Dorchester office. For example, some local office staff does not know the process for handling duplicate Internet applications, including those for existing BayState Combined Application Project clients. Also, the Web Application Liaison reported that he had received a batch of applications that were already beyond the 30-day timeframe upon receipt. During the exit conference, Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA) staff discussed correction of these and other known issues before statewide implementation of the Internet application.

In addition to the identified findings that require corrective action, we offer suggestions to improve program access based on the review team's observations. For example, FNS suggests that DTA discontinue the use of the "blue form," which is not required. DTA uses this form to obtain a second signature from applicants. Although regulations do not prohibit the State agency from continuing this practice, eliminating this form would improve program access and potentially program participation. Also, as part of the review, FNS staff interviewed applicants and clients in the local office waiting

areas. Overall, those interviewed responded favorably regarding the service they received. However, our staff person who made calls to all four offices prior to the review reported that he was unable to contact some of the offices. We encourage the State to explore solutions to these customer service related issues.

We want to thank the staff at the Dorchester, Lawrence, Malden, and Somerville Offices for their time and assistance during the review. We anticipate that DTA will address all deficiencies and ensure that all policies and procedures, as well as all local offices, comply with Federal law and regulations. FNS shares DTA's goal to increase FSP participation by low-income households, and we acknowledge the successful steps that you have already taken. FNS is available to assist in the development of a corrective action plan (CAP) that details how the State agency will meet required corrective actions related to the Federal review team's findings. Please respond to this letter within 30 days to discuss your plan, which specifically describes your Agency's corrective action for each of the findings, as well as expected implementation timeframes. You may contact me at (617) 565-6397 to discuss the findings or to obtain assistance in planning the appropriate corrective action.

Sincerely,



Mary A. Ferris
Regional Director
Food Stamp Program
Northeast Region

Enclosure

cc: Phuoc Cao
Lauren Arms



Food and Nutrition Service
Northeast Region
Food Stamp Program

**Food Stamp Program Access Review
November 8-17, 2005**

**Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance
Dorchester, Lawrence, Malden, and Somerville Offices**

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Acronyms and Definitions

Corrective Action: Action proposed or taken by an operating organization (State or local agency) to change or improve operational effectiveness.

Baystate CAP: Combined Application Project with the Social Security Administration that allows SSI recipients who live alone to be certified for Food Stamp benefits via a simplified application process.

DTA: Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance. The agency responsible for administering the Food Stamp Program.

Finding: Identification of non-compliance with program regulations, policies, and procedures [associated with required corrective action].

FNS: Food and Nutrition Service.

FSP: Food Stamp Program.

Noteworthy Initiatives: Projects and practices worthy of recognition and sharing with other States for replication.

NPA: Non-Public Assistance.

Observation: Identification of a weakness involving management practices or unregulated activity [associated with a suggestion].

On-site: FNS activity performed at a State's central office, local office or program operating site/location, i.e., activity not performed in FNS offices.

PA: Public-Assistance.

Required Corrective Action: Statement of an action that must be taken to comply with regulations and established policies and procedures. These actions may be prescribed or the State agency may be required to determine the action(s) to be taken [associated with a finding].

Suggestion: Statement of action that addresses observations in the report. These actions may or may not be required [associated with an observation].

State Agency: An agency contracted to provide Federal food program administration within the State.

Technical Assistance: Guidance and support to State agencies to achieve regulatory compliance and improvement.

I. Scope of Functional Areas/Review Purpose

Full access to the Food Stamp Program (FSP) for all eligible households who wish to apply is one of the highest priorities of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). The Department is concerned that potentially eligible individuals are hesitant to apply due to a perceived stigma, because they are not aware of eligibility after leaving public assistance, or, in some cases, because they may actually be discouraged from applying. Program Access Reviews are routinely conducted across the country to evaluate customer service in local offices to identify and eliminate barriers to participation.

MA's participation of eligibles is significantly below the national average. Major improvements have been seen from FY 2003 to FY 2004. In November 2005 the Percentage of Eligibles for 2003 was released. The new data indicates that **43%** of those potentially eligible received FSP benefits in MA in 2003. This is significantly less than the national average of 56%.

Massachusetts is ranked 49th for the Program Access Index (PAI) with 58.4% participating in 2004 (compared to 47.2% in 2003 and 38% in 2002). The PAI is the ratio of participants to persons with incomes below 125 percent of poverty, not eligible individuals. MA is ranked 9th most improved from FY 2003 to FY 2004, though MA is significantly below the national average of 66.3%.

Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) program access reviews help determine if barriers to participation exist and offer suggestions to improve customer service. These reviews are part of our Agency's ongoing oversight of State and local compliance with FSP law and regulations.

