

Transitions



A Publication of the Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance

this month in...

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From the Commissioner

Dear Fellow Employees,

As employees at the Department of Transitional Assistance, we often face a difficult balancing act: how do we make sure we're assisting our clients with the appropriate supports and benefits, while also ensuring that our clients are on course to a better place financially? Some would say it is similar to the fisherman's tale about providing fish versus teaching someone to fish—only the latter provides ongoing sustenance. In emergencies and during financial duress, sometimes both are needed and the ability to provide both requires our skill in balancing the correct amounts of compassion, empathy, and firmness.

On the side of the scale providing supports and benefits, we've created a number of initiatives to enhance our clients' access to important resources. For example, many of you know that over the past year, we've added 80,000 recipients to the Food Stamp Program, and we've done so without increasing the amount of time it takes us to process food stamp applications. In fact, for the second year in a row, we've received a federal bonus award of over \$1 million for the timely processing of food stamp applications.

On the side of the scale providing firmness, though still staying focused on maximizing the resources available to our families, we also spend a lot of our time connecting clients to work, and education and training tied to work. Simply put, we cannot move our clients beyond poverty if work is not part of the package of activities in which our families engage. Fully relying on cash benefits, even when combined with food stamp benefits, maintains someone well below the poverty level. If even a minimum amount of work is achievable, we are able to ensure our families have access to other

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benefits—like the state and federal earned income tax credits that provide more income than our cash benefits alone. On this measure, as you know, we recently received over \$8 million in federal bonuses for being among the most improved states in the job entry and ongoing workforce success categories.

The bottom line is that everyone who walks through our doors has a lot to offer and comes to us with many assets—some of which may be hidden. As you know, our job is to help stabilize individuals and families by making sure those who are eligible for our programs have timely access to these programs. But in the long run, we're also looking to capitalize on our client's assets, help everyone recognize their potential contributions, and move most of our clients (some more gradually than others) into the world of work. Although this is often a difficult balancing act, it is one that best serves our families.

It is my hope that in 2006, we continue to build upon our accomplishments from this year and to derive satisfaction from these efforts.

Sincerely,



John Wagner, Commissioner



COMMUNICATION is the KEY

Quality Corner

This month we will discuss three NPA errors – one related to shelter costs, another to household composition, and the last to unearned income.

Monthly Rent

On his application, the applicant reported that he paid \$129 in rent. The verification screen shows that the rent was verified by a receipt, but no verification was found in the AU record. The \$129 was entered onto BEACON as a weekly amount. During the review, Quality Control verified that the shelter expense was in fact \$129, but this figure represented a monthly amount. This caused an overpayment of \$114.

What's an AU Manager to Do?

It was a very simple error. According to the local office, the AU Manager was aware that the rent was a monthly amount, but nevertheless entered it as a weekly amount on the Shelter Expenses window. AU Managers must be careful when selecting the frequency from the dropdown list. Selecting the wrong frequency will cause a calculation error.

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Household Members

At the time of the recertification in June, the recipient listed herself, her spouse and two children on the handwritten semiannual report. Quality Control agreed that there were four household members. BEACON, however, showed that the youngest child had been closed and never reopened since the previous certification in December. Following the June recertification, BEACON still showed only three household members rather than four. This caused an underissuance error for the review month.

What's an AU Manager to Do?

The AU Manager could have checked the *AU Composition Results* window to identify all persons with a responsibility of "Recipient." The *Interview Wrapup EBC Results* window also shows the number of eligible FS AU members under *Federal AU size*.

The AU Manager did issue supplemental benefits to the family, but it was after the review month and therefore could not be used to offset the error.

Unearned Income

A recipient who was laid off from her job came in to reapply for FS benefits. She reported that she had applied for Unemployment Compensation benefits in Alabama because that was the home base of the company which recently laid her off. She stated that she would be receiving \$176 in weekly Unemployment Compensation benefits. The AU record contained a printout from the appropriate state agency in Alabama; it showed the date of the last check sent, listed the amount, which was \$176, and **that it covered two weeks**. The AU Manager mistakenly used the \$176 figure as a weekly amount. Quality Control verified with the recipient, and with the Alabama Disclosures Unit, that the recipient in fact, received \$88 weekly or \$176 every two weeks.

What's an AU Manager to Do?

