



May 4, 2020

Together is How RI Succeeds  
*A COVID-19 Update from Our Agencies*

Valued Partners,

COVID-19 has challenged the State in many new ways, and we likely have yet to realize many other obstacles. The need to physically distance ourselves for the health and safety of everyone has increased the need for public benefits for many Rhode Islanders, particularly those who have found themselves now out of work.

Not only is the State committed to protecting existing services, but we have worked tirelessly to respond to additional needs of our residents and our committed providers. Given we share many valued community partners, we plan to send combined, regular updates like this first one to all of you who help extend our reach throughout Rhode Island and amplify our news in the communities and vulnerable populations who need us most.

Below are operational and policy steps taken to support benefit access for Rhode Islanders by our agencies. Given our work overlaps, such as is the case for Medicaid, there may be some duplication in each of our updates.

### **Executive Office of Health and Human Services (EOHHS) – Medicaid EOHHS**

EOHHS' priority is to ensure that the state's Medicaid population continues to have access to benefits and care, while also promoting provider solvency.

The steps taken by EOHHS – including waivers and State Plan Authority (SPA) requests – are as follows:

#### Access to Benefits & Care:

EOHHS extended current prior authorization requirements, suspended the termination of individuals and relaxed provider enrollment requirements during the state of emergency. Meanwhile, the state is in the process of modifying beneficiary enrollment processes to allow for expedited processing of applications for all Medicaid populations. We're also identifying a

process in which the uninsured can receive coverage through Medicaid for COVID-19 testing and testing-related services.

EOHHS has worked closely with CMS and our physical and behavioral health provider community to ensure that access to treatment remains available, despite obstacles caused by social distancing. Effective March 18 and until further notice, Rhode Island is reimbursing for clinically appropriate, medically necessary covered services, including behavioral health services to members via TeleHealth. This includes both fee-for-service and managed care. Working with CMS, the state is focused on ensuring that Rhode Islanders' access to critical health care services is not impacted by the widespread disruptions caused by COVID-19. Temporary steps taken to address the COVID-19 emergency include the use of non-HIPAA compliant videoconferencing. Medicaid continues to add more codes available to providers. These codes and other information can be found [here](#).

EOHHS is working to meet the needs of the state's most vulnerable populations during this emergency period and has requested from CMS the ability to provide payments to homeless individuals for:

- Emergency case management
- Meals in shelters
- Temporary housing
- Rent of at-risk individuals
- Mobile phone minutes

#### Provider Resources

The state also moved quickly to support our providers. A Governor Raimondo Executive Order authorized waiver and Medicaid State Plan amendments and adjustments to provider rates. The order was necessary as EOHHS needs prior approval from the General Assembly to seek approval from CMS to request a change to the waiver and/or the State Plan. During the emergency, the Executive Order allows us to temporarily change rates and funding. EOHHS now has the authority to ask for the CMS changes and expedite the processes and procedures to implement the changes while we await formal final approval from CMS. The changes sought from CMS are based upon available and suggested options presented by CMS to the states. Not all waivers have been approved.

Retroactive to April 1, 2020, the state increased by 10 percent the Medicaid fee-for-service rate for the critical services provided by nursing homes, assisted living facilities and providers of developmental disability services. This temporary rate increase – to expire on June 30, 2020 – recognizes the additional costs organizations are facing related to the COVID-19 crisis.

EOHHS is still in the process of pursuing retainer payments for all HCBS providers, although CMS currently appears to only be approving retainer payments for habilitation and personal care providers. Of course, EOHHS is committed to working with the provider community to find additional ways to ensure funding levels are maintained by those who provide services to our Medicaid population.

### Supporting the Provider Workforce

Governor Gina Raimondo has established a Workforce Stabilization Loan Program to stabilize and maintain the congregate care workforce currently on the frontlines of the COVID-19 public health crisis. The fund will provide payroll support for frontline workers earning under \$20 per hour who work with seniors, people with developmental disabilities, individuals with mental health and substance abuse disorders, and young people in Rhode Island's Department of Children, Youth, and Families congregate care facilities.

