

Part 1

Application and Proofs

1 How do I apply for food stamp/SNAP benefits?

You have many options. You can apply for food stamps/SNAP benefits in person, by mail or fax, or on-line. 106 C.M.R. § 361.140. For the address, telephone and fax number of the DTA office that serves your city or town, call 800-249-2007 or go to www.mass.gov/dta for the local DTA office locations.

You can:

- Apply *in person* at the local DTA office that serves your city or town.
- File an *on-line* application through the Internet, see **Question 2**.
- *Mail or fax* a paper application. You can get a paper application at your local DTA office or call the SNAP Benefits Hotline at 1-866-950-FOOD (3663) and ask that the application form be mailed to you. You can also print out the longer paper form (including translated forms in Spanish and Portuguese) by going to the following website: www.mass.gov/snap A copy of the short two-page application for seniors is available at this website and also included in **Appendix E**.
- File an application *through the local Social Security office (SSA)* if everyone in your household is applying for or gets SSI. 106 C.M.R. §§ 361.110, 361.190. See **Question 3**.

NO wrong door!

If you mail a food stamp/SNAP application or go in person to a DTA office that does not serve your city or town, that DTA office must accept your application and send it to the correct DTA office. 106 C.M.R. § 361.130. A

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local DTA office cannot refuse to accept your application just because they do not cover the town or city where you live.

Cash assistance applications

Your application for TAFDC (Transitional Aid to Families with Dependent Children) or EAEDC cash assistance (Emergency Assistance for Elderly, Disabled and Children) is also an automatic application for food stamp/SNAP benefits. 106 C.M.R. §§ 361.160. You do not have to file a separate food stamp/SNAP application or have a separate interview, even if your cash assistance application is ultimately denied. 106 C.M.R. § 365.120(A)(1), (A)(2).

Same-day filing

DTA has to let you file your application *the same day* you contact them. 106 C.M.R. § 361.130. If you go to the local DTA office and ask for a food stamp/SNAP application, the office must give you one and allow you to submit it the same day. If you ask DTA for an application by mail, DTA has to mail it to you the same day. 106 C.M.R. § 361.140.

You also have the *right to apply* for benefits whether or not a DTA worker or the Virtual Gateway screening tool thinks you are eligible. 106 C.M.R. §§361.050-361.130. DTA cannot send you away or screen you out of filing a food stamp/SNAP application.

If you are approved, you will get food stamp/SNAP benefits back to the date DTA gets the *signed* application form if you are applying in person or by mail or fax. 106 C.M.R. § 361.080. Even if you cannot fill in all of the blanks, put down your name, address and phone number (if you have one), sign and date the form, and turn it in. You can give the rest of the information later. 106 C.M.R. §§ 361.100, 361.130.

Advocacy Reminders:

- ✓ Don't delay applying just because you don't have all the proofs. You can apply now and bring in the proofs or give more information later. See **Questions 7** and **8** for the kinds of proofs you need.
- ✓ Never mail or give to DTA original documents (they might get lost). Send photo copies of documents in the mail or fax them. If you bring in documents, ask DTA to copy them and give you back all originals. If you fax your application or proofs, be sure to keep a copy of the fax receipt. Also be sure to keep the original of anything you mail.

- ✓ To check on the status of your food stamp/SNAP application, get the name of your case worker and other case information, it may be easier to use the My Accounts Page or call a special DTA number, 1-877-328-2363. See **Question 13**.
- ✓ When you apply for food stamps/SNAP or other DTA benefits, your DTA worker must also tell you about your option to *register to vote*. DTA is required to help you fill out a voter registration form if you wish to do so, and send it to the local city or town registrar. 106 C.M.R. § 360.950. If you apply by mail or on-line, DTA must mail you a voter registration form. You can also download a copy of the National Voter Registration form at the following website:
http://www.eac.gov/voter_resources/register_to_vote.aspx

Additional Policy Guidance on FS/SNAP Applications: •

Simplified two-page food stamp/SNAP application available for seniors. F.O. Memo 2008-38 (July 10, 2008) • Electronic signatures accepted for Virtual Gateway applications. F.O. Memo 2007-32 (June 29, 2007) • An application only has to contain the applicant’s name, address and signature to be “sufficient” for establishing an application and start date; completed application not required to start process. F.O. Memo 2006-53 (Nov.17, 2006), F.O. Memo 2005-16 (March 28, 2005).

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Can I apply through the Internet?

Yes! You can apply for your own food stamp/SNAP benefits on-line, through the **Virtual Gateway** at www.mass.gov/snap. This is also called a “web application.” A Virtual Gateway or web application is an *electronic application* for benefits and accepts an *electronic signature*. All the information you provide is electronically sent to DTA to start the food stamp/SNAP application process.

Unlike MassHealth, you do not need to go through a social services agency or health care provider to file a web application. You can do this yourself—in your home, at a library, at your place of work!

When you first file a web application, you will find a “screening form” that asks questions about your household, your income and expenses to determine potential eligibility. This screening form is *optional*. If you wish to proceed, fill out the food stamp/SNAP application on-line.

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Signing the application

Your electronic signature has the same legal weight as an ink signature, and you do not need to also sign a paper application. Your electronic signature is an agreement that the information you have and will provide is truthful and accurate, that you will report changes timely, and that you understand your rights, responsibilities and penalties for not following the rules. During the phone interview your worker will go over these rights and responsibilities. See **Question 6**.

A food stamp/SNAP application filed on the Virtual Gateway is considered filed if received before 5 PM, or the next business day if after 5 p.m. or a weekend. After the application is filed, a DTA worker is supposed to contact you within 2 business days to screen you for *expedited* or emergency benefits (see **Question 9**) and to schedule an interview.

Next steps after filing the web application

Filing a web—or paper—application is only the *first step*. You still need to have an interview with a DTA worker *and* to send in proofs. See **Questions 6 and 7**. The interview with the DTA worker is usually done by phone unless you want an interview in person, or DTA has a good reason to require you to go the office. Be sure to list a phone number on the application where DTA can reach you or a member of your family (not a messaging system).

