

# **Health and Human Services Eligibility System Update**



**Health and Human  
Services Commission**

**October 2010 Update**

## ELIGIBILITY SYSTEM ACCOMPLISHMENTS

The Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC) continues its work to meet the stated goals of H.B. 3575, 80<sup>th</sup> Legislature, Regular Session.

In conjunction with these tasks, in May 2010, HHSC developed a Comprehensive Management Improvement Plan (CMIP) to improve the timeliness, accuracy, and efficiency in determining eligibility for the SNAP, Medicaid, and TANF programs. The plan incorporates HHSC initiatives, as well as recommendations from the State Auditor's Office, the statewide single audit, and the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) SNAP Corrective Action Plans. The CMIP covers approximately 60 recommendations and contains more than 70 related project plans, including: communication with clients, clerical support, workforce management, program management and monitoring improvements, local office business processes, and process and system integrity.

Since the March 2010 eligibility system update to the Joint Committee on Oversight of the Health and Human Services Eligibility System, HHSC has or is taking the following actions:

### 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) (81<sup>st</sup> 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. Currently, phone system upgrades to provide sufficient capacity are planned for eligibility offices across the state. Since April 2010, 42 priority sites have received upgraded capacity and/or have been refreshed. Statewide implementation for all phones is targeted for April 2012.
- HHSC surveyed 500 clients and clerks in 40 offices to identify communication improvements. The results are being used to develop a client communication and outreach plan, as well as inform local office business process improvement strategies.

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

The conversion of the Central Texas Region (Region 7) to TIERS was completed in April 2009. In 2010, HHSC successfully completed the conversion to TIERS of all eligibility offices in the Lubbock and El Paso Regions and is currently assessing the feasibility of

rolling out TIERS to the Beaumont Region in October 2010 and the Tyler Region in November 2010.

- HHSC developed new Basic Skills Training for newly hired clerks, as well as a one-day “refresher” training for tenured clerks; HHSC also revised TIERS training for clerks in rollout regions.
- In March 2010, HHSC received federal approval from FNS to eliminate the required interview at for recertification of SNAP cases that involve SSI recipients or other cases the agency deems stable through a risk-based assessment. This change was implemented in May 2010 and has helped reduce workload.
- In September 2009, HHSC offices 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 207 out of 315 offices statewide are using SDND as of September 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. State workers continue to verify information, determine eligibility, and issue benefits. The pilot began on March 1, 2010 in Dallas, Fort Worth, Houston, and San Antonio. A total of 61 food bank staff have received HHSC training to conduct interviews, and as of September 3, these staff had completed 9,413 interviews. In April 2011, HHSC is scheduled to release a TIERS self-service option for community-based organizations that will allow automated data collection and reporting for the pilot.
- 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. No errors related to the SUA have been identified since implementation.
- 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 January 2011.

- HHSC implemented 20 significant TIERS usability enhancements for workers in August 2010. These changes include calendar pop-ups so staff can more easily enter dates, more intuitive wording for required items, highlighted sections showing the worker where an error has occurred in data entry, and improvements in the layout of the screens and navigation buttons.

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

- In September 2010, HHSC will provide information folders to guide clients through the application and renewal process for SNAP benefits. The folder provides a simple explanation of the process and a place to store needed documents and contact information.
- In September 2010, HHSC revised forms to better explain what clients need to bring to an interview. The new form has been added to the staff handbook, and will be printed and distributed to offices and clients as supplies of the current form are depleted.
- With input from stakeholders, HHSC is developing new integrated applications for services that are easier to read and understand. The Texas Works application is complete, and development of a new application for Medicaid for the Elderly and People with Disabilities is underway. Both applications are planned for release in April 2011.
- HHSC is enhancing the self-service options in the Interactive Voice Response (IVR) System, which will allow callers with cases in TIERS to obtain additional information about their case, including information needed to complete their application or renewal, and information about case status.
- HHSC continues to evaluate options for several communication improvements, including kiosks in offices, text messaging, and Internet and web-based communication with clients.
- 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 November 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 in early 2011.