

Transitions



A Publication of the Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance

this month in...

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From the Commissioner

Dear Colleagues,

Working at Central Office and visiting local TAOs over the past several weeks, I've been encouraged by the way so many of you perform on the job. Whether showing your abilities to grasp complex program information or keeping pace with the breadth of available client resources, the positive impact of your efforts is apparent and substantial.

To build upon these valuable contributions, I'd like us to begin finding ways to be even more effective at helping our clients achieve economic stability. Last month, we looked at the role quality customer service plays in meeting our Department's mission. Key to any solid customer service approach is clear and straightforward communication between our Department and the clients we serve.

Strong communication skills become even more critical when asking our clients to fulfill certain program requirements. For example, our TAFDC work program requirement is in place to help families get the jobs and training they need to become financially self-supporting, but for a variety of reasons these requirements are not always met.

As we work toward engaging our clients in work, I'd like us to first ensure that we have done our best to help families meet our participation requirements. This means that once a full explanation of our work program is presented, we need to ask our clients about any potential barriers they may have to participation. If a client is unable to participate in one of our ESP components, in addition to the available support services from us (child care, transportation, domestic violence) he or she may benefit from a referral to one of

our partnering agencies (Department of Social Services, Department of Mental Health, Department of Public Health, Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission, F.O.R. Families, etc.).

Over the next few months, we will be taking a closer look at our work program requirements as well as the work program sanctions we have in place to determine whether there are ways to improve the process. In the meantime, as Department employees, we need to do all that we can to ensure that the sanctions currently in place are applied consistently, prudently and only as a last resort. We can best achieve this by maintaining a positive dialogue with our clients, providing them with a complete explanation of the work program and what it entails, helping individuals plan for any anticipated challenges through a careful assessment of their needs, providing support services, referring families to specialists and/or our partnering agencies and exploring good cause reasons for those unable to meet their obligations. Reducing the benefits available to already low income families is a drastic step that should only be made after we have taken all appropriate steps to support the family, and determined that there are no good cause reasons that explain the noncompliance.

At the same time that I am enlisting your support in this effort, I have also begun a review of our shelter noncompliance policies and practices. In a letter sent last month to our contracted shelter providers, I made a similar appeal for understanding, uniformity, intervention and fairness when implementing noncompliance procedures. We are asking shelter providers to only refer the most serious noncompliant situations, such as when a family member poses a danger to himself or others, engages in criminal behavior or uses illegal substances while residing in shelter.

Our objective is to ensure that shelter rules are uniform statewide, that clients have a complete understanding of the rules as well as the reasons these rules are in place, and that providers work with clients to develop environments that support problem solving through timely intervention. We want to minimize future instances of noncompliance by maximizing the amount of information, support and services given to shelter residents. In the future, we also plan to provide technical assistance and include “best practice” guidance on self-sufficiency and family stabilization.

Quality Corner

This month we will review two errors, one related to noncitizen calculation and the other to medical expenses.

Noncitizen Earned Income

An NPA FS case was certified as a Universal Semiannual Reporting case. The household consisted of two legal permanent resident (LPR) parents and eight children who were also LPRs. Four of the children were over 18 years old and four were under 18. The parents and the four older children were ineligible legal noncitizens for Food Stamp purposes. At the time of the most recent recertification, both parents were working full time; the four older children were also working. The earnings of the parents and the older children were entered on the Earned Income window as noncountable for Food Stamps. Consequently these earnings were not counted in the food stamp benefit calculation. This caused a substantial overpayment error. The gross income for this household had, in fact, exceeded the income limit for their household size.

What's An AU Manager to Do?

Noncitizen policy and procedures can be complex and at

times difficult to understand. AU Managers and Supervisors must refer to Policy Online to ensure that current noncitizen policy is correctly applied.

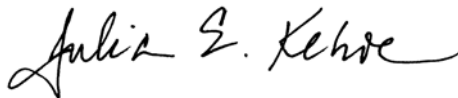
On the Earned Income window, the AU Manager should have entered the earnings of the legal but ineligible LPR adults as countable for Food Stamps. On the Noncitizen window, the AU Manager should have answered *Yes* to the Legal FS Disqualified indicator for each of the LPR adults. BEACON would then have calculated this household's Food Stamp benefits in accordance with 106 CMR 364.600 (C). For more information on calculating Food Stamp benefits for mixed households, see *A User's Guide: Transitional Assistance Programs and BEACON*, Chapter XII-E, pages 28 through 30.

