



Excellent Service for All

Innovation in the Food Stamp Program

Access, Outreach, Payment Accuracy, Nutrition Education, Certification Policy & Quality Control

U.S. Department of Agriculture
Food and Nutrition Service
Mid-Atlantic Region
Food Stamp Program

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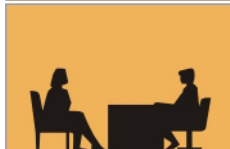
Positive Actions for Negative Errors

This issue of *Excellent Service for All* looks at ways to improve the negative error rate, the calculation of which is based on denials, terminations and suspensions of food stamp households.

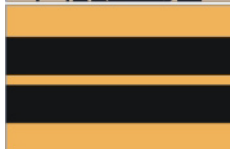
The consequences of erroneously turning away eligible customers can be staggering to customers and administering agencies alike:



Without access to the Food Stamp Program, eligible customers may go hungry. Economically insecure households *count* on their food stamp benefits. They *depend* on them.



When eligible households encounter difficulty at the food stamp office, the accompanying negative publicity erodes public and legislator confidence in and support for the Food Stamp Program.



A negative error rate of more than 1 percent requires the submission of a corrective action plan to the Food and Nutrition Service. This takes time and attention that could be devoted to other activities.



Incorrect denials, suspensions and terminations reduce the chances for state agencies to receive a performance bonus from the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Most agencies can imagine a number of great ways to take advantage of this additional funding.

Within the following pages you'll find an article on the successful actions taken by staff of the Maryland Department of Human Resources to lower the negative error rate. While Maryland, let's just say, wasn't really even close to the rates of the states that received performance bonuses for "lowest" or "most-improved" negative error rates in 2005, for the first nine months of fiscal year 2006, the negative error rate there was almost half what it was.

Another article also outlines what the Virginia Department of Social Services has been doing to prevent invalid negative actions. For fiscal year 2005, the Virginia negative error rate was 9.15 percent.

As you read about the error reduction strategies of Maryland and Virginia, think about the efforts you are putting forth to ensure proper access to the Food Stamp Program. Note the ideas that have been implemented by these colleagues, and get in touch with them to swap information.

USDA Awards States \$18 Million for Access and Application Processing

The U.S. Department of Agriculture recently awarded bonuses to several state agencies for providing the best or most-improved access to the Food Stamp Program in 2005 and having the highest percent of food stamp applications processed timely in 2005.

Awardees for 2005 Performance

Best Program Access Index

	Rate	Award
Missouri	77.4%	\$1,399,616
District of Columbia	72.9%	\$ 293,222
Maine	72.3%	\$ 440,475
Tennessee	71.2%	\$1,729,032
National	50.6%	

Most-Improved Program Access Index

	Rate	Change	Award
Washington	53.5%	07.5%	\$1,192,325
Illinois	60.5%	04.9%	\$2,366,422
New York	53.5%	04.9%	\$4,088,410
Iowa	49.4%	04.8%	\$ 490,498

Best Application Processing Timeliness Rate

	Rate	Award
Massachusetts	99.5%	\$1,092,542
North Carolina	97.8%	\$2,035,244
District of Columbia	97.8%	\$ 350,003
Kentucky	97.8%	\$1,484,700
West Virginia	97.6%	\$ 742,671
Montana	96.9%	\$ 294,840
National Average	89.5%	

The West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources also received a bonus for program access performance in 2004, as well as bonuses for application processing performance in 2003 and 2004. The District of Columbia Department of Human Services received bonuses for program access performance in 2003 and 2004 (see page 6 for information on an access activity of the District of Columbia Department of Human Services).

Additionally, the July 2006 edition of *Excellent Service for All* included articles on the program access and application processing initiatives of West Virginia and an article on telephone interviewing, which is used extensively by the Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance to increase program access. Massachusetts also received a bonus for application processing performance in 2004.

Percentage of Poverty and Census Survey Changes to Program Access Index

The 2002 Farm Bill authorized the U.S. Department of Agriculture to award bonuses annually to states that demonstrate high or most-improved performance in the areas of access, application processing timeliness, payment accuracy and negative accuracy.

