

Food Stamp Policies Changing

The PA Department of Public Welfare is in the process of implementing several important changes in Food Stamp policy.

Transitional Food Stamps. Families going off cash assistance due to increased earnings are already guaranteed at least five months of extended FS at the previous monthly allotment level. Effective November, the monthly allotment will automatically be adjusted upward to reflect the loss of the cash assistance grant. Effective February, those qualifying for Transitional Food Stamps will be expanded to include virtually all families going off cash assistance, whether or not increased earnings are a factor.

Mandatory Standard Utility

Allowance. Effective January, all households will be able to use the Standard Utility Allowance so long as they pay at least some of their own utility bills. Previously this option was not available to shared households nor to those living in subsidized housing. As part of the same policy change, and as part of simplifying the application process, no household will be permitted to claim utility costs higher than the SUA by showing actual utility bills.

Waiver of ABAWD Time Limits.

Able-bodied adults without dependents are limited to 6 months of FS out of every 36-month period. This time limit is waived in areas of high unemployment. Effective June 2003, waivers have been in place for 31 entire counties plus 7 cities. Effective December 1, Carbon County is newly covered by a waiver.

According to Ed Zogby, Director of Policy for the DPW Division of Income Maintenance, additional policy changes are under review, including the following.

Resource Verification. Federal law permits Pennsylvania to simplify the FS application process by aligning its FS eligibility requirements with another program, such as Family Medicaid, which does not consider resources at all. For the FSP, advocates have asked DPW to ignore completely the following kinds of resources: real estate, vehicles and retirement accounts.

Face-to-Face Interviews. Federal law permits DPW to waive this interview for households in which all members are elderly or disabled and there is no earned income. Currently the interview is waived only upon request on a case-by-case basis.

Remote Pinning. In Pennsylvania, after a household is found eligible, the head-of-household must return to the County Assistance Office (CAO) to receive his/her Access card and confidential PIN number. In at least five states, this process is handled by mail and telephone, thus avoiding another time-consuming trip to the office.

In September, FS participation reached 885,000, a 15 percent increase over September 2002. Federal dollars for the purchase of groceries totaled \$71.7 million, up nearly \$13 million from the same month a year ago. In November the USDA released its analysis of FS participation for the 12 months ending September 30, 2002. In Pennsylvania 67 percent of eligible households participated, up from 65 percent the previous year. Although well ahead of the national average (57 percent),

Pennsylvania's ranking among the high-population states slipped from 1st to 3rd with Ohio and Georgia jumping ahead.