

Kristen E. Jefferies
Deputy Budget Director, Mass Health
Executive Office of Health and Human Services
One Ashburton Place
Boston, MA 02108

April 25, 2016, by email

Robert Leshin
Acting Director, Office for Food and Nutrition Programs
Department of Early and Secondary Education
75 Pleasant Street
Malden MA 02148

Dear Ms. Jefferies, Mr Leshin:

I am writing to bring to the attention of both EOHHS and DESE a matter raised by the *Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Support Group*, an organization formed by the [Cape Cod Neighborhood Support Coalition](#). We recently discovered that a number of low-income children in receipt of MassHealth (Medicaid) were not directly certified for National School Lunch Program (NLSLP) free meals in accordance with the terms of the state's Medicaid NSLP Direct Certification Demonstration Project. As you know, USDA approved Massachusetts for this Demonstration Project in June of 2014, to begin school year 2014/15.¹ Under the Demonstration Project, Massachusetts Medicaid-eligible children with gross income below 133% of the federal poverty level (FPL) are automatically or "directly certified" for free school meals, without having to submit a NSLP meals application. The students' Medicaid eligibility information is secured through a data match between DESE and EOHHS before the beginning of each school year and on a periodic basis after that.

As I understand the current Medicaid Direct Certification process, only DESE and EOHHS exchange the MassHealth recipient eligibility information for the Medicaid Direct Cert process, after schools have completed the regular direct certification process. In other words, the MassHealth recipient data cannot be accessed by local school districts in the same manner that DESE and local school districts conduct direct certification of children receiving or living with a child receiving SNAP (food stamps) or cash assistance (TAFDC) administered by the Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA) in order to reconcile "partial matches" or otherwise confirm a child's or sibling's receipt of these benefits.

After hearing from the *Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Support Group*, MLRI was able to confirm the MassHealth eligibility and income status of one such grandchild from the Barnstable Public School District. This 13 year-old child receives both Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and MassHealth benefits. On April 12, 2016, the MassHealth Enrollment Center confirmed for MLRI that

¹ Letter of 6/16/14 from USDA Food and Nutrition Service Program Monitoring and Operational Support Division, Director Sara Smith-Holmes to DESE Office for Nutrition, Health and Safety Programs Director Kathleen Millett.

this child is coded in MassHealth as an “active recipient” with “gross income at 0% FPL.”² Yet, his grandmother – who has legal custody of her grandson – has not been able to get free school meal status for her grandchild despite her repeated efforts last fall to raise this matter with both the Barnstable Public School Superintendent as well as with DESE. As a result, the grandmother has been paying the *full price for school meals* for the entire school year 2015/16. In addition, members of the Support Group have shared with me that other grandparents within their organization are raising grandchildren receiving MassHealth and in a similar school meals predicament.

MLRI can confirm the details of the child mentioned above so that EOHHS can learn how these kids are falling through the direct cert cracks. However, I would also like the opportunity to have a broader discussion about the scope of EOHHS data and/or MassHealth categories that EOHHS is making available to DESE for purposes of the Medicaid Demonstration Project. One significant advantage of the Medicaid Demonstration Project, if properly and robustly implemented, is that it should pick up many of these MassHealth eligible grandchildren, in addition to DCF foster children where there may be delays in communicating foster status with schools, as well as non-citizen children in receipt of MassHealth Limited and CMSP but not otherwise be receiving TANF or SNAP Benefits. All of these categories of MassHealth children are eligible for direct certification and need to be so identified.

As you know, children in kinship care situations are not eligible for direct certification in the same manner as foster children who are eligible for free NSLP meals upon confirmation of foster care status through the Department of Children and Families (DCF).³ Nevertheless, the *Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Support Group* feels that the exclusion of their grandchildren from free NSLP school meals – children whom they are raising at home but have not legally adopted and for whom most receive very little if any child support – is no different than being a foster parent, except unpaid. Getting the state’s Medicaid Direct Certification Demonstration Project to work correctly could ameliorate this discrepancy for hundreds of low income grandchildren being lovingly raised and cared by their grandparents.

I look forward to hearing from you on ways we can work together to address this matter.

Sincerely



Patricia Baker
Senior Policy Analyst

cc. Kerry Bickford, *Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Support Group*

² 130 CMR §519.002 (B) re automatic eligibility for SSI recipients. Within the MassHealth system, SSI children coded as “referred” MassHealth cases due to an auto referral by the Social Security Administration to MassHealth. They are coded at 0% FPL income because MassHealth does not need to confirm the gross income test based on receipt of SSI. DCF placed foster children are similarly auto eligible and coded in MassHealth as “referred” cases.

³ 7 CFR §245.6(b) (2). Note that DCF foster care children can also be directly certified through the MassHealth Direct Cert process should there be any delay in the Department of Children and Families staff not timely reporting the foster care status of a child to the local school liaison, a problem which some local schools have complained about to MLRI.