Medical Deduction Error

This NPA FS case consisted of an elderly couple, both of whom received SSI. At the time of the last recertification, the client presented a \$700 dental receipt to the AU Manager. A notation on the receipt said it was paid every other month. The AU Manager divided the bill in half and subtracted \$35, allowing a medical deduction of \$315 for the certification period. The case was assigned a two-year certification period.

When clients succeed in finding jobs or locating housing, we all succeed. As we redouble our efforts towards reducing homelessness, increasing opportunities for economic self-sufficiency and improving customer service, I want to thank you all for your dedication to these priorities.

Sincerely,



Julia E. Kehoe, Commissioner

Quality Corner (con't)

Quality Control verified with the client and the client's dentist that the \$700 dental receipt was a one-time dental bill that had been paid in two installments. There seems to have been some miscommunication between the AU Manager and the clients, who were both elderly and who both had limited English proficiency.

What's An AU Manager to Do?

Considering the amount of the bill and the client's income, the AU Manager should have followed up with the client for clarification. For example, the AU Manager could have asked the client to sign a *Voluntary Authorization to Release Information* form authorizing the Department to contact the client's dentist, or the AU Manager could have asked the client how often the bill was received and how the bill was being paid. If there seemed to be a communication problem, the AU Manager should have requested the services of an interpreter, which might have been helpful in resolving the issue.

Once the bill was determined to be a one-time expense, it should have been allowed as a deduction for one month or averaged over the first 12 months of the certification period. For more information on averaging expenses, see 106 CMR 364.440(C)(D), and more recently an FYI in the June 2007 issue of *Transitions* entitled *Processing Nonrecurring Medical Expenses*.

Note: The AU Manager should not have subtracted \$35 from the medical expenses before entering the amount on the system. BEACON is programmed to automatically subtract \$35 from the total medical expenses entered for the household.

From the Forms File

New Form

18-205-0707-05

RUIMV(7/2007)

Receipt of Unearned Income Match Verifications

This form must be sent to clients by AU Managers as an acknowledgment that a verification(s) which the client has brought or mailed to the TAO as a result of an Unearned Income Match Notice sent by the Special Match Unit, has been faxed to the Special Match Unit. See Field Operations Memo 2007-37 for more information.

Revised Forms

09-250-0807-05

09-251-0807-05(S)

RR-FSP-1B (Rev. 8/2007)

Notice of Rights, Responsibilities and Penalties

The Notice of Rights, Responsibilities and Penalties no longer contains a signature line. Use this version of the RR-FSP-1B and destroy all other versions.

13-150-0707-05

13-151-0707-05(S)

EA-Plan/PT 1(Rev. 7/2007)

EA Self-Sufficiency Plan - Phase II - Part 1

Income information has been added to this form. Refer to Field Operations Memo 2007-40 for more information.

02-602-0707-05

02-603-0707-05(S)

EX-WVREQ-1 (Rev. 7/2007)

Family Cap Exception/Waiver Request

This form has been revised to clarify that a client may apply for either a Family Cap Exception or a Domestic Violence Waiver if her child was conceived as a result of rape or sexual assault by a current or former intimate partner, relative or household member. Additional types of verifications have also been listed that can be used to facilitate the process of approving exception or waiver requests. See Field Operations Memo 2007-35.

The following EA forms have been revised to reflect the regulation changes promulgated in State Letter 1326 - EA - *Right to Fair Hearing*. The Online versions have been revised as well.

02-035-0707-05

02-157-0707-05(S)

NFL-9 (Rev. 7/2007)

Notice of Approval, Denial or Termination for Emergency Assistance or Other Financial Services

13-039-0707-05

13-042-0707-05(S)

NFL-ST (Rev. 7/2007)

Notice of Termination of Temporary Emergency Shelter

13-210-0707-05

13-211-0707-05(S)

TES-IC (Rev. 7/2007)

Informational Contacts

02-202-0707-05

02-204-0707-05(S)

TES-TR-1 (Rev. 7/2007)

Notice of Shelter Transfer

02-280-0707-05

02-281-0707-05(S)

TES-TR-3 (Rev. 7/2007)

Notice of Transfer at Shelter Request

13-075-0707-05

13-076-0707-05(S)

TES-WN-13 (Rev.7/2007)

Warning Notice of Noncompliance

From the Hotline

Q. A TAFDC client came to the office today requesting a crib and layette payment for her newborn. Do I need to get her request for this benefit in writing?

A. No. A TAFDC client who requests the infant benefit (verbally or in writing) can be approved for the payment, if otherwise eligible. The issuance of the crib and layette payment must be noted on the BEACON Narratives Tab. Refer to 106 CMR 705.600 for more details.

Reminder: AU Managers must inform clients of any available Department benefits they may be eligible to receive. Refer to 106 CMR 701.220 for more details.