Whenever there is conflicting information, the AU Manager must ask the recipient to provide additional verification or seek the recipient's permission to obtain verification via collateral contact. In this situation, the form was difficult to read and the format unfamiliar to the AU Manager. The easiest way to resolve the discrepancy would have been for the AU Manager to complete the *Voluntary Authorization to Release Information* Form and call the Alabama agency for clarification.

HAP Referrals and Toolbox

EA
Field Operations Memo 2005-24A

This memo identifies all of the housing assistance services that are provided by HAP and informs staff that, effective immediately, *Toolbox* is no longer available for prevention services that it will now be used to transition families from shelter into permanent housing and that is now available only once in a 24-month period.

This memo identifies all of the uses of *Toolbox*. *Toolbox* is available to an AU that is moving from shelter into public or subsidized housing.

Local Housing Authority Transitional Housing Program II (LHATHP) – Everett Housing Authority

EA

Field Operations Memo 2005-25B

This memo advises staff that the Everett Housing Authority has been added to the list of LHAs participating in the Local Housing Authority Transitional Housing Program II (LHATHP). There are now 10 LHAs participating in the LHATHP II.

RAFT – Residential Assistance for Families in Transition

EA

Field Operations Memo 2005-47A

Some agencies are expected to exhaust their RAFT funds by mid-December, while the remaining agencies will probably have enough funds to continue through mid-January. Before referring anyone seeking RAFT, the AU Manager or Homeless Coordinator must contact their Housing Consumer Education Center to verify that applications are still being accepted.

F.O.R. Families Program

EA

Field Operations Memo 2005-55

This memo advises AU Managers, HAP providers and shelter staff that the F.O.R. Families Program will now be available to homeless families from the following TAOs: Boston, Brockton, Davis Square, Holyoke, Hyannis, Lawrence, Lowell, Malden, New Bedford, North Shore, Plymouth, Revere, Springfield, and Worcester.

The primary goal of the F.O.R. Families Program is to help families transition from homelessness to stable permanent housing. The F.O.R. Families Home visitor is trained to work with homeless families who are placed in shelters or families who are ineligible for EA benefits and are denied shelter placement. Services are free and participation is voluntary.

The *F.O.R. Families Referral Form* is used to refer EA AUs to F.O.R. Families. The EA AU must agree to the referral and sign the *Release of Information Form*.

DTA Online Intranet Site

All

Field Operations Memo
2005-56

DTA Online, the Department's Intranet site, has been redesigned. The site includes a number of links to DTA topics and subtopics and links to non-DTA sites.

This memo provides TAO staff with information and instructions about the various options displayed on the site. Included as part of the memo are two attachments. Attachment A is a print of the new DTA Online home page. Attachment B is the DTA Online Navigation Guide. The DTA Online Navigation Guide provides a complete listing of all topics and subtopics available on the site. The guide can also be accessed from Policy Online: Online Guides.



“Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.”

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

TAFDC, EAEDC and FS – Alternative SSN Clean-up Project

TAFDC, EAEDC and FS
Field Operations Memo
2005-57

A recent LOQC review found that, while a majority of the AUs with Alternative SSNs were processed correctly, there remained outstanding issues for a number of other AUs. These issues must be addressed by AU Managers in a special clean-up project.

This memo:

- informs TAOs about the “Alternative SSN” clean-up project report; and
- gives TAO staff procedures for updating the 376 affected AUs listed on the report.

OCR/DTA Agreement Regarding the Learning Disabled: Screening and Assessing Learning Dis- abilities

TAFDC
Field Operations Memo
2005-58

As part of a *pending* agreement with the Office for Civil Rights (OCR), the Department must provide TAFDC applicants and recipients with the opportunity

for screenings and in-depth assessments for learning disabilities. This agreement will help TAFDC applicants and recipients with learning disabilities obtain equal access to participation in DTA’s Employment Services Program (ESP). DTA will be entering into the agreement to ensure that TAFDC applicants and recipients with learning disabilities are helped in overcoming barriers to reach self-sufficiency.

Applicants and recipients whose screening indicates that they *might* have a learning disability and who participate in ESP will qualify for a further in-depth assessment. This memo informs TAO staff about:

- the learning disability screening and assessment process, and
- changes to BEACON that relate to the learning disability screening and assessment process.

Employment Services Program (ESP) – Expansion of Activities

TAFDC
Field Operations Memo 2005-60

Employment Services Program (ESP) activities are being expanded to address the need for more ESP activity slots. These activities are designed to help recipients become self-sufficient. This memo tells TAO staff about the activities being offered and the activities’ projected start dates.



