![pennsylvania DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES]

DATE: **December 27, 2021**

OPERATIONS MEMORANDUM #21-12-02

SUBJECT: Issuing Special Allowances for Supportive Services (SPALs) for Technology Needs to Employment and Training (E&T) Participants

TO: Executive Directors

FROM: Robert Patrick
              Acting Director
              Bureau of Operations

PURPOSE

To inform County Assistance Offices (CAOs) of changes to SPAL policy providing for the issuance of SPALs for technology needs to Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) E&T participants participating in specific educational activities.

To consolidate guidelines for the issuance of such SPALs to SNAP E&T and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Road to Economic Self-Sufficiency through Employment and Training (RESET) participants.

BACKGROUND

Per OPS 11-05-04, SNAP E&T participants are prohibited by current policy from receiving a SPAL for the purpose of purchasing a personal computer (PC) or related hardware or software. In May 2020, ESA 20048-135 clarified that TANF RESET participants may receive such technology SPALs in limited circumstances, but that SNAP E&T participants still remained ineligible.

DISCUSSION

In January 2021, the federal Food and Nutrition Service issued new regulations allowing the issuances of technology SPALs to SNAP E&T participants. As a result, DHS is waiving the state regulation prohibiting the issuance of technology SPALs to SNAP E&T participants. Effective upon publication of this memorandum, guidelines for the issuance of technology SPALs will apply to both SNAP E&T participants and TANF RESET participants, as outlined below.

When deciding whether a technology SPAL should be issued, CAO staff should assess the following:

- What items may be covered with a technology SPAL?
- Who can receive a technology SPAL?
- When is a technology SPAL necessary?
- What code is used in eCIS?
- What limits apply?

What Items May a Technology SPAL Cover?

The CAO may issue technology SPALs to eligible E&T participants for the purchase of a PC, which can include a desktop computer, notebook computer (laptop), Chromebook, tablet, or similar device. In addition to the purchase of a PC itself, technology SPALs may be issued for related software or hardware items such as:

- software required by the E&T provider, such as the Microsoft Office suite;
- a Universal Serial Bus (USB) webcam, if required by the E&T provider and the participant's PC does not have a built-in or functional webcam; and
- specialized equipment or software, such as a USB mouse, trackball, printer, or voice-to-text software, if required by the E&T provider or if the participant has a medical condition requiring the use of such devices.

Who Can Receive a Technology SPAL?

In order to receive a technology SPAL, SNAP E&T and TANF RESET participants must be engaged in one of the following types of activities:

- a DHS-approved credentialing program, defined as a program that leads to an industry-recognized certificate, license, diploma, or degree in a high-priority occupation or a growing job market in the local area;
- an Adult Basic Education (ABE) program;
- an English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) program; or
- a High School Equivalency program

NOTE: A SNAP E&T or TANF RESET participant who is engaged in any of the above activities can receive a technology SPAL regardless of the E&T contracted program (EARN, Work Ready, KEYS, or SNAP 50/50) they are participating in.

SNAP E&T and TANF RESET participants engaged solely in activities other than those listed above are not eligible to receive technology SPALs.

Questions about whether an activity or program qualifies under this section should be sent to RA-PWBEP.SNAP@pa.gov for SNAP E&T participants and RA-PWBEP.TANF@pa.gov for TANF RESET participants.

When is a Technology SPAL Necessary?

The CAO will consider issuing a technology SPAL to a SNAP E&T or TANF RESET participant when it is necessary to allow effective remote participation in any of the above-listed activities. The CAO may accept a participant's statement that a handheld internet-connected device they already own, such as their smartphone, is not a practical or appropriate device to effectively participate in the remote E&T program.

If the participant already owns or otherwise has access to a PC but claims the computer does not meet the standards necessary to effectively participate in the remote E&T program, the CAO may require verification prior to issuing a technology SPAL for a new PC. Verification may include, but is not limited to:

- the participant's statement that the PC is needed for use by another household member to work from home or attend school virtually;
- the participant's statement that the PC has an operating system which is no longer supported by the company which made it (as of September 2021, Microsoft no longer supports Windows 7 and earlier versions);
- documentation from the E&T provider citing the need for a PC with hardware specifications inconsistent with the participant's PC; or
- documentation from the manufacturer of software required by the E&T provider citing minimum system requirements that are not consistent with the participant's PC.

Reminder: SPALs should always be the most practical, least expensive option to meet the participant's needs.

What Code Should be Used in eCIS for Technology SPALs?

The CAO will use Code 257 to issue technology SPALs to eligible SNAP E&T and non-working TANF RESET participants. The CAO will use Code 857 to issue technology SPALs to working TANF RESET participants who meet all criteria to receive technology SPALs.

What Limits Apply to Technology SPALs?

A $1,000 lifetime limit applies to the work, education, and training category of SPALs. Since E&T participants will likely incur further costs in this category (e.g. – textbooks), CAOs may encourage E&T participants to apply for other programs such as the FCC's Emergency Broadband Benefit (EBB) program that allow eligible participants to receive a reduced-price laptop and internet service. However, the CAO must not deny a technology SPAL due to failure to apply for the EBB program, nor require a participant to apply for an outside resource if doing so would delay the participant from obtaining the technology items needed to facilitate E&T participation.

NEXT STEPS

1. Share and review this information with appropriate staff members.
2. This Memorandum obsoletes ESA-20048-135.
3. Direct questions regarding this Operations Memorandum to your Area Manager.
4. This Operations Memorandum is in effect until further notice.
5. The SPAL Desk Guide has been updated to reflect these changes.