Whether or not DTA reaches you immediately to do an interview, DTA will send you a plastic EBT card and PIN in the mail. Your EBT card will not have any benefits on it until you are approved for benefits. DTA sends the EBT card early in the process so you can use your food stamp/SNAP benefits as soon as your case is approved.

To check on the status of your food stamp/SNAP application, get the name of your case worker and other information, you can use the My Accounts Page or call a special DTA number, 1-877-328-2363. See **Question 13**.

Additional Policy Guidance on Web Applications: • Updates to Virtual Gateway application to address duplicate applications, provide printable application confirmation letters. F.O. Memo 2010-17 (Feb. 24, 2009) • Special SNAP Web Units established in Boston and Springfield areas for centralized handling of SNAP web applications. DTA Transitions, pg 1 (Dec. 2009) • Expansion of Virtual Gateway statewide; application is considered received same day if it arrives before 5 PM. If paper/walk-in application still pending, web application will be denied. F.O. Memo 2007-63 (Nov. 28, 2007) • Electronic signatures now used for Virtual Gateway applications; separate paper signature cannot be required. F.O. Memo 2007-32 (June 29, 2007)

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Can I apply for food stamp/SNAP benefits at the local Social Security office?

The rules say that persons applying for Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and certain SSI recipients have a *right to apply* for food stamp/SNAP benefits at the Social Security Administration (SSA). 106 C.M.R. §§ 361.190, 366.926. Federal law requires *SSA to take your food stamp/SNAP application* if every member of your household receives or is applying for SSI. 7 U.S.C. § 2020(I)(1).

SSI applicants and recipients who live alone (or live with others but purchase and prepare separately) and meet other rules have the right to apply for a special benefit, called Bay State CAP. See **Question 4**.

Federal law also says that SSA should *offer an application form* to Social Security (RSDI) recipients. 7 U.S.C. § 2020(J). For regular food stamp/SNAP applications – including SSI applicants and recipients who do not qualify for Bay State CAP – DTA has a simple one-page SNAP application form for SSA offices to use. An SSA claims a representative should offer to help you fill out the food stamp/SNAP application and send it to the appropriate DTA office with any proofs you gave SSA. DTA will contact you to get additional information if proofs are missing or information is unclear. 106 C.M.R. § 361.190. However, if you need *emergency food stamps/SNAP*, it may be faster to go to the local DTA office or apply on-line. See **Question 9**

Additional Policy Guidance on Applications through SSA: • The Social Security Administration provides detailed instructions to SSA Claims Representatives on their obligation to offer to take food stamp/SNAP applications for SSI recipients. Policy Operations Manual: SSI 01801.010. Available at: <https://secure.ssa.gov/apps10/poms.nsf/aboutpoms>.

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What are Bay State CAP benefits and how can SSI recipients get them?

Bay State CAP is a “Consolidated Application Project”—a joint demonstration project of the Massachusetts DTA and the Social Security Administration (SSA) started in 2005.

When you apply for SSI – or when your SSI benefits are re-determined by SSA – the SSA Claims Representative should ask you if you want food stamp/SNAP benefits and then send this information to DTA electronically. DTA uses the information from your SSI application/ recertification to calculate your Bay State CAP benefits. 106 C.M.R. §366.910.

Who qualifies for Bay State CAP

For SSA to take a Bay State CAP application, you must be either filing an application for SSI or be an SSI recipient, and meet the following:

- Be 18 years old or older and unmarried (single, divorced, separated),
- Be living alone or living in a shared arrangement under SSI rules,
- Purchase and prepare food separately from others you live with,
- Not have any earnings in addition to your SSI income (once approved for Bay State CAP, you can stay on the program as long as you have earnings for less than three consecutive months), *and*
- Not be permanently disqualified from the food stamp/SNAP program (for example, because of past fraud).

See 106 C.M.R. §§ 366.900-366.910.

If you are applying for SSI benefits and your SSI will be approved within 30 days, SSA should take a Bay State CAP application. If your SSI case will take *more than 30 days* to process, (it often does), you may be better off applying for regular food stamp/SNAP benefits. You can apply for regular benefits at the Social Security office or DTA. See **Question 3**.

If you need emergency food or cash benefits, you should apply at the DTA office. See **Question 9**. Once your SSI is approved, SSA should contact you and ask about food stamp/SNAP and Bay State CAP benefits.

Why getting Bay State CAP benefits can be easier

Getting Bay State CAP can be *easier* than applying for regular food stamps/SNAP for a couple of important reasons:

- You don't have to contact DTA to get the benefits.
- You only need to answer *three* questions: 1) Do you want food stamps/SNAP?, 2) Do you purchase and prepare separately from others?, 3) What are your shelter costs?"
- You don't have to provide any more proof than you already gave SSA.
- You don't have to recertify (reapply) for three years and you only have to report changes (if you moved or get a job) to SSA, not DTA.

Bay State CAP recipients often receive the same benefit amount as regular food stamp/SNAP benefits. Sometimes the regular SNAP can be higher – it depends on the amount of your shelter costs and if you have out-of-pocket medical expenses. MLRI's Food Stamp calculator, available in the Benefits section at <http://www.masslegalservices.org/SNAPCalculator> will calculate both Bay State CAP and regular food stamp/SNAP benefits to see which is more.

Additional Policy Guidance on Bay State CAP: • Increase in Standard Utility Allowance from \$375 to \$575/month triggering increase in all Bay State CAP amounts not at the maximum benefit. F.O. Memo 2010-59 (Dec. 30, 2010) • Initial roll-out of Bay State CAP, worker instructions, client brochure and notices, one-page application form for regular food stamp/SNAP application. F.O. Memo 2005-4 (Jan. 14, 2005) and F.O. Memo 2005-33 (Aug. 2, 2005) • Bay State CAP outreach efforts to SSI recipients not on food stamps. F.O. Memo 2005-18 (April 15, 2005), F.O. Memo 2005-50 (Oct. 3, 2005), and F.O. Memo 2005-53 (Nov. 2, 2005) • Bay State CAP recertification process. F.O. Memo 2006-8 (Jan. 19, 2006) • No closure of Bay State CAP case if SSI termination is less than 30 days, DTA reinstatement procedures. F.O. Memo 2007-23 (March 30, 2007) • SSA detailed guidance to SSA District Offices regarding Bay State CAP - SSI Policy Operations Manual, SI BOS01801.302; <http://www.ssa.gov/> accessed through: <https://secure.ssa.gov/apps10/poms.nsf/aboutpoms>.

