MEPD and Texas Works Bulletin 19-1

Date: January 14, 2019

To: Eligibility Services – Regional Directors
   Program Managers
   Eligibility Services Supervisors
   Regional Attorneys
   Hearings Officers

From: Gina Carter, Deputy Associate Commissioner
       Access and Eligibility Services Program Policy
       State Office 2115

Subject: Federal Government Shutdown Information

Bulletins are sent to supervisors and other regional managers. Supervisors must share this information with all eligibility staff. Please ensure that copies are provided to staff that do not have access to e-mail. If you have any questions regarding the policy information in this bulletin, follow regional procedures.

Active bulletins are posted on the following websites:

- [Texas Works Handbook (TWH)](http://hhs.texas.gov/laws-regulations/handbooks/texas-works-handbook/texas-works-bulletins);
Federal Government Shutdown Information

Background

As of December 21, 2018, certain federal agencies have been partially or totally shutdown due to a lapse in federal funding. This lapse of funding impacts the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) administered by HHSC.

There are no impacts to the Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP) or any Medical programs.

This bulletin provides information and guidance related to the federal government shutdown. Staff must continue to process all applications, redeterminations, and changes regardless of the federal government shutdown.

Current Policy

Eligibility for Federal Employees Furloughed or Working without Pay

All Programs

With a lapse in federal funding, some federal employees affected by the shutdown may be furloughed or reporting to work without pay. Furloughed federal employees or federal employees working with no expected pay applying for benefits should be treated the same as other applicants in similar circumstances and must meet the financial and non-financial requirements to receive benefits.

If furloughed federal employees or federal employees required to work without pay do not anticipate to be paid, staff must not count such potential monies as income when determining eligibility for benefits.

Staff must follow current policies and processes, in addition to any other applicable policies for the household situation, such as:

- TWH A-141, Expedited Eligibility Criteria, - households eligible for expedited SNAP application processing must have income verification postponed.
- TWH A-1323.5, Wages, Salaries, Commissions, and Tips, and MEPD E-3110, Wages - only count the earned income in the month it is paid.
- TWH A-1350, Calculating Household Income and MEPD E-3100, Types of Earned Income - all countable income received or expected to be received must be used to determine eligibility for benefits.
- TWH A-1355, How to Project Income, and MEPD E-3100, Types of Earned Income - when projecting ongoing income.
Furloughed federal employees may be eligible for unemployment insurance benefits (UIB) during the federal government shutdown. Staff must count UIB as unearned income following policy in TWH A-1324.19, Unemployment Compensation and MEPD E-3310, Annuities, Pensions and Other Periodic Payments.

Staff must take into consideration each household’s specific circumstance using current policy in TWH A-2350, Streamlined Reporting Households and TWH A-2324, Length of Certification, as these households may likely have a change in income within the next six months and should be assigned the appropriate change reporting status and certification periods for SNAP.

In addition, as currently required, staff should clearly document all collateral contact information, attempts to obtain verification and reasoning for any alternative methods used when making eligibility decisions.

**SNAP and TANF**

Staff must apply regular policies and processes related to SNAP Employment and Training (SNAP E&T) and Choices registration and participation requirements. There are no exemptions for SNAP E&T or Choices specifically for individuals who are furloughed or temporarily laid off.

**Early Issuance**

**SNAP**

SNAP EDGs that are active as of January 15, 2019 will receive early issuance of their February benefits by January 20, 2019 instead of their regularly scheduled issuance day. Households who receive February SNAP benefits early will not get another benefit issuance in the month of February. The following notice will be sent to these households in English and Spanish informing them of the early release of their February SNAP benefits:

*Because of the federal government shutdown, the U.S. Department of Agriculture is instructing the Health and Human Services Commission to issue February SNAP benefits early. February SNAP benefits will be on your Lone Star Card by Jan. 20.*

You don’t need to take any action at this time. Benefits are being issued early to carry clients through the month of February.

*Once your benefits are loaded onto your Lone Star Card, you’ll be able to use them. However, we encourage you to space your food purchases rather than making mass purchases.*
For general updates about this federally funded program, visit hhs.texas.gov. To check benefit amounts, visit YourTexasBenefits.com or call the Lone Star Help Desk at 800-777-7EBT. For questions about benefits, dial 2-1-1 and select option 2.

Applications Pended for Information

SNAP

Staff must make every effort to process all applications and redeterminations as soon as possible following direction from State Office. Due to the uncertainty of federal funding, staff must encourage households to provide their pended information as soon as possible regardless of their due date.

However, staff must continue to follow current policy in TWH B-140, Summary of Due Dates for Form H1020, Request for Information or Action, and allow households the applicable timeframes to provide verification. SNAP applications and renewals pended for verification must not be denied for failure to provide prior to final due date.

SNAP applications and redeterminations that are currently pending at close of business on January 15, 2019 will be sent the following notice in English and Spanish requesting that they provide any needed verification as soon as possible regardless of the final due date listed on the Form H1020, Request for Information or Action:

Because of the federal government shutdown, the U.S. Department of Agriculture told states that they can issue benefits until federal funds are no longer available; it is unclear from the federal government when that will occur.

If we asked you for verification to complete your application or renewal, HHSC must have your verification documents as soon as possible, even if we gave you a different deadline.

Once your benefits are loaded onto your Lone Star Card, you’ll be able to use them. However, we encourage you to space your food purchases rather than making mass purchases.

You can send verification documents to us on YourTexasBenefits.com or the Your Texas Benefits mobile app (available for Android and iPhones). You can also fax it to us at 877-447-2839.
For general updates about this federally funded program, visit hhs.texas.gov. To check benefit amounts, visit YourTexasBenefits.com or call the Lone Star Help Desk at 800-777-7EBT. For questions about benefits, dial 2-1-1 and select option 2.

For any SNAP applications or redeterminations pended on or after January 16, 2019, staff must manually insert the following comments on the H1020 for any SNAP applications or redetermination.

English:

Because of the federal government shutdown, the U.S. Department of Agriculture told states that they can issue SNAP benefits until federal funds are no longer available. It is unclear from the federal government when that will occur. HHSC must have your verification documents as soon as possible, even if there is a different deadline listed on this notice.

Spanish:

Debido al cierre de la Administración federal, el Departamento de Agricultura de los EE. UU. ha pedido a los estados que sigan otorgando beneficios hasta que los fondos federales se agoten. El Gobierno federal no ha aclarado cuándo sucederá esto. La HHSC debe recibir sus documentos de verificación lo más pronto posible, aun cuando haya otra fecha límite indicada en este aviso.

TANF

There are no changes to January or February TANF benefits due to the federal government shutdown. Staff must continue to process TANF applications, redeterminations, and changes using current policies and processes.

Communications and Additional Staff Resources

SNAP and TANF

Communication about the federal government shutdown status will be publically available using various methods. The HHS website (hhs.texas.gov) will contain the most current information regarding the federal government shutdown including Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs).

Links to the HHS website will also be placed on YourTexasBenefits.com, the mobile app, IVRs for 2-1-1 and EBT, as well as other HHS media outlets. Additionally, SNAP recipients who are signed up for email or text messages are being sent a message that refers them to the HHS website for updates.
Staff resources can be found on The LOOP on this page: https://oss.txhhsc.txnet.state.tx.us/Pages/Government_Shutdown_2019.aspx

Staff should use the FAQs when addressing questions from households.

State Office will continue to monitor the status of the federal government shutdown and provide any additional policy updates to staff as needed.

**Effective Date**
The policy is effective upon the release of this bulletin.