

Excellent Service for All

- Access
- Outreach
- Payment Accuracy
- Policy
- Quality Control



Issue 6, November 2004

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

## Bonuses Awarded for Excellent Performance

Congratulations to the 23 states that were awarded a total of \$48 million in bonuses recently from the U.S. Department of Agriculture for excellent performance during 2003.

Within the Mid-Atlantic Region, New Jersey was among the seven states that had the lowest payment error rates in fiscal year 2003, and the 2.43 percent earned the state \$1,628,344. The District of Columbia received a total of \$968,117 as one of two states that had the most-improved negative error rate AND one of four states that had the highest participant access rate. The District achieved a decrease of 12.69 percentage points in its negative error rate from fiscal year 2002 to 2003, and its participant access rate for 2003 was 90.9 percent. West Virginia earned \$979,960 for processing initial applications timely 95.52 percent of the time in fiscal year 2003.

Section 4120 of the Farm Bill, signed into law on May 13, 2002, replaced the enhanced funding system with a performance system that awards bonuses to states with high or improved performance in the areas of active and negative error rates, participation and application processing.

Within the next two pages is a breakdown of the four categories of awards, the bonus amounts given and percentage rates for each awardee. We've also included the factors that contributed to the success of the states within the Mid-Atlantic Region. We'll bring you additional information on the states' improvement activities in future editions of this newsletter.



It's What's Inside

Prince George's Co., MD - self-examination and overhaul of operations

Pennsylvania - excellence, starting with reception

Outreach & Access Products★Services

Newport News, VA - customer selection of recertification appointment date/time

Bergen Co., NJ - keeping kids busy during interviews

# Performance Bonuses

## \$24 million - lowest & most-improved payment error rates

### Best

Texas	\$7,397,749
<b>New Jersey</b>	<b>\$1,628,344</b>
Mississippi	\$1,471,230
Arkansas	\$1,281,929
Hawaii	\$ 502,987
S. Dakota	\$ 206,471
Wyoming	\$ 105,259

### Key Components in New Jersey

Continued top-level commitment to improve the accuracy of benefits throughout the state, review of possible error cases weekly by a committee representing policy, program, systems and quality control, implementation of simplified reporting in 2001 for households with earnings, error rate goal for each local agency and extensive training of local agency staff on policy, interviewing and customer service.

To swap information, contact: Marybeth Schaedel, New Jersey Department of Human Services, (609) 588-2197, mary.schaedel@dhs.state.nj.us

### Most-Improved

California	\$6,819,955
Illinois	\$4,357,620
N. Hampshire	\$ 228,456



## \$6 million – lowest & most-improved negative error rates

### Best

S. Carolina	\$2,780,978
Nebraska	\$ 639,764
N. Hampshire	\$ 333,373
S. Dakota	\$ 301,292

### Key Components in the District of Columbia

In fiscal year 2001, when the negative error rate was 32.44 percent, the District of Columbia Department of Human Services established its Peer Review Team, which reviews all negative actions and works cooperatively with the centers to correct errors and discuss methods to prevent errors.

To swap information, contact: Sondra Jackson, District of Columbia Department of Human Services, (202) 698-4337, sondra.jackson@dc.gov

### Most-Improved

Colorado	\$1,356,033
<b>District of Columbia</b>	<b>\$ 588,560</b>

## \$12 million – highest & most-improved participant access rates

### Best

Tennessee	\$3,081,290
Missouri	\$2,438,673
Oregon	\$1,954,598
<b>District of Columbia</b>	<b>\$ 379,557</b>

### Key Components in the District of Columbia & Delaware

District of Columbia - Commitment to service, adoption of customer-friendly policies, accommodation of working recipients, partnering with community organizations to conduct outreach and provide assistance to customers who are Limited English Proficient and solicitation of customer feedback on service. Recent surveys indicate, the District is doing an "excellent" job in meeting customer needs.

