



Commonwealth of Massachusetts
Executive Office of Health and Human Services
Department of Transitional Assistance

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 Commissioner

Operations Memo 2013-51
September 20, 2013

To: Department of Transitional Assistance Staff

From: *bb* Lydia Conley, Acting Assistant Commissioner for Policy, Program and External Relations *for tk*

Re: **SNAP: Annual Cost-of-Living (COLA) Changes and Initial Communication Regarding November Benefit Decrease**

Overview

The annual SNAP COLA will be processed during the weekend of September 21, 2013. This is a mass change affecting the entire SNAP caseload. This recalculation will impact the household's monthly benefit for October.

The following elements of the COLA will change effective October 1, 2013.

- **Shelter Deduction** - The maximum shelter deduction (for households without an elderly or disabled member) will increase to **\$478**.
- **Standard Deduction will increase for all household sizes.**

| AU Size | Old Standard Deduction | New Standard Deduction |
|-------------------|------------------------|------------------------|
| 1 | 149 | 152 |
| 2 | 149 | 152 |
| 3 | 149 | 152 |
| 4 | 160 | 163 |
| 5 | 187 | 191 |
| AU size 6 or more | 214 | 219 |

**Overview
(continued)**

- **Standard Utility Allowances (SUAs)**
 - The Heating/Cooling SUA will **increase from \$586 to \$608**;
 - The Nonheating SUA will **increase from \$360 to \$374**;
 - The Phone SUA will **increase from to \$41 to \$43**; and
 - The Bay State CAP SUA will **increase from \$586 to \$608**.
- The Disaster SNAP Income Eligibility Standards will increase

See Attachment A for revised COLA standard amounts.

Unchanged COLA Standards

- **Maximum Benefit Levels** - The maximum SNAP benefit levels for all household sizes **remain unchanged through October 31, 2013**.
- **Minimum Benefit Level** - The minimum benefit level for eligible one- and two-person households **remains at \$16 through October 31, 2013**.
- **Homeless Shelter/Utility Deduction** - The Homeless Shelter/Utility Deduction remains at **\$143**.

**Purpose of
Memo**

The purpose of the memo is to:

- advise TAO staff about the annual COLA recalculation; and
- provide staff initial information about the decrease in SNAP benefits that will occur in November 2013.

**Impact of
COLA on
SNAP
Benefits**

Recalculation results indicate that SNAP households will either:

- receive a small increase in SNAP benefits; or
- remain at the same SNAP benefit amount.

**Automatic
Update of
Active SNAP
Households**

During the weekend of September 21, 2013, active SNAP cases on BEACON, including Bay State CAP, will be automatically recalculated using the new COLA standards. SNAP cases with a decrease in benefit amount will be displayed on the Active by Grantee Name view under Assistance Unit Lists.

Note: Any decrease in SNAP benefits that occurs at this time will not be caused by the COLA recalculation but will be due to other simultaneous case activity.

Report of Updated Households

A report entitled “*Food Stamp 10/2013 COLA Updated Case*”:

- will be available on View Direct, Report ID: DTA 9023 during the week of September 23, 2013;
 - will list all households that have experienced a change in benefit amount as a result of the COLA;
 - will list the household’s old and new SNAP benefit amounts (as adjusted by the system); and
 - can be referenced by TAO staff.
-

Client Notices

There will be no client notice specifically for the COLA adjustment. However, clients will receive a notice in November explaining both the COLA benefit change and the ARRA benefit reduction.

When to Use New Standards

SNAP cases authorized **after** the close of business on Friday, September 20, 2013 will be recalculated using the new COLA standards. Effective Monday, September 23, 2013 the new COLA standards will be used in all automated SNAP calculations. Case managers must be careful to use these standards in any necessary manual calculations.

Closed SNAP Households

Retroactive benefits will not be owed to closed households because the COLA is effective on the client’s cyclical date in October and not on October 1.

Eligibility Charts and Issuance Tables

SNAP eligibility charts, issuance tables, standard utility allowance amounts, maximum and minimum benefit amounts, shelter deduction and standard deduction amounts will be updated and posted on the www.mass.gov/dta website by October 1, 2013.

