

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

Issue 14, July 2007



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Call Centers

Improving access to change reporting and promoting payment accuracy

Call centers can help reduce complaints, customer- and agency-caused errors and visits by customers to the local food stamp offices. In turn, these customer service improvements can increase the amount of time available to take action on changes and complete certifications and re-certifications.



Staff members of the call centers, which also may be known as change centers or customer service centers, may work exclusively on processing the information provided by customers about changes in their household circumstances, for some or all programs. At other centers, they may be responsible for a combination of tasks such as processing the majority of case work, as well as the changes, handling new hires matches and answering general customer inquiries. The centers may be highly automated or not, staffed full- or part-time and operate in particular jurisdictions or statewide.

In the March 2007 edition of *Excellent Service for All*, we provided an overview of the centers in Pennsylvania. On pages 2 and 6 of this issue, we take a look at the centers in West Virginia and the District of Columbia.



Food Stamp Program reaches more people

The U.S. Department of Agriculture recently announced that the Food Stamp Program served 65 percent of eligible individuals in 2005, an increase of 4 percentage points from the previous year. The program delivered 80 percent of the benefits that all eligible individuals could receive, which indicates the program appears to be reaching those most in need.

The rise in enrollment can be attributed in part to the representatives of federal, state and local food stamp agencies, faith- and community-based organizations, food banks and pantries, anti-hunger groups, businesses and others, who have aggressively promoted the program and included outreach as a component in their customer service plans.

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Customer Service Centers - West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources

What WE can do for YOU is the philosophy of the customer service centers in West Virginia.

Customers can phone changes to the two centers between 8 a.m. and 5 p.m., Monday through Friday, or provide the information by mail or fax or on-line. The responsibilities of the 46 staff members include entering the information into the automated eligibility system, requesting verifications, completing case notes in the automated system and notifying the customers of the effect the change has on benefit levels. They handle changes in contact information, income, school enrollment, assets, EBT, lump-sum payments, periodic reports and health insurance.

Homework first

Before considering this new way of doing food stamp business, officials of the West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources (DHHR) visited with their counterparts at the Texas Department of Human Services. In June 2001, DHHR piloted the concept in the four largest counties that covered 48 percent of the food stamp caseload.

And then implementation

Since November 2002, customers throughout the state have been accessing the customer service centers, which are in Charleston and Fairmont.

On average, each month both centers handle approximately 15,000 change and information calls; 7,500 pieces of mail; 170 on-line changes; and 1,500 aged/disabled food stamp reviews and CHIP reviews.

Advice

Jim Kautz, DHHR supervisor of the centers, offers advice on implementing a center (see next column). In addition, he says: Most important, answer calls at a rate acceptable to the customers. If wait times or busy signals become excessive, customers will resume calling the local offices. You will be left with merely another specialization that provides no real assistance.

To swap information, contact: Jim Kautz, West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources, (304) 558-2400, jkautz@wvdhhr.org.

Tips from West Virginia

- Provide adequate space in work stations for a quiet, productive environment.
- Bring in an adequate amount of staff and those with a working knowledge of eligibility rules. The average length of a phone call can help determine staffing needs.
- Make every effort to keep the blockage rate (busy signal) at 5 percent or less.
- Measure and stay on top of the hang-up rate so it does not exceed 10 to 20 percent.
- Be sure calls are answered in a timely manner; callers should not be on hold more than two minutes.
- Include a supervisor in the work area at all times to answer questions, monitor problems and redirect staff to phone calls so the number of callers waiting is not excessive.
- Do not sidetrack center staff with special projects.
- Do not place so much emphasis on reviews and paperwork that processing changes is negatively affected.
- Have all staff handle change information for all programs instead of specialization by program.

Change Center - District of Columbia Department of Human Services

The change center of the Income Maintenance Administration (IMA) in the District of Columbia has been operational since August 2004, accepting information for the food stamp, cash and medical assistance programs by phone, fax and mail.

Staffed by more than 35 individuals (eligibility specialists, managers and support personnel), from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m., Monday through Friday, the mission of the IMA Change Center is to provide timely and accurate services.