To swap information, contact: Sharon Cooper-DeLoatch, District of Columbia Department of Human Services, (202) 698-3900, sharon.cooper-deloatch@dc.gov

### Most-Improved

S. Carolina	\$1,812,972
Oklahoma	\$1,499,861
Maine	\$ 645,237
<b>Delaware</b>	<b>\$ 187,811</b>

Delaware - Extended categorical eligibility to all possible households in 2000, extended simplified reporting in early 2003 with some exceptions, allowance of individuals with felony drug conviction to access the program and training of Food Bank of Delaware (USDA outreach grantee) in 2002 on program requirements and coordination with the organization in its pre-screening activities.

To swap information, contact: Roseanne Mahaney, Delaware Department of Health and Social Services, (302) 255-9629, roseanne.mahaney@state.de.us

## \$6 million – highest percent of timely-processed applications

Kentucky	\$1,948,772
Oklahoma	\$1,421,687
Massachusetts	\$1,257,396
<b>West Virginia</b>	<b>\$ 979,960</b>
N. Hampshire	\$ 206,004
S. Dakota	\$ 186,181

### Key Components in West Virginia

Commitment to payment accuracy, teamwork, concerted effort to control the process, one day per week set aside for processing, customer service center that lightens the ongoing casework of the eligibility specialists and computer alerts on processing deadlines.

To swap information, contact: Randal Thomas, West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources, (304) 558-2757, randalthomas@wvdhhr.org



*rrring! Rrrring!*

*You pick up the telephone. It's your dentist's office calling to say you have an appointment there the following day. You had completely forgotten about the appointment! Probably made it in a rush and forgot to write it down. Good thing they called! It would have taken at least a month to get another appointment.*

*What better way to keep customers happy and businesses in operation? Can this method, most common to health care providers, be applied to a food stamp office?*



## Newport News, Virginia Customers Select Date, Time for Recertification Agency Reminds Customers of Appointments

The Newport News Department of Social Services in Virginia, asks customers to select a date and time when they would like their recertification interview to take place, and then reminds them of the appointment.

Prior to implementation in 2001, customers often failed to show up for the recertification interview. This created an overwhelmingly large volume of interviews to be conducted and recertification applications to be processed at the start and end of each month.

The practice of "personal scheduling and reminding" has proved to be successful in reducing the number of "no-shows." The rate at which customers keep their appointments has improved significantly, and, in turn, not nearly as many request to reschedule, says Angela Ricks, agency supervisor. She says it also helps eligibility specialists to schedule their time better. Customers have reported that they like being able to schedule their own recertification

interviews, Angela says. The customer service initiative increases access to the program and more likely enables customers to receive benefits without interruption, she adds.

Scheduling the appointment at a time convenient for the customer and then reminding the customer of the appointment also should allow both the customer and eligibility specialist to prepare for and concentrate and spend an adequate amount of time on the interview.

At the end of the month, the eligibility specialists input the recertification slots for the next month into the computer and send a notice to households due for recertification. Customers phone the agency's call center with preferred times and dates, and the agency subsequently reminds them of the appointment a day or two beforehand.

*To swap information, contact: Angela Ricks, Newport News Department of Social Services, (757) 926-6119, adr700@eastern.dss.state.va.us*

### ...Performance Bonuses

#### 2003 Participant Access Rates

Best	
Missouri	103.5%
Oregon	91.4%
Tennessee	91.0%
District of Columbia	90.9%

#### Most-Improved\*

Maine	91.6%
Delaware	79.5%
Oklahoma	96.6%
S. Carolina	90.1%

### FY 03 Payment Error Rates

Best	
S. Dakota	1.16%
New Jersey	2.43%
Texas	3.29%
Arkansas	4.02%
Mississippi	4.07%
Wyoming	4.23%
Hawaii	4.78%

#### Most-Improved\*\*

Illinois	4.87%
N. Hampshire	7.52%
California	7.96%

### FY 03 Negative Error Rates

Best	
S. Carolina	0.27%
Nebraska	0.49%
S. Dakota	0.59%
N. Hampshire	0.92%
Most-Improved**	
Colorado	7.46%
District of Columbia	8.54%

### FY 03 Timeliness Processing

Massachusetts	98.36%
S. Dakota	98.25%
Kentucky	98.24%
N. Hampshire	97.14%
W. Virginia	95.52%
Oklahoma	95.04%

\*Determined by subtracting CY02 rate from CY03 rate and ranking highest positive point change. (Oklahoma could not receive an award for best AND most-improved.)

