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Annual Department of Transitional Assistance Organizational Report

November 2024



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OVERVIEW

Section 10 of Chapter 18 of the Massachusetts General Laws requires the Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA) to submit a report annually that contains a description of the organization of the department and a review of the work of the agency.

AGENCY MISSION

DTA's mission is to assist and empower low-income individuals and families to meet their basic needs, improve their quality of life, and achieve long-term economic self-sufficiency. DTA offers a comprehensive system of programs and supports to help individuals and families achieve greater economic self-sufficiency, including food and nutritional assistance, economic assistance, and employment supports.

PROGRAMS ADMINISTERED

DTA administers nutrition and economic assistance programs as well as employment and training programs that receive both state and federal funding, which aim to meet the agency's mission. In addition to administering these programs, DTA provides rigorous oversight and special attention to eligibility standards and compliance for each program. DTA uses advanced analytics and a variety of fraud detection practices to promote programmatic integrity.

SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM (SNAP)

SNAP benefits help families supplement their food budgets to afford nutritious food. Residents of the Commonwealth who participate in SNAP include families with children, older adults, and persons with disabilities. While administered by DTA, SNAP benefits are 100% federally funded and regulated. The Commonwealth is responsible for 50% of the costs to administer the program.

Beyond the core responsibilities in administering the SNAP program, DTA works alongside a variety of partners contributing to the mission of food security in the Commonwealth.

HEALTHY INCENTIVES PROGRAM (HIP)

HIP is an innovative state program that supports food security and economic development by incentivizing SNAP households to buy fruits and vegetables from local farm retailers. Administered by DTA in collaboration with the MA Dept. of Agricultural Resources, the Healthy Incentives Program credits SNAP households' EBT accounts for healthy produce purchases at participating Massachusetts farmers' markets, farm stands, mobile markets and community supported agriculture (CSA) farm share programs, up to a monthly maximum amount.

SUMMER EBT

The Summer EBT program is a new federal option that Massachusetts elected to join. The program launched in the Summer of 2024, with benefit distribution beginning on July 29. Summer EBT provides grocery-buying benefits to low-income families with school-aged

children when schools are closed for the summer.

TRANSITIONAL AID TO FAMILIES WITH DEPENDENT CHILDREN (TAFDC)

TAFDC is a state and federally funded program that provides financial assistance and employment programming to families with children, and pregnant women, with little or no income. TAFDC is operated under the federal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) block grant. Certain TAFDC participants are required to perform a work-related activity as a condition of eligibility.

Participants receive child care and transportation assistance to support their engagement in education, training, or other employment related activities.

EMERGENCY AID TO THE ELDERLY, DISABLED, AND CHILDREN (EAEDC)

EAEDC is a state funded program, which provides financial assistance to certain adults who are elderly or disabled, as well as children. Those eligible for EAEDC include people over 65 who are waiting for Supplemental Security Income payments to begin, individuals unable to work due to a physical or mental incapacity, and individuals who are participating in a Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission program.

SUPPLEMENTAL SECURITY INCOME (SSI) AND STATE SUPPLEMENTAL PAYMENTS (SSP)

The SSI program is a federal program that provides cash assistance to older adults, persons with disabilities, and the blind. Massachusetts provides optional state-funded payments designed to supplement these funds. Currently, the University of Massachusetts Medical School administers SSP payments for DTA.

EMPLOYMENT SERVICE PROGRAMS (PATHWAYS TO WORK)

DTA provides employment services for TAFDC clients through the Employment Services Program (ESP). The primary goals of DTA's employment and training programs are to assist clients to prepare for and connect with career pathways and resolve barriers for sustained employment. DTA case managers connect clients to employment and training programs by referring them to appropriate activities based on their skill level and economic mobility goals. DTA also administers the SNAP Path to Work program, a partnership between federal, state, and local partners that provides the state's SNAP clients with the skills, training, experience, education, and employment supports needed to find and keep good paying jobs.

AGENCY STAFFING

As of September 2024, DTA employs approximately 1,890 employees across the Commonwealth in the areas of programs, policy, and management. DTA staff have a range of responsibilities from benefit eligibility, employment and training assistance, program integrity, legal, finance, policy development, and fair hearings. More than 80% of the department's active employees (1,536 employees), are deployed in one of our 20 local transitional assistance offices in communities across the Commonwealth. Those not assigned to local offices include additional support units like program integrity investigators, administrative hearing officers, policy specialists, domestic violence specialists, etc.

Currently, the Department's SNAP workforce, serving the largest caseload of the agency's primary programs, consists of 741 employees, including 566 caseworkers and 175 supervisors.

The Department's economic assistance workforce includes 486 DTA staff members serving clients who receive TAFDC and EAEDC, including 128 supervisors.

In addition to DTA's case management workforce, our local transitional assistance offices are staffed by 309 employees, 65 of whom serve in managerial roles, and others provide administrative assistance and interpreter services, or offer intensive, targeted client supports.