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Can someone else apply for me?

Yes. You can always ask a family member, friend, or human services agency *to help you fill out an application*, on paper or on the Internet. Helping agencies, family members or advocates can also accompany you to DTA and attend any interviews with you, with your permission.

You can also have someone you trust be your “authorized representative” *to apply for you directly* and receive notices and recertification forms on your behalf, but you can get the EBT card yourself. Or you can choose to have your authorized representative *receive the EBT card* and buy food for you. 106 C.M.R. §§ 361.300, 361.310. (An “authorized representative” is different from an individual or agency that helps you fill out a paper or web application.)

In most cases, DTA cannot force you to have an authorized representative if you do not want one. It is your choice. You will need to sign a form allowing a person to be your “Authorized Representative, Authorized Agency or Authorized Payee.” See **Appendix C** for a copy of the DTA form, or download one from DTA’s website: www.mass.gov/snap

If you choose to have an authorized representative buy food for you, this person’s name must be on the EBT (Bay State Access) card to buy your groceries. See **Question 62**. You can also ask DTA to issue *two* Bay State Access cards—one for you and one for your authorized representative. If an authorized representative has access to all your food stamp/SNAP benefits, be sure you trust the person you pick. 106 C.M.R. §§ 361.300-361.370.

If you live in a group home for persons with disabilities, you are eligible for food stamp/SNAP benefits as a one person household even though you live with others. 106 C.M.R. § 361.240(B). Many group homes are run by the Department of Mental Health (DMH) and the Department of Mental Retardation (DMR) where state agency staff assist with these applications and providing DTA the proofs for eligibility. You can apply for your own food stamp/SNAP benefits or the group home may decide to be your authorized representative. See **Question 30**.

If you are a resident of an alcohol or drug treatment program, there is no choice and the program staff will be your authorized representative. 106 C.M.R. § 365.610. If you are living in a teen parent program, the program is given the authority to decide if it will be the authorized representative

and receive the food stamp/SNAP benefits, or if it will allow you to apply and spend the benefits. 106 C.M.R. § 365.620(B).

Additional Policy Guidance on Authorized Representatives: •

Human services providers can be “authorized representatives” for the limited purpose of submitting an electronic application on the Virtual Gateway. F.O. Memo 2007-23 (June 29, 2007) • Residents of drug/alcohol treatment programs and teen parent programs are required to transfer their benefits to the program staff (through on-site POS terminals), who then purchase food for the residents. F.O. Memo 97-17 (March 14, 1997) • Detailed guidance on eligibility of DMR and DMH group home residents including the process for applying, designating an authorized representative, level of authorized rep’s authority to transact benefits. F.O. Memo 2009-10, Q. 4 (Feb. 20, 2009), F.O. Memo 2004-41 (Oct. 8, 2004) and F.O. Memo 2004-15 (April 2, 2004).

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Does DTA have to interview me and what happens if I miss the interview?

DTA is required to interview *all applicants* for food stamp/SNAP benefits. 106 C.M.R. § 361.500. The interview should be conducted by phone, where DTA calls you at a specific time using the phone number you listed on the application form. You have the option of an in-person interview if you wish. Under limited circumstances, DTA can require you to come to the local office if they have a good reason to require an in-person interview.

DTA will also schedule a phone interview when your case is being reviewed (recertified). 106 C.M.R. § 366.320(B). Special rules apply for elder and disabled households at recertification. See **Question 70**.

Scheduling the interview

DTA is supposed to try to *contact you* by telephone within *two (2)* days of when they received your application and *screen you* for emergency benefits (see **Question 9**), and to schedule an interview. If a social services agency helped you fill out a paper or on-line application and is listed on the application as an authorized helping agency or emergency contact, DTA should contact the agency if unable to reach you.

If DTA has not reached you within two days, they should send you a *written notice* scheduling an interview by telephone. This interview should

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take place within *seven* days of your application in order to screen you for expedited benefits. If you do not hear from DTA by phone or by mail within five (5) days of filing your application (or sooner if you need emergency benefits), call your local DTA office and ask to speak with a supervisor or the office director.

What happens during the interview

During the interview, the DTA worker's role is to confirm the information you gave on your application, discuss any new information that DTA got from other government databases about you, and tell you what proofs or verifications you need to provide. If you are subject to a work requirement (see **Questions 36 and 37**), the worker should discuss this with you. During the interview, the DTA worker should also explain your rights and responsibilities. Again, if you need emergency (expedited) food stamp/SNAP benefits, the worker should screen you on the first contact (in person or by phone), even if he or she there is not enough time to do a full interview on first contact. See **Question 9**.

In addition to the DTA worker asking you for information, the interview is a chance for you to ask questions about the food stamp/SNAP program and other benefits you might be eligible to receive. The interview must be conducted confidentially (not in a public setting where others can hear) and the information you provide must be kept private and not shared outside DTA unless you give written permission. 106 C.M.R. §§ 361.550, 360.300. If you need help getting any proofs, or you need a list of alternative proofs, you have a right to ask the worker for help or a list of alternatives during the interview or any other time.

If you miss a scheduled interview

If you miss an interview DTA scheduled for you (either in person or by phone), DTA is required to send you a *written notice*. The notice must say you missed an interview and that you have the right to ask for another scheduled interview. 106 C.M.R. §§ 361.500, 361.540. You do *not* need to show *good cause* for missing the first interview. However, it is up to you to contact DTA to ask for a rescheduled interview.

If DTA does not hear from you *within 30 days* of when you first applied, your food stamp/SNAP application will be denied. 106 C.M.R. § 361.700(B)(1). You still have the right to reapply for benefits and the denied application will not be held against you, but the date your benefits start will be the date of your new application.