The awards for access are based on the Program Access Index for each state, as calculated by the Food and Nutrition Service.

The Program Access Index represents the ratio of the average monthly number of food stamp participants to the number of people with income below a particular percentage of poverty.

For 2003 and 2004 performance, they were based on the Census Bureau's Current Population Survey and 100 percent of poverty. *For 2005, however, they were based on the Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS) and 125 percent of poverty, and in order to provide the performance bonuses for most-improved, the 2004 Program Access Index for each state was correspondingly recalculated using ACS and 125 percent of poverty.*

As noted in the proposed and final rules that established the bonuses, the Food and Nutrition Service had reserved the right to use the ACS.

The most significant difference between the surveys: ACS is the largest in the nation, and unlike the CPS, it is mandatory. Because the ACS sample is about 30 times larger than the CPS sample (3 million households vs. 100,000 households), it is expected to produce more precise state estimates, and, therefore, result in a more equitable distribution of awards. For the nation, ACS and CPS are very close in their estimated number of people with income under 125 percent of poverty.

To obtain information about the change to the American Community Survey: www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/rules/Memo/06/080206a.pdf.

Ways to Improve the Negative Error Rate and Access...

One way to measure how well the public can access the Food Stamp Program is to monitor the negative error rate, which was 5.91 percent nationally for fiscal year 2005. As you read this article, bear in mind, improper denials, suspensions and terminations are not customer-caused but are cause for customer concern. The negative error rate should garner a good deal of attention from every state and local food stamp office. If it's not excellent, then customer access and service are not excellent.



The Maryland Department of Human Resources (MD DHR) has implemented a number of initiatives to decrease its negative error rate, all of which have brought success to the state. Through the first nine months of fiscal year 2006, the negative error rate there was almost half what it was last fiscal year. Here's how this happened.

FNS and Maryland launch joint project -

MD DHR conducted an in-depth analysis of all invalid negative actions that occurred in 2005, and the Mid-Atlantic Regional Office of the Food and Nutrition Service re-reviewed negative actions that occurred during a six-month period in 2005. They found many instances of automatic closure before ongoing eligibility was established in expedited service cases, automatic denial even though verification actually was in the case record and denial when customers actually had attended the interview. In addition, applications were denied for verification that was a requirement only for other benefit programs.

Tweaking the technology -

MD DHR made some changes to its automated eligibility system and the pay-off has been significant. An alert now advises the eligibility specialists on the 50th day when action to complete the case has not been taken. MD DHR officials say, after the alert was added, the total number of negative actions decreased 17.38 percent, or an average of 7,727 per month.

State and local staff and a five-act play...

To resolve some of the problems not related to the automated system, the state secured the help of Alligator DONE-Deed. Yes, that's right.

The causes of negative errors and hindrances to application timeliness were explored through the adventures of eligibility specialist, Alligator DONE-Deed, during a five-act play of the same name. The performance by state and local agency staff was part of the MD DHR training session for all eligibility specialists, supervisors and members of management in the local agencies throughout the state.

Much to the amusement of the audience (and themselves), the actors dressed the part of swamp creatures. Emerging from the swamp, the trainees were better equipped to smack mosquitoes and side-step quicksand (... as they made their way through the daily routine of an eligibility specialist, the training participants learned of strategies to avoid common errors).

After the last curtain call, a more serious side of the training kicked-in - a policy game, modeled after a popular television show, which brought the participants to their feet answering questions from categories such as "Annoying Mosquitoes" and "Sneaky Snakes." Small prizes were awarded.

Alligator DONE-Deed was written by Vesta Kimble, quality control director, MD DHR.

Yes, it actually was serious...

The training also included experts from policy, quality control and automation. They provided an overview of the problems uncovered in the data study, ways to reverse the negative situation and interactive training on, and case examples for, the 7- and 30-day processing and redetermination procedures, ➔

Negative Actions Guide

The National Payment Accuracy Workgroup, comprised of staff from each regional office of the Food and Nutrition Service, developed a guide of critical initiatives for the accurate determination of denials, terminations and suspensions.

