

# Transitions



A Publication of the Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance

## this month in...

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## From the Commissioner

Dear Fellow Employees,

This past spring I wrote to you about the reauthorization of the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Block Grant. More recently, newly developed requirements for this federal legislation were published. The new requirements define the activities that each state may count towards TAFDC federal work participation targets, specify the ways in which work participation activities must be verified and set firm time limits on some of these activities. The implementation date for these changes is October 1, 2006.

Prior to the reauthorization in February, decisions on what constituted work participation had been left up to the individual states. To make federal monitoring of each state's performance easier and more equitable, these new requirements will hold all states to consistent work participation and verification standards.

The new federal requirements designate areas of work participation that will be monitored to qualify for ongoing federal funding. Some of these work participation areas are more narrowly defined by the federal government than in the past. Many of the activities designated by the federal government will be familiar to you. They are, for the most part, the same as or similar to our current ESP participation components.

For example, you'll see changes impacting the former Basic Job Search and Structured Job Search component activities. These two ESP components are combining into one Job Search/Job Readiness component. Our Department, in conjunction with the Division of Career Services (DCS) and the Office of Refugee and Immigrants (ORI) has developed the Job Search/Job Readiness activity to meet the new TANF guidelines. A description of the new component and procedures for implementing this new activity will be detailed in an upcoming Field Operations Memo.

To properly comply with the Federal reauthorization of the TANF Block Grant, the most significant adjustment for our Department will

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be in implementing more effective strategies to meet a higher federal work participation rate. Increasing our participation rate in work and work-related activities is one of our overarching objectives. To meet this objective, one of our strategies involves identifying those who could benefit from Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission or Vocational Rehabilitation referrals and finding better ways to facilitate job opportunities for these families. The Resource Team Program recently launched in the Worcester and Springfield Transitional Assistance Offices (TAO) is an example of this effort. By creating a team of Disability Specialists, Disability Coordinators and Vocational Specialists, we plan on providing a coordinated approach that is scaled to meet individual client needs. A modified version of this Program is also underway in the Newmarket TAO where Vocational Specialists are currently providing these services.

Of course, you play an instrumental role in helping us meet these new TANF guidelines. As members of a Transitional Assistance Office team, it is important that you ensure clients understand the full measure of their potential, regardless of their work program status. We rely on you to explain the kinds of ESP referrals and services that will support employment goals. As the point of first contact, an Assistant Unit Manager's message promoting work and work-related activities is often the catalyst that will jump-start many parents on a successful job path.

In addition to lending an encouraging word about job possibilities, information on the ways in which our Department supports employment is often invaluable to parents. Many of us are familiar with transportation payment eligibility rules and our newly developed Car Ownership Program for those who are in need of transportation to work, but we need to ensure that our clients are also aware of these supports. And while we're on the topic of ESP Support Services, preliminary and ongoing assurances of easy access to reliable and quality child care are, of course, essential to any parent considering a job or job training. Your skill at sharing this type of information with clients is paramount to the success of fully engaging our TAFDC caseload.

There may be quite a few adjustments for many of us over the coming months. I appreciate the patience and perspective you always bring to these kinds of challenges.

Together, I'm confident that we can implement a welfare reform reauthorization plan that respects the full engagement requirements of the new federal mandates while at the same time fulfilling the job preparation requirements and training needs of our clients. Thank you for helping out in this effort.



John Wagner, Commissioner

September 2006

## From the Hotline

The questions and answers below pertain to food stamp application processing guidelines. Additional information is available on this topic in Field Operations Memo 2006-30.

- Q.** I received a food stamp application today by mail. There is no telephone number on the application. How do I proceed?
- A.** If there is no telephone number on the mail-in application, a Food Stamp Application Appointment Letter for an In-Office Interview must be sent to the applicant by Day 2. This procedure applies whether or not a hardship waiver reason is indicated on the application since there is no way for the AU Manager to contact the applicant by telephone.
- Q.** I received a food stamp application today by mail. There is a telephone number on the application but the applicant did not indicate a hardship waiver reason. How do I proceed?
- A.** Try to contact the applicant by telephone. If you are unable to speak with the applicant, mail a Food Stamp Application Ap-

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pointment Letter for an In-Office Interview, by Day 2. If you are able to speak with the applicant, screen him and schedule an interview, based on the applicant's circumstances.

**Q.** I received a food stamp application today but was unable to speak with the applicant. The applicant indicated a hardship waiver reason on the application. When must I contact this applicant?