The Department is in the process of hiring staff across all programs, including SNAP case workers, TAFDC and EAEDC case workers, Self Sufficiency Specialists, and Full Engagement Workers. As part of the agency's diversity, equity, and inclusion work, DTA has been actively recruiting diverse candidates to fill vacancies in both management and front-line roles to ensure the agency reflects the families and communities the Department serves. The agency's efforts have included implementing revised hiring practices, launching an agency-wide mentorship program, and supporting the creation of employee-led affinity groups, known as employee resource groups (ERGs), to identify and support professional development and career advancement opportunities for specific employee populations.

ORGANIZATION OF DTA

DTA is organized into 20 local transitional assistance offices and two administrative offices. Transitional assistance offices are responsible for providing direct services to clients and those seeking assistance throughout the Commonwealth. The agency's Administrative office houses the Office of the Commissioner, senior management, policy, quality management, program integrity, operations, legal, finance, and other administrative units.

Included in this report is an organizational chart of DTA's administrative office and a leadership chart of the Department's 20 local transitional assistance offices.

Beginning in early 2025, DTA will open a new community-based transitional assistance office at 1785 Columbus Ave in Boston. This new office will help with the significantly increased foot traffic in DTA's other Boston office in Nubian Square.

The new office is located between Jackson Square and Egleston Square, along public transit routes, co-located with several other human-services agencies.

At this new location, DTA will be co-located with EOHHS agencies including DCF Jackson Square Area Office, Mass Abilities (MBY), and nonprofit agencies including Boston Health Care for the Homeless Family Clinic, Horizons for Homeless Children, and YouthBuild, and directly across the street are a Family Resource Center and the Dimock Center. On neighboring streets, there are several buildings offering low-income housing for older adults as well as housing developments.

DTA OPERATIONAL UPDATE

DTA continues to leverage technological enhancements as it manages high caseloads and the expiration of federal flexibilities and increased federal pandemic-related supports to maintain a high level of customer service for individuals and families and promote economic stability.

Over the past several years the agency has expanded its digital services, and while DTA offices are open across the state for in-person services, the majority of DTA clients are continuing to choose to do business with the Department through its enhanced online and telephonic platforms. Our client-facing web-portal and mobile application continues to be enhanced to support client access and experience. For example, our client-facing web-portal, DTA Connect, is available in several languages: English, Spanish, Brazilian Portuguese, Simplified Chinese, Vietnamese, and Haitian Creole. Clients can reschedule their appointments with DTA via DTA Connect. Residents can now easily initiate a SNAP application when applying for or renewing their MassHealth benefits online. These updates will improve the customer experience by streamlining the process to apply for SNAP benefits while residents are already submitting information needed to determine their healthcare eligibility.

DTA continues to prioritize accessibility and an inclusive experience, both in digital service delivery as discussed above, as well as in-person. All local offices contain a client-facing Pictorial Communication Board to support clients who are Deaf, hard of hearing, nonverbal or have limited verbal or English proficiency. These boards include images and descriptive words in eight languages to help determine the primary reason for a client's visit. Virtual meetings are an option for clients who want or need a face-to-face interaction but are not able to come into an office. This is a great option for clients who rely on closed captions or when the meeting includes multiple people. Further, DTA provides Video Remote Interpreter (VRI) access in all local DTA offices. VRI is an auxiliary aid that provides video remote American Sign Language (ASL) interpreter services.

In 2024, DTA expanded the utilization of DTA Connect through the Update My Information (UMI) rollout. This enhancement is a major improvement to DTA Connect that will allow DTA clients to update their profiles and case information themselves without having to speak directly to DTA staff. Clients can now update information such as their phone and text preferences, addresses, preferred languages, certain expenses, and more, directly in the DTA Connect App.

DTA continues to play a key role in the Commonwealth's work to promote food security and a strong local food system and economy. DTA participates in a monthly cross-Secretariat food security workgroup to develop action steps that advance current food security priorities, key issues to be addressed/resolved, cross system solutions and resources needed, and to identify and support cross-system strategies to promote food security and access.

As a Department, recent highlights to support and promote food security include: in Summer 2024, DTA administered the new Summer EBT program. This new federal program helped feed an estimated 600,000 students while schools are closed for the

summer. Low-income Massachusetts families with school-aged children were eligible to receive financial assistance to buy groceries, bringing more than \$67 million in federal funds to the state's economy

The Department's financial benefit programs continue to be critical support to families and individuals with low incomes. TAFDC Pathways to Work is the Department's strategy in connecting individuals and families to education, employment and training programs and support services that promote career pathways, economic mobility, and family well-being. Pathways has been redesigned and is now returning after pandemic pauses.

This phase of Pathways to Work system enhancements simplifies work rule policies, streamlines procedures, and creates new strategies to promote meaningful engagement for TAFDC clients. All families receiving TAFDC are eligible to engage in TAFDC Pathways to Work activities and must be offered the opportunity to do so, regardless of if they need to meet the work or school rules. Connecting families to opportunities and supports early on helps them take steps towards their individual and family goals while working with DTA.

DTA is committed to providing the individuals and families we serve with safe, reliable, and equitable access to all of the Department's vital supports and services. Though the Department's staff are managing higher caseloads and an increase in work due to the expiration of several federal flexibilities and the step-down of federal pandemic-related supports, our focus remains on prioritizing client benefits, access, and customer service.