To address the needs of workers, providers, and patients, EOHHS will offer forgivable loans to eligible providers on the condition that these funds are used to address the challenges facing these frontline workers. The loan will be forgiven, in full, if this condition and audit requirements are met.

Applications are due by Saturday May 2 at 5pm. Learn more:

<http://www.eohhs.ri.gov/Initiatives/Workforce.aspx>

### **Department of Human Services (DHS)**

DHS continues to be a critical resource and support for our families and individuals during these unprecedented times. Yet it has required us to adapt our work processes since our face-to-face assistance was eliminated for the safety of our customers and staff. Over the last few weeks, we have also sought many federal waivers, maximized the opportunities provided in our program's State Plans and investigated the creative suggestions from our staff and community partners to meet the needs of Rhode Islanders. Here is an overview of the majority of changes we've made to policy and procedure, and some items that are yet to come. They are divided into topics and/or programs.

#### Avoiding Disruption of Benefits

Public benefit programs require regular, usually annual, recertification to ensure a program recipient continues to receive the correct benefit for their household. This process, at minimum, involves returning a recertification form and may require verification of income or expenses and an interview with DHS staff. With waivers from our federal partners and some regulatory flexibility, we extended certification periods by six months for those due to recertify for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Rhode Island Works (RI Works), General Public Assistance (GPA), and/or Medicaid, in March, April and May. Those households will maintain their benefits through September, October, and November, respectively.

#### Increased Access and Flexibility for Interviews

With our office lobbies closed, we received federal waivers and issued state plan amendments to allow all required in-person interviews to happen over the phone. RI Works families have been able to apply for benefits and complete their required employment plans over the phone. SNAP and GPA interviews are happening over the phone to allow for eligibility to be determined and verified while maintaining safe distance. SNAP waivers have also allowed for an extension of our ability to postpone interviews for SNAP applicants who are eligible on an expedited timeline

and offers the flexibility to skip the interview entirely if we have all the information necessary to make an eligibility decision.

#### Increased Access Via Telephone

The Department has invested in the ability to complete more of our work via phone through telephonic signature functionality. Staff are introducing a recorded, telephonic signature to allow for the completion of a RI Works employment plan and the processing of applications for Long Term Services and Supports, which reduces the time related to mailing such forms that need signatures. FNS has approved a telephonic signature waiver that will allow SNAP applications to be accepted over the phone as well.

#### Increased SNAP Benefit Issuance for Increased Purchasing Power

We've received approval for two waivers that allowed for some SNAP recipient households to receive additional SNAP benefits. First, the USDA Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) authorized all households to receive the maximum SNAP benefit for their household size. In RI, that meant that 45% of our SNAP households received a supplement, increasing their March, April and May SNAP benefits to the maximum benefit amount. Second, RI was proud to be the second state in the nation approved for the distribution of Pandemic-EBT (P-EBT). P-EBT is a special SNAP benefit being made available to children who receive free or reduced-price meals in school when school is in session. Since school is closed due to COVID-19, those children will receive SNAP benefits in the amount of the value of those school meals. SNAP households with school age children where the system found an exact match received the additional benefit on April 20. Those children who receive free or reduced-price meals who do not receive SNAP benefits, or where the system didn't find an exact match for the SNAP household, will receive a special P-EBT card with that benefit on or about May 1.

#### Reducing Client Burden for Verification Standards

The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) has afforded states the opportunity to accept "self-attestation" from applicants for Medicaid. This waiver allows Medicaid eligibility to be determined as long as an applicant's immigration status is verified. This waiver further allows states to maintain Medicaid eligibility for all benefit recipients, regardless of life changes, as long as they remain in Rhode Island and don't have a change to immigration status. Therefore, a household who may have switched from Medicaid to qualified health plan (QHP) due to a change in income or household size will stay on Medicaid through the time of COVID-19.

