Department of Human Resources 311 West Saratoga Street Baltimore MD 21201	# FIA ACTION TRANSMITTAL
Control Number: #07-17	**Effective Date: Immediately** **Issuance Date: March 2, 2007**

TO: DIRECTORS, LOCAL DEPARTMENTS OF SOCIAL SERVICES
DEPUTY/ASSISTANT DIRECTORS FOR FAMILY INVESTMENT
FAMILY INVESTMENT SUPERVISORS AND ELIGIBILITY STAFF

FROM: KEVIN M. MCGUIRE, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

RE: CLARIFICATION OF ACTION TRANSMITTAL #07-04 AND SUGGESTIONS FOR TELEPHONE INTERVIEWING

PROGRAM AFFECTED: FOOD STAMP PROGRAM

ORIGINATING OFFICE: OFFICE OF PROGRAMS

SUMMARY

As stated in Action Transmittal 07-04, effective October 1, 2006, case managers must interview all households before issuing food stamp benefits. We can no longer issue expedited food stamps without an interview. This requirement places a workload burden on local departments, which must meet policy requirements and still maintain timeliness standards. Action Transmittal 07-04 also states that if the food stamp applicant cannot be interviewed on the day of application, we must give him or her a scheduled appointment for a specific date and time. If the food stamp applicant misses the scheduled appointment, we must send a notice of missed interview (NOMI).

Local Departments have expressed concern over the 102 alert “Application due - enter delay reason” and coding the MISC screen with a “CD” when there is a customer delay. There was also concern about how to enter narration on CARES and how to ensure accurate compliance data on Datawatch reports. This action transmittal clarifies those issues.

Action Transmittal 07-04 also states that if the household does not keep the interview, the household is not eligible for expedited benefits. We have received clarification from the Food and Nutrition Service about this policy.

This action transmittal also provides guidelines and suggestions for conducting a telephone interview for customers who are unable to come into the local department of social services for an interview because they have a hardship. Telephone interviews are essential to maintaining application processing timeliness.

CLARIFICATION OF CARES PROCEDURES FOR SCHEDULING APPOINTMENTS FOR FOOD STAMPS APPLICATION

If the interview appointment is scheduled from the SCDI screen, CARES will automatically send out a NOMI by recognizing that option O (interview) has not been initiated by the scheduled interview time. It is important that option O not be initiated until after the NOMI goes out.

1. On the date of application, all information is entered in option J. Complete the CIRC screen. This allows CARES to determine if the customer is expeditable and correctly code the INCH screen with a "Y" or an "N" in the Expedited Food Stamps field. Enter narration from option 6 from the AMEN screen. Do not enter option O to enter narration.

2. If the customer is expeditable, a 102 alert will appear the day after the application is pended. If the customer caused a delay, because he/she missed the application interview appointment, the MISC screen must be coded with a "CD" for customer delay after the NOMI has gone out. The NOMI will go out in overnight batch the day the customer missed the appointment. It is acceptable to access Option O the following day. Remember, if option O was initiated in error prior to the NOMI being sent, this negates the CARES programming, and you must send a notice of missed interview manually. Send Letter 0014 in these situations.

3. Do not change the expedited food stamp field from a "Y" to an "N" because the customer has not had an interview.

4. After expedited food stamps are issued, remove the "CD" on the MISC screen. That field must be addressed for ongoing food stamps. Effective July 2006, cases that are still pending at 60 days because of an agency delay no longer automatically close, but remain pending. It is important that that field be coded correctly for ongoing food stamps.

SUGGESTIONS TO HELP IN IMPLEMENTING THE POLICY CORRECTLY:

1. Make every effort to interview expeditable customers on the day of application.

2. If that proves impossible, J screen the application on CARES and make the appointment from the SCDI screen. Give the customer a copy of the appointment before he or she leaves the local department. For customers who do not stay to receive a scheduled appointment, or who submit their applications by fax or through SAIL, J screen the application in CARES and be sure to complete the CIRC screen. Applications that meet the expedited criteria will be coded with a "Y" on the INCH screen and must have the interview appointment scheduled as soon as possible. Expedited Food Stamp applications should be given priority by scheduling their appointments sooner than applications that are not expeditable.