Q. I am recertifying a food stamp household consisting of a father and his 16-year-old son who has dropped out of high school. Is the son required to enroll in the FS Employment and Training Program?

A. No. A 16-or17-year-old who is not the head of household is exempt from the Food Stamp Employment and Training Program. Other 16-or17-year-olds

who may also be exempt from this program include those who are attending school on at least a half-time basis and those participating in an employment and training program on at least a half-time basis. Refer to 106 CMR 362.310(B) for more details.

Q. Recently, a client receiving food stamp benefits stated that she had temporarily moved from the home she owns into an apartment for employment reasons. Can this client claim the mortgage of her home as a food stamp shelter expense, even though she is not currently living in the home?

A. Yes. If the client is responsible for the mortgage payment, she may have her mortgage deducted as a shelter expense, as long as certain other conditions apply.

To allow the shelter deduction for your client, she must state that:

- she intends to return to the home once the reason for vacating the property has ended;
- any current or new occupants to the vacated home are not claiming the shelter deduction for food stamp purposes; and
- the vacated home is not leased or rented during the household's absence.

Per 106 CMR 364.400(G), shelter expenses may be deducted on a home when it was vacated due to employment or training away from home, illness, natural disaster or casualty loss.

If all of the conditions above apply, you may indicate this on the BEACON Narratives Tab and approve the mortgage payment as a shelter expense.

Note: While a food stamp household may have a combined shelter expense deduction on their vacated property as well as their current abode, only one SUA per household is allowed. See 106 CMR 364.400(G).

“What we have done for ourselves alone dies with us; what we have done for others and the world remains and is immortal.”

Albert Pike

Clarification of the TAFDC Family Cap Exemption/ Waiver Request Process

TAFDC

Field Operations Memo 2007-35

This memo issues a revised Family Cap Exception/Waiver Request form and clarifies that a client may apply for either a Family Cap Exception or a Domestic Violence Waiver if her child was conceived as a result of rape or sexual assault by a current or former intimate partner, relative or household member. It also reminds AU Managers that referrals to Domestic Violence Specialists are always voluntary and clients are not required to meet with the Specialists. When a client submits a written request explaining extraordinary circumstances based on which a waiver should be granted, because none of the exception or waiver reasons apply, the request must be forwarded to Central Office for a decision by a Central Office designee.

TAFDC - Automated Mailing of TAFDC Caring for the Disabled AUs

TAFDC

Field Operations Memo 2007-36

Field Operations Memo 2007-36A

The Department automated procedures to reverify the TAFDC Exemption, Caring for the Disabled, effective with Increment 2.1.20.

Field Operations Memo 2007-36 told TAO staff that beginning August 1st 2007, BEACON will send out notices and a revised *Verification of Caring for the Disabled* (TAFDC-4) form every six months to reverify the exemption. Automating this process is intended to reduce work for AU Managers and will ensure that the Department knows which individuals are being cared for and ensure that verification is returned timely.

The purpose of this memo is to tell TAO Staff about:

- the automated Caring for the Disabled reverification process;
- the “Reasonable Date” edits in the “Form Return Date” field of the Caretaker window; and
- the Actuate Report to track these AUs.

Field Operations Memo 2007-36A told TAO staff about a temporary suspension of the automated mailings.

Automating the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) Match Process

ALL

Field Operations Memo
2007-37

This memo:

- informs TAO staff about the automated IRS Match process and a new CEO-Special Match view for processing the match information;
- describes the CEO-Special Match Unit's responsibilities for processing the IRS Match;
- instructs AU Managers on safeguarding confidential information relative to the IRS Match;
- describes AU Manager's role in assisting clients with providing verifications to the CEO-Special Match Unit; and
- describes the TAO Appeals Liaison's responsibilities for appeal hearings.



Federal Minimum Wage

All
Field Operations Memo
2007-38

As of July 24, 2007 the federal minimum wage will increase to \$5.85. This memo serves to explain the effect of this increase on FS/ET and FS work program policy.

Negative Errors

FS
Field Operations Memo
2007-39

USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) monitors accuracy in the Food Stamp Program by reviewing two types of error rate: the payment error rate and the negative error rate. The payment error rate measures errors made in active households when the Department overpays or underpays a food stamp client. The negative error rate measures errors that occur when the Department denies or closes a food stamp household incorrectly.

This Field Operations Memo provides AU Managers and Supervisors guidance for maintaining a low negative error rate by:

- explaining the impact of negative errors;

- providing examples of negative errors; and
- providing examples of effective ways to prevent negative errors from occurring.