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Essex County, NJ



photo by Yvonne Davis, Essex County Division of Welfare

“**W**e’re very concerned about seniors and people with disabilities, for example, and want to make sure we reduce barriers for them,” says Bruce Nigro, director of the Essex County Division of Welfare, a large local agency in northern New Jersey. “We want to make sure that anyone who has a hard time getting into the office, has access to all of our services.”

A fully equipped office on wheels...

In thinking about how they wanted to accommodate and provide good service to potential food stamp customers, the enthusiastic Essex staff went from the idea of driving some desks and chairs around the neighborhood in a van, to a full office concept on wheels. They imagined a mobile center that would mirror an office, complete with a reception area and staff members who greet the public, and yes, a place for the public to wait and offices where interviews could be conducted confidentially! “We wanted to provide that same kind of environment for customers who we would meet in the Mobile Citizen Services Center,” says Marc Pilchman, chief of Administrative Services, Essex County Division of Welfare (ECDW).

With a portion of the bonus funds provided to the New Jersey Department of Human Services by the U.S. Department of Agriculture for the state’s exemplary performance in payment accuracy, and support and facilitation from the county executive’s office, the project to improve service to residents got off the ground, or rather, took to the streets, Marc says.

The Mobile Citizen Services Center is a bus large enough to accommodate three family service work-

Mobile Citizen Services Center

Literally bringing the program *to* people

ers, a driver and a receptionist. It is equipped with laptop computers, a wireless connection, a copier, cell phones, traditional office supplies, brochures, posters and much more.

The bus also is outfitted with tables and an awning to provide shade and additional space during warm weather months. And more importantly, it is completely compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act.

...benefits the agency...

The additional means to provide service to Essex County residents has been rewarding for the mobile unit workers. “They tell me how satisfying it is to help people who aren’t able to get into the office,” says Deborah Jackson, supervisor of the ECDW Outreach Unit.

...and accommodates customers

Deborah says the customers benefit in terms of accommodation and comfort. With the mobile unit right in the communities, “a senior who would have a great deal of difficulty coming into the office, for example, is much more likely to just walk into the courtyard of his housing complex to get some help solving a problem.”

Getting benefits promptly to the customers is another part of the Essex itinerary. “We can take an application in the morning, it can be processed in the afternoon, and the benefits can be available in the evening,” adds Deborah, who stays in contact with the mobile workers by cell phone.

The schedule for the mobile unit workers has been full. They have been to community and health fairs,

➔ continued on next page

Congratulations -

Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare and the Virgin Islands Department of Human Services!

USDA awards states for exemplary performance

Congratulations to these states for exemplary performance in the areas of payment and negative error rates in fiscal year 2006. Each will receive the bonus amount shown, from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, as authorized by the 2002 Farm Bill.

Best Payment Error Rate

South Dakota - \$347,653
Virgin Islands - \$148,643
Missouri - \$3,234,784
Washington - \$2,913,859
Mississippi - \$1,986,833
North Carolina - \$4,021,638
Hawaii - \$567,407

Most-Improved Payment Error Rate

Rhode Island - \$456,583
Idaho - \$484,888
New York - \$9,837,712

Best Negative Error Rate

Vermont* - \$268,010
Nebraska - \$466,639
Pennsylvania - \$3,651,458
South Dakota - \$270,011
Minnesota - \$999,092

Most-Improved Negative Error Rate

Vermont*
Rhode Island - \$344,790

*States cannot receive bonus funding in both "best" and "most-improved" categories of a particular area of performance.

...Mobile Services (from page 3)

PTA meetings, day-care centers and soup kitchens - actually "all kinds of locations where there could be someone who might want to apply for the Food Stamp Program but is not crossing our path," says Deborah.

In the summer, the bus and staff are typically out four or five times a week, including many Saturdays. Earlier this year when they were involved in identifying the number of homeless in the county, they netted 35 food stamp applications from homeless customers.

The skills and mobility of the workers also proved to be a catalyst for many of the people who were temporarily sheltered recently in a school due to a fire at their senior housing complex. "We processed 35 applications from seniors who normally may not have availed themselves of the benefit," says Bruce.

To swap information, contact: Marc Pilchman, Essex County Division of Welfare, (973) 733-3306, mpilchma@oel.state.nj.us.

