

T Transitions

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this month in...

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From the Commissioner

Dear Fellow Employees,

"Customer Service" is a phrase that we all hear a lot. I'm sure in your day-to-day lives you have, as have I, experienced great customer service and customer service which, to be gentle, could use improvement. The experience of ordering over the phone from a mail-order catalog, going through a supermarket check-out line, arranging to have your car serviced, buying your lunch, riding the bus, train or subway—the list of "customer service" encounters is long and each encounter affects our daily life in some way. From some of them you walk away smiling, feeling like "wow, that person was great and so helpful"; from others you leave shaking your head and saying, "Don't they get it? They're supposed to be helpful—or at least polite. It's their job."

As you well know, we are also in a customer service business. And ours is trickier than some. Our customers are brought to our office by a hardship or crisis. Our customers don't have a choice of where to go to get the services and benefits they need. Our customers have sometimes already encountered resistance, lack of helpfulness and a variety of other negative experiences along the way. And our customers, too frequently, may be overwhelmed by the bureaucracy and the requirements of the programs from which they seek assistance. After they leave our office, what has their experience been?

I am fully aware that you work under a number of stresses and that your jobs are not easy. Yet I believe customer service is as critically important to you as it is to me. We offer a variety of services and programs. To receive these benefits, individuals frequently have to discuss some very personal details of their life. Yes, we have rules

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From the Hotline

The questions and answers below address recent changes associated with Standard Utility Allowances in the Food Stamp Program. These changes were effective April 1, 2003 and were issued as part of State Letter 1255.

Q. My food stamp recipient has verified that she pays a mortgage on a single family residence. Since she owns and lives in her own home, can I assume that she is eligible for the Heating/Cooling SUA as long as she confirms that she is paying her own heating bills?

A. Yes. If your recipient verifies that she owns a single family home, it may be assumed that she is responsible for her own heating bills. This SUA would also be appropriate for a recipient who provides you with a rental agreement verifying that her rental amount does not include heat. Therefore, the Heating/Cooling SUA would be appropriate.

Q. If I assume that the Heating/Cooling SUA is appropriate when my recipient either owns a single family home or pays a rental amount that does not include heat, how do I verify that I have used the appropriate SUA? Do I still need to request utility bills or a written statement from the recipient?

A. To verify that you are using the appropriate SUA, confirm with the recipient that she is paying her own heating bills and request a copy of the recipient's mortgage agreement or rental/lease agreement stating that utilities are not included. This is sufficient verification for using the Heating/Cooling SUA.

Q. Although the warmer months are approaching, I am still recertifying AUs using the Heating/Cooling SUA even though many of my recipients are not currently paying for any heating or cooling costs. If my recipient normally pays for heating costs during the fall, winter and spring months but has no expenses for heating or cooling during the summer, is he entitled to the Heating/Cooling SUA when his certification period ends this month?

A. Yes, SUAs are yearly amounts. Although your recipient is not currently paying any heating or cooling costs, it would be appropriate to use the Heating/Cooling SUA as long as heating is a regular, recurring expense during the year.

More information on the SUA is located in *A User's Guide: Transitional Assistance Programs and BEACON*, Chapter XIV, pages I-4

through I-6 as well as in 106 CMR 364.400(G).

FYI

USDA Clarification Regarding the Use of Fans for Cooling Expenses

USDA has issued a clarification that FS AUs that do not incur heating costs separately from shelter costs are not entitled to the Heating/Cooling SUA if the only cooling expense is a fan. The *BEACON User's Guide* will be updated shortly to remove the reference to fans as an allowable cooling expense.

From the Forms File

New Form

*13-080-0403-05
EA-3 (4/2003)
Application for Housing
Assistance Services*

This form is completed when an applicant is requesting only HAP services to prevent homelessness. The form collects information for determining the applicant's financial eligibility for HAP services. Please refer to Field Operations Memo 2003-11 for more information on the use of this form. The Spanish version will soon be available.

Resolving EA Information on BEACON

EA
Field Operations Memo
2003-11

This memo instructs staff on:

- taking actions on the pending or active EA AUs that are not known to SSPS. The names are found on the View: *EA AUs in Shelter Within Last Two Months*;
- updating records when the AU's EA benefits are being terminated and its TAFDC benefits are being changed or terminated due to income, including entering the last date of shelter on the EA-1 for entry on SSPS;
- taking and processing HAP applications;
- adjusting or voiding an SSPS hotel/motel invoice; and
- putting the seven-digit hotel/motel vendor number on the SSPS invoices. Hotel/motel SSPS invoices must be sent to CSN.

The EA AUs that do not have shelter information on SSPS must be reviewed and appropriate action taken by May 1, 2003.



Continued from Page 1

and regulations and we must follow them. But how we ask a question, the tone used during an interview, how someone is greeted or how an interview is ended can make all the difference. Sometimes it is as simple as treating a person the way you would want to be treated.

I believe customer service should be a two-way street. If you treat an individual with courtesy and respect, you deserve to be treated in the same manner. Sometimes that may not happen. But that should not change the commitment to perform our duties in a professional and courteous manner. There is a level of personal satisfaction that goes along with knowing you have done something in the best possible way. You deserve that level of satisfaction and I hope you will join me in pledging to continue to provide the best possible customer service, especially during these difficult times. As always, I thank you for your ongoing commitment to the Department and to our recipients.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John Wagner". The signature is fluid and cursive.

