

Health and Human Services Eligibility System Update



**Health and Human
Services Commission**

March 2010 Update

ELIGIBILITY SYSTEM ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Since the last hearing of the Joint Committee on Oversight of the Health and Human Services Eligibility System, the Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC) has or is taking the following actions to meet the stated goals of H.B. 3575, 80th Legislature, Regular Session:

Increase the quality of and client access to services provided through the programs.

- In response to an increasing volume of applications and caseload growth resulting from Hurricane Ike and the downturn in the economy, HHSC requested and received approval to increase eligibility staffing under the authority of Senate Bill 1, Article II, HHSC Rider 61(b) (81st Legislature). Since the beginning of fiscal year 2010, there has been a net increase of more than 800 eligibility staff statewide.
- Phone system upgrades were implemented to support the expanded use of telephone interviews. Funding and capital budget authority was secured during fiscal years 2008-2009 to install new phone systems at 152 sites throughout the state between December 2008 and August 2009. Beginning mid-March 2010, additional telephone capacity will be added in 53 offices for staff conducting telephone interviews. An additional 220 sites are being planned with a target start date of April 2010, and statewide implementation for all phones is targeted for July 2011.
- HHSC updated the TIERS training curriculum to make the training more experiential and hands-on for staff, and a train-the-trainers program was developed to ensure that trainers have a more thorough working knowledge of TIERS. The new trainings are being tested in March 2010 in preparation for additional rollouts of TIERS.

Implement more efficient business processes that will reduce times for application for program benefits and reduce staff work load.

- In February 2009, TIERS was updated to improve the redetermination process for workers. The worker can now choose which screens require updates based on information provided by the client. Workers must still review all information before finalizing the renewal.
- The remaining counties in the Central Texas Region (Region 7) were converted to TIERS as of April 2009. Conversions are planned to resume in 2010, with the first rollouts planned for the Lubbock Region (Region 1) and El Paso Region (Region 10).
- HHSC received federal approval from USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) to transfer approximately 20,000 elderly Supplemental Security Income SNAP recipients from the regular SNAP caseload to the more streamlined SNAP Combined Application Project (CAP) caseload in April 2009. Under SNAP CAP, interviews are not required, so this made more appointments available to eligibility offices for other SNAP clients.

- In May 2009, HHSC received approval from FNS to continue to conduct a telephone rather than face-to-face interview for renewing SNAP clients for another four years. The waiver was expanded to also allow telephone interviews for initial applications. Allowing telephone interviews is more convenient to the applicant and provides additional scheduling flexibility.
- Dual monitors have been installed in nine training rooms statewide to create the actual working environment for TIERS trainees. Additional training rooms will be outfitted with dual monitors as additional regions prepare to convert to TIERS.
- HHSC offices have implemented a streamlined Same Day Next Day (SDND) process in which applicants are interviewed the same day or next day they come into the local office to file an application for services. The SDND process reduces the period of time between when the application is submitted and the required interview. As a result, applicants do not require multiple visits to the office to complete the application process. Workloads are processed more efficiently, providing improved customer service. A total of 142 out of 311 offices statewide are using SDND as of March 2010.
- HHSC requested and received approval from FNS to conduct a pilot to allow application assistance provided to clients by contracted food banks to meet the interview requirement. This eliminates a redundant step, which streamlines the application process for clients. The pilot began on March 1, 2010 in Dallas, Fort Worth, Houston, and San Antonio. State workers will continue to verify information, determine eligibility, and issue benefits.
- HHSC implemented a Standard Utility Allowance (SUA) for SNAP households in March 2010. Previously, a utility allowance was computed by HHSC staff as an income deduction for SNAP applicants with a heating or cooling cost. The standard deduction simplifies policy and reduces workload for staff.
- HHSC is coordinating with the Office of the Attorney General (OAG) to create direct access to OAG child support information via the data broker inquiry. Eligibility staff currently research child support income or payments by performing a separate inquiry into the OAG's child support payment database when the applicant reports child support as income or a payment. This change will help reduce errors related to income calculations in cases involving child support income or payments. Implementation is planned for summer 2010.
- Additional TIERS usability enhancements for workers are planned for implementation in August 2010. These changes include adding navigation buttons, a listing of the last ten cases worked to allow the worker to easily access the cases for additional work, highlighting on mandatory data fields that are incomplete, pop-up calendars for date entries, a summary of all changes to the case since the last certification, and advance warning to the worker that the TIERS session is about to time out.

Implement simplified application and enrollment processes for the programs in a manner that is consistent with program goals established by the Legislature.

- CHIP self-service Internet options were expanded in 2009 to allow CHIP families to renew coverage, as well as submit a new application online and request a blank application be mailed to them. On average, 29 percent of new applications and 18 percent of renewals received each month are submitted through the self-service option. An average of 4,500 requests for blank applications are also received each month. In addition, individuals submitting CHIP applications or renewals via any channel can now receive emails to confirm receipt of an application/renewal or missing information; and email reminders to prompt them to finish an online application, submit renewal application, or to submit additional information needed to complete their case.
- Additional improvements to the integrated application form have been made to make it easier for clients to complete, and questions were re-ordered to align more closely with the data entry flow within TIERS. Release of the new paper application will coincide with the form becoming available through the self-service website.
- Revisions are underway to simplify and improve the readability of the self-service website and the most common client letters and forms, such as the denial notice or change in benefit level.
- TIERS has been updated to pre-populate certain information in client forms to facilitate renewals and the return of needed information. Information now pre-populated includes data such as address, phone, date of birth, and gender.
- Bar-coding logic was implemented to allow case documents to be automatically linked to the client's case. Bar-coding was implemented in June 2008 for various CHIP forms, including missing information, plan enrollment, and renewal documents. Bar-coding was also added to return address labels in May 2009 for clients to use when returning documents to HHSC. This allows the returned documents to be auto-linked to the case and reduces the amount of manual linking required by staff.
- HHSC is planning to implement system changes that will allow eligibility workers to use the Social Security Administration's (SSA) verification system to confirm Social Security numbers as proof of citizenship, rather than waiting for documentation to be provided by the applicant. This change is targeted for implementation in May 2010.
- HHSC will expand the capabilities of the current self-service website that allows individuals to complete and submit an application for benefits via the Internet. Enhancements will be developed to allow information entered into the online application to feed directly into TIERS, which eliminates the data entry currently required by state staff. The enhancements will be implemented by spring 2011.