

FOOD AND NUTRITION SERVICE (FNS)

A. NATURE OF FNS' FOIA OPERATIONS

FNS has a de-centralized Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) program. The FOIA Officer is stationed in headquarters in Alexandria, Virginia. FNS has a FOIA Coordinator for each Program Office (12 FOIA Coordinators) and each Regional Office (7 FOIA Coordinators). The majority of FOIA requests received in FNS pertain to Food Stamp fraud and Food Stamp trafficking, both of which require extensive and careful redaction under the law. The FOIA Officer is also the Directives Manager, Acting Records Officer, and Intranet Liaison for the Information Administration Branch. This allows approximately 30% of his/her time to devote to FOIA/PA issues and operations. FNS processes approximately 165 FOIA requests per year. Therefore, although the number of requests is not large, the time needed for expert management is substantial.

B. AREAS SELECTED FOR REVIEW

FNS reviewed the following potential improvement areas:

- Electronic FOIA—automated processing
- Clarity of FOIA requests and responses
- Acknowledgment letters
- Backlog reduction
- Politeness/courtesy

C. NARRATIVE STATEMENT SUMMARIZING RESULTS OF REVIEW

The FNS organization consists of 12 Program Offices and 7 Regional Offices. The FOIA officer resides in one of the Offices, in the Information Technology Division. Because there are so many individuals involved in the processing of the requests, and the turnover of employees in the Agency, it is difficult to maintain the level of knowledge required to process FOIA requests.

The service provided to those seeking information under the FOIA is very responsive and excellent in most areas. Time is taken to contact requestors by email, telephone, or by letter to clarify requests to the extent possible, which enables the FOIA Officer to accurately describe to the Program and Regional offices what the requestor is seeking.

Although the website provides information about the FOIA process, personal contact helps in many ways to reach a satisfactory conclusion.

FNS allows any form of written request for information under FOIA: letter, email or facsimile. Telephone requests are also allowed with a letter from the Agency confirming the requested information in the telephone call.

D. AREAS CHOSEN AS IMPROVEMENT AREAS FOR PLAN FOR FNS

- Backlog reduction
- FOIA Website Improvement

E. IMPROVEMENT AREA PLANS

1. Backlog reduction

Goal: The actual backlog will be reduced by 90% by December 31, 2007, and by 95% by July 1, 2008.

Target completion: 12-31-2007, 7-1-2008 (and continuing thereafter).

Steps

- Review backlog of existing requests **(To be completed by 9-30-2006 and monthly thereafter.**
- Contact the appropriate Program Office via email messages to remind offices of upcoming due dates on a weekly basis. **(To be completed each week.)**

2. FOIA Website Improvement

Goal: FNS will update the FOIA website, which will include FOIA submission, Reading Rooms, and contact information.

(Target completion: 12-31-2006).

Steps

- Review existing FOIA webs pages throughout the Federal government to determine best design, serviceability to FNS customers. **(To be completed by 9-30-2006).**
- Design the FNS web page to ensure ease of use by the public to initiate FOIA requests (by letter, fax, or email) and to allow for enhanced

communication between the public and the FOIA staff. (**To be completed by 11-30-2006**).

- Complete the FNS web page and links to appropriate USDA pages. (**To be completed by 12-31-06.**)

F. IMPROVEMENT TIME PERIODS

Areas anticipated to be completed by 12-31-2006

- FOIA Website Improvement

Areas anticipated to be completed by 12-31-2007

- Backlog reduction up to 90%

Areas anticipated to be completed after 7-1-2008

- Backlog reduction up to 95%