#### Waiver of Penalty for Non-Compliance with Work Activities

SNAP participants who are identified as Able-Bodied Adults Without Dependents (ABAWDs), and thus are eligible to receive SNAP benefits for three months in a 36-month period unless meeting work requirements, will not be subject to that time limit until the end of the pandemic. SNAP participants who leave a job due to concerns about their health or safety will be provided a good cause exemption from the voluntary quit penalty. RI Works participants are being engaged in activities remotely but are also being provided with good cause exemptions if they do not participate in work activities at this time. Households that would have been terminated from RI Works for failure to cooperate are not being terminated and we've eased the transition to

hardship months for those households that would have come to the end of their 48-month time limit during this time.

#### Response to Federal COVID-19 Unemployment Insurance and Stimulus Payments

Per the federal CARES Act, the \$600 weekly Unemployment Insurance increase is not counted as income as part of the Medicaid or MPP eligibility calculations. The \$1,200 stimulus payment is disregarded for all public benefit programs.

#### Child Care for Essential Health Care Workers

Though family and center-based child care providers had to be closed due to social distancing requirements, the Department created opportunities for individual child care providers to have an emergency licensure to provide safe, secure care for the children of essential health care workers. The Rhode Island Department of Health (RIDOH) assisted with a creating strict, cohort-based model to maintain the safety of the children in care.

#### Access to Food

Though FNS allows SNAP recipients to order groceries via phone or the internet, payment for food requires the shopper to swipe their EBT card and enter their personal identification number (PIN). The Department is working with several community agencies, grocers, and farmers to facilitate access to mobile Point of Sale devices to allow for delivery to SNAP recipients. We've also submitted a waiver request to FNS to expand our existing Restaurant Meals Program to allow all SNAP recipient households to redeem their SNAP benefits in this manner. The Department is also preparing to submit a waiver for online purchasing that would eliminate the need for the on-site EBT card swipe and increase delivery access to SNAP recipients.

#### Support for Burial Services

In preparation for a potential increase in the need for State burial services, DHS has filed an emergency rule to allow for applications for GPA burial to have eligibility determined based on information attested to by the person filing the application for burial assistance. The Department is also working to pre-pay funeral homes to ensure burial services will be easily facilitated in case of increased need.

### **HealthSource RI (HSRI)**

HealthSource RI remains focused on connecting Rhode Islanders with high quality, affordable health coverage. Being covered is as important as ever and the team at HealthSource RI (HSRI) is working to ensure that those who need it can enroll by contacting our Contact Center, using webchat or accessing our online application. The following are a few important reminders regarding coverage through HSRI:COVID-19 related Special Enrollment Period:

[HealthSource RI \[health.us2.list-manage.com\]](https://health.us2.list-manage.com) offered a limited-time Special Enrollment Period following Governor Raimondo's State of Emergency declaration in response to COVID-19. Uninsured Rhode Islanders were able to purchase coverage through April 30, 2020. Coverage will begin on the first of the month following the application.

Other Special Enrollment Periods:

In addition to the Special Enrollment Period, HealthSource RI offers year-round enrollment for Rhode Islanders who experience qualifying life changes (e.g., losing employer-sponsored health coverage, getting married, turning 26 and transitioning off a parent's insurance, having a baby, or moving to RI). The Special Enrollment Period is available for sixty-days after the qualifying life event has taken place.

**Drive-Thru Payment at CVS:**

You can now pay your HealthSource RI bill at a CVS Pharmacy(R) without going into the store. Pay your HealthSource RI bill using the drive-thru window! Just bring your invoice barcode page and pay using a credit/debit card or cash.

HealthSource RI is Here to Help: To purchase coverage or for more information, please go to [www.HealthSourceRI.com](http://www.HealthSourceRI.com) [[health.us2.list-manage.com](http://health.us2.list-manage.com)] or contact the HealthSource RI call center Monday through Friday, 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. at 1-855-840-4774.

*HealthSource RI Special Enrollment Period Fact Sheet:*

- [Did you lose your healthcare coverage? \[health.us2.list-manage.com\]](http://health.us2.list-manage.com) (English)
- [¿Perdió su cobertura de salud? \[health.us2.list-manage.com\]](http://health.us2.list-manage.com) (Spanish)

Thank you for your continued partnership with us, and work for all Rhode Islanders.

Stay well,

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