John Wagner
Commissioner

Some Technical Corrections in A User's Guide: Transitional Assistance Programs and BEACON

All
***A User's Guide: Transitional Assistance Programs and
BEACON Update 043***

This update transmits technical corrections only. No revisions to procedures are transmitted by the reissued pages.



COMMUNICATION is the KEY

Quality Corner

Two recent Quality Control errors highlight problems that have been presented here before, but bear repeating. The first involves Universal Semiannual Reporting and the second, child support payments made by a recipient.

Universal Semiannual Reporting

At her most recent certification in September 2002, the head of the household reported that one of her daughters moved out of her home. Unfortunately, the AU manager left the daughter in the FS AU. Several months later, the daughter returned to the household, with earnings.

AUs were recently converted from Quarterly Reporting to Universal Semiannual Reporting. Under the Semiannual Reporting process, if AU Managers complete the most recent certification correctly, recipients are not required to report certain changes – for example, changes in household composition. In this case, however, because the AU manager did not remove the daughter from the AU at the certification, the AU was not correct.

What Can an AU Manager Do?

Universal Semiannual Reporting potentially is a great benefit to the recipient (who will not have to report all changes), to the AU Manager (who will not have to recertify as often), and for the error rate (which will have fewer errors from unreported changes). If the certification is not correctly completed, however, Universal Semiannual Reporting will be ineffective in reducing errors. Comprehensive interviewing and the accurate input of new information are essential if these AUs are to be correct.

Child Support Payments

A parent in the FS AU has children from another relationship and the father is required to pay child support to these children. He did not report the support expense at the most recent certification, even though he makes regular payments. When the Quality Control reviewer asked him if he had such expenses, he reported them immediately.

What Can an AU Manager Do?

In any AU with children from a previous relationship, be sure to ask if anyone is paying child support. It is an allowable expense and provides

more food stamp benefits to the family. When following the BEACON application screen, the language is somewhat hidden, since it asks, “Does anyone in the household have support expenses?” without specifying child support. While we work on having the language improved, please make sure to note that this question includes child support payments made by members of an AU. (See *A Users Guide: Transitional Assistance Programs and BEACON*, Chapter XIV, page G-1 for examples of situations where the Support Expenses window should be completed.)

No New Section 8 Vouchers

All
Field Operations Memo
2003-12

Effective immediately, the Regional Housing Authorities through DHCD will not issue any **new** Section 8 vouchers. HAP providers are aware of this change and are increasing their effort to locate affordable housing. At this time, this ruling does not impact anyone who has already secured housing with a Section 8 voucher or anyone who has a Section 8 voucher but has not leased an apartment. Advise all applicants and recipients about this freeze on the availability of vouchers.

FYI

Federal Employer Identification Number (FEIN)

When taking action to resolve Earned Income Matches, AU Managers must ensure that the Federal Employer Identification Number (FEIN) is entered on the Employer Details window as accessed from the Employer tab on the Employment Status window in BEACON. The FEIN is needed to identify and verify the Assessed Persons' employer.

Prevention of Earned Income Match discrepancies is enhanced by ensuring that:

- the correct FEIN and all other data documented in the DOR Income Match window are entered in the appropriate Employment Status window fields, and
- the Employment Status window is updated when an earned income source is terminated.

For more detailed information regarding the Earned Income Match refer to *A User's Guide: Transitional Assistance Programs and BEACON*, Chapter II-A: TAO Office Explorer Views.

"The whole point of composing, you see, is not to find one chord or one note you love. It is only when they progress to another chord or note that you have meaning."

Leonard Bernstein

FYI

Third Party Recoveries

When a TAFDC or EAEDC applicant is applying due to an accident, incident or injury, or a recipient has an accident, incident or injury, the person must assign to the Department and Division of Medical Assistance (DMA) the right to recover an amount equal to the benefits provided as a result of the accident, incident or injury.

This assignment is required as a condition of initial and continuing eligibility at application, reevaluation or any time the information becomes known to the Department. The assignment document, which is the Assignment of Third Party Recovery (A-16), is a stand-alone form outside of BEACON. The person must sign this form, agreeing to assign to the Department and DMA an amount of money equal to the amount of assistance provided by the Department and DMA. The original signed form goes to DMA, a copy of the signed form goes to the applicant/recipient and a copy of the signed form is filed in the AU record.

The AU Manager must obtain appropriate third party information. The information regarding the accident, incident or injury, which was formerly collected on the Assignment Information Sheet (A-17), is now entered on the Accident and Incident window.

See *A User's Guide: Transitional Assistance Programs and BEACON*, Chapter XIII-I and the Third Party Liability Reference Guide found on Policy Online/Online Guides for detailed instructions.

Random Moment Sampling

All Field Operations Memo 2003-13

Federal regulations require the Department to determine administrative expenses for federal and state programs. This is achieved through the Random Moment Sampling process. The process involves the RMS Coordinator at Central Office calling AU Managers and asking questions about the activity they were engaged in prior to receiving the call. The responses are recorded on observation forms. Through the cooperative efforts of the AU Managers and the RMS Coordinators, observation forms are completed both accurately and in a timely manner.