\*\*Determined by measuring the percentage points improved.

# Triage is Lifesaver in East St. Louis Office



Unprecedented staff cuts and an early retirement option two years ago found officials of the East St. Louis office of the Illinois Department of Human Services in need of ways to calm reigning chaos - stat.

The shot in the arm cure to its resulting additional workload turned out to be the operation of a “triage” room - an unused area off the lobby, complete with a window, telephone, computer, printer, forms and office supplies.

*Triage is helping to bring back sanity, says Alan Summers, regional administrator with the Illinois Department of Human Services.*

Triage is helping to bring back sanity, says Alan Summers, regional administrator with the Illinois Department of Human Services. He explains, it’s appealing to staff because they are not asked to see customers in the lobby any longer, which reduces the amount of interruptions in their work day. Additionally, in most instances the full needs of the customers, other than those related to TANF-only and food stamp and medical recertifications, are handled in triage by the eligibility specialist who is on rotational duty. Needs range from accepting reported changes, to providing information on food resources and other immediate assistance.

Customers also appear to be extremely pleased with triage. They are relieved to know that their needs can be met without a lengthy wait, Alan says.

While it has become popular since its implementation in May 2003, early-on customers and staff expressed concern about the different way that service was being provided. Customer apprehension centered on not being able to talk to the eligibility specialist with whom they were familiar, says Alan, and likewise, the eligibility specialists felt uneasy about serving customers who were not part of their caseload.

To swap information, contact: Alan Summers, Illinois Department of Human Services, (618) 993-7479, DHSZ500@dhs.state.il.us

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Take advantage  
of this wonderful opportunity  
to acknowledge  
local food stamp offices.



## Hunger Hero Awards

The Food Stamp Outreach Coalition\* recently announced a program to honor local food stamp offices whose employees embrace the mission of the Food Stamp Program and provide exemplary customer service.

Offices that have a unique and creative approach to serving food stamp customers will be selected as 2005 Hunger Heroes, and will be acknowledged at the next American Association of State Food Stamp Directors Conference, hosted by the American Public Human Services Association. All nominated local offices will receive a certificate in recognition of their extra effort, commitment and passion, and the office names will be listed on the website of the Food and Nutrition Service.

The nomination process is simple. A nomination can be made by anyone who has observed or has personal experience or worked with a local food stamp office that provides excellent service to food stamp applicants and/or recipients. Nomination consists of providing a statement of 200 words or less that describes why the local office should receive a Hunger Hero Award.

Nominations must be submitted to the Food Stamp Outreach Coalition and received by March 1, 2005. The nomination form can be obtained from and/or completed on-line at: [www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/outreach/Hunger-Heroes.htm](http://www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/outreach/Hunger-Heroes.htm).

Completed forms also can be submitted by -  
Fax: (703) 605-0795

E-mail: [FSOC@fns.usda.gov](mailto:FSOC@fns.usda.gov) (questions also can be sent to this e-mail address)

Mail: Food Stamp Outreach Coalition  
Hunger Heroes Subcommittee  
c/o Food and Nutrition Service  
3101 Park Center Drive, Room 820  
Alexandria, Virginia 22302

\*See article on page 11 for detailed information about the Food Stamp Outreach Coalition.

# Excellence in Service - A Commitment to Professionalism



*“Excellence is not only measured by statistics or standards but also by the effect we have on the community, co-workers and customers.”*

Four years ago the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare began turning this basic philosophy of theirs into a tangible way of promoting customer service as an organizational expectation. A workgroup of 20, representing a cross-section of staff (upper and middle management, staff development, community advocates and representatives of clerical and social workers unions), set to work on the development of *Excellence in Service*, a commitment to professionalism, with the ultimate goal - to become a world-class organization.

To accomplish this mission, the Excellence in Service workgroup (EIS) first conducted a survey of the 67 local agencies to get staff views of excellence within the agency and their offices. The anonymous responses provided thoughtful and forthright comments and suggestions, pointing to the need for increased commitment, training for clerical and eligibility staff and enhanced external customer service. Here's how the EIS workgroup addressed these:

### ***Excellence in Service:***

- Promoting sensitivity and harmonious working relationships;
- Improving the knowledge base of all and the quality of services both internally and externally;
- Striving consistently for the seamless flow of all services offered and showing mutual respect to everyone;
- Teaching the effective use of all Department resources and technologies; and
- Examining the organization consistently.