ARRA: Upcoming November Recalculation

ARRA, also known as the Federal Stimulus Plan, initiated an increase in SNAP benefits which was effective on April 1, 2009. ARRA expires on November 1, 2013. The expiration of ARRA will cause a benefit reduction for nearly all SNAP households (estimated at approximately 460,000 out of the 500,000 households in the current SNAP active caseload).

Maximum benefit levels will be decreased in the system, as will the minimum benefit level, and all SNAP households will be recalculated. Clients will receive their decreased benefit amount on their November cyclical date.

**ARRA:
Upcoming
November
Recalculation
(Continued)**

In October, TAO staff will receive an operations memo about the ARRA changes for SNAP

In preparation for the November 2013 decrease in SNAP benefits, TAOs will be provided with materials to effectively inform clients and answer related questions clients may ask. The following materials are being transmitted with this memo:

- 1) Attachment B - Poster: The posters will be available in English and Spanish. These must be posted in waiting rooms and SNAP rooms.
- 2) Attachment C - Flyer: The flyers will be available in English and Spanish. These must be distributed by TAO staff to clients in the waiting room.
- 3) Attachment D - Talking Points: They will be used by TAO staff and community agencies to provide consistent messages to clients regarding the Fall 2013 benefit changes.

TAO and
Stakeholder
Information

Attachments B and C (poster and flyer) will be produced at Schraffts and shipped to TAOs during the week of September 23, 2013.

Questions

If you have any questions, please have your Hotline designee call the Policy Hotline.

| MAXIMUM MONTHLY GROSS INCOME LEVELS | |
|---|----------------------------|
| HOUSEHOLD SIZE | GROSS INCOME LEVELS |
| 1 | \$1,245 |
| 2 | \$1,681 |
| 3 | \$ 2,116 |
| 4 | \$ 2,552 |
| 5 | \$ 2,987 |
| 6 | \$ 3,423 |
| 7 | \$ 3,858 |
| 8 | \$ 4,294 |
| Each additional HH member will increase by \$436 | |

| MAXIMUM MONTHLY NET INCOME LEVELS | |
|---|--------------------------|
| HOUSEHOLD SIZE | NET INCOME LEVELS |
| 1 | \$ 958 |
| 2 | \$ 1,293 |
| 3 | \$ 1,628 |
| 4 | \$ 1,963 |
| 5 | \$ 2,298 |
| 6 | \$ 2,633 |
| 7 | \$ 2,968 |
| 8 | \$ 3,303 |
| Each additional HH member will increase by \$335 | |

| STANDARDS FOR SPECIAL CIRCUMSTANCES INVOLVING AN ELDERLY & DISABLED INDIVIDUAL | |
|---|------------------------------|
| HOUSEHOLD SIZE | 165% OF POVERTY LEVEL |
| 1 | \$ 1,580 |
| 2 | \$ 2,133 |
| 3 | \$ 2,686 |
| 4 | \$ 3,239 |
| 5 | \$ 3,791 |
| 6 | \$ 4,344 |
| 7 | \$ 4, 897 |
| 8 | \$ 5,450 |
| Each additional HH member will increase by \$553 | |

MAXIMUM BENEFIT LEVELS EFFECTIVE 4/1/2009
 (Will expire on October 31, 2013)

| HOUSEHOLD SIZE | MAXIMUM BENEFIT LEVEL |
|---|------------------------------|
| 1 | \$ 200 |
| 2 | \$ 367 |
| 3 | \$ 526 |
| 4 | \$668 |
| 5 | \$ 793 |
| 6 | \$ 952 |
| 7 | \$ 1,052 |
| 8 | \$ 1,202 |
| Each additional HH member will increase by \$150 | |

SUA AMOUNTS

| | |
|------------|-------------------|
| Heating | \$608 (increase) |
| Nonheating | \$374((increase) |
| Phone | \$43 ((increase)) |

STANDARD DEDUCTION

| AU Size | New Standard |
|-------------------|---------------------|
| 1 | 152 |
| 2 | 152 |
| 3 | 152 |
| 4 | 163 |
| 5 | 191 |
| AU size 6 or more | 219 |



SNAP Benefits Changes for Fall 2013

SNAP recipients will see two changes in their benefit amounts in Fall 2013:

- In October, **benefits will increase** slightly for most households to reflect the cost of living adjustment.
- In November, most families will see their **benefits decrease** due to the end of the additional benefits provided by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA), commonly known as the stimulus package.