EA Self-Sufficiency Plan: • Budgeting Strategy • Public Housing Applications

EA
Field Operations Memo 2007-40

This memo provides instructions to AU Managers, shelter case managers and HAP specialists for developing or revising the EA family's Self-Sufficiency Plan regarding:

- including the family's monthly net income amounts on the Self-Sufficiency Plan;
- creating a budget with the family by taking into account the family's current expenses and debts and resolving debts that may prevent or delay the family from being rehoused; and
- no longer applying at every housing authority but applying at the housing authority within 20 miles of the family's home community, unless there are domestic violence issues or other safety issues, and applying at any other housing authority where the EA family would accept the offer.

TAFDC - ESP: Pre-Worksite Training and Supported Work Activity Name and Procedural Changes

TAFDC
Field Operations Memo 2007-41

Field Operations Memo 2007-12 informed TAO staff about combining the activities of Pre-worksite Training and Supported Work into one activity "Supported Work." TAO staff were unable to provide transportation payments to clients participating in Supported Work. Additionally, no Participation and Attendance forms were generated for these clients. TAO E-mail 2007-3 informed TAO staff about temporary solutions to these problems.

The purpose of this memo is to give TAO staff procedures to follow to enroll clients into Supported Work Job Search/Job Readiness (the renamed "Pre-Worksite Training" activity).

Notice Guidelines for Entering Text on Department Notices and Department Forms

All

Field Operations Memo 2007-42

Standard notices and forms, either paper or BEACON-generated, are the only notices and forms that should be used when contacting clients. However, free-form text may be added to the notices and forms to address specific client situations. This Field Operations Memo explains the circumstances under which free-form text may be added to notices and forms in contacting clients, and provides the Departmental guidelines to be followed, unless otherwise instructed, when developing free-form text.

FYI

BEACON Online Help Updates Issued in July 2007

BEACON Online Help Update Issue # 11 (07/27/07)

FYI

Changes to the EOHHS mass.gov DTA Home Page

Research and Statistics

The program links (Emergency Aid to the Elderly, Disabled and Children; Food Stamps; Homeless; Supplemental Security Income; and Transitional Aid to Families with Dependent Children), when selected, display updated caseload information.



From the Forms File (con't)

Revised Brochure

02-211-0707-05

YRTK (Rev. 7/2007)

Your Right to Know

Sections have been updated, deleted and added to the revised brochure. Updated sections are: *Your Responsibilities, Your Rights, Availability of Benefits and Noncitizen Status*. Deleted sections are *Your Right to Know How the Department Will Use Facial Images and Replacement of Facial Image Identification Cards*. Added sections are *Nondiscrimination and Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)*. The Spanish version will soon be available.

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FYI

Entering Participation and Attendance Forms on BEACON

Participation and Attendance forms are used to report monthly client participation in an ESP activity. Once a client returns the form, AU Managers must enter it into BEACON. This may be done once the client's name appears on the "Outstanding Participation Forms" view. Clients are asked to return the *Participation and Attendance* forms by the 10th of each month.

To ensure that clients are not sanctioned inappropriately, AU Managers are reminded that returned *Participation and Attendance* forms must be entered into BEACON no later than the 18th of the month (or the first business day after the 18th if the 18th falls on a weekend or a holiday).

For accurate federal reporting purposes, if a client returns a *Participation and Attendance* form before the last Friday of the month and his or her AU is pending to close, the information on the form must be entered into BEACON. If the sanction is related to work program participation and the *Participation and Attendance* form shows that the client has

met his or her work program requirement, the sanction must be removed.

Additionally, if a client is reopening his or her AU and has a current *Participation and Attendance* form, the form may be entered into BEACON at the same time as the reopening occurs. This will ensure that the Department collects accurate participation information for federal reporting.

FYI

Report of EBT Benefits Which Have Not Been Accessed by Client for More Than 90 Days

EBT benefit inactivity is tracked on a report entitled *Report of EBT Benefits Which Have Not Been Accessed by Client for More Than 90 Days*. This report serves as a tool to identify clients who have not accessed their EBT benefits for 90 days or longer, and can be accessed through Document Direct. To ensure accurate case management and prevent errors, it is important that AU Managers follow procedures found in *A User's Guide: Transitional Assistance Programs and BEACON*, Chapter XVI-C, pages 25 and 26, to determine why the client has not accessed benefits.

Note: AU Managers must not apply the procedures described above (i.e., Chapter XVI-C of the User's Guide) to Bay State CAP households who appear on the *Report of EBT Benefits Which Have Not Been Accessed by Client for More Than 90 Days*. Procedures for processing CAP households will be forthcoming.

