

Transitions



A Publication of the Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance

this month in...

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From the Commissioner

Dear Colleagues,

Thank you very much for the warm welcome I have received these first few weeks on the job! I am looking forward to meeting those of you I haven't had the pleasure of speaking with yet. It is an honor to serve as the Commissioner of the Department of Transitional Assistance and to work with all of you. Our mission is so critical to so many families and individuals in Massachusetts, and I am committed to building on the great work you have been doing to increase economic opportunities for the people we serve, reduce homelessness, and provide the highest level of customer-focused, strength-based assistance.

During my experience as a public school teacher in New York City, I was often overwhelmed by the issues the students were grappling with as they tried to receive the education necessary to improve their opportunities and the quality of their lives. I was most struck by how resilient they were, and how successful they would be if only they had access to the opportunities many of the people I knew took for granted: safe, high performing schools, stable housing, adequate food and health care, and recreational and cultural activities. I was determined to work to effect the systems changes necessary to address the root causes of poverty.

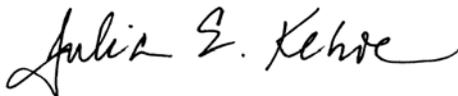
Since then, my experience at the Budget Bureau of the Executive Office for Administration and Finance, the Department of Housing and Community Development, and most recently, the Metropolitan Boston Housing Partnership has given me the tools necessary to operate top notch, cost-effective programs. I have learned the importance of collaborating with all stakeholders: government agencies, community-based organizations, corporations, founda-

tions, employers, property owners, and most of all, the people we serve.

Key to this collaboration is high quality customer service. I understand this was a top priority of my predecessor, and it is one of mine as well. I believe that in order to most effectively meet our mission, we must understand how our policies, procedures and communication styles directly or indirectly impact the assistance we give. We must continually seek input from our customers and partners, and strive to improve, even when we're already doing a great job! We have received feedback from several focus groups, and have developed a customer service survey to measure our performance. We will use the information that we receive to identify best practices as well as opportunities for change. Our next step will be to expand these efforts in order to get as much information as often as possible so we can continually strive to best provide assistance to those we are employed to serve.

Thank you for your continued support and patience as I learn my way around DTA. I look forward to meeting as many people as possible over the next several months.

Sincerely,



Julia E. Kehoe, Commissioner



COMMUNICATION is the KEY

Quality Corner

This month we will review an error that pertains to Monthly Reporting.

Changes Recorded on a Monthly Report

A TAFDC AU included a mother and four children. On her November Monthly Report, she reported a change in household composition and a change in shelter expenses. One of her sons was no longer living with her and her rent had changed to \$89 per month. Although the income from this Monthly Report was correctly entered onto BEACON, the change in household composition and the change in shelter expenses were not processed.

The December Monthly Report included this same changed information but the Monthly Report was submitted late and the TAFDC AU closed. When the TAFDC AU was reinstated in January, the AU Manager noticed the reported changes in household composition and rent amount, but it was too late to avoid the overissuance error for the December food stamp issuance.

What's an AU Manager to Do?

The Monthly Report not only collects information about

earned income, it also collects changes in unearned income and household circumstances.

AU Managers must carefully review all the answers on the Monthly Report to detect any changes in household circumstances. In this particular case, the change in household size and the change in shelter expenses would have impacted the food stamp benefit amount for December. Changes reported on a Monthly Report must be reviewed and entered onto BEACON in a timely manner once verified. This timeliness ensures that the food stamp benefit is correct for both the PA AU and a potential NPA AU.

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From the Forms File

Revised Brochure

02-615-0507-05

DVB Brochure (Rev.5/2007)

Domestic Violence Unit -

Everyone Deserves to be Safe!

This brochure has been reformatted, and the TAO Domestic Violence Specialists' contact numbers have been updated. The brochure will be available in other languages soon.

New Food Stamp Program Outreach Materials

The following outreach tools were created to better assist applicants and make the FS process easier for applicants, outreach providers and AU Managers. These materials were presented at the third annual Food Stamps *There When You Need Them* trainings across the Commonwealth. The focus was on food stamp outreach for the elderly population.

09-425-0507-05

FSOP-Fax Cover (5/2007)

Food Stamp Outreach Partners Fax Cover

This fax cover standardizes the cover page for FS applications, verifications and other information received from Outreach Partners. This form will assist outreach providers and AU Managers by summarizing needed information on one page. The following information can be indicated on the FS Outreach Partners Fax Cover: agency contact, applicant information, requests for phone interview or interpreter services, proofs or other documents submitted with the application. A comments section is included for additional information and any additional comments.

