Integrity & Accessibility: Strengthening Public Benefits in Massachusetts
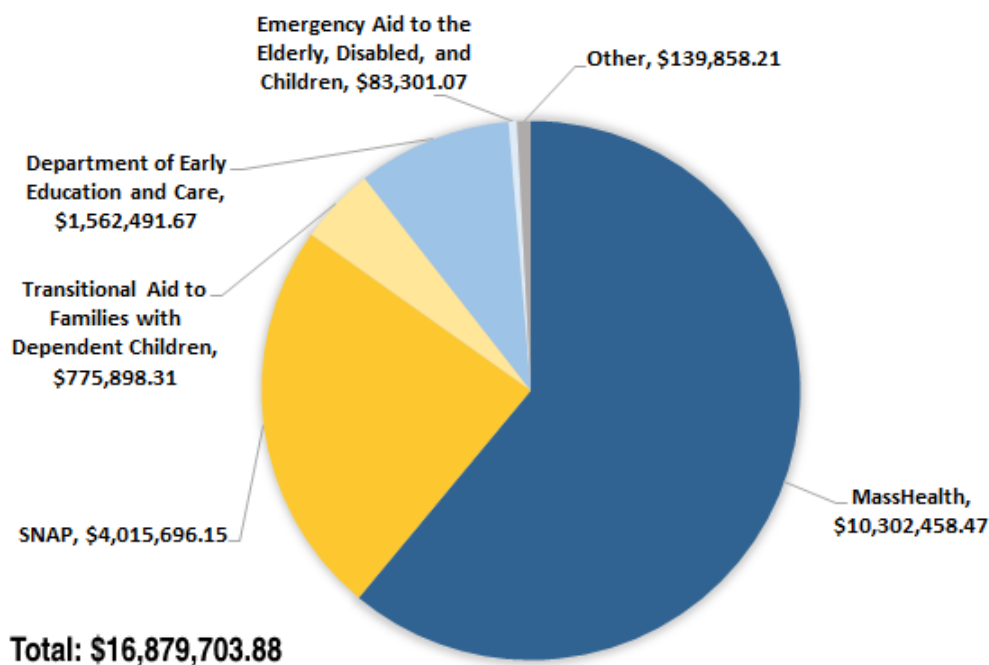
Public benefit programs play a critical role in the health and well-being of the Commonwealth and its residents. The Office of the State Auditor (OSA) aims to make state government work better and to ensure programs are meeting their intended goals. For public benefit programs we accomplish this by focusing in on two key areas—integrity and accessibility.

Integrity: Combating Fraud in Public Benefit Programs

Fraud in these programs represents a small percentage of overall spending, but has a disproportionate impact in weakening public trust in these programs, which is why the OSA's Bureau of Special Investigations (BSI) works to root out bad actors that undermine these programs. In FY17, BSI identified a record $16,879,702.88 in fraud, approximately a 9 percent increase over the previous year, and the seventh straight year of record fraud identification. This does not represent an increase in fraud, but is a reflection of two key things:

⇒ Through the development and use of sophisticated data analytics tools and strategic partnerships, BSI is getting better at finding fraud in these programs.

⇒ BSI focuses its efforts on the most egregious perpetrators of public benefit fraud. This is evidenced by the fact that the average amount of fraud found in completed investigations is $14,678.

FY17 FRAUD IDENTIFIED, BY PROGRAM

Emergency Aid to the Elderly, Disabled, and Children, $83,301.07

Other, $139,858.21

Department of Early Education and Care, $1,562,491.67

Transitional Aid to Families with Dependent Children, $775,898.31

SNAP, $4,015,696.15

MassHealth, $10,302,458.47

Total: $16,879,703.88

Accessibility: Identifying Barriers to Receiving Assistance

In addition to ensuring public benefit programs operate with integrity, the OSA also conducts audits to ensure these programs are accessible to the individuals that need their assistance. In the last year, the OSA released two audits in a series examining barriers to accessing these programs.

⇒ **Catastrophic Illness in Children Relief Fund:** This program provides assistance to families of children with serious, and potentially life threatening conditions or injuries. The audit found that ineffective application processing resulted in families waiting an average of 9 months to receive assistance. The audit recommendations would streamline the application processing, and could reduce the wait to as little as 3 months.

⇒ **Department of Veterans' Services:** This organization works with Veterans Service Officers to connect veterans with supportive services, and provide additional assistance. The audit found that by bolstering its partnerships with agencies such as MassHealth and the Office of the Secretary of the Commonwealth, DVS improve its efforts to reach veterans to make them aware of services for which they may qualify.

Fast Facts on Massachusetts Public Benefit Programs

Public assistance programs promote the health and well-being of the Commonwealth. They serve as a critical resource for some of the state's most vulnerable and disadvantaged residents—children, the disabled, low income individuals and families, and seniors.

⇒ As of June 30, 2017: approximately 58 percent of MassHealth members were children, adults with disabilities, and seniors.

⇒ The Department of Transitional Assistance's SNAP FY17 Participation Report revealed:

◊ One in nine Massachusetts residents received SNAP benefits.

◊ 91 percent of individuals receiving SNAP are children, adults with disabilities, and seniors.

◊ 72 percent of households receiving SNAP benefits had a gross countable income below the Federal Poverty Level, which is $24,300 for a household of four.

About the Bureau of Special Investigations

The Office of the State Auditor's Bureau of Special Investigations investigates allegations of public assistance fraud throughout the Commonwealth. BSI investigates programs administered by the Department of Transitional Assistance, MassHealth, and the Department of Early Education and Care. BSI receives referrals for investigation from its agency partners, public tips, information from federal agencies, and through the use of its data analytics tools. The public can report potential fraud to BSI at: https://www.mass.gov/auditor