Additional Policy Guidance on Interviews: • Elimination of face-to-face interview unless requested by household or required due to “questionable” information. F.O. Memo 2009-63A (Nov. 23, 2009) • DTA must send notice of missed interview (NOMI) if applicant misses an in-office or phone interview; no need to establish “good cause” to get rescheduled interview. Worker should contact helping agency listed on application if unable to reach client. F.O. Memo 2007-16 (March 15, 2007) • Clients who miss appointments will be sent an appointment letter within two days of missed interview. Transitions, p. 9 (July 2010) • Worker must screen for expedited benefits eligibility at first contact with client. F.O. Memo 2006-30 (July 10, 2006) • If no phone number for client on application, DTA will schedule in-office interview. Transitions Hotline Q&A (Sept. 2006).

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What proofs (verifications) do I need?

During your interview, the DTA worker should tell you what proofs are needed. 106 C.M.R. §§ 361.550, 361.600. In addition, you will receive a computer-generated *verification checklist by mail* that tells you the specific proofs and alternate proofs you can provide. DTA should not ask you to resend proofs you already provided with your application. If you are eligible for expedited benefits, you only need to provide proof of your identity. See **Question 9**.

If you do not have all the proofs when you apply, give DTA *photo copies* of what you do have. You do not need to provide original documents. If you mail or fax documents, be sure to put your name and last four digits of your SSN on each document so it can be matched with your file. Don't mail original documents! If you bring documents to DTA, be sure DTA gives you a receipt, makes copies, and gives you back your originals. If you send a fax, keep a copy of the fax receipt.

DTA cannot limit proofs to any single type of document and cannot require verification from any particular person. In many cases, you can sign a sworn statement (self-declaration) as proof, or give DTA permission to contact someone who can verify the information. 106 C.M.R. §§ 361.640, 361.650, 363.210(G). See **Question 8** for what you can do if you don't have all the proofs the worker says you need.

Required proofs for food stamp/SNAP eligibility

- Proof of the identity of the *head* of household—for example, your birth certificate, driver's license, an I.D. for health benefits or other social

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service program, or wage stubs. If you don't have these, DTA can verify your identity by confirming your SSN through an SSN data base, or your DTA worker can make a phone call (collateral contact) to a third party who knows you. See **Question 8**. Only the *identity of the head of the household* needs to be verified. You do not need to verify the identity of children or other adults in the household unless their identity is questionable, but you do need to provide their social security numbers. 106 C.M.R. § 361.610(G).

- Proof of *where you live*—for example, a lease, rent release, bank statement, a utility bill, a note from a neighbor, or a collateral contact (such as a telephone call by DTA to a neighbor) that shows where you live. 106 C.M.R. § 361.610(H). Your worker cannot require you to get the DTA “landlord verification form” signed. Any other proof of your residence is acceptable. Note, you do *not* need proof of residency if you just came to the area, you are homeless or you are a migrant worker. 106 C.M.R. § 362.120.
- Proof of *earned income* – such as copies of wage stubs (usually the last four weeks, unless you just started working), direct deposit bank statements, or a statement from your employer about your earnings. 106 C.M.R. §§ 361.610(A), 363.210(G)(1)
- Proof of *unearned income* – such as a copy of a benefit or award letter, copy of a check or payment, bank statement showing direct deposit. 106 C.M.R. § 363.210(G)(2). DTA can also check certain government data bases (such as the Social Security Administration SDX system, Division of Unemployment Assistance system) for information on many sources of unearned income.
- Proof of *self-employment business expenses* – for example, the purchase of a computer, cosmetology equipment, farm equipment, construction tools, a truck to haul materials or carry tools, fishing boat or other equipment; rental fees if you drive a rented van or taxi; insurance costs; the cost of heating your office or part of your home used for your business; the cost of food and toys if you run a day-care center at home, etc. 106 C.M.R. § 365.940. See **Question 46**.
- If you are subject to the *asset test*, DTA will need proof of your money in the bank, stocks and bonds, real estate, etc. 106 C.M.R. § 361.610(E). Most households do not need to prove assets unless under sanction or they're elder/disabled households with gross income over 200% poverty level. See **Question 42**.

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- Proof of the *immigration status* of anyone in your household who is not a U.S. citizen and who wishes to receive benefits with the rest of the household. 106 C.M.R. § 361.610(B). Proof includes a copy of your legal permanent resident “green card” (Form I-551) if you are an LPR, your work authorization documents (Form I-688), arrival departure (Form I-94), records of any other government proof or statement from an attorney that shows your immigration status. See **Question 21**. DTA will verify your status through the SAVE system. If you or someone in your household does not meet the immigration status rules or chooses not to be included in the application, you do not need to verify immigration status. The other members can still get benefits if otherwise eligible. Even if not on benefits, you will have to report your income to DTA. See **Question 25**.
- The *social security numbers* (SSNs) of those persons in your household who are applying for food stamp/SNAP benefits. You *do not* need to show an SSN card or any other document with your SSN, but you do have to give DTA the number orally or write it down. DTA will verify the number through its computer system. If you are applying for benefits for yourself and do not have an SSN, you need proof that you have applied for one. If someone in your household does not meet the SSN requirement or does not provide his or her SSN, the other members of the household can still get benefits without including that person (but his or her income may be counted). 106 C.M.R. §§ 361.610(F), 362.500. See **Question 25**.
- Other proofs relevant to your eligibility if DTA determines that information you gave is “questionable.” 106 C.M.R. § 361.620. **Question 8** describes when information can be considered “questionable” by DTA.

Optional Information and Proofs to Increase Benefits

Some expenses that may increase your benefits can be *self-declared*. Other expenses and eligibility factors must be verified to get higher benefits. If you do not provide information on the expenses, or proofs where required, your benefits will be calculated without these deductions. In that sense, the information and proofs are optional. 106 C.M.R. § 364.450(D).

- *Rent or mortgage/home-ownership expenses can be self-declared*. Be sure to write down your shelter expenses on your application or recertification form. You can also send DTA a separate written statement. See **Appendix C** for a sample self-declaration of shelter costs. If shelter costs appear questionable, DTA may ask for additional proof such as a rent receipt, canceled check, money order, tenancy lease, or a statement from your landlord. Home-ownership expenses, if

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questionable, can be verified by your mortgage statement, home insurance, property tax, and proof of repair costs. See **Question 57**. 106 C.M.R. §§ 361.610(K); 364.400(G).