## **Commitment**

The EIS held an excellence in leadership conference for executive directors. During the meeting, the overall *Excellence in Service* initiative was introduced and the establishment of local agency EIS workgroups was discussed, as were strategies to enhance customer service.

## **Training**

The EIS next tackled the development and implementation of a standardized training program to orient new employees to the organization and its goals. A three-day program that emphasizes teamwork was instituted and is presented jointly to new eligibility specialists and clerical staff. A five-day program also

was instituted for new clerical staff, and it is delivered at a central location by a team of staff development specialists and local agency clerical trainers.

## **Customer Service**

The EIS then became involved in looking at mechanisms to review the processes of the state and its local agencies from the perspective of the customer, and training staff on behaviors that will make the process more responsive to the needs of the customer. The outcome was CLIMB, or **C**ommit, **L**ocate, **I**dentify, **M**odel & **M**onitor, **B**uild, and thus far, CLIMB has been used to examine the intake and reception processes.

### **Reception**

Examination of this area started with the Process Overview, which helped the local offices to evaluate their strengths and weaknesses. The survey of almost 100 questions centered on the physical set-up, the building, lobby area, sign-in, greeting and procedures such as scheduled appointments, walk-in visits, EBT cards, pick-up and drop-off of information and expedited service (see article on the next page for a sample of the questions).

This effort resulted in the development and implementation of measurable customer service standards that reflect the Department's overall commitment to excellence in service. The mandated standards cover greeting, wait time, privacy, identification of staff to customers, procedure for information dropped-off, office hours, brochures, bulletin boards, business hours, parking, geographic directions, program and interpretation services.

The Process Overview spurred the local agencies to make a lot of changes in their reception operation (see article on the next page).  
(continued next page)

The Excellence in Service workgroup of the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare developed a self-evaluation for its 67 local agencies to determine the adequacy of their reception areas and procedures. The following is a sample of the questions from the instrument.

## Reception Self-Assessment



### Physical Set-Up

#### Parking

- Are spaces reserved for clients' use?
- If yes, are they clearly marked as reserved for clients' use?

#### Building

- Are the hours of operation posted on the exterior of the building?
- If you have a drop-box, is it in a well-lit, accessible spot?
- Are written directions to your office included in mailings from your office, for both clients and other visitors?

#### Lobby

- Is someone assigned and present at the front desk during the entire day, including lunch and breaks?
- Is there a private area in the lobby where someone could sit and fill out a form or an application?
- Is there a telephone available for clients to call a cab, for example?
- Are employees in the reception area permitted to eat and/or drink at their desk?
- Is anyone, other than those working the reception desk, allowed behind the reception counter at any given time?
- Is someone assigned the responsibility to check the restrooms during the day to see if supplies are needed? Is there a diaper change area in both restrooms? Are there domestic violence palm cards in both restrooms?

### ...Excellence in Service

#### Intake

The CLIMB review of processes next brought about the development of a survey on intake. The local offices have completed the Intake Process Review, which asked 90 questions on expedited service and requesting, completing and submitting an application. Training of local office staff on intake was completed recently.

The EIS is in the process now of developing the CLIMB process review for ongoing eligibility.

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#### Sign-In and Greeting

- Are clients and visitors aware of the need to check-in at the reception area?
- Is your sign-in procedure posted in the lobby?
- If clients and visitors must stand in line to speak to the receptionist, are they given an estimate of how long they will be in line?
- Do you have a procedure in place to follow-up after a "reasonable" amount of time, to ensure that clients and visitors are not "lost in the shuffle?"
- Are the discussions between clients/visitors and the receptionist beyond earshot of others in line and those in the reception area?

#### Procedure

##### Scheduled Appointment

- How is the staff member notified when a client arrives for an appointment?
- Are appointments scheduled throughout the day?
- What is the procedure if a client is late for an appointment?

##### Walk-In

- If there is no office-wide procedure, what happens when a client walks-in without an appointment?
- If a client walks-in, what procedure do you have in place to ensure that the client is seen that day?