**A.** Since the applicant indicated a hardship waiver reason(s) on the submitted food stamp application, mail a Food Stamp Appointment Letter for a Telephone Interview by Day 2.

**Note:** Review the hardship reasons with the applicant at the beginning of the interview to ensure that this applicant qualifies for a waiver of the face-to-face interview. If the applicant is determined ineligible for a waiver, ask the applicant to

appear in the TAO for the food stamp application interview.

**Q.** If my food stamp applicant provides a telephone number on her application and I am able to speak with her on the telephone that same afternoon, how should I proceed?

**A.** During the initial contact, you should screen for expedited service and explore potential hardship reasons. If you determine that the applicant is eligible for a waiver of the face-to-face interview, the interview may be conducted by telephone at that time if the applicant agrees, or the interview may be scheduled for a later date using the Food Stamp Appointment Letter for a Telephone Interview.

**Q.** There are no expedited questions on the paper food stamp application. What day in the process must I schedule the interview?

**A.** If you are unable to contact the applicant by telephone by Day 2, send an appointment letter scheduling an interview by Day 7.

**Q.** If a food stamp Web application received by our office is identified as expedited because the applicant answered "yes" to the expedited questions on the application, then by what day in the process must I schedule the appointment?

**A.** For expedited applicants, an appointment must be scheduled by Day 7 so that the DTA screening can occur timely.

**Note:** If the applicant answered "no" to the expedited questions, the appointment must be scheduled by Day 14.

## From the Forms File

### Revised Forms

*13-220-0806-05*

*TES-EPR-1 (Rev. 8/2006)*

*Emergency Placement Request*

This form has been revised to facilitate a smoother transition to the designated shelter. The form includes additional information that will allow the shelter to better prepare for the family's arrival. Refer to Field Operations Memo 2006-35 for more information.

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09-005-0906-05

09-006-0906-05 (S)

FSP-5 (Rev. (2) 9/2006)

*Food Stamp Change Report Form*

The *Food Stamp Change Report Form* has been revised to include updates to the requirements for change reporters (i.e. non-TBA, and non-USR AUs).

### **Revised Brochures**

18-123-0806-05 (*Armenian*)

18-124-0806-05 (*Cambodian*)

18-121-0806-05 (*Chinese*)

18-126-0806-05 (*Croatian*)

18-118-0806-05 (*French*)

18-117-0806-05 (*Haitian Creole*)

18-122-0806-05 (*Laotian*)

18-119-0806-05 (*Portuguese*)

18-125-0806-05 (*Russian*)

18-120-0806-05 (*Vietnamese*)

*Your Right to Interpreter Services*

These brochures have been updated to include the new Division of Hearings (DOH) Post Office box number. Please destroy old versions and use the updated versions.

### **The following brochure is now available in Spanish.**

18-826-0706-05

EBT-TB (Rev. 7/2006)

*Electronic Benefit Transfer*

### **Quality Corner**

This month we will discuss two errors. The first is related to income matches and the second to incomplete or inadequate verification.

#### **Income Matches**

A TAFDC AU was closed for failure to provide school verifications for the children. When the school verifications were received, the AU Manager reopened the AU but did not check the income matches for the AU. The recipient did not report the income at the time of the reinstatement. A New Hire Match showed the recipient was working. QC determined that the recipient had been employed for

over a month prior to reinstatement, and the recipient's earnings made the TAFDC AU ineligible. The absence of these wages from the calculation resulted in a large food stamp overpayment.

#### **What's an AU Manager to Do?**

When reopening an AU, all elements of eligibility must be considered. The recipient should have reported this income, but it is the AU Manager's responsibility to make use of all available resources when determining eligibility. AU Managers must routinely check income matches before reopening an AU.

#### **Incomplete or Inadequate Verification**

This error involves an EAEDC recipient who was living in his deceased parents' home that was left to him and his four siblings. He lived in the house with a disabled sister who purchased and prepared meals separately from him. His sister received SSI and CAPFS.

The Landlord Verification form in the AU record showed that the recipient paid \$50 weekly for rent, but the form was unsigned. The AU record also included utility bills in his name. The AU Manager allowed

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the rent but no SUA. QC determined that the recipient did, in fact, pay utilities and was entitled to the heating/cooling SUA. Further investigation revealed that the only expenses on the home were taxes and insurance which, when divided among the five siblings, resulted in a monthly shelter cost of \$27.37 to the recipient. The absence of the SUA from the calculation resulted in an underpayment error.