Within the nine sections of *Keys to Valid Negative Actions*, readers will find information on:

- Providing access to the program and the resulting consequences of inaccurate case work;
- Communicating top-level commitment;
- Analyzing all data for root causes;
- Reviewing and correcting cases;
- Reducing or eliminating problem areas;
- Verifying and documenting thoroughly;
- Ensuring automation fully supports eligibility;
- Providing eligibility specialists with tools to determine eligibility; and
- Informing customers of timeframes and verification requirements.

To obtain a copy of *Keys to Valid Negative Actions*: diane.gething@fns.usda.gov.

...[Maryland initiatives](#)

verification requirements, timeframes for taking action on reported changes, narration principles and the automated eligibility system. The handouts included a booklet of cheat sheets.

A motivational speaker rounded out the training with a presentation on moving up the ladder.

To swap information, contact Vesta Kimble, Maryland Department of Human Resources, (410) 767-7947, vkimble@dhr.state.md.us.

4★Excellent Service for All

Virginia

...Improve Negatives and Access

These valid points about invalid negative cases, and positive actions to reduce negative errors, are part of an ongoing presentation that is provided by the Virginia Department of Social Services (VA DSS) to reduce errors:

1) Incorrect denials, terminations and suspensions mean customers are not receiving their rightful benefits.

2) These agency-caused errors bring to mind questions about the quality of customer service.

3) If the state agency has a negative error rate 1 percent or greater than the national average, it must submit a corrective action plan to the Food and Nutrition Service.

4) If the negative error rate is not among the lowest or most-improved, the state agency will not get a performance bonus from the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Lurking About

In addition to this message, error cases and applicable policy is explained and error prevention is discussed during meetings with the 19 local agencies that represent 53 percent of the caseload and at the annual meeting held by the eligibility specialists' professional organization.

The presentation is based largely on an analysis by VA DSS of the negative actions that occurred in fiscal years 2004 and 2005 and what's happening currently. Denying cases too early constitutes a large portion of the error pool. Runners-up: time-limited participation, voluntary quit/reduction in work effort, resources, household composition and students and other policy misapplications.

Read All About It

Another angle to reduce the negative error rate was the hiring of six full-time case readers, three of whom work within the two largest local agencies. They review as large a sample of active and negative cases as possible before action is taken (denied, approved, etc.). Additionally, the 19 largest local agencies are encouraged to include negative cases in their case reading activities. VA DSS also provides field consultants throughout the state, to assist local offices with policy questions and assess training needs.

About Face

VA DSS is making changes as well to the automated eligibility system to reverse the negatives situation. An alert was added to prevent denial prior to the normal processing timeframe, a field will enable eligibility specialists to explain why a negative action was made, and a denial code for failing to cooperate with quality control will be displayed on prior-certified cases.

VA DSS also attended one of the negative error reduction trainings provided by the Maryland Department of Human Resources (see page 3, *Ways to Improve the Negative Error Rate and Program Access...*).



To swap information, contact Cathy Pemberton, Virginia Department of Social Services, (804) 726-7398, catherine.pemberton@dss.virginia.gov.



2006 Food Stamp Hunger Champions

The Food Stamp Outreach Coalition announced this past month the winners of the 2006 Food Stamp Hunger Champion awards. The program honors local offices that provide exemplary service in helping eligible customers obtain food stamps.

Mentors

Ashtabula County (Ohio) Department of Job and Family Services
North Shore Transitional Assistance Office,
Massachusetts

Honorable Mentors

**Brunswick County Department of Social Services,
Lawrenceville, Virginia**

Implemented several practices that remove barriers to participation. An EBT educational video playing in the waiting area, an automated 24-hour food stamp information line and monthly newsletters to community churches and organizations are just a few of the practices used to increase participation in this rural community.

Catawba County Department of Social Services,
Newton, North Carolina
Lancaster (California) District Office
McCree District Office, Flint, Michigan
Springfield (Vermont) Economic Services
Texas Health and Human Services, Houston
Wichita (Kansas) Regional Office

The Mentors were given awards in October at the Food Stamp Directors Conference held by the American Public Human Services Association. The Food and Nutrition Service also will provide plaques to the Honorable Mentors and a certificate to each nominated office.