FYI

DTA Employment Programs Deskguide

The DTA Employment Programs Deskguide outlines the service components, availability and intended target population of the employment, training and job placement programs offered by the Department in Fiscal Year 2006.

Programs are listed by geographical region.

The Deskguide contains information on all components offered in the Employment Services and the Food Stamp Employment and Training programs and will assist TAO staff in making referrals.

FYI

Partial Data Collection on the Absence Window

Department of Revenue Child Support Enforcement Unit (DOR/CSEU) can begin the process of establishing support orders on non-custodial parents with basic information such as a partial date of birth (i.e., month and year, but not day), state of birth (but not city/town), last year employed or last year in the military (but not month or day).

A future increment of BEACON will allow for partial data entries in certain fields of the Absence window. Until that time, AU Managers can enter any partial data the custodial parent has provided in the Other Identifying Characteristics field on the Personal tab of the Absence window. The field accepts up to 50 characters and spaces combined. This information will, when viewed by DOR through E-tag, allow them to begin the process of establishing paternity or a court order for support.

When entering partial date data in the Other Identifying Characteristics field, AU Managers should use the following format for consistency:

If the day and year of the date of birth are known, but not the month, enter the data as: DOB xx/03/1958.

If the month and day of the date of birth are known, but not the year, enter the data as: DOB 04/03/xxxx.

AU Managers are reminded to emphasize with recipients the importance of cooperating with the DOR child support process (unless Good Cause exists) in their transition to self-sufficiency.

FYI

Pay Stubs with Flexible Credits

Some employers provide *credits*, *flexible benefits*, or *flex credits* as a benefit to offset the costs of medical insurance, life insurance, etc. The term varies among employers. Flex credits are generally identified separately as “credits” on the pay stub, but are added to the employee’s total gross income.

Flex credits provided by employers that are used for benefits such as health insurance or life insurance, but **cannot** be taken as cash by the employee, are not countable as income.

AU Managers must check pay stubs closely to see if credits or flex credits or flexible benefits are identified in the earnings section of the pay stub. If so, follow-up is required. Due to differences among employers in the administration of flex credits, AU Managers must verify the terms of the employer’s flex credit program to determine the correct amount of countable income on the applicant’s or recipient’s pay stub. Be sure to annotate the

From the Forms File

New Forms

13-273-1205-05

4 Family Ref (12/2005)

F.O.R. Families Referral Form

13-270-1205-05

4 Family Release (12/2005)

Release of Information Between DTA and DPH F.O.R. Families

These forms must be used to refer an EA family to the F.O.R. Families Program. Refer to Field Operations Memo 2005-55 for more information.

New Poster/Flyer

26-400-0106-05

26-401-0106-05 (S)

OCR-Poster-1 (1/2006)

Do You Have a Disability?

26-404-0106-05

26-403-0106-05(S)

OCR-Flyer-1 (1/2006)

Do You Have a Disability?

The poster must be displayed in TAO waiting areas. Refer to Field Operations Memo 2005-58 for more information.

Revised Form

13-075-1205-05

TES-WN-13 (Rev. 12/2005)

Warning Notice of Noncompliance

This revised form alerts EA recipients to their right to a fair hearing if they disagree with the noncompliance decision and/or the decision to transfer.

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Parental Control	March, December	361.200(A)
Program Violations	October	367.495 through 367.950
Standard Utility Allowance	August	364.400
Verification Requirements	November	361.600 through 361.660
Verification Requirements at Recertification	November	366.320(C)

TAFDC

Topic	Month	Related Procedure/ Policy, 106 CMR:
BEACON/Absent Parent Information	August	A User's Guide, Chapter XIII-G
Calculation of the Grant Amount	May	204.500
Community Service	February	207.170
Community Service/ Noncitizens	June	203.400(A)
Composition of the Assistance Unit	March	204.305
Deemed Income	March	204.210(D)
ESP Support Services: Child Care	June	207.210(A)
Exemptions	March	203.100
Extension of Benefits Beyond the 24-month Period	February	203.210
Good Cause Criteria	July/February	701.380
Learnfare	April	203.900
Overpayments/ Underpayments	October	706.200 through 706.296
Voluntary Authorization to Release Information	December	702.340(B)
Relationship	March/May	203.585
Supported Work	May	207.160
Verification/Dependent Child: Under Age 18	December	203.570(B)
Verification/Relationship	December	203.585(B)
Work Requirement	February	203.400