3. When J screening a case in CARES, try to call the customer who is expeditable and did not stay to receive a scheduled appointment. Schedule the appointment from the SCDI screen and allow CARES to send out the appointment notice. Narrate the phone conversation through option 6 from the AMEN screen. Do not enter the narration through option O. If the customer cannot be reached by phone, send the appointment through the mail, even if there is no address listed on the application. In such cases, use the agency's address.

4. Local departments have also expressed concern over combined SSI/MA and FS applications since an interview is not required for the SSI/MA. Since case managers can obtain the verification required for these applications from SVES, we recommend completing (J, O, P, and Q) on the SSI/MA case and adding the FS after the MA is finalized. Schedule the appointment for the FS interview from the SCDI screen and allow the appropriate notices to go out.

THE TELEPHONE INTERVIEW

Reminder: Telephone interviews are a tool that can help with compliance with timeliness. Policy requires that we offer a telephone interview if the customer has a hardship and is unable to get into the office for an interview.

Hardships situations include but are not limited to:

a. Illness,
b. Transportation difficulties,
c. Residency is a rural area,
d. Care of a household member,
e. Prolonged severe weather, or
f. Work or training hours that prevent a household from participation in a face-to-face interview.

Case managers are required to conduct telephone interviews for customers with hardship reasons that prevent them from coming to the local department for a face-to-face interview. Many customers have difficulty keeping their face-to-face interview due to conflicts with their work schedule, child care barriers, transportation, disabilities, etc. Hardship reasons are loosely defined. We have promoted telephone interviews and telephone collateral contacts to help customers who have difficulty getting to the local office and to help local departments meet the timeliness standards.

Some states have federal waivers that extend phone interviews to almost their entire caseloads. Although Maryland does not plan to do this, we can take pointers from states with more experience in using telephone interviews. The Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare (DPW) has done extensive training on telephone interviewing. The trainees are reminded that time, energy and unnecessary work can all be saved only if the case manager prepares in advance to ensure the best possible telephone interview. Proper preparation involves the case manager, the workspace and the customer.

DPW offered the following tips for effective telephone interviewing:

- Prepare your desk and mind to be clutter free and organized during the interview.
- Have the necessary materials at your disposal, i.e., case record, application, forms, narrative, pens, pencils, etc.
- Have the computer screens available.
- Have your prepared questions and needed verification list nearby.
- Explain to the customer how the process will differ from the face-to-face interview.
- Explain to the customer the importance of returning the requested items by the deadline indicated in the letter.
- Use active listening techniques. Provide feedback after a customer answers a question.
- Listen for inconsistencies, which can be indicated by delayed responses, long pauses and "um" and "ah" in conversations, and ask follow-up questions.
- Confirm understanding by asking questions until clear on all issues, and ask the customer to confirm your understanding by repeating it to you.
- Be clear and ask open-ended questions. (For example ask: "What other income do you and your family have?" Instead of: "Is Social Security your household's only income?") Don't be afraid to ask multiple questions about a particular subject, especially if there is doubt or confusion.
- Ask the customer if there are any questions for you.
- Identify and only request information necessary to determine eligibility.
- Use a wrap-up checklist. Be specific and consistent about deadlines for verifications.

CASE EXAMPLES

Mrs. A comes into the local department to file an application. She did not want to stay for an interview because the reception room was crowded. The receptionist, who accepted her application, informed her that if she was able to stay for an interview today, she could have access to her food stamps as soon as tomorrow, if she is eligible. The receptionist also informed her that delaying the interview would delay the receipt of food stamps. Mrs. A agreed to be interviewed that day, was found eligible for expedited food stamps, and was able to access her benefits the day after she filed the application.