Within the Mid-Atlantic Region of the Food and Nutrition Service, nominations were received for these local offices:

Delaware

Claymont DSS Teams 032 and 035
New Castle DSS Team 177
Dover DSS Teams 312, 400, 630 and 710
Georgetown DSS Teams 720, 812, 860 and 930

Maryland

Baltimore City Department of Social Services
Garrett County Department of Social Services
Prince George's County Department
of Social Services

Virginia

Brunswick County Department of Social Services
Chesterfield/Colonial Heights Department
of Social Services
Fairfax Department of Family Services
Fredericksburg Department of Social Services
Prince Edward County Department
of Social Services

West Virginia

Summers County Department
of Health and Human Resources
WV DHHR, Martinsburg
WV DHHR, Summersville

To obtain a complete list: www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/outreach/hunger-champions_06.pdf.

The Food Stamp Outreach Coalition, formed by the Food and Nutrition Service, is a national group of organizations and government agencies that share ideas and resources to improve accessibility to and increase participation in the Food Stamp Program.

For information on the Food Stamp Hunger Champions program or the Food Stamp Outreach Coalition: FSOC@fns.usda.gov.

Partnering to Increase Community Awareness



The Income Maintenance Administration (IMA) of the District of Columbia Department of Human Services receives a lot of invitations to participate in outreach events and meetings. Its desire to capitalize on these opportunities to meet with people who are interested in learning more about the Food Stamp Program, led IMA in February 2005 to create a group called Public Education Liaison (PEL).

The mission of the PEL members is to bring awareness of nutrition assistance initiatives and information to appropriate external audiences as well as internal stakeholders. "The Public Education Liaison group is a good vehicle for what we do," says Ellen Wells, DHS deputy administrator of Program Development and Training. "They provide consistent and timely information about the Food Stamp Program."

The PELs are from the agency training unit and units within the Division of Program Development and Training. The five individuals work in this function part-time. By the very nature of their regular assignments – training and policy development and explanation - PEL activities are a natural off-shoot for interaction with the community and front-line staff, says Ellen.

External Outreach

PEL members cite the following examples of how their personal touch helps to establish strong relationships in the community and facilitate recognition of IMA as an agency close to its customers.

Their messages are delivered where and when the audience is likely to be comfortable and receptive in a supportive environment. The experience of PEL member and trainer Felicia Green Holt with a local church, illustrates this underlying strategy of PEL. The seniors of Walker Memorial Baptist Church were comfortable in their church home asking questions about nutrition assistance, and at the end of the session, the pastor invited Felicia to make a return visit. "I feel really connected to the seniors now," says Felicia. "And, I know I helped dispel some food stamp myths."

IMA has a standing invitation to appear at a monthly food distribution in southeast DC. PEL member Charlene Davis is the "IMA face" for this event. She provides brochures and applications, answers questions on-the-spot, assists with completing applications and when necessary, records customer inquiries for later research and response.

An overview of *Eat Smart, Play Hard*, an initiative of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, was provided recently to a school principal and the PTA by PEL member Sam Jenkins.

PELs have promoted the Food Stamp Program at job centers and talked with teenage mothers and grandmothers who are raising grandchildren. They also integrate tips on nutrition in their work, directing the community audience to the Food Stamp Nutrition Education Program administered by the District of Columbia Department of Health.

Internal Outreach

Each of the PELs is assigned to a specific IMA center or office. They meet regularly with IMA managers and staff to highlight articles of particular note from *Excellent Service for All*, share their outreach experiences and materials, respond to questions and concerns about the operation of the Food Stamp Program, and they learn about staff and customer reaction to program changes.

To swap information, contact: Ellen Wells, District of Columbia Department of Human Services, (202) 698-3946, ellenm.wells@dc.gov.

USDA Awards \$1 Million in Outreach Grants to Non-Profit Organizations

The U.S. Department of Agriculture awarded outreach grants to 15 faith- and community-based organizations recently to raise awareness about the benefits of the Food Stamp Program among eligible low-income people such as the working poor, legal immigrants and the elderly.