- *Child or adult dependent care expenses can be self-declared.* This includes what you pay for day care, after-school programs, summer programs, care for an elder/disabled person as well as transportation to and from the care. See **Question 55**. Be sure to write down your dependent care costs on your application or recertification form, or send in a separate statement (sample in **Appendix C**). If you need to verify child care costs because information appears questionable, proof may include a statement from your caregiver, canceled checks or other proof of payment. 106 CMR § 361.610 (K)
- *Age or date of birth can be self-declared.* Your age is relevant if you are elderly (60 years of older) or are seeking an exemption from the work rules. A self-declaration is allowed unless the information is questionable. 106 CMR § 361.610
- Proof of receipt of a *disability-related benefits* is required to be able to claim medical expenses or uncapped shelter as a disabled person. Proofs can include a statement from the agency that provides the benefit. 106 C.M.R. §§ 361.210(B), 361.610(I) If you get SSI, SS-DI, MassHealth as disabled or if DTA provides a cash benefit (such as EAEDC or TAFDC) where you have been determined to be severely disabled, you do not need proof. DTA can check you status in BEACON. See **Question 19**.
- Proof of *child support* paid to children outside the household including the amount you pay and of your legal obligations – such as a court order or legally enforceable agreement. See **Question 54**. 106 C.M.R. §§ 361.610(J), 364.400(E).
- Proof of out-of-pocket *medical and/or custodial expenses* for a disabled or elderly (60 or older) household member. See **Question 53** for more details on the range of proofs. 106 C.M.R. § 361.610(D).

Advocacy Reminders:

- ✓ Proof of U.S. citizenship is not required unless DTA determines that your status is “questionable.” 106 C.M.R. § 362.210(A). The U.S. citizenship of a child should not be questionable just because his or her parent is foreign born.
- ✓ Persons born in Puerto Rico do not need to reverify identity, age, date of birth or U.S. citizenship unless information provided is questionable.

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Recent actions by the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico to void birth certificates issued prior to July 2010 should not affect most food stamp/SNAP applicants or recipients.

- ✓ If your address changes while you are applying or when you get benefits and DTA did not receive or record your address, some of your mail may get returned. DTA workers are instructed to not deny or close your case without first attempting to contact you and/or using new address information that may be on the returned mail.
- ✓ Missing wage information and date of termination from work can often be verified through an internet-based employee verification system, called “The Work Number.” <http://www.theworknumber.com/> If your employer uses The Work Number and gives you the employer code and a PIN number, you can use this system directly for your own employment information. It may also be possible for your DTA worker to access this information (once DTA establishes a contract with The Work Number). Ask your employer if he or she participates in The Work Number.
- ✓ If there is a missing wage statement but your pay stubs show year-to-date gross income, DTA should be able to figure out the missing gross income from the other pay stubs.
- ✓ If DTA asks for proof of income from a job where you are no longer employed, this may not be required. They should only ask if you are subject to the voluntary quit rules (see **Question 39**) and only for work you left within the last 60 days prior to applying. Contact an advocate for help.

Additional Policy Guidance on Scope of Verifications: • Updated DTA policy guidance to workers on permanent verifications, optional and alternate verifications, self-declarations, worker assistance including instructions on missing wage information. F.O. Memo 2010-55 (Nov. 23, 2010) See also related DTA guidance on SNAP verifications requirements in F.O. Memo 2007-39 (July 7, 2007), F.O. Memo 2006-43 (Sept. 26, 2006) • DTA guidance on handling cases for individuals with voided Puerto Rican birth certificates. F.O. Memo 2010-49 (Nov. 1, 2010) • *Shelter expenses* may be self-declared unless questionable, including self-declarations on the SNAP application or recert forms. F.O. Memo 2010-29 (June 16, 2010) • *Child care expenses* can be self-declared, unless expenses claimed are questionable. F.O. Memo 2007-19 (March 15, 2007) • *Child support obligation* can be verified through the Department of Revenue, canceled check, wage or UC withholding statements. Transitions Hotline Q&A (May 2008) • DTA update on the verification of *immigrant status* through the SAVE system. F.O. Memo 2010-36A (Sept. 29, 2010) • Birth certificate not required for *identity verification*, any document which provides identity information acceptable. DTA Transitions, p.4 (June 2010) • Applicant can also

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prove identity with an SSN that is confirmed through the State Verification and Exchange System (SVES). Transitions FYI (May 2007) and F.O. Memo 2006-30 (July 10, 2006) • *SSN card* never needed to verify SSN under any circumstances; SSN is verified through a match with SSA. Transitions Hotline Q&A, July 2003 • DTA policy on new computer-generated *verification checklist*. F.O. Memo 2007-22 (March 29, 2007) • Household need not verify *U.S. citizenship* unless information is questionable. Transitions Hotline Q&As (March 2006, May 2006) • DTA access to *earned income* information through “The Work Number” temporarily suspended. F.O. Memo 2010-56 (Nov. 30, 2010) • Detailed instructions for DTA workers on how to access The Work Number (when operational), F.O. Memo 2007-3 (Jan. 31, 2007) • Detailed instructions to DTA workers on handling of *returned mail including* worker obligations to try to reach client by phone or mail before taking negative action on case. F.O. Memo 2008-22 (April 30, 2007) • Instructions that a cash or SNAP case cannot be closed for “*whereabouts unknown*” until worker takes specific steps to try to contact the household first. F.O. Memo 2007-39 (July 31, 2007).

8

What if I am having trouble getting all the proofs, or the proofs get to DTA late?

There are important DTA rules about verifications that you should know, especially if you are having trouble getting proofs or if you think DTA is asking for too many proofs.

Self-declaration

You can self-declare number of food stamp/SNAP eligibility factors unless DTA determines that the information you provided is “questionable” (see below). A self-declaration includes *any signed and dated communication* from the head of household, including information you write on your application or recertification form, your change report form, or a separate statement. **Appendix C** has two sample self-declaration forms for dependent care and shelter.

