FNS USDA
Food & Nutrition Service

**MODERNIZATION OF THE
FOOD STAMP PROGRAM IN FLORIDA
SUMMARY**

Office of Research, Nutrition and Analysis   **February 2008**

Background

In 2004, Florida's Department of Children and Families (DCF) implemented major changes to the way it administers the Food Stamp Program (FSP) and other public assistance programs. The modernization effort, known as Automated Community Connection to Economic Self-Sufficiency or "ACCESS Florida," was designed to simplify application processing and case maintenance, reduce administrative costs, and improve client access to services.

In 2005, the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) funded a case study that provided a comprehensive description of Florida's modernized FSP as of 2006. It also provided a discussion of how the key program changes might affect client access, administrative costs, error rates, and client satisfaction, and it examined key indicators of FSP performance before and after ACCESS Florida was implemented.

The study does not provide an impact assessment in which observed changes in FSP performance can be attributed specifically to the State's modernization initiative. ACCESS Florida was implemented statewide, so no comparison sites were available to distinguish the influence of modernization from other potential factors. The study also was not designed to provide a cost-benefit analysis that can determine whether the benefits of the new model outweigh its costs. Finally, the findings pertain to a relatively early phase of ACCESS Florida, which is still evolving.

Method

The study used data from three primary sources:

1. Interviews with DCF and community partner staff.
2. Discussion groups composed of recent food stamp applicants and potential clients.
3. Administrative data on FSP applications and participation, administrative costs, and error rates.

In-person staff interviews and discussion groups with food stamp clients were conducted in 4 of Florida's 14 administrative districts between July and September 2006. The districts were purposively selected to capture urban and rural populations and large concentrations of elderly persons and Hispanics, and to facilitate interviews with Customer Call Center staff. Telephone interviews conducted in three additional districts provided information on program variations. Statewide administrative records on FSP participants before and after implementation of ACCESS Florida were analyzed, and data on costs and other factors were reviewed.

Florida DCF Districts & Customer Call Centers (CCC)
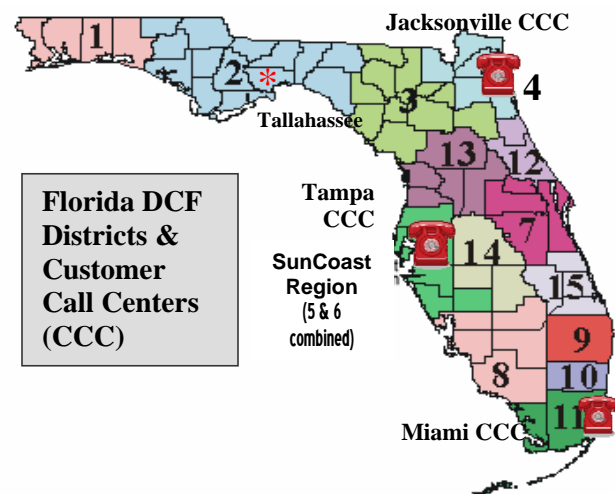
Key Changes Under ACCESS Florida

The key changes can be classified into three categories:

1. **Organization Restructuring**—The DCF structure was reorganized to specialize the various tasks performed by caseworkers. Separate staffs conduct interviews, determine eligibility, and monitor cases. This allows work to be shifted from overburdened staff to

underutilized staff. Specialization also supports the goal of more efficient completion of tasks and thus allowed DCF to reduce the workforce by consolidating and centralizing many activities. For food stamp clients, reorganization meant that they were no longer working with a single caseworker.

In addition to internal restructuring, DCF developed partnerships with community organizations to serve as locations where clients can apply online for benefits and receive various levels of application assistance. Partners do not determine eligibility.

2. **Policy and Procedural Changes**—To further improve workforce efficiency and simplify the application process for clients, policies and procedures were changed to make client intake and case maintenance easier. DCF shortened the eligibility interview for most clients (screened as low-risk for errors) from 1 hour to less than 15 minutes, relied more heavily on telephone interviews, and reduced client verification requirements. They also restructured the reception areas of local offices, known as Customer Service Centers (CSCs), to provide computer stations, copiers, fax machines, and secure drop boxes for clients' use. As a result, many application and reporting functions previously performed by DCF staff (e.g., data entry and copying) were turned into client self-service procedures.

3. **Technology Changes**—DCF used technology to produce additional efficiencies and facilitate restructuring. Clients could apply electronically through the Intranet at computer stations in CSCs or through the Internet from their home or community partners. Expanded access through the Web-based application also facilitated the closure of CSCs across the State. The majority of clients use the Web application to apply for food stamp benefits, even those who travel to the CSCs.

Florida also developed three high-tech Customer Call Centers for participants to report changes in their circumstances and ask questions about their case. An Automated Response Unit (ARU) allows customers to obtain basic information about DCF programs and on the status of their pending applications.

Any questions that cannot be answered by the ARU menus are transferred to a live call agent.

Finally, DCF adopted document-imaging technology to maintain all case files electronically, enabling any worker to access information for updates and inquiries.

Key Milestones
ACCESS Florida Development

2003	• Florida legislature mandated DCF cost savings • SunCoast Region piloted key reforms
2004	• Changes to organization of Customer Service Centers (i.e., local offices) implemented statewide • Customer Call Centers developed
2005	• Staff roles restructured • Key policy reforms implemented • Web-based application launched • Community Partner Network established
2006	• Document imaging system launched • Case study of ACCESS Florida

Findings

Program Access—Information on FSP caseload trends in Florida is insufficient to suggest that program access improved or became more difficult.