II. Work Performed

FNS Regional Office staff visited the Dorchester, Lawrence, Malden, and Somerville offices from November 8 through November 16, 2005, to review food stamp policies and procedures. In addition, the team examined case records, including Internet applications, denied applications, and closed cases at these offices. They examined a total of 71 cases, including 25 Internet applications, 24 denied cases, and 22 closed cases at the Dorchester office. They examined a total of 83 cases, including 4 Internet applications, 51 denied cases, and 28 closed cases at the Lawrence office. They examined a total of 93 cases, including 14 Internet applications, 47 denied cases, and 32 closed cases at the Malden office. They examined a total of 94 cases, including 14 Internet applications, 49 denied cases, and 31 closed cases at the Somerville office.

During the review, FNS staff also interviewed program administrators, staff and clients and observed daily operations in the reception area, as well as the prescreening process for new applications. Prior to the review, a bilingual FNS staff person contacted each of the four offices in order to identify potential barriers to FSP access for both English and Spanish speaking persons.

III. People Contacted

At each of the offices visited, FNS reviewers conducted interviews with both local office staff and clients as outlined below.

Dorchester

- 1 Receptionist
- 2 Supervisors
- 1 Web Application Liaison
- 1 Caseworker
- 10 clients in waiting area

Lawrence

- 1 Receptionist
- 1 Supervisor
- 2 Caseworkers
- 1 Screener
- 10 clients in waiting area

Malden

- Center Director
- 1 Receptionist
- 2 Supervisors
- 1 Caseworker
- 10 clients in waiting area

Somerville

- Center Director
- 1 Supervisor
- 1 Caseworker
- 1 Receptionist
- 10 clients in waiting area

In accordance with the Program Access Review guide, FNS staff also contacted an advocate organization, Massachusetts Law Reform Institute (MLRI), prior to the review to solicit comments regarding local office operations. MLRI completed the advocate questionnaire and provided input relative to customer service issues. In addition, MLRI collected anecdotal information from other legal service organizations and members of the Food Stamp Improvement Coalition regarding their experiences and provided that to FNS in a separate document along with recommendations to improve operations.

MLRI's summary also provided to FNS a list of "star players" who the advocate organizations identified as extremely responsive service providers. In addition, the questionnaire listed actions taken by DTA to improve participation, including:

- Bay State Combined Application Project outreach and implementation
- Issuance of policy guidance and staff training on non-citizen eligibility

MLRI's summary of access barrier case example issues indicates that advocate organizations throughout the state have encountered various customer service and procedural problems, including:

- Inability to reach staff by phone
- Failure to schedule phone interviews
- Access barriers for limited English proficient households
- Inadequate filing and recordkeeping
- Excessive and inappropriate verification demands
- Insensitive customer service

We understand that MLRI also provided copies of this information to DTA. This information, along with the Federal review team's findings, indicates that DTA needs to address and improve customer service, as well as related food stamp policy/procedures implementation described in this report.

IV. Findings and Required Corrective Actions

Finding #1: Local office staff could not locate and provide all requested case records at the time of the review. Some records do not contain applications.

Office	Internet Cases Provided/Requested	Denial Cases Provided/Requested	Closed Cases Provided/Requested	Retention Rate
Dorchester	30/38	24/48	30/31	72%
Lawrence	4/4	51/51	28/30	98%
Malden	14/14	47/47	32/32	100%
Somerville	14/17	49/51	39/39	95%

Reviewers requested 117 cases in Dorchester. Of the cases requested, 84 were found, which resulted in a 72% retrieval rate. Section 11(a) of the Food Stamp Act of 1977, as amended, requires State agencies to maintain the necessary records to ascertain whether the program is being conducted in compliance with the provisions of the Act and the regulations. Records shall be available for inspection and audit at any reasonable time and shall be preserved for at least three years. The Federal regulations at 7 CFR 272.1(f) require the State agency to "retain all program records in an orderly fashion, for audit and

review purposes, for a period of three years from the month of origin of the original record.”

The Federal regulations at 7 CFR 273.2(f)(6) require that case records be documented to support eligibility, ineligibility, and benefit level determinations. Regional Letter 99-24 reminds State agencies of their case record documentation responsibilities.

Required Corrective Action: In accordance with the Food Stamp Act and the Federal regulations, State agencies must maintain and make available upon request all program records. In addition, program records must include required documentation, including the application.

Finding #2: Internet applications are not screened for expedited service nor are the applicants provided with the opportunity to participate within seven days of filing the application.

There often was a lag time between the date an Internet application was filed and the date the application was created or acted on. This did not allow the applicant to receive benefits within seven days if the client was eligible. Often the application was not screened within seven days nor was an interview scheduled or identity requested.

The Dorchester office receives the majority of Internet applications. During interviews, local office staff indicated that they do not consider Internet applications to be “real” applications and, therefore, they do not process them timely. Eligibility workers must comply with the 30-day application processing standard regardless of how the application arrives at the office.

Federal regulations at 7 CFR 273.2(i)(2) require the State agency to have procedures designed to identify households eligible for expedited service **at the time the household requests assistance**. The State agency shall complete the interview and the application process within the expedited service standards.