##### EBT Card

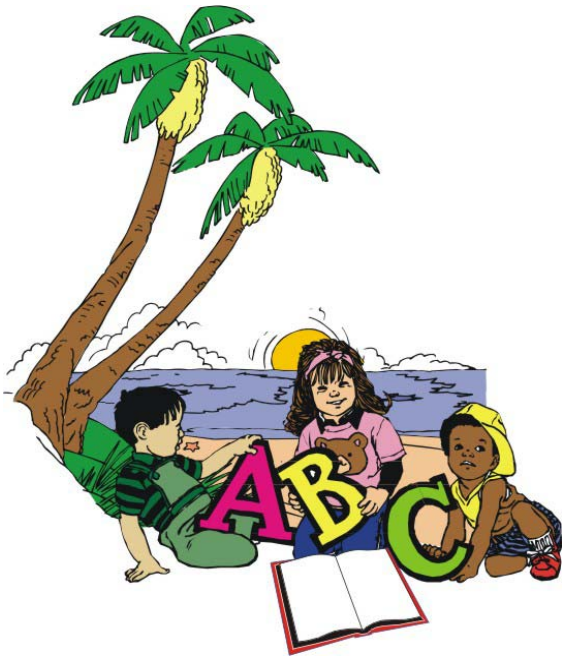
- During what hours can a client get an EBT card?
- Does the client need an appointment?

##### Pick-Up and Drop-Off of Information

- Do you have a procedure for photocopying material?
- Is a receipt provided when materials are dropped-off?

##### Expedited Service

- Describe your expedited review procedure.



## Improving Reception Settings and Procedures

It's a good bet that some youngsters have gotten their first experience with books in food stamp offices where staff are especially passionate about promoting education, like in Berks County, Pennsylvania. Children there are encouraged to take a book home from the reception area. Read on to find out what some of the local agencies in Pennsylvania have done to improve the settings and procedures of their reception areas.

### Allegheny County Assistance Office, Eastern District

- Painted a peaceful, scenic mural on one wall of the reception area.
- Installed a CD machine and plays the sound of running water, and brought in a fish tank.
- Runs a motivational tape.

### Berks County Assistance Office

- Provided child-size chairs.
- Obtained books from a local public library.

### Dauphin County Assistance Office

- Posted operations procedures and employment and training opportunities in English and Spanish.
- Re-arranged the chairs to promote conversation, and added five desks for greater comfort in completing paperwork.
- Held a fundraiser to purchase child-size furniture.
- Donated children's books.
- Purchased artwork and plants.
- Added a drop-box to collect documents during and after business hours.

### Lebanon County Assistance Office

- Changed the seating arrangement to two small groups that face the reception desk.
- Placed the customer grievance forms more prominently.
- Removed myriad of signs from the walls and posted agency information by category.
- Mounted pamphlet racks on the walls and grouped the materials by category.
- Created a "Community Service and Events" area where information on other social service agencies is filed in a binder that can be accessed by customers.
- Reiterated to staff that eligibility specialists should not conduct business behind the reception desk.
- Reinforced to staff that all scheduled customers are to be seen within 15 minutes of their arrival.
- Instructed staff to use a normal tone of voice to call customers for the interview and to address them by their proper title (Mr., Ms., etc.).
- Provided an area where customers can complete the application in privacy.

### Montour County Assistance Office

- Held a customer appreciation day, complete with decorated lobby, information packets on various programs and refreshments donated by the staff, all without disruption in work activities.

### Washington County Assistance Office

- Traded a service for coffee tables, artificial plants and other accessories, from a hospital that was closing.
- Printed flyers from the community posters that wallpapered the waiting area, inserted them into plastic sleeves and filed them according to topic in a book that is available to the customers.
- Provided forms, notepads and pens in a basket with applications.
- Added a drop box to collect documents.

To swap information, contact: Georgine Beyer, Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare, (717) 772-2652, [gebeyer@state.pa.us](mailto:gebeyer@state.pa.us)

This article was developed from the presentation given by Sandy Fraser of the Beaver County Assistance Office in Pennsylvania, at the payment accuracy conference, *Navigating A New Way*, hosted in May 2004 by the Mid-Atlantic Region of the Food and Nutrition Service, and from documents provided by the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare.