The following can be self-declared:

- Identity of other household members aside from the head of household, who must verify identity,

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- Household living situation (e.g. that you purchase and prepare food separately from others)
- U.S. citizenship,
- Age, or date of birth,
- Shelter expenses (rent, homeownership, utility costs),
- Dependent care expenses (child care or adult care),
- Sources of non-countable income, including loans,
- All information needed for expedited food stamp/SNAP benefits, except identity (see **Question 9**).

106 C.M.R. §§ 361.610 (A),(K); 361.800, 363.210(D), 364.450(D).

Alternate proofs

DTA must accept *any documents* that reasonably prove your eligibility. You do not have to give a specific kind of document or proof. 106 C.M.R. § 361.640. Some eligibility factors can be verified through a wide range of documents, such as your identity, where you live (your address), your age or date of birth (if required). DTA cannot demand a specific document such as a birth certificate for identity, or statement from a landlord for residence.

Questionable information

Under some circumstances, DTA can ask for additional proofs if DTA determines the information or documents you provided is “questionable.” 106 C.M.R. § 361.620. “Questionable” means the information inconsistent with other information on your application, information you reported to your worker or known to DTA (e.g. through data base checks). DTA must review the individual circumstances of a household before determining information is questionable.

Example: Clara Jones has been unemployed for a year and has no income when she applies for food stamps/SNAP. She claims rental costs of \$850 per month. Clara reports she has been borrowing money from friends as well as run up debt on her credit card. This information is not “questionable” and she should not need to provide additional verifications.

Your worker cannot make up a reason to reject the proofs you brought in. The worker must document in your case record the reasons for rejecting a

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proof. 106 C.M.R. § 361.660. If you think you have given DTA enough proof, or if you think your DTA worker is unreasonably requiring a specific type of proof, ask to speak to a supervisor or contact a legal advocate.

DTA worker assistance and collateral contact

DTA workers are supposed to help you get proofs you need if you tell DTA you are having difficulty, including offering to do a “collateral contact” with a third party. For example, if you need a document from another state, from an employer or proof of a disability, your DTA worker must help you. If you have a disability that makes it hard for you to get proofs or comply with other DTA rules, your worker must make a reasonable accommodation for you. See **Question 12**.

“Collateral contact” is where you give your DTA worker permission to call other agencies or persons to verify information. 106 C.M.R. § 361.640(B). **Appendix C** has a sample of DTA’s collateral contact form. It is up to you to give your worker the names of people to contact, and to sign a collateral contact form giving DTA permission. Allowing DTA contact a third party is *voluntary*. Also, DTA cannot require proof from a particular person if you can verify the information in a different way. Your privacy is important and must be respected. 106 C.M.R. § 360.400.

You cannot be denied food stamps/SNAP just because you are having trouble getting proofs, but you can be denied if you refuse to cooperate with getting the proofs or refuse to be interviewed, or you do not meet the other eligibility rules. 106 C.M.R. §§ 361.400 and 361.650.

Reopening an application denied for lack of proofs

DTA is required to send you a notice of *pending status*. 106 C.M.R. § 361.930. The notice should list the specific proofs or verifications missing and tell you that you have another 30 days (for a total of 60 days *from* the date you first applied) to bring in these proofs and have your case opened back to the date you first applied and met the eligibility requirements. You do *not* need to sign a new application. If you think DTA is taking too long to reopen your case, contact an advocate.

If you get a notice telling you that your food stamp/SNAP application was denied for lack of proofs—DTA will reopen your application if you get the missing proofs to DTA within this second 30-day period.

Reopening an application denied more than 30 days ago

Suppose DTA denied your application and for some reason you did not get the missing proofs in during the second 30-day period following the denial.

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You should first file a new application for benefits so you can get on food stamps/SNAP quickly. But you *also* have the right to appeal the denial notice to get back benefits to the date you first applied.

If you *file an appeal within 90 days* of the date of the notice *and* bring the missing proofs to the hearing, the hearings officer is required by law to accept these proofs under the *de novo* review rules and approve benefits, assuming you were otherwise eligible. 106 C.M.R. § 343.500(A). You do not need to have a good cause reason for failing to provide the proofs initially. You simply have a right to present the missing proofs at or before the hearing and claim the back benefits. See **Question 82**.

Advocacy Reminders:

- ✓ DTA should not deny your case because the additional proofs that relate to deductions such as medical expenses or the amount you pay in child support are missing. Instead, DTA should calculate your food stamps/SNAP without the deductions. If you later give DTA proof of the deductions, the amount of your benefits should be recalculated.
- ✓ If more than 30 days has elapsed from the notice of denial (the period where you can get benefits reopened after you bring in proofs), don't forget that you always have a right to file an appeal within 90 days of the date of the denial or termination notice. Under the fair hearing rules, the hearings officer must accept the proofs under special "de novo" appeal rules. See **Part 6** on Appeal Rights. You should both reapply for benefits *and* consider filing an appeal for the back benefits.

Additional Policy Guidance on Verifications: • Updated DTA policy guidance to workers on *permanent, optional and alternate* verifications, use of *self-declarations, worker assistance* including instructions on missing wage information. F.O. Memo 2010-55 (Nov. 23, 2010) See also related guidance, F.O. Memo 2007-39 (July 7, 2007), F.O. Memo 2006-43 (Sept. 26, 2006) and F.O. Memo 2008-59 re "negative case errors" (Nov. 12, 2008) • *Shelter expenses* may be self-declared unless questionable; household can self-declare on SNAP application or recertification form. F.O. Memo 2010-29 (June 16, 2010) • *Child care expenses* can be self-declared, unless expenses claimed are questionable. F.O. Memo 2007-19 (March 15, 2007) • Living expenses that exceed income are not questionable if household has reasonable explanation. Transitions Hotline Q&A, (March 2010) • Worker assistance must be provided if clients cannot get verifications for reasons beyond their control, including domestic violence situations. Transitions FYI, pg. 9 (May 2008) • Applications denied for lack of proofs must be *reopened* if missing verification is received within 60 days of date of initial application; household not required to file a new application. F.O. Memo 2006-20 (April 21, 2006) • Original documents not required, photocopies and faxed documents are acceptable. Transitions Hotline Q&A (June 2005) • Workers cannot limit verifications to any single type of document and cannot require

verification from a specific person. Transitions Hotline Q&A (August 2004); Transitions FYI, (August 2005) • Most household information and expenses that have *not changed* do not need to be re-verified at re-certification. Earned and self-employment income must be re-verified.) F.O. Memo 2010-3 (Jan. 19, 2010). See also F.O. Memo 2007-39 (July 13, 2007) • If client is having difficulty getting verification from third party, DTA worker must offer to assist through collateral contact. F.O. Memo 2010-55 (Nov. 23, 2010) and F.O. Memo 2005-49 (Oct. 3, 2005).