### What's an AU Manager to Do?

The AU Manager should have questioned the recipient about the utility bills and the unsigned Landlord Verification form. This would have led to a discussion on the ownership of the home and clarified the actual shelter costs the recipient was paying. This information would have prevented the error.



## TAFDC: Work Program Participation Review - Phase 3: Age School through Eight, Authorizing Batch Sanctions and Removing Interrupted Sanctions – Phase 3 and TAFDC Recipients Receiving SSI

### TAFDC

#### Field Operations Memo 2006-31- A

The Department is in the process of making changes to the TAFDC Program to comply with federal reauthorization of the TANF block grant. One of the most significant areas to be addressed is participation in work-related activities.

This Field Operations Memo:

- informs TAO staff of the need to conduct a desk review to determine whether an AP coded “Youngest Child 2 to School” should be changed to “Youngest Child School thru 8.” If the desk review identifies that the recipient must increase the hours of participation, the AU Manager **must** contact the recipient for an interview, to explain the Work Program requirement as well as other AU changes and to refer or enroll the recipient in an activity to help the recipient meet the required hours;
- provides a follow-up to Field Operations Memo 2006-27: “Work Program Participation Review - Phase 2: Age Nine and Older; Authorizing Batch Sanctions and Removing Interrupted Sanctions – Phase 2.” Specifically, procedures for processing AUs who are in “Interrupt Status” or Batch Sanctions that are pending authorization are included; and
- gives TAO Staff instructions for processing TAFDC recipients who are receiving SSI and either remain active or need some other correction in BEACON to reflect the receipt of SSI (i.e., Work Requirement Reason needs to be changed).

This Field Operations Memo is being reissued with corrected procedures on Pages 9 and 10 and obsoletes Field Operations Memo 2006-31.



## **Food Stamp Program Access Review**

FS

Field Operation Memo 2006-33

This Field Operations Memo:

- describes USDA's findings from the Food Stamp Program Access Review it conducted in 2005, and
- describes the steps the Department has taken to address these findings.

## **TAFDC Clothing Allowance**

TAFDC

State Letter 1314

Field Operations Memo 2006-34

The Department will pay a nonrecurring clothing allowance for September 2006 for TAFDC recipients. The clothing allowance is \$150 per recipient under the age of 19. The clothing allowance is prorated for recipients eligible in September 2006 but who have a start date on or after September 1, 2006.

## **Revision to the TES-EPR-1**

EA

Field Operations Memo 2006-35

The *TES-EPR-1* form has been revised to facilitate a smoother transition to the designated shelter. The form includes additional information that will allow the shelter to better prepare for the family's arrival.

## **Food Stamp Employment and Training (FS E&T) for Individuals with Mental Illness Who Are Homeless - New Initiative**

DTA has contracted with the Department of Mental Health (DMH) to help food stamp recipients achieve self-sufficiency through the receipt of comprehensive training and employment services. This new initiative is called the *Homeless Employment Services Partnership* (HESP). HESP serves mentally ill individuals who are DMH customers and are homeless, formerly homeless or at risk of becoming homeless and are receiving food stamp benefits. Currently, the HESP initiative is limited to DMH customers living in the Framingham and Springfield areas served by the Framingham, Springfield Liberty and Springfield State TAOs.

## **Safe Assistance to Further Economic Empowerment (Project SAFE) New Initiative**

Project SAFE is a new initiative supported by DTA's Domestic Violence Unit, Housing and Homeless Services Unit, and Employment Services Program. Project SAFE develops self-confidence and skills necessary for recipients to maintain employment by providing practical skills such as safety planning, self-defense and economic literacy training to those recipients who choose to participate. The new initiative is currently helping TAFDC families residing in the David John Louison Shelter in Brockton, Millennium House in Boston, and House of Hope in Lowell.

## **FYI**

### **Administrative Fees for SSI/RSDI Representative Payees**

A recent Q.C. error identified that, in some circumstances, representative payees, such as group homes, charge an administrative fee for managing recipients' SSI or RSDI benefit checks. This fee, which varies based upon the recipient's benefit amount, should be treated as noncountable income.

These fees have been found among DMR, DMH, CAP, and regular NPA AUs. There is no known way to readily identify representative payee AUs that are required to pay administrative fees. Therefore, it is important to explore this potential when interviewing recipients who reside in group living situations or institutional settings, or any recipient with an authorized representative payee.

If the AU verifies payment of an administrative fee, enter the amount of the fee in the Dependent Care window in BEACON as a monthly dependent care expense. This will ensure that the administrative fee amount is not considered in the benefit calculation.