# Prince George's County, Maryland

## The New Way of Operating

*At the Prince George's County Department of Social Services in Maryland, 247 staff members serve about 27,000 food stamp, 8,000 TANF and 102,000 medical customers.*

*To keep pace with the increase in the caseload and dwindling resources during recent years, the Prince George's County Department of Social Services in Maryland found it needed a different approach to conduct business. Subsequently it was brought to an intense self-examination. Let's take a look at The New Way, Prince George's comparison of operations with other localities and reorganization of work, complete with reassignment of staff.*

In early 2003, the Prince George's management staff visited offices that had a good payment accuracy rate (and we're proud to say, they were located within the Mid-Atlantic Region).

The journey took them to Charleston, West Virginia; Newport News, Norfolk, Fairfax County and Alexandria, Virginia; and Mercer County, New Jersey, where they gathered facts about procedures for tracking cases and actions, handling case work as presented instead of assignments by alphabet, customizing a service center, implementing appointment times preferred by customers (see article on page 3 for more information on this activity), reviewing cases prior to payment and separating the interview and processing functions.

Some of what they learned reinforced that they were on the right track. The other wealth of information, advice (and good wishes), helped the managers to set their sights on a plan that speaks

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to the welfare of the employees and customers while promoting unity and accountability. Specifically the plan addressed:

- Improvement in the quality of service to customers
- Promotion of teamwork
- Utilization of staff strengths
- Enhancement of the agency's image
- Reduction in stress

Through *The New Way*, the agency basically reorganized work into four distinct processes and assigned individuals to units, according to strengths and desires.

### Assessment & Interview



The eligibility specialists in this unit are skilled interviewers who have superior interpersonal skills. They interview throughout the day, and each is expected to interview at least eight households per day.

They also screen the cases through the computer system, review the applications, input information, pend applications for verification, set up the case records and forward the cases to the unit supervisor for review within one day. The unit supervisor ensures the accuracy of verification requests and then moves the cases to the Case Processing Unit within three days.

### Case Processing



This group of eligibility specialists begins work on the cases after all the verifications have been received. They review the documents, complete the processing through the computer system and forward the cases to the unit supervisor for review within three days. Because the unit members do not have contact with customers, they can focus on their primary mission, which is to get eligible cases paid. The eligibility specialists must meet a productivity standard of completing 10 cases each day.

To expedite the processing, the unit conducts collateral contacts when verification is incomplete, rather than request additional verification. Using a targeted review template, the unit supervisor reviews the cases for accuracy and then forwards them to the Case Review & Approval Unit.

### Case Review & Approval



The eligibility specialists in this unit are exceptionally adept at interpreting and following policies and procedures. They conduct targeted reviews of the cases and approve or deny all cases in all programs. Once cases are ap-



*The New Way:  
Eliminates Caseloads  
Improves and Ensures Prompt Customer Service  
Promotes Teamwork*



*Equally important to the project was the honest assessment of the skills and abilities of all staff who play a role in the process, says Charlene Gallion, deputy director for Family Investment.*



proved, they are forwarded to the unit supervisor who conducts a full review within three days to ensure that policy and procedures were applied consistently and correctly. Staff in the unit must meet a productivity standard, which is a minimum of 10 cases each day. It should be noted – by the time a case is approved, three reviews have been completed.

## Customer Care



The Customer Care Unit assists walk-in customers, takes action on reported changes and responds to incoming calls. The unit also maintains records in a central file and tracks incoming mail. The unit supervisor reviews case actions. If an income change occurred, the case is forwarded to the Case Review & Approval Unit to ensure payment accuracy. The customer is notified of the case status within three days.

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To swap information, contact: Charlene Gallion, Prince George's County Department of Social Services, (301) 909-7020, cgallion@dhr.state.md.us

This article was developed from the presentation given by Charlene Gallion of the Prince George's County Department of Social Services in Maryland, at the payment accuracy conference, *Navigating A New Way*, hosted in May 2004 by the Mid-Atlantic Region of the Food and Nutrition Service.

Prior to implementation of *The New Way*, the Prince George's team sought the opinions, approval and assistance of their state counterparts who were very supportive and helpful in making changes to the computer system.