- After growing steadily from 2001 to 2004, Florida's FSP caseload stopped growing in 2005 when ACCESS Florida was implemented. While ACCESS Florida may have led to the flattened trend, the decline in the State's unemployment rate from 4.6 to 3.2 percent between 2004 and 2006 is another plausible explanation for lower caseload growth.

- The FSP caseload composition in 2006 was almost identical to that of 2004. Participation by subgroups that might be affected most by modernization changes (the elderly, non-English speakers, and disabled) did not change.

- Across the State, declines in caseload growth rate were largest in counties where Customer Service Centers had closed.

- While the caseload stopped growing under modernization, the number of applications for

food stamps and other assistance was about 10,000 higher in July 2006 compared to July 2004. Denials were also higher for reasons that could not be determined in this study. Simplification of rules, online applications, and less burdensome interviews could account for the increased volume of applications.

Administrative Costs—Since the State's 2003-2004 Fiscal Year, DCF reduced annual operating costs for **all ACCESS Florida programs** (i.e., including the FSP and others) by $58 million (22 percent) and its total workforce by more than 40 percent.

- The largest reductions came from the salaries and fringe benefits of the downsized workforce. Additional savings ensued from the closure of 62 (out of 145) Customer Service Centers.

- Most of the technological changes under ACCESS Florida were developed in house by DCF staff. Call center technology and other purchased software were funded from the workforce savings.

Payment Errors—Payment errors appear to have increased in Florida under ACCESS Florida. Rates increased from under 6 percent in Federal Fiscal Year (FFY) 2004 to 8.4 percent in FFY 2006.

- The rate increase may reflect the effect of the numerous changes to application procedures under ACCESS Florida and/or the backlog of FSP recertifications that occurred when DCF relocated staff to process hurricane-related disaster benefits in 2004 and 2005.

- **Client Satisfaction**—Although many clients indicated problems with specific components of modernization, nearly all rated their most recent FSP experience as more positive than previous ones with DCF. Shorter interviews, shorter wait times, and reduced documentation requirements made applying for food stamp benefits easier.

- A smaller but substantial set of clients expressed difficulty with the online application and the Customer Call Centers. They found the ARU confusing, and experienced long wait times to speak to a call agent. Some clients preferred working with a single caseworker.

Lessons Learned

Other States can learn from Florida's approach, but their experiences may be different.

- The policy, organizational, and technology changes made by Florida are comprehensive and interdependent. Another viable option is to implement pieces of ACCESS Florida, but the results may be different.

- The development and implementation of Florida ACCESS was influenced by the State's unique demographic characteristics (e.g., large elderly and Hispanic populations) and institutional factors (e.g., a State merit system that allowed reductions-in-force not based solely on seniority).

- Florida created special software to connect its Web application and legacy mainframe. Other States will have different systems and technological challenges.

For More Information

Cody, Scott; Renee Nogales; Emily Sama Martin. *Modernization of the Food Stamp Program in Florida.* Prepared by Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., for the Food and Nutrition Service. February 2008. (Available online at www.fns.usda.gov/fns)

Acknowledgement

LESSONS LEARNED

Start-Up:
- Rapid implementation timeline needed to meet the Florida legislature's mandated cost savings was achieved at the expense of a smoother transition period.

- Regular communication across all staff levels, before implementation and over time, was an effective means of obtaining staff buy-in, solving problems, and sharing best practices.

- Florida emphasized adherence to core features of modernization, but also recognized the need for some local organizational flexibility.

- Reliance on client self-reporting may have increased errors and is being scaled back.

- Major organizational changes also bring changes in the skill levels needed by staff, causing turnover and recruitment problems.

- The development and maintenance of a Community Partner Network requires the commitment of full-time staff to recruit, train, and communicate with and monitor partners.

Client Access:
- Assistance in the lobbies and computer areas of Customer Service Centers (CSCs) is crucial to accustom clients to modernization.

- Overall the policy and procedural changes reduced client burden by requiring fewer trips to CSCs, offering access outside usual work hours, and requiring less documentation. The closure of many CSCs and the elimination of the caseworker model were difficult adjustments for other clients.

- Adjustments to modernization are greater for some clients but one cannot assume that all members of a subgroup will have the same experience. (For example, elderly persons with no computer skills are often aided by family and friends.)

- Less jargon and clearer language would make the online application more user-friendly, reducing client burden and errors.

Technology
- Software that can transfer data from the Web application to the mainframe database (where eligibility and benefits are determined) and recall client data stored in the mainframe database in order to electronically enter this information in other forms and reports is essential for realizing expected efficiencies. Eliminating manual reentry of client data may also reduce errors.

- Better understanding of the expected volume of calls to the Customer Call Centers is needed to prevent unplanned shortages of call agents that disrupt workflow in other units. Work shortages and turnover in these centers will require new approaches to assigning existing staff and recruiting more call agents.

Costs
- Software development is ongoing and will require an information technology budget that goes beyond initial development costs.

- Without financial support, some organizations may be unlikely to join the Community Partnership Network. The most common type of cost incurred by community partners is technology upgrades.

- Reducing leasing costs from closing CSCs will take time, as many leasing agreements are long-term.