09-420-0407-05

IFSA (4/2007)

Information for Food Stamp Applicants Next Steps

This form was shared with Outreach Partners who will be assisting clients by sending FS applications to DTA by fax or through the web. The next steps in the application process are outlined on this form in an effort to clearly set expectations for FS applicants. It states

that an interview and proofs are required to complete the FS application process. Outreach Partners will give this form to clients once the FS application has been submitted to DTA.

09-430-0507-05

FSOP-MEB (5/2007)

Claiming and Verifying Medical Expenses May Increase Your Food Budget

The brochure discusses the medical expense deduction for FS and lists medical expenses which may be claimed and verified to increase FS benefits. Verified medical costs are used as a deduction from income when calculating FS benefits. Low income elders in particular can benefit from the medical expense deduction.

09-427-0507-05

FSOP-MECL (5/2007)

Food Stamp Outreach Partner Medical Expense Checklist

The Medical Expense Checklist complements the brochure. The checklist has specific categories that identify the type of medical cost and the amount to better assist applicants in providing medical expense information. Elder advocates and other Outreach Partners will help applicants complete the checklist and assist in gathering necessary proofs. The checklist will be sent to DTA along with other application materials. Upon receipt of a checklist, the AU Manager may explore medical expenses with the applicant and request proofs needed to maximize FS benefits for the elderly and disabled population.

The Medical Expense Receipt Envelope was created to assist applicants and recipients in gathering medical proofs. These envelopes were distributed at the trainings and will be shared with elders at Councils on Aging and Senior Centers.

From the Hotline

The questions below pertain to battered noncitizens and their families. For additional information on this topic, please reference Field Operations Memo 2005-22 and the FYI in this month's Transitions.

Reminder: In all cases, refer battered noncitizens to the Domestic Violence Specialist, even when there is no verification related to the battered noncitizen status.

- Q.** In the TAFDC and FS Programs, if a person has an eligible noncitizen status, such as Asylee, Cuban/Haitian, Amerasian, Refugee or Deportation Withheld, and is also a victim of domestic violence, must I still require the battered noncitizen verifications?
- A.** No. If a person has an eligible noncitizen status, verification of the battered noncitizen status is not required.
- Q.** A mother applying for food stamp benefits does not qualify as a battered non-citizen because she does not meet the program's five year LPR requirement. Can her LPR children still qualify for food stamp benefits?
- A.** Yes. For this mother to qualify as a battered non-citizen in the Food Stamp Program, she must have resided in the United States as a qualified noncitizen for five years or meet one of the other requirements in 106 CMR 362.220(B)(8)(e). But her children may still be eligible LPRs because they are under age 18. Refer to 106 CMR 362.220(B)(7).

TAFDC - Individual Development Account (IDA) Program for Educational Advancement - New Initiative

The Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA) and the United Way of Massachusetts Bay (UWMB) are working together to help active TAFDC clients reach lasting economic self-sufficiency and stability with the creation of the Individual Development Account (IDA) Program for Educational Advancement. The IDA Program helps eligible TAFDC clients accumulate savings to be used for certain vocational educational training programs.

This New Initiative Memo:

- identifies who is eligible for referral to the IDA Program;
- informs TAO staff about the IDA Program and how it works; and
- outlines the responsibilities of AU Managers and UWMB representatives.



Food Stamp Calculation for Legal Permanent Residents Who Do Not Provide Sponsor Deeming Information

FS

Field Operations Memo 2007-26

Due to a recent clarification from USDA, the Department is now able to extend the more favorable food stamp calculation at 106 CMR 365.520(B) to noncitizens who do not provide sponsor deeming information.

This Field Operations Memo:

- issues procedures for processing Legal Permanent Residents (LPRs) who have resided in the U.S. as qualified noncitizens for five years but who do not provide sponsor deeming information; and
- describes a report that identifies AUs that require AU Manager review to determine whether or not FS benefits must be recalculated for the next cyclical period.

FYI

Accessing Policy Online

Policy Online can be accessed from the following three locations: DTA Online, your desktop shortcut and from within BEACON. Policy Online is a client-server based application, which means that MIS staff deploys Policy Online monthly to each TAO and at Central Office. The utilization of any of these three access methods currently pulls the Policy Online application from each office's local file server.

Beginning in June, a three-phase project to move Policy Online to a web-based environment will begin. By hosting Policy Online in a web-based environment, updates to Policy Online can be done at any time.