Staff from all levels of the organization participated on implementation teams. This dedicated group of eligibility specialists, supervisors, clerical support and administrative staff met bi-weekly for six months to develop a plan that would ensure the success of the project. Their participation in the process was vital to the successful implementation of *The New Way*. Equally important to the project was the honest assessment of the skills and abilities of all staff who play a role in the process, says Charlene Gallion, deputy director for Family Investment.

The transition, which was piloted in one office, was difficult even though the project was something that staff wanted to do, Charlene says, but they say it is a relief now to focus on one function.

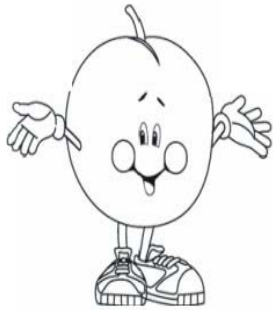
Customers obviously benefit from the job satisfaction and increased productivity of the Prince George's staff. They could expect a 2-1/2 hour investment of their time the old way but now only about 1 hour *The New Way*, according to the agency's clocked self-assessment. Charlene further explains, the typical customer who walks-in to apply, only waits approximately 15 minutes.

Additionally, the agency's customer service survey rated overall satisfaction as "good," and revealed that staff members are courteous, knowledgeable and clear in providing instructions.

Besides the improvement in service time and overall productivity, Charlene says, *The New Way* has improved access to programs and the agency's public image and has increased the accountability of staff.

And as one can imagine, they learned a tremendous amount about routine operations. The self-examination helped Prince George's to know intimately the processes involved, the volume of work coming and going and just about everything that everyone is doing, Charlene says.

# Draw and color your favorite veggies



## Bergen County, New Jersey Pint-Size Customers Kept Busy Coloring

**“It looks like the kids got plenty of sleep and ate their power cereal this morning!”**

At one time this might have been the thought of eligibility specialists in Bergen County, New Jersey, when faced with a customer who brought along children to the interview. But now the agency keeps kids occupied, during intake and recertification interviews, with its nutrition activity.

Bergen County staff created the very colorful, two-sided, 11” x 17” coloring sheet, *Eat Healthy...Be Healthy*, and the agency printed 10,000 of them this past summer. On one side, kids find and color the “Five-A-Day Friends,” Paula Plum, Lucy Lettuce, Calvin Carrot, Bobby Banana and Gus Grapes and can color the letters that match each fruit or vegetable found in the word mix and fill-in the missing letters of pictured fruits and vegetables.

*Some children get antsy and distract parents if they do not have anything to keep their attention, which causes the parents to be less focused on answering the interview questions accurately and can affect the outcome of the case, explains Pat Bogert, training supervisor for the agency.*

Fruits and vegetables also border the other side of the activity sheet, and young artists are urged to draw and color their favorites. The agency provides boxes of crayons (four per box) for its pint-size customers.

Eligibility specialists, parents and children are very pleased with the activity sheets. Children love them, and they stay entertained during the interview process, which makes it go faster because there are fewer distractions, says Janice Roll, deputy director of the Bergen County Board of Social Services.

*To swap information, please contact: Patricia Bogert, Bergen County Board of Social Services, (201) 368-7677, pbogert@bcbs.com*

Note: Morris and Ocean counties in New Jersey also printed the nutrition activity sheet and provide crayons.



## Mexico – U.S. Partnership for Nutrition Assistance

The Secretary of Agriculture and the Secretary of Foreign Affairs, Mexico, signed the Mexico – U.S. Partnership for Nutrition Assistance. Under the provisions of the partnership, the Mexican Embassy and 45 consulates in the United States will provide information on the eligibility criteria of the 15 domestic nutrition assistance programs administered by the Food and Nutrition Service, including the Food Stamp Program, WIC program, National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program.

We’ll bring you details of this promising new initiative in the next issue of this newsletter.

## FOOD STAMP PROGRAM Products★Services

Take advantage of these professional food stamp products and services, brought to you by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service.