The grantees plan to use a variety of outreach strategies, including information dissemination, pre-screening, application assistance, community events,

education programs and train-the-trainer programs. Most will work with partners, such as other faith- or community-based organizations, senior service programs, food banks or pantries, health care providers and housing programs.

Grant opportunities were available to private non-profit organizations, including faith- and community-based organizations and public entities with the exception of state and local food stamp offices.

2006 Grantees

- **The Food Bank of Monmouth and Ocean Counties, Neptune, New Jersey**
\$45,087, one-year project
- **PathWays PA, Inc. Holmes, Pennsylvania**
\$75,000, one-year project
- Catholic Charities of Wichita, Inc.
\$60,528, two-year project
- East Arkansas Family Health Center, Inc., West Memphis
\$74,918, two-year project
- Families Under Urban and Social Attack, Inc., Houston
\$74,847, one-year project
- Genesys Health System/Health Access, Grand Blanc, Michigan
\$74,901, two-year project
- Greater Waterbury Interfaith Ministries
\$61,050, one-year project
- Intercultural Family Health Education Center, Inc., West Palm Beach
\$74,087, one-year project
- Louisville/Jefferson County Metro Government
\$74,939, 16-month project
- Montana Food Bank Network, Inc., Missoula
\$69,000, two-year project
- New Hampshire Housing Finance Authority, Bedford
\$69,685, 18-month project
- The Salvation Army, Roseville, Minnesota
\$75,000, two-year project
- Special Services for Groups, Los Angeles
\$75,000, two-year project
- Structured Employment Economic Development Corporation, New York, New York
\$75,000, one-year project
- United Way of Tuscon and Southern Arizona
\$75,000, one-year project

The Food Bank of Monmouth and Ocean Counties

PathWays PA, Inc.

Within the Mid-Atlantic Region of the Food and Nutrition Service, The Food Bank of Monmouth and Ocean Counties and PathWays PA, Inc. were among the 15 organizations awarded a 2006 outreach grant by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

The one-year project of the Food Bank of Monmouth and Ocean Counties in Neptune, New Jersey, will target the working poor, seniors and legal immigrants in the two counties. Replicating a model from a nearby food bank, The Food Bank of Monmouth and Ocean Counties will train staff and volunteers at all member agencies to pre-screen, provide application assistance and disseminate information.

PathWays PA, Inc., in Holmes, Pennsylvania, will launch a community-based effort to distribute information, pre-screen using laptop computers and provide on-line application assistance to low-wage workers in Delaware County through its one-year project.

To get additional information on the projects of the outreach grantees:
www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/outreach/grants/2006/2006-summary.htm.

An outreach grant opportunity is made available annually to private non-profit organizations and public entities (except state and local food stamp offices) by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Eight grants of \$125,000 were awarded this past year. Congreso de Latinos Unidos of Philadelphia was among the grantees.

Congreso is a community-based, non-profit organization with a mission to strengthen Latino communities through social, economic, education and health services, leadership development and advocacy. The grant allowed the organization to establish a food stamp enrollment campaign of education and outreach to increase participation in the Food Stamp Program.

The following information on Congreso's one-year project targeted to the working poor, immigrants and seniors was based on an interview with Congreso representatives Nicholas Torres, executive director, and Sybille Damas, project grant coordinator.

Overall, the goal of Congreso's outreach initiative was to provide support to individuals, families and the community as a whole on their path to self-sustainability through increased use of food stamp benefits. This was accomplished within the framework of providing eligible participants with the information necessary to make educated decisions about participation in the Food Stamp Program.

Congreso de Latinos Unidos provides bilingual and bicultural services to people of all ages through a variety of social programs. The organization's approach gives it the ability to reach a population that has been traditionally difficult to enroll in nutrition assistance programs, particularly the Food Stamp Program. Congreso's reputation within the community transcends the

stigma attached to many government programs within a culture that promotes self-sufficiency.

To accomplish the educational aspect of the campaign, Congreso worked within its existing programs to identify potential enrollees during their intake process. These programs provided an opportunity to pre-screen applicants for benefits using a tool designed by a partner organization with a similar mission - the Greater Philadelphia Coalition Against Hunger. Congreso's approach provided a safe place for immigrants to seek advice on the best way to apply for food stamps.