Required Corrective Action: All applications must be screened for expedited service and, if determined eligible, applicants must be interviewed within the expedited timeframe.

Finding #3: Local office staff does not schedule interviews for all applicant households.

The review team found cases in each of the four offices visited that had been denied without an interview ever being scheduled for the initial application. DTA policy requires caseworkers to contact applicants to schedule an interview. If contact is not made, an interview is not scheduled.

Federal regulations at 7 CFR 273.2(e)(3) state that the State agency “must schedule an interview for all applicant households who are not interviewed on the day that they

submit their applications.” These interviews should be scheduled as quickly as possible to ensure that the client is able to participate within 30 days.

Required Corrective Action: The State agency must ensure that an interview is scheduled for all applicant households.

Finding #4: Local office staff does not send a notice of missed interview in all cases when an applicant fails to appear for a scheduled interview.

In most cases, the State agency appropriately denies applications on the 30th day following the date of application for failure to appear for an interview. However, reviewers noted that a notice of missed interview is not sent when an applicant fails to appear for an initial interview. Federal regulations at 7 CFR 273.2(e)(3) require the State agency to provide households who fail to appear for a scheduled interview with a notice informing the applicant that they missed the interview and that they are responsible for scheduling a second interview.

Required Corrective Action: The State agency must provide applicants with a notice of missed interview when clients fail to appear for a scheduled interview.

Finding #5: In some cases, local office staff denied applicants for failure to provide verification, and the applicants were not provided with a notice of required verification.

The FNS team reviewed cases in each of the four offices visited that had been denied Food Stamp benefits for failure to provide verification although the eligibility workers had failed to provide the notice of required verification in one case in Dorchester, two in Lawrence, five in Malden, and three in Somerville. There were also other cases in each of the offices that did not receive verification checklists and that had been denied for other reasons.

Federal regulations at 7 CFR 273.2(c)(5) require the State agency to provide all households with a notice that informs them at application and recertification of the verification requirements that the household must meet.

Required Corrective Action: DTA must ensure that all applicants, including those that mail-in, drop off, fax, or submit their application electronically, are provided with a notice of required verification.

Finding #6: Applicants are required to file a second application when they return within 60 days of the original application.

Reviewers found a few cases where clients were required to file more than one application within 60 days. Information obtained from the original application should have been used and amended as necessary. Federal regulations at 7 CFR 273.2(h)(2) state that if a household is denied for failure to perform a required action but completes

all required action within 60 days of the original application date the State agency shall reopen the case without requiring a new application.

Required Corrective Action: Applicants should not be required to file an additional application when they comply with application requirements within 60 days of the original application. DTA previously submitted a policy proposal that when implemented should eliminate this deficiency. DTA must inform FNS as to when this policy will be effective.

V. Observations and Suggestions

Observation #1: FNS was unable to contact some offices prior to the review to obtain application information.

Prior to the review, a FNS staff person placed calls to each office to determine whether applicants are able to contact their local office and to assess how applicants are treated when they contact the offices. The goal was to have two conversations with each office – one in English and one in Spanish.

FNS was unable to get in touch with a person at the Dorchester office. When the FNS reviewer called requesting a Spanish speaker, the reviewer was transferred two times and was ultimately unassisted. FNS made several attempts to contact somebody at the Somerville office, but the office was non-responsive. Later during that same day, a Spanish-speaking staff person called the Somerville office and received very good service. Both calls made to the Lawrence office were responded to timely and in a pleasant manner. The Malden office responded immediately to the FNS English-speaking caller, but when the same reviewer called speaking Spanish, he was immediately transferred to voicemail with no live assistance provided.

The numbers used for the offices were obtained from the State's website, so these would be the same phone numbers dialed by potential applicants. It is important for the State to be responsive to inquiries about FSP eligibility and other applicant information. Although this part of the review focused on contacting the main reception area, FNS remains concerned that it is very difficult for clients to reach their caseworker as well. During interviews, local office staff indicated that they are unable to keep up with the amount of phone calls and voicemails that they receive on a daily basis. We encourage the State to explore solutions to these telephone related issues.

Suggestion #1: Applicants must be able to contact their local office. DTA should review their current telephone system and answering procedures to ensure all applicants and clients are provided with the information they need over the telephone.

Observation #2: The “blue form” used to obtain a second signature from applicants may be an impediment to the application process.

DTA requires that applicants sign a form called the “blue form” before most applications can be approved. DTA staff has indicated that it can slow the process down and that it is unfair for an otherwise eligible applicant to be denied simply because this form was not returned. Last year FNS and DTA discussed this practice at length, and we determined that regulations do not prohibit the State agency from continuing this practice. However, regulations require that the State agency provide a copy of the application to each applicant that submits an electronic application, but there is no requirement that the copy of the electronic application be signed and returned after the initial application is signed.

Suggestion #2: FNS suggests that DTA consider combining signatures in the initial application and discontinuing the use of the “blue form.” This would improve program access and potentially program participation.