### Free Photographs



If you're looking for current, colorful and professional photographs produced specifically for use in outreach and nutrition education communications, check out the Food Stamp Program Photo Gallery. You'll find images for your electronic and print publications in six categories: food purchasing, farmers' market, nutrition education, physical activity, pre-screening and meals. The digital images are copyright-free and are provided as a complimentary resource by the Food Stamp Program for use by the program and its partners. The pictures should be used only for promotional, informational and educational purposes of a non-profit nature. To access the photographs, go to the resource library of the Food Stamp Nutrition Connection at: [grande.nal.usda.gov/foodstamp\\_album.php](http://grande.nal.usda.gov/foodstamp_album.php).

### Outreach Website



The Food and Nutrition Service recently expanded the food stamp outreach pages of its website. Now it features a national map with links to state sites that show local office locations, organizations doing outreach, by state, as well as each state's food stamp applications. It contains a growing library of locally-developed outreach guides, promising practices, other related materials, other websites and much more. The website highlights the efforts of countless organizations that continue to conduct food stamp outreach in their communities, as well as information on the new Food Stamp Outreach Coalition (see below). To browse the outreach website, go to: [www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/outreach/default.htm](http://www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/outreach/default.htm).

### Outreach Coalition



The Food and Nutrition Service initiated a partnership in December 2003 with hunger, nutrition and social service organizations and their state and local affiliates. The Coalition was formed to strengthen partnerships and share ideas and resources, ultimately to increase participation in and improve access to the Food Stamp Program. The Food Stamp Outreach Coalition formed three subcommittees.

1. Regional Office Collaboration/State Food Stamp Offices/Promising Practices Subcommittee - to facilitate the strengthening of communication channels between the seven regional offices of the Food and Nutrition Service and state and local food stamp agencies and review existing materials and the content of the agency's website, suggest ideas for the development of new materials and collect and share promising practices on outreach and access, including technology.
2. Hunger Heroes Subcommittee - to develop a national award for exemplary local food stamp offices (see article on page 4).
3. Business Interests Subcommittee - to encourage businesses and employers of potentially eligible people to become more involved in food stamp outreach.

There are no membership fees to join the Food Stamp Outreach Coalition. If you would like to become a member, contact Dawn Washington of the Food and Nutrition Service, headquarters office in Alexandria, Virginia. Her e-mail address is: [dawn.washington@fns.usda.gov](mailto:dawn.washington@fns.usda.gov).

## FOOD STAMP PROGRAM Products★Services

## Participation Grants

Participation grants totaling close to \$5 million were awarded in July by the Food and Nutrition Service for projects aimed at simplifying food stamp application and eligibility systems or improving access to benefits. Of this amount, \$1 million was awarded for the establishment of a new partnership between a state agency and non-profit organizations. The proposals of the six grantees were selected from more than 40 others. To obtain information on the awardees and their projects, go to: [www.fns.usda.gov/cga/PressReleases/2004/fsp-grants.htm](http://www.fns.usda.gov/cga/PressReleases/2004/fsp-grants.htm).

## Outreach Grants

The Food and Nutrition Service awarded \$1 million in food stamp outreach grants in September. To obtain information on the eight awardees and their projects, go to: [www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/outreach/grants/2004/summary.htm](http://www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/outreach/grants/2004/summary.htm).

## FNS – IRS Partnership

The Food and Nutrition Service and the Internal Revenue Service have built a partnership to enhance their outreach efforts targeted to the working poor. So far, the agencies have jointly conducted presentations to community groups. The Food and Nutrition Service provides posters and pamphlets for distribution at offices of the Internal Revenue Service, and it provides information on the Earned Income Tax Credit in the materials it sends to people who call its toll-free number.

## Application Assistance

Free assistance to improve food stamp applications was offered again by the Food and Nutrition Service recently, under contract with Kleimann Communication Group. States that took advantage of the service this round include Delaware, Virginia, Colorado, Louisiana, Michigan, North Carolina, North Dakota and Oklahoma. Sixteen other states have benefited from this service during the past two years, including, within the Mid-Atlantic Region, Maryland and West Virginia.

## National Pre-Screening Tool

Individuals can learn whether they may be eligible to participate in the Food Stamp Program by accessing the pre-screening tool of the Food and Nutrition Service at: [www.foodstamps-step1.usda.gov](http://www.foodstamps-step1.usda.gov).

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## Excellent Service for All



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