Phase one of this project has been completed and included the re-direction of Policy Online to the web-base environment. This means that you are now guaranteed to have the most current Policy Online information when you access Policy Online via DTA Online, as these files are updated by Policy and Program Management staff on an "as needed" basis in real-time.

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Access to Policy Online from your desktop shortcut and BEACON will continue to be updated once a month by MIS staff until each of the remaining phases is complete.

Phase two of the project will redirect the Policy Online desktop short cut to the web-based environment.

Phase three will redirect the Policy Online shortcut within BEACON to the web-based environment.

At the conclusion of this project, all points of access for Policy Online will be web-based. TAO staff will be notified of the scheduled dates of implementation for phases two and three of this project.

FYI

BEACON Online Help Update Issued in May 2007

BEACON Online Help Update Issue # 9 (05/23/07)

FYI

Changes to the EOHHS Mass.gov DTA Homepage

This month you will see the following changes to the EOHHS Mass.gov DTA homepage.

Research and Statistics:

The link to DTA Facts and Figures has been updated with May 2007 Grant Levels, Eligibility Standards and FY'07 Appropriations.

The program links for 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.

“Avoid having your ego so close to your position that when your position falls, your ego goes with it.”

Colin Powell

FYI

Processing Nonrecurring Medical Expenses

Food Stamp regulations allow a client to choose to average nonrecurring medical expenses over the certification period or have the nonrecurring medical expenses applied as a deduction for a single month. For the client to make an informed decision, the AU Manager must understand the implications of both options and be prepared to explain the effect each option has on the food stamp benefit.

There are instances when the averaging of nonrecurring medical expenses is not advantageous to the client. For example, a nonrecurring medical expense of \$360, averaged over a twelve-month certification period, allows the client \$30 per month in medical expenses. Since food stamp regulations only allow medical expenses in excess of \$35 per month, the AU would not receive a medical deduction. In contrast, if the \$360 nonrecurring medical expense had been applied to a single month, the medical deduction would have yielded an increase in food stamp benefits, provided the AU was not already receiving the maximum monthly benefit allotment.

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If the nonrecurring medical expense is reported during the certification period, the AU Manager may average the expenses over the remainder of the certification period or may allow the expense as a one-time deduction, based on the client's preference. For more details on nonrecurring medical expenses, see 106 CMR 364.440(C) and (D).

Remember: Whenever a nonrecurring medical expense is allowed as a one-time deduction, the AU Manager must zero out the medical expense after that particular month's FS benefits have been issued.

FYI

Project SAFE Update

New Initiatives Memo: *Pre-Employment Services for Homeless TAFDC Families Initiative*, issued September 5, 2006, informed TAO staff about the Safe Assistance to Further Economic Empowerment (Project SAFE) Program implemented in fiscal year 2006. In fiscal year 2007, Project SAFE was offered to residents in four emergency shelters.

To date in FY 2007, Project SAFE has been implemented at *The Family House* in Dorchester, *Housing Families, Inc.* in Malden

and the *Crittenton Hastings House* in Brighton. The final shelter scheduled this year for Project SAFE is *Crossroads* in East Boston. This implementation is scheduled to begin in early June. For fiscal year 2008, Project SAFE will be implemented in five additional shelters.

FYI

TAFDC and FS Eligibility for Battered Noncitizens

Field Operations Memo 2005-22, *TAFDC and FS Program Eligibility for Battered Noncitizens*, clarifies the process for determining if a noncitizen is eligible for TAFDC and food stamps as a battered noncitizen. Persons who may ordinarily be ineligible for benefits could be eligible because of their domestic violence history.

TAFDC and FS applicants do not have to self-petition under the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) to qualify for TAFDC or food stamps as a battered noncitizen. There are a number of ways an individual can obtain their battered noncitizen status. Applying under VAWA is one way for an individual to obtain battered noncitizen status. The applicant may also have the required immigration status under the regulations if they have a pending or approved I-130 petition to immigrate as a spouse or child of a U.S. citizen or as a spouse or child of a Legal Permanent Resident (LPR).

The code found on the applicant's permanent resident card shows whether the noncitizen immigrated through a family member or by some other means. Some common codes which verify that the noncitizen immigrated through a spouse or parent are IR1, IR2, IR6, IR7, F21, F22, F24, F26, F27, F29. Please note that these codes are only examples. There are additional codes which may indicate that the individual meets the criteria to be eligible for TAFDC or FS as a battered noncitizen.

If you have a question about a code or are unsure about whether the applicant has the correct immigration status to qualify as a battered noncitizen, please refer to Field Operations Memo 2005-22, the Noncitizen Online Guide or contact your TAO Noncitizen Liaison.