Mr. B completed a food stamp application. He informed the receptionist that he could not wait to be interviewed because he was late for work. The application was J screened in CARES. According to the information entered on the CIRC screen, Mr. B was potentially eligible for expedited food stamps. An appointment was made from the SCDI screen for the following day because he was off work that day. The screener/case manager printed the SCDI screen and placed a copy in the record and gave a copy to Mr. B. The screener/case manager also entered narration from option 6 on the AMEN screen. Mr. B failed to appear for that interview. At the close of business of day 2 (the appointment date) CARES sent a NOMI to the customer. On day 6, the case manager had not heard from Mr. B so she entered a “CD” on the MISC screen. Since the NOMI had been sent, she accessed the MISC screen from option O. This allowed the case to appear on Datawatch reports as a customer-caused delay in expedited food stamps. Although this adds to the number of overdue expedited cases, it is important for the reports to capture the correct information. This customer is expeditable and the customer caused the delay in benefits. For this reason, it is important that the expedited food stamp field not be changed from a “Y” to an “N” simply because the customer has not had an interview.

Ms. C dropped off an application and did not stay to be screened nor to receive a scheduled appointment. The case manager called Ms. C and they made an appointment for day 3. The case manager screened the application, made an appointment on the SCDI screen and narrated the telephone call with Ms. C. Ms. C did not appear for the appointment, and CARES sent a NOMI at the close of business on day 3. The case manager did not hear from Ms. C by the end of day 6, and she entered a “CD” on the MISC screen and narrated. Ms. C did not contact the local department regarding her interview and the case is denied on the 30th day (<u>or the next business day if the 30th day is a weekend or holiday</u>).

Mr. D had a neighbor drop off a completed and signed food stamp application for him. The receptionist noted there was no phone number on the application and the neighbor did not know Mr. D’s phone number. The case manager entered all information in option J and CARES indicated that Mr. D met the expedited criteria. The case manager scheduled an interview appointment for the fourth day after application on the SCDI screen and CARES sent an appointment letter to Mr. D. (Although the time of delivery of mail varies, federal guidelines state that we can consider mail as delivered in 3 days.) Mr. D did not show for his interview. The NOMI went out the end of day 4. On day 6, the case manager had not heard from Mr. D and she entered a “CD” on the MISC screen and narrated that the customer has not contacted the local office regarding the application. Mr. D called the office on day 15. He told the case manager the he was in a wheel chair and was having trouble getting to the office. The case manager conducted a telephone interview. She changed the expedited discovery date on the MISC screen to the date of the phone interview and narrated. Although this is not a timely expedite, the reason for the delay is clear, because the MISC screen was coded “CD”, the expedited discovery date was entered and narration explaining the circumstances was completed. After the expedited food stamps were issued, the case manager removed the “CD” from the MISC screen, so that the delay reason field could be properly addressed for the ongoing food stamps.

Mrs. E dropped off an application at the local department but did not stay for an interview nor to receive an appointment time. The case manager J screened the application and it did not meet the expedited criteria. The case manager scheduled an appointment for day 11 from the SCDI screen and narrated through option 6 from the AMEN screen. CARES sent an appointment letter to Mrs. E. She did not show for her appointment and at the close of business on day 11 CARES sent a NOMI to Mrs. E. When Mrs. E received the NOMI, she called the local department and told the case manager that she was having trouble getting to the local office because after she got her children to school, she went to work and didn’t get home until late and she had no one to watch the children at night. The case manager did a telephone interview and narrated the reason for the hardship.

REMINDERS

Remember, all food stamp applicants must be interviewed before food stamps are issued and all food stamp applicants must be given a specific appointment if no interview is conducted on the date of application. If the customer misses that appointment, a notice of missed interview must be sent. This policy applies to all food stamps applicants, not only those eligible for expedited food stamps.

NOTE:

The University of Maryland School of Social Work, Family Welfare and Research Training Group offers telephone interviewing training. This training covers the role of the interviewer and the interviewee, and the benefits of telephone interviewing. To schedule training please contact Jill Hlaston at 410-706-4388.

INQUIRIES

Please direct policy questions to Kay Finegan at (410) 767-7939 or Rick McClendon 410-767-7307.

cc: FIA Management Staff
Constituent Services
DHR Help Desk