9

Can I get emergency food stamp/SNAP benefits?

Yes! If your income and cash and savings are low enough, you can get emergency benefits. This is called “expedited service.” 106 C.M.R. § 365.800. It is DTA’s obligation to screen all households for expedited service. If you are eligible for expedited service, DTA must get you your benefits within seven (7) days after you apply and are screened for expedited.

You are eligible for expedited service (benefits within 7 days) if:

- you have \$150 or less in gross income for the month and \$100 or less in cash and savings, *or*
- your rent (or mortgage) plus the utilities (using the Standard Utility Allowance for your household) are higher than your combined gross monthly income and cash and savings, *or*
- you are a migrant household with \$100 or less in cash and savings. 106 C.M.R. §§ 365.810-365.830.

If you meet one of these criteria and you provide *proof of identity* (who you are), you can get your benefits within 7 days. If you do not have other proof of identity, DTA can check your identity through your SSN or call someone (such as a friend, relative, or agency worker) to check your identity. 106 C.M.R. § 365.830. Your social security number (SSN) is sufficient proof of identity if DTA is able to confirm it through the State Verification and Exchange System (SVES). To get food stamp/SNAP benefits for more than one month, you will have to provide proofs of all the other eligibility factors. 106 C.M.R. § 365.850(B). See **Question 7**.

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Expedited food stamps/SNAP are *not extra* benefits—they are just a way to get you your first month’s benefits faster. The *amount* you get in expedited food stamp/SNAP benefits is based on the income you received or anticipate receiving in the month of application, even if the income is from a terminated source, such as the last paycheck from your former employer. 106 C.M.R. § 365.840. Regular ongoing food stamp/SNAP benefits do not count income from a terminated source.

Advocacy Reminder:

- ✓ If you need expedited food stamps/SNAP right away, it may be best to apply in person at the local DTA office. DTA is supposed to contact you by phone and screen you for expedited, but sometimes that does not happen, or you and DTA play phone tag. If you go to the DTA office in person, you must be screened that same day. If you cannot go to DTA, be sure to give enough phone numbers on your application for DTA to reach you (including helping agencies that can reach you).
- ✓ If DTA tells you that you can only get expedited food stamps/SNAP benefits once, contact Legal Services. DTA cannot refuse to give you expedited benefits a second time if you reapply and need them as long as you verified all the eligibility factors the last time or it’s been at least a year since your last expedited benefits.

Additional Policy Guidance on Expedited Benefits: • Expedited benefits can be issued more than once if the applicant previously verified required information, or if more than a year has elapsed since receipt of expedited. Transitions FYI (Dec 2010). • Even though asset test is eliminated for most “categorically eligible” households under 200% FPL, households seeking expedited benefits must give DTA information on the amount of *liquid assets* available. Transitions Hotline Q&A, (July 2008) • Expedited benefits should not be denied for lack of proof of identity if DTA can verify SSN through State Verification and Exchange System (SVES). Transitions FYI, (May 2007) • Worker should screen for expedited at time of first contact with applicant - either in person or by phone. F.O. Memo 2006-30 (July 10, 2006) • Instructions to speed up processing SNAP benefits for homeless applicants who are not otherwise expedited. F.O. Memo 2000-35 (Dec. 19, 2000) • Proof of non-citizen status is not required for expedited benefits; declaration of applicant is sufficient. Transitions Hotline Q&A (Dec. 1997).

10 How long does it take to get food stamp/SNAP benefits if I am not eligible for emergency benefits?

If you do not qualify for emergency benefits, DTA has to decide on your application and make sure you get your food stamp/SNAP benefits *within 30 days* after the day you apply. The amount you get should be retroactive to the date you applied if you are eligible. 106 C.M.R. § 361.700(A).

If DTA cannot decide on your application within 30 days of the day you applied because some required proofs are missing, DTA will deny your application and send you a notice of pending denial. If you give DTA the missing proofs within 60 days of applying, DTA must “reopen” your case. DTA cannot make you start a new application. See **Question 8**.

11 What if I do not speak English or I am deaf?

If English is not your primary language or you are deaf or hard of hearing, DTA must provide you with a bilingual DTA worker or an interpreter (in person or by telephone) if you want one. 106 C.M.R. § 360.510. If no bilingual staff person or DTA interpreter is available, the DTA office must use a tele-language line to locate an interpreter without delay.

If you are calling by phone, the worker or receptionist should do a three-way phone call with you and the tele-language service to ensure you are able to communicate with DTA and received same services as all others.

Under federal law, DTA is required to send written notices and materials to you in your primary language if you do not speak English. DTA currently only translates its BEACON-generated notices and forms into Spanish. If you do not receive a notice in your primary language, this could be a violation of federal food stamp/SNAP law. Contact an advocate.

Advocacy Reminders:

- ✓ By federal law, DTA must provide you with an interpreter if you need one. DTA should not tell you to bring your own interpreter. See Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, 42 U.S.C. § 2000d. DTA should not tell you to have a family member interpret for you. The 2008 Farm Bill codified the regulatory requirements in the food stamp statute. (See Section 4118, Public Law 110-246, June 18, 2008.)
- ✓ Federal food stamp law also requires DTA to have written materials in languages other than English if there are at least 100 households in the area served by the welfare office that speak that language. 7 C.F.R. § 272.4(b)(3). A written notice cutting or stopping your benefits is not valid if it is not in your primary language, you do not read English, and there are 100 or more households in the area served by the welfare office that speak your language.
- ✓ For more information on the federal and state government’s duties to persons with limited English proficiency (LEP), see www.lep.gov and www.usdoj.gov/crt/cor.
- ✓ For food stamp/SNAP information in 35 languages, see <http://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/outreach/translations.htm>

Additional Policy Guidance on Interpreter Requirements: •

Reaffirms DTA obligations to meet its Title VI obligations to provide bilingual services to LEP clients with extensive guidance on use of interpreters. Workers must use tele-language line if bilingual staff is not available. No need for supervisory sign-off to access language line, and workers should use three-way calling with phone clients (not require them to come in). DTA cannot turn a client away or tell them to come back due to a lack of interpreters. Children under age 12 not allowed to interpret; older children only for setting up appointments; interpreter should be offered even if English-speaking family member or friend accompanies client to DTA. F.O. Memo 2008-16 (April 1, 2008).