You will receive a notice in November explaining the changes and your new benefit amount.

Questions? Call Project Bread at 800-645-8333.

For more information about the benefit changes, go to www.mass.gov/dta/arra

For budgeting and shopping strategies, go to ChooseMyPlate.gov.

For community resources, call 211.





SNAP Benefit Changes for Fall 2013

More Information

For more information about the November benefit change, go to mass.gov/dta/arra

For general questions, call Project Bread at 1-800-645-8333.

For budgeting and shopping strategies, go to

choosemyplate.gov

For community resources, call 211.

More Info on DTA

Please visit www.mass.gov/dta or follow DTA on Twitter at @DTA_Listens

In October, SNAP benefits will increase a small amount for some households with the cost of living adjustment (COLA).



In November, SNAP benefits will decrease for most SNAP households due to the ending of ARRA.

ARRA provided larger benefit amounts to clients as part of the overall economic stimulus package. This benefit increase expires on November 1, 2013.

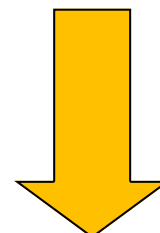
What is the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA)?

Congress passed and the President signed ARRA, also known as the stimulus package, into law in 2009 in order to boost economic activity as a result of the economic downturn.

How much will benefits decrease?

If you get the maximum amount for your household size and there are no other household changes, the SNAP benefit change may look like this:

| HH Size | Now | After Nov 1 | Decrease |
|---------|-------|-------------|----------|
| 1 | \$200 | \$189 | -\$11 |
| 2 | \$367 | \$347 | -\$20 |
| 3 | \$526 | \$497 | -\$29 |
| 4 | \$668 | \$632 | -\$36 |
| 5 | \$793 | \$750 | -\$43 |



What is my new benefit amount?

SNAP recipients will receive a notice in November explaining the benefit change and their new benefit amount. Be sure to let your case manager know if you have child care expenses or if you have medical expenses (if you are elderly or disabled). These may help boost your SNAP benefits.

Key Messages

SNAP recipients will see two changes in their benefit amounts during the fall of 2013.

- In October, benefits will increase slightly for most households to reflect the cost of living adjustment.
- In November, most families will see their benefits decrease due the end of the additional benefits provided by the 2009 law:

In April 2009, a law called the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA) commonly known as the stimulus package, raised SNAP benefits to help people affected by the recession. The increased benefits provided by this law are expected to end on Nov. 1, 2013.

Questions and Answers

The questions and answers below were written to assist you with questions clients may ask about the SNAP benefit decrease that will take place in November and about other available resources for individuals and families in need of assistance.

How much will my benefits change in November?

Your benefits are based on many things—income, household size and expenses. So it is hard to say how your benefits will change. But, for example, if you live in a household of 4 and nothing else changes, your benefit could go down as much as \$36 a month.

How will I be notified of a change in my benefits?

You may hear about these changes on the news or see posters in local offices, or at a community agency. In November, once your new benefit amount has been calculated, you will receive a notice explaining the change.

When will SNAP benefits go down?

You will receive the lower SNAP benefits in November on the regular date in which you receive SNAP benefits in your EBT account.

After November 1st, callers may ask:

Why did my benefit go down to ____? Your benefits are based on many things—income, household size and expenses. If there were no household changes, your benefit was calculated using the new maximum amount for your household size. On November 1, maximum amounts went down everywhere in the country due to the loss of ARRA funding.

| Maximum Household Allotments | | | |
|-------------------------------------|------------|--------------------|-----------------|
| HH Size | Now | After Nov 1 | Decrease |
| 1 | \$200 | \$189 | -\$11 |
| 2 | \$367 | \$347 | -\$20 |
| 3 | \$526 | \$497 | -\$29 |
| 4 | \$668 | \$632 | -\$36 |
| 5 | \$793 | \$750 | -\$43 |

What should I do if I need food right away?