The vehicle is accessible to prospective customers and active recipients, although re-certifications are handled typically through the Active Outreach Unit, which is available to meet with customers in their homes, Deborah says.

It took a good 15 months to get out of the garage, so to speak, from receiving state approval to issuing a Request for Proposal (RFP) to ordering the bus, plus an additional six months to build it, "made-to-order," says Bruce.

Making contacts and getting feedback from the community and non-profit organizations is important to the success of this customer service initiative. The Mobile Citizen Services Center took about 600 applications in the first six months. "We anticipate this will grow as new community relationships are forged," Deborah says.



If you're interested in mobile services:

Marc says they developed the specifications, which were reviewed by the Essex County Office of Purchasing, and followed the required protocols in researching and subsequently selecting a vendor via the bid process. The lowest bidder was selected; the company had a clear track record in the United States and Canada for developing this type of product.

You may need to recruit someone who has a bus operator license, tap into your jurisdiction's existing vehicle maintenance capabilities and find a place to park the vehicle and a way to keep the generators going.



Check out this link to food assistance in New Jersey



A one-stop resource for food assistance information, www.endhungernj.org, was unveiled recently to faith- and community-based organizations and the news media by the New Jersey Department of Human Services and the Hunger Prevention Advisory Committee, the co-developers of the website.

The website provides access to the state food stamp pre-screening tool and the food stamp application, information on emergency food providers, public transportation, food safety, nutrition educa-

tion materials and nutrition references and donating food, money or time to help people in need.

Click on *Need Food?* for the names and addresses of 355 food pantries and soup kitchens. Select *Need Help?* for links to the 2-1-1 service, the food stamp pre-screening tool, the food stamp application and the addresses and phone numbers of community action agencies, county offices on aging, county welfare agencies, the New Jersey Department of Agriculture, regional food banks and WIC clinics. *Nutrition Education* provides informa-

tion on the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, food safety, MyPyramid Plan and Tracker, a recipe finder, USDA Team Nutrition and more. *Frequently Asked Questions for Providers* brings up topics like the Food Stamp Program, WIC, Emergency Food Assistance Program, National School Lunch Program, School Breakfast Program, Summer Food Service Program, emergency food providers, etc.

To swap information, contact Lisa Ashbaugh, New Jersey Department of Human Services, (609) 588-2250, lisa.ashbaugh@dhs.state.nj.us.

Region Commemorates 6th National Hunger Awareness Day

Maryland

East Baltimore Church of God was the site for a fresh produce distribution and press conference June 5, commemorating the sixth National Hunger Awareness Day.

The Maryland Food Bank provided thousands of pounds of fruits and vegetables through its Produce Give-Away-Program at the church. Staff of the FNS, Towson Field Office and the Maryland Department of Human Resources helped serve the bountiful lot and provided food stamp application assistance.

Press conference speakers: Yvette Jackson, administrator, FNS, Mid-Atlantic Region; Dr. Eric Hentges, executive director, USDA, Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion; Deborah Flateman, CEO, Maryland Food Bank; Hector Torres, former executive director, Governor's Commission on Hispanic Affairs; and officials from the Baltimore City Council and the Baltimore City Health Department.

New Jersey

The Community Food Bank in Hillside marked National Hunger Awareness Day by hosting workshops and demonstrations.

Pat Dombroski, deputy administrator, FNS, Mid-Atlantic Region, was among the speakers for the workshop on e-tools. Staff and volunteers from many area emergency food pantries, congregate feeding sites and charitable programs learned about New Jersey on-line programs and websites, such as www.endhungernj.org and www.njhelps.org.

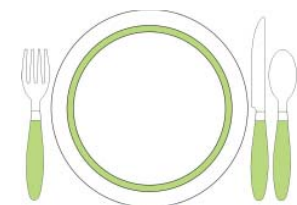
In the evening, Joe Weingart, food stamp director, FNS, Mid-Atlantic Region, attended *Hunger in the Midst of Wealth*, a forum on hunger sponsored by Mercer Street Friends, a Quaker-affiliated organization in Trenton.

Food pantry operators read moving testimonials from recipients who had expressed their appreciation for commodity assistance.