12

What if a disability makes it hard for me to apply, get proofs, or comply with the food stamp/SNAP rules?

The federal Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requires DTA to provide equal access to programs and services to qualified people with disabilities. 42 U.S.C. § 12132; see 106 C.M.R. §§ 360.250, 701.390.

Under the ADA you are a person with a disability if you have a physical or mental disability that substantially impairs a major life activity, such as learning, understanding, walking, working, breathing, or caring for yourself. A temporary health problem like a broken leg may not be a disability under the ADA. You can be disabled under the ADA even if you are not receiving any benefits on the basis of disability.

If a disability makes it hard for you to meet DTA rules or use DTA services, you can ask DTA to grant exceptions to the rules or modify the services. These are called “reasonable modifications” or “reasonable accommodations” under the ADA.

Example 1: Because of your disability, you need extra time or help getting information to DTA. DTA should give you the extra time or help.

Example 2: You have trouble reading because of a learning disability. DTA should explain its notices to you.

Example 3: Because of your disability, you should get a waiver of the face to face interview, and you should be able to communicate with your DTA worker through appropriate communication devices (e.g., a TTY, CART services, or other devices).

If you need special help or an exception because of a disability, you can ask your worker, the local office director, or any member of the “Accommodation Team” in each DTA local office. DTA should then fill out a form called a “Request for an ADA Accommodation.” DTA may ask for a copy of medical records or other evidence of the disability or permission to contact a doctor or other professional who can verify your disability. You may also need to document the connection between the disability and the special help or exception you are requesting.

The DTA local office should give you a written decision on your request for reasonable accommodation no later than 30 days from your request. If the local office denies your request in whole or in part, you can ask for DTA Central Office Accommodation Appeal Committee reconsideration by filling out the back of the form and giving it to your worker. The Committee has 10 days to make a decision on the reconsideration request. You can also file your request directly with the Committee if the local office does not decide your request in 30 days.

If the DTA Central Office Accommodation Appeal Committee denies your request for accommodation in whole or in part or does not make a decision in 10 days from your request for a decision, you can request a hearing by filling out the back of the form and sending it to the Division of Hearings.

Try to get a legal advocate to help you with your request for review and your appeal. See **Appendix G** for a list of Legal Services offices. See **Part 6** on appeal rights.

Additional Policy Guidance on ADA: • DTA has issued extensive guidance to the field on their obligations under the ADA and specific forms for clients to request accommodation. You can request an accommodation at any time and not just at application or recertification. F.O. Memo 2010-59 (Dec. 30, 2010).

13

Is there a quick way to check the status of my application or my benefits?

There are two ways to quickly check the status of your food stamp/SNAP application and your ongoing benefits – especially if you cannot reach any at the local DTA office.

- You can set up a “My Accounts Page” (MAP) which allows you to check on the status your cash or food stamp/SNAP benefits at any time. Visit www.mass.gov/vg/selfservice and click on “My Accounts Page.” Once you have a MAP account, you can find out the status of your case, the benefits amount; the date your benefits will be received; the name and phone number of your DTA worker; the date your next recertification is due and information on notices that DTA sent you in the past 90 days. For security purposes, in order to set up a MAP, you will be asked for your name, SSN, date of birth, your EBT card number – which card you should receive in the mail before benefits are approved – and other information. (If you do not have an EBT card yet,

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you cannot set up a MAP. You will also need an email address to receive your initial MAP password.

- You can call a special DTA automated phone line to get information on your food stamp/SNAP benefits: **1-877-382-2363**. This “interactive” phone number allows you to find out the status of your food stamp/SNAP application, the amount of your monthly benefits if approved, the next payment date for your benefits, when you need to recertify your benefits, and the name of your DTA worker. It does not give as much case information as the MAP. However, you do have the option to speak to a live person, but be prepared to wait until one is available. To access your case information through this process – for security purposes – you will need to give your SSN, year of birth, zip code and your EBT card number (even if the card is not active).

Additional Policy Guidance on Web Applications: • Interactive Voice Response phone system for case information, Transitions (Jan.2011) pg.2.
• DTA instructions to staff on My Accounts Page (MAP) rollout and how to access the MAP. F.O. Memo 2010-6 (January 20, 2010) and Transitions, pg 1 (April 2010).

14

My worker always refers to “BEACON.” What is BEACON?

BEACON is DTA’s computer system. The DTA worker puts information about each client into BEACON. BEACON is programmed to decide eligibility and benefit amounts, create a list of proofs you need to give to DTA, keep track of when you have to meet with your worker, and create notices to send to you about your benefits.

DTA workers follow instructions in the BEACON User’s Guide to conduct interviews and put information into BEACON. Your local DTA office has a copy of the BEACON User’s Guide and you have a right to look at it because it is a public document. As of this writing (January 2011), DTA has upgraded BEACON system with more changes. We anticipate in the near future DTA will have new BEACON User’s Guide or other instructions that will be important for advocates.

Sometimes BEACON makes mistakes because the worker did not give BEACON the right information. Sometimes BEACON makes mistakes because the computer program is wrong. Sometimes BEACON tells the

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worker to ask for information or proofs you should not have to give. BEACON is only a computer system. It does not set the rules or make policy.

Your DTA worker should not refuse to fix a problem because of BEACON. If you have any questions or problems with BEACON or you get notices from DTA you think are wrong, talk to your worker or your worker's supervisor. If the problem is not fixed right away, you should contact an advocate and appeal. See **Part 6**.