



Transitions

A Publication of the Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance

this month in...

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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

From the Hotline

- Q I know that PACES can automatically prorate the income and shelter expenses of a State Supplemental Food Stamp Program (SSFSP) recipient(s) in a combination case (FS/SSFSP). Does PACES also prorate other expenses such as dependent care expenses and child support payments?
- A No. PACES does NOT automatically prorate other allowable expenses such as dependent care and child support payments for an SSFSP recipient in a combination case. Other allowable expenses (other than shelter expenses) must be prorated manually and the manually prorated amount entered as a deduction in FIW1 Block #9 for Dependent Care expenses or FIW1 Block #10 for Child Support expenses. (See 106 CMR 365.520 (B)(3).)
- Q How is the asset value of “leased vehicles” determined for TAFDC and food stamp benefits? Would the down payment, equity or fair market value be considered as an asset or does the leased vehicle have no countable value for TAFDC and food stamp purposes?
- A There is no countable asset value for leased vehicles for TAFDC and food stamp benefit purposes. Fair market or equity value would not be counted since the vehicle is not owned or registered in the recipient’s name. The down payment is noncountable since it is spent and no longer available to the recipient.
- Q How long is a drug felon disqualified from food stamp benefits?
- A According to food stamp policy at 106 CMR367.800, an individual is ineligible for food stamp benefits if he or she is convicted under federal or state law of a felony which includes as an element the possession, use or distribution of a controlled substance and the conviction is for conduct that occurred after 8/22/96. ***These individuals are permanently ineligible for food stamp benefits.***
- Q Can funeral and burial expenses be approved for a child born after the family cap?
- A Yes. State law requires us to pay for funerals and burials for indigent persons. All the requirements of 106 CMR 705.700 and 705.710 must be met.
- Q A food stamp recipient receives a Social Security check for his child who is not part of the food stamp household since the child is a resident of an institution. Is the Social Security countable to the food stamp household?

- A Any portion of the Social Security income which is not used for the care and maintenance of the child would be countable to the food stamp household. The household must verify the amounts used for the care and maintenance of the child.
- Q I have an NPA food stamp case in which one of the household members is physically disabled. They own one vehicle used to transport the disabled household member to medical visits. Can this vehicle be excluded?
- A Yes. If an NPA food stamp household has a disabled member requiring transportation, that household is entitled to a vehicle exclusion. The vehicle does not have to have special equipment or be used primarily by or for the transportation of the physically disabled household member. (See 106CMR 363.140 (C) (5).)



FYI

Post-Secondary Education and Four-Year Colleges

Transitional Assistance Office staff are reminded that an Employment Development Plan (EDP) cannot be approved for participation in a post-secondary education program that is beyond the associate's degree level. See 106 CMR 207.140.

Staff are also reminded that ESP support services for recipients with an approved EDP must be authorized *only* for the hours required to support the ESP activity that is included in the approved EDP. Staff should note also that recipients eligible as "grandfathered" (see 106 CMR 203.400(B)) who are finishing their four-year college program are eligible for ESP support services.



**Remind recipients with children to immunize!
A healthy start for all!**

FYI

PRISM II - School Attendance and Review Alerts

Since Transitional Assistance Offices no longer receive the yearly TAFDC Potential to Graduate Report or the EAEDC Student Report, it is important to remember that Transitional Assistance Workers must check their weekly PRISM II Alerts that identify:

- TAFDC: School Attendance Child Turns 18
- TAFDC: School Review Child Turns 19
- EAEDC: School Attendance Child Turns 18 and
- EAEDC: School Review Child Turns 21.

Determine the current eligibility for those identified by PRISM. Alert and initiate any necessary action on the case. Instructions on the PRISM II Alerts are found in the *PRISM II User's Guide*, Chapter II.

FYI

DOR New Hire Recipient Match Change

Beginning in June, the DOR New Hire Recipient Match will be run semimonthly.

Transitional Assistance Office staff will receive reports and alerts at the beginning of the month and mid-month. The report received in paper form is the SSN match only. The SSN *and* name matches are shown as alerts on PRISM II. Please follow the current DOR New Hire Recipient Match Report procedures, as this change requires no new action from TAO staff.

For detailed Department of Revenue New Hire Recipient Match Report procedures, refer to *PRISM II User's Guide*, Chapter II: Alerts.

FYI

Food Stamp Household Expenses

The Landlord Verification form and the Shared Housing Verification form are the preferred methods of verifying information on landlord/tenant and shared housing arrangements; however, food stamp regulations provide that verification cannot be limited to a single type of document. The AU Manager must accept alternative forms of verification if provided. See 106 CMR 351.640.

EBT - Voluntary Repayment Deduction for Overpayment

All Electronic Benefit Transfer - Issuance 006

The EBT guide was revised to clarify the difference between “rescinding” benefits and “deducting” benefits.

- Benefits issued in error may be “rescinded” if: (a) an overpayment referral was not completed, (b) the recipient has signed the EBT-4 form requesting that benefits issued in error be rescinded, and (c) the recipient has sufficient EBT funds to cover the rescission.
- Benefits may be “deducted” if: (a) an overpayment referral was completed, (b) the recipient has signed the EBT-4 form requesting a voluntary deduction, (c) the recipient brings in a copy of the overpayment claim (yellow bill) that he or she received from the Contracts and Recoveries Unit, and (d) the recipient has sufficient EBT funds to cover the deduction.

FYI

How to Count AmeriCorps Benefits

AmeriCorps benefits are treated differently in the cash assistance (TAFDC and EAEDC) programs and the Food Stamp Program (FS/SSFSP).

Since TAFDC and EAEDC regulations do not include AmeriCorps benefits in the list of noncountable income (see 106 CMR 204.250 and 321.250), AmeriCorps benefits are considered countable earned income for the TAFDC and EAEDC programs.

Food stamp regulations (see 106 CMR 363.230 (K)(4)) include AmeriCorps benefits in the list of those benefits which are not counted for the Food Stamp Program. However, this regulation also refers to 106 CMR 363.220 (A)(5) which states that if an individual is participating in an AmeriCorps *on-the-job training* program, the earnings are countable in calculating food stamp benefits. At this time, there are **no** AmeriCorps on-the-job training programs. Therefore, *all* AmeriCorps earnings are noncountable in determining food stamp benefits.

June 2000

The Online Update 032

All Volume 1: PACES User's Guide Appendix E: PACES Case Processing

The new Case Closing and Reduction Schedule revises the Food Stamp Cyclical Month Schedule and provides the July, August and September 2000 payment schedules.

TAFDC Casework Activity

TAFDC Field Operations Memo 2000-7 C

This Field Operations Memo increases the number of eligibility reviews for certain exempt cases so that, in addition to reviewing TAFDC eligibility, food stamp benefits are looked at and adjusted more frequently in an effort to reduce food stamp errors.