## **FYI**

### **Changes to DTA Online**

This month you will see the following changes to DTA Online:

#### **Diversity - Events**

The option Diversity - Events includes a link to the September Diversity event entitled: *National Hispanic Heritage Month (September 15-October 15)*.

## **Resource Inventories – DTA Employment Resources Deskguide**

The DTA Employment Resources Deskguide includes a new section entitled *TAFDC Work Experience* and provides a summary of Vocational Rehabilitation Services.

### **Non-EOHHS Links**

The Department of Labor and Workforce Development is now two separate agencies: Department of Labor and Department of Workforce Development. The link DLWD has been deleted and replaced with the link to the Department of Labor (DOL) and the link to the Department of Workforce Development (DWD).

## **FYI**

### **Changes to the mass.gov DTA Homepage**

This month you will see the following changes to the mass.gov DTA Homepage:

#### **Programs and Services – Food Stamp Benefits**

The Food Stamp Benefit information page includes a Nondiscrimination Statement. The statement appears at the bottom of the page.

#### **Research & Statistics – DTA Facts and Figures**

The *DTA Facts and Figures* includes caseload information, grant levels, eligibility standards and FY'06 appropriation data for August 2006.

## **FYI**

### **Changes to Policy Online**

This month you will see the following changes to Policy Online:

#### **TAO E-Mails – Special Procedures**

The available options listed on the Policy Online main menu selection page includes a new option entitled *E-Mails – Special Procedures*. When selected, links to the e-mails with special procedures sent to TAO staff will be displayed. The e-mail title line contains the year, sequence number and subject (ex.,2006-3: FY07 State Budget Language Regarding EA Presumptive Eligibility).

## **FYI**

### **Display of ESP and Employment Participation Hours**

Effective with BEACON Increment 2.1.20, on the Monitor Participation window, BEACON will display the total number of *actual* participation hours for a given month for both exempt and nonexempt Assessed Persons (APs).

For APs with a single activity (for example, education *or* employment), BEACON will display the actual participation hours entered from the Participation and Attendance form or the Monthly Report, respectively. For APs with multiple activities (for example, education *and* employment), BEACON will total and display the actual participation hours entered from both the Participation and Attendance form and the Monthly Report.

These changes will help the AU Manager determine which hours were used to meet the Work Program requirement. It will also help the Department determine current participation rates and will allow the Department to make decisions about ways to increase work participation.

## **FYI**

### **Medical Deductions**

While interviewing elderly or disabled food stamp recipients, it is important to remember to ask about any non-reimbursed incurred medical expenses, even if the expenses are unpaid. Maximizing benefits for these individuals is especially important as health care costs can be prohibitive and can force an individual to make a choice between buying food or paying for medical necessities, a dilemma faced by many seniors with low incomes.

Disabled recipients are entitled to these deductions whether they are children or adults, as long as the recipient meets the disability standard set forth in policy. All expenses must be verified, and the AU Manager, if requested, must assist the recipient in obtaining verifications. The AU Manager must also accept the recipient's claim that the expense has not been reimbursed, unless questionable. AU Managers are reminded that in addition to items such as prescriptions, eyeglasses, dental care and health insurance premiums, there are many other costs that are acceptable medical expenses. These include but are not limited to:

- over-the-counter medications with approval by a licensed practitioner;
- hospitalization or nursing home costs while on food stamps;
- dentures, hearing aids and prosthetics;
- veterinarian bills and food for service animals such as Seeing Eye dogs;
- lodging and transportation costs;
- psychotherapy;
- home health aides, attendants, housekeepers or child care services required due to disability;
- medical equipment purchases or rentals;
- alternative health treatments including chiropractic services, acupuncture and massage therapy;
- co-pays for office appointments and emergency room service; and
- medical supplies such as incontinence diapers and hearing aid batteries.

See CMR 364.400 for details on medical expenses.



## FYI

### New “Benefit Type” for Certain AUs

Effective with BEACON Increment 2.1.20, benefits for certain AUs will be displayed on the Benefit History Tab of BEACON with the value of “State Only” in the “Benefit Type” field. BEACON will assign the value of “State Only” in the “Benefit Type” field to the affected AU. No AU Manager action is needed.

“Life is a place of service, and in that service one has to suffer a great deal that is hard to bear, but more often to experience a great deal of joy. But that joy can be real only if people look upon their lives as a service and have a definite object in life outside themselves and their personal happiness.”

Count Leo Tolstoy