Through the project, 196 people were pre-screened and 187 applied directly for benefits.

While interacting with their clients, the Congreso staff was able to dispel myths surrounding food stamp eligibility for immigrants.

The effectiveness of the grant was proven by the results of surveys given to participants. Of the individuals contacted, more than 90 percent were more aware of the Food Stamp Program than previously. Overall, the campaign directly affected 2,710 individuals.

In addition to providing program access through education, the campaign produced an effective outreach effort to engage and educate the community through the media. This aspect of the project was especially challenging because of the wide range of clientele served by Congreso. As executive

director Nicholas Torres observed, "To be effective, it was critical for us to find the vehicle that would be most effective in communicating our message. To meet this challenge, we considered all forms of media at our disposal in order to find a common denominator."

Congreso found that radio was the most effective way to get its message to the public.

Through a series of 10 weekly radio shows that focused on the Food Stamp Program, Congreso estimated that it reached 150,000 people. In addition, it was observed that the number of calls received by Congreso increased considerably after the radio shows were broadcast. While radio was found to be the most effective media tool, newspapers also had a significant impact. Nine advertisements in four Spanish-language newspapers reached an average of 10,000 readers per issue.

Lessons-Learned

It is difficult to change the misconceptions about the Food Stamp Program; for example, among the working poor there is a belief that food stamps are a form of welfare and using them was counter to the value of not needing public assistance. A solution to this issue would be a more sustained message to educate employers about the program benefits.

It is possible to develop a relationship with administrators of local food stamp offices.

USDA Awards \$5 Million in Participation Grants

Congreso plans to provide updates of the organization's services and mission to these offices; this will go far to create an even better working relationship.

Throughout the campaign, Congreso realized it was critical to establish partnerships and collaborative efforts with multiple entities in order to educate people about the benefits of the Food Stamp Program. These partnerships reinforced the message and created awareness of the multiple resources within the community. Sybille Damas, project coordinator explains, "The FNS grant allowed us to step outside of our normal mission and expand our reach in the community."

Sustainability also was an important aspect of the campaign effort.

A one-year grant only "starts the ball rolling." Staff focused on maintaining momentum by implementing three main components: cross-training staff on alternative program enrollment systems; incorporating food stamp education in all social service components; and continually seeking diverse funding sources through enhanced partnerships with federal, state and local government, as well as faith- and community-based organizations.

Congreso has enjoyed working on this project and will continue its efforts of providing education and reducing the barriers to food stamp participation. The educational experience provided to its clients allowed the organization to learn from these individuals. Nicholas notes, "The grant provided us with a learning opportunity that was beneficial to use organizationally."

Five participation grants totaling close to \$5 million were awarded recently to state agencies and faith- and community-based organizations by the U.S. Department of Agriculture to improve customer service and access to the Food Stamp Program. The grant projects will involve the development of web-based applications and application sites outside of the traditional social services office.

2006 Grantees

- **State Information Technology Consortium**
In partnership with the Virginia Department of Social Services, Virginia Legal Aid Society and Virginia Department for the Aging
The Consortium will develop an automated application for food stamps and Meals on Wheels that can be used in customers' homes through mobile technology. The Consortium also will develop an XML web service that will take data from a phone and on-line database intake process of Legal Aid, use it to populate a food stamp application and route the application to the appropriate local department of Social Services. The Consortium will post the source code, business process documentation and technical documentation on the Internet for use by any organization interested in replicating this strategy.
- **San Francisco Human Services Agency**
In partnership with faith- and community-based organizations
The project calls for the establishment of a phone bank, a web-based screening and application tool and remote enrollment and recertification sites in neighborhoods throughout the city.
- **Georgia Department of Human Resources**
In cooperation with the Georgia Department of Aging Services and Christ Lutheran Church
A web-based food stamp application will be created to allow pre-screening and submission of applications online, submission of change reports by e-mail and transfer of cases between counties.
- **Angel Food Ministries in Alabama**
With the endorsement of the Alabama State Agency
Computers and point-of-sale devices, loaded with the pre-screening tool of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, a printable version of the food stamp application, a list of verification requirements and information about other community resources, will be placed within 50 sites of Angel Food Ministries. Site volunteers will assist individuals with filling out the application and delivering it to the appropriate food stamp office. Point-of-sale technology will allow customers to use their Electronic Benefits Transfer cards to purchase groceries at the sites.