You may call the Project Bread FoodSource Hotline at **1-800-645-8333** for information on a food pantry or food distribution site near you. You can also locate a food bank near you by going to <http://www.gbfb.org/need-food/index.php>. When you call, ask for the nearest food distribution site. You can also call **211** to ask for the nearest food pantry or food distribution site.

Could there be a mistake in the amount of my SNAP benefits?

Your benefits are calculated automatically based on the current information in your case record. If your case record is up to date, your new benefit amount will be correct.

Can I appeal this decrease in my SNAP benefits?

Mass changes like the ARRA decrease cannot be appealed. However, if you think there's a mistake in DTA's calculation of your benefit, you can appeal.

Is there anything I can do to increase my benefits?

If you have child care or dependent care costs, or are elderly or disabled and have medical costs, you may be able to increase your SNAP benefits. You can call your case manager to talk about counting these expenses.

I can't pay my rent. Where can I go for help?

Call 211 for information and a referral to agencies that may have resources for rental assistance.

I can't pay my oil bill. Where can I go for help?

Call 211 for information and a referral to agencies that may have resources for fuel and utility assistance.

What is the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA)?

ARRA is also known as the stimulus package. It became law in 2009 in order to boost economic activity during the recession.

How did ARRA affect SNAP?

ARRA increased the maximum SNAP benefit to provide larger amounts to clients. This increase in benefits is expected to end on November 1, 2013.

How do I check the balance for my SNAP benefits to know how much I have?

A couple of easy ways to check your SNAP balance are:

- Check the SNAP balance on your last grocery receipt.
- Call the toll-free number on the back of your EBT card.
- Check online at My Account Page (MAP).

How can I look at MAP?

You will first need to register through the Virtual Gateway. If you need help registering go to www.mass.gov/vg/selfservice and click on the “Login Assistance” option under “Key Resources.” Once you have a Virtual Gateway user name and password, you will need to provide your social security number, zip code and EBT card number to look at your information.

How can I figure out how to feed my family healthy foods on a lower budget?

The USDA provides several resources to help you prepare healthy meals on a low budget. If you have access to a computer, please go to mass.gov/dta/arra for more information.

RESOURCES

Project Bread FoodSource Hotline (Hunger Hotline) 1-800-645-8333

- The FoodSource Hotline is a free telephone information and referral service operated by Project Bread, a Massachusetts-based non-profit agency. Its purpose is to connect people in need to a variety of food resources, such as food pantries, soup kitchens, Meals on Wheels and SNAP.
- The FoodSource Hotline can provide information in 160 different languages — from Arabic to Cambodian, Russian to Vietnamese. This special service links callers with a translator, usually within 30 seconds.
- The FoodSource Hotline can also serve the hearing impaired community through its TTY line, 1-800-377-1292.

Mass 2-1-1

Mass 2-1-1 is an information resource for emergency food, rent, heating and utility assistance, mental health counseling, health programs, public health and safety

services, child care referrals, job resources, and other help for individuals, parents and families. [Click here to learn more about Mass 2-1-1](#)

Additional Questions and Answers

What is SNAP?

SNAP is the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, which used to be called the Food Stamp Program. SNAP is funded by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). USDA regulates and establishes the standards for calculating SNAP benefit amounts. DTA administers SNAP in Massachusetts.

SNAP provides critical nutritional support to low-income households in Massachusetts by helping families and individuals to buy nutritious food. Eligibility for SNAP is primarily based on monthly household income.

What is the COLA?

COLA is the Cost of Living Adjustment the federal government makes each October. It can cause an increase, a decrease or no change in a household's SNAP benefit.

The COLA may update the maximum benefit level for household sizes, as well as other items that are part of the benefit calculation such as the standard deduction, shelter deduction, and income tests (both gross and net). By law, States must make these SNAP adjustments each Oct. 1.