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Caseload Management

Timely completion of tasks and organization can be a challenge for eligibility specialists whose job is to manage a large number of the cases. At the York County Assistance Office in Pennsylvania, casework supervisor, Philip Tomb and supervisor, Stephanie Ludwig developed a guide to address these concerns.

Caseload Management Guide, Putting It All Together, contains these daily and monthly tasks and checklists.

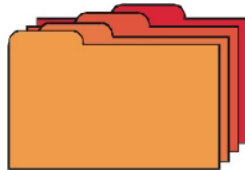
Things To Do Daily

The daily routine of eligibility specialists should include changing voicemail recordings, retrieving and writing down voicemail messages, completing at least three checks of the Income Eligibility Verification System, reading intranet notices of policy clarifications and changes, checking at least three times for reminders or notices generated by the automated eligibility system, checking mail that requires some kind of response, follow-up, etc., completing semi-annual report forms and going to the daily tickler file, all of which should be completed within the first two hours of the day.

During the remainder of the day, the eligibility specialists should retrieve and write down voicemail

messages again at noon and near the end of the work shift, return all calls the day they were received, review the list of pending applications and information from the automated restitution referral and computation system, complete each appointment within one hour, act promptly on all mail and date-stamp all documents that will be filed in the case record.

Putting It All Together



Tips – Six Basic Steps: How to be More Organized

Caseload Management Guide, Putting It All Together also includes six organizational skills for eligibility specialists:

1. Time Management – Be open and willing to experiment with different time management techniques to find what works best.
2. Tools – Use the organizational tools already available, such as calendars, folders, filing system, computer access/programs, phone call logs and office equipment and support.
3. Task Completion – Be flexible when striving to complete tasks because work interruptions are inevitable. Focus on goal-setting and follow-through to complete assignments.
4. Prioritize Work - Prepare today for customer interviews tomorrow by printing the schedule, pulling cases and having forms ready. It is important to consider the items that are more important and impending deadlines. Those items should be completed first.
5. Reorganize Daily - Maintain separate files for pending cases. For each case, it is important to tag and arrange the cases by due date.
6. Get into a Routine – Establish a routine to make a productive work day; for example, remember to return all calls by the end of the day, clean the desk area, empty the in-box and discard outdated papers. Although these may seem like menial tasks, allowing them to build can decrease organization and productivity, making it difficult to catch up.

To swap information, contact Philip Tomb, York County Assistance Office, (717) 771-1130, ptomb@state.pa.us; and Stephanie Ludwig, York County Assistance Office, (717) 771-1227, sludwig@state.pa.us.

Increasing Confidence and Knowledge of Program Policy

What three items must be verified at recertification? The nervous, new employee who is participating in the policy training breathes a sigh of relief because she has a help card called "Get Help from a Teammate." She gets the answer from a more experienced team member. (As a new eligibility specialist, she also could have used the food stamp manual as a reference.) Her team wins a point for its correct answer. The certification policy game, FAP Attack, continues with the next roll of the dice...

This scenario is probably much like the competitions that took place between the Antrim and Kalkasa departments of Human Services in Michigan, where *FAP Attack* premiered this past year.

In looking to make policy training more interesting, the managers of the two local offices, Paula Dietel and Laurie Luinstra, created the board game, *FAP Attack*,* which covers everything from application processing, verification requirements, certification periods, coding, budgeting income, disqualification, etc. "We both had highly motivated and competitive staff and knew this could be beneficial in a learning mode," says Laurie Luinstra, Family Independence manager, Kalkaska Department of Human Services.

Low-Cost, Creative and Fun

Laurie bought the game board at an office supply store. A pattern of three oval loops, made up of 120 individual movement spaces were drawn on the board, with markers and colored pencils. Colorful icons and instructions were added to the spaces with information for special player actions. Each loop on the board represents a level of play, with ascending levels offering more difficult policy questions and higher points. The policy question and special benefit cards and characters representing each player were printed on cardstock.

Paula and Laurie wrote nearly 500 food stamp-related questions. They surveyed staff and asked them to provide questions and examples of unclear policies.

"Try thinking about the strengths and weaknesses of your staff and what you want them to learn," says Laurie.

The complexity of the questions increases throughout the game. The more complicated the question, the more points the player earns if the questions are answered correctly.

Players have the opportunity to obtain special cards when their markers land on particular spaces. The cards fall within the "help" and "attack" categories. For example, the card "Sabotage Bomb" would enable a player to pass a question to the other team, along with an answer that can be the correct one or a fabrication. If the question is answered correctly, however, the

other team gains control of the board. With a "Recovery" card, the player would get another chance to answer a question. A "Chain" card complicates the way players move on the board and is an optional-use card to add a little spice. If an opponent plays a "Chain" card, the other player must roll doubles to move forward.



photo by Roberta Gibson, Antrim County Department of Human Services

Game play can be tailored. It can be shortened by adjusting the number of points needed to win. "We may have used 50 questions before the allotted time lapsed and then declared a winner based on who had the most points." Laurie says. Individuals or teams of new and/or experienced eligibility specialists can play. "When our offices played each other, a real team effort was fostered. We mixed the teams up, including both new and experienced workers on each team.

"The experienced staff wanted to play the game again. They enjoyed it so much more than a lecture or a computer presentation and still had to challenge themselves to search policy and make correct choices."

To swap information, contact Laurie Luinstra, Kalkaska County Department of Human Services, (231) 258-1215, luinstral@michigan.gov.

* The name of the Food Stamp Program throughout Michigan is Food Assistance Program (FAP).

FOOD STAMP PROGRAM Products★Services

Paid Radio Advertising

The Food and Nutrition Service is in the process of planning the paid radio advertising component of its 2007 national media campaign. As in the past three years, it will be a major element of the upcoming campaign.

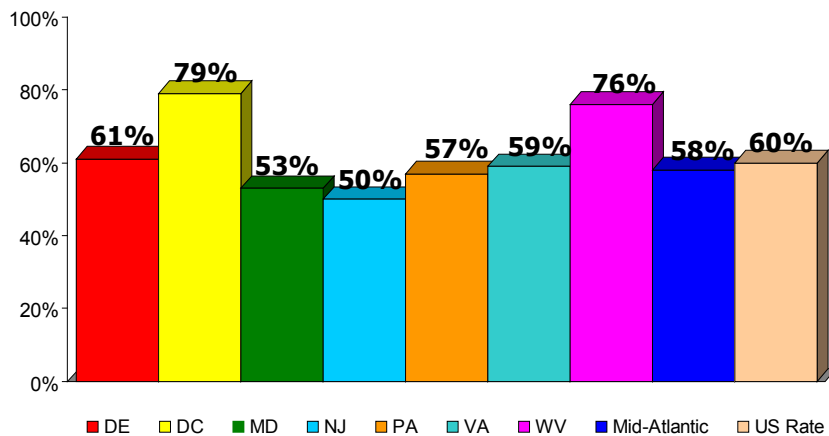
Messages will once again be available in English and Spanish, and scripts/productions of past years will be used again.

The ads will run in March, April, August and September. *Start planning now to coordinate your outreach activities with the radio ads.*

2004 Participation Rates

The U.S. Department of Agriculture recently released the 2004 state participation rates (see chart below).

To obtain a report on the participation rates: www.fns.usda.gov/oane/MENU/Published/recentreleases.htm.



...Participation grants

- California Statewide Automated Welfare Systems (SAWS C-IV Project)

In partnership with community-based organizations

The "C-IV Yourself" project will develop a program to apply for food stamps through the Internet and generate a list of verifications. Individuals will be able to access their information through a PIN.

For more information: www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/government/06-participation-grants.htm; and www.fns.usda.gov/cga/PressReleases/2006/PR-0340.htm.

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