Pennsylvania

Also for National Hunger Awareness Day, Tim Walsh, community relations liaison, FNS, Mid-Atlantic Region, participated in a food drive at Shop-Rite Supermarket in Fairless Hills. The event was held in cooperation with the Bucks County Hunger Nutrition Coalition and the Bucks County Opportunity Council. About 300 pounds of food was collected and donated to St. Mary's Cupboard.

Tim also passed along food stamp and MyPyramid materials to more than 200 store customers. The shoppers also had an opportunity to talk with a representative of the Bucks County Assistance Office about applying for food stamps.



Telephone Unit

The Telephone Unit is responsible for answering calls and messages left after-hours; phoning customers to obtain verifications and clarify information; completing all required changes received by phone, mail and fax in the automated eligibility system; documenting the actions in the system; sending the required customer notices; providing information on the actions, along with e-mail and print copies of documentation, to the appropriate local offices; and referring customers to the appropriate entities and organizations that provide other needed services.

Completion Unit

The Completion Unit is geared toward implementing, removing and canceling Food Stamp Employment and Training, TANF and child support sanctions; processing employment verifications; documenting the actions in the automated eligibility system; and providing information on the actions to the appropriate local offices.

Special Projects Unit

The Special Projects Unit provides full-service in the area of processing the yearly Social Security cost-of-living adjustments as well as death, prison and new hires matches; implementing, removing and canceling intentional program violation sanctions; adding new-borns based on reports received from child support and hospitals and other outside entities; documenting the actions in the automated eligibility system; and providing information on the actions to the appropriate local offices.

Positive results

In fiscal year 2006, the IMA Change Center processed close to 80,000 changes, half from sources like matches. It also processed 20,000 changes provided by fax or through the mail and close to 9,000 medical assistance re-certifications received through the mail.

According to IMA officials, the IMA Change Center delivers positive benefits for customers: The customers are now able to save valuable time and money by reporting their change anytime, day or night, from the comfort of their home, rather than making visits to the local offices. Customers can reach someone, so they do not have to leave a message on voicemail. The wait time to report a change has been affected in a positive way. In addition, the customers are pleased with the timely completion of changes and receipt of benefits.

Advice

Staff members of the IMA Change Center provide the following advice to those who are interested in starting a center:

- ❖ Staff the center with an adequate number of employees who have excellent customer service skills, are able to interpret policies and procedures correctly and determine program eligibility accurately.
- ❖ Make sure the center has on-site technical/administrative support; ongoing training; team supervision and staff input; a policy/operational employee handbook; position and task descriptions for staff; an ongoing operational budget; high-tech, cutting-edge equipment, furniture and supplies; and processes for monitoring, evaluating, reporting and communicating.

To swap information, contact: David Whitmire, District of Columbia Department of Human Services, (202) 724-2485, david.whitmire@dc.gov.

Participation Rate (from page 1)

To learn about the participation rate and who is participating: *Trends in Food Stamp Program Participation Rates: 1999 to 2005* and *Characteristics of Food Stamp Households: FY2005* collectively provide information about yearly and monthly participation rates for individuals and households; individual participation rates by demographic and economic characteristics; characteristics of households and participants and much more. The two comprehensive publications can be obtained from the website of the Food and Nutrition Service.

To obtain a copy of:

- *Trends in Food Stamp Participation Rates: 1999 to 2005*

- *Characteristics of Food Stamp Households: FY2005*

www.fns.usda.gov/oane

Partnering: A blueprint for providing food assistance

With a low participation rate and only information-sharing activities in its outreach plan, James City County Social Services in Virginia decided it was high time to throw out “the old model of waiting for people to come,” says Tom Little, eligibility chief.

“We decided to ramp up our efforts and strive for larger goals than awareness. We knew we’d need help with this because we are a small agency.”

Training organizations to pre-screen for food stamps

So, this past December, James City County Social Services brought together a host of faith- and community-based organizations, and with the support of the local agencies in neighboring Williamsburg and York County, showed them how they could provide application assistance to potential food stamp customers. “We hoped to get more people involved in helping us reach more eligible individuals,” Tom says. “It seemed natural to reach out to community agencies.”

Tom, along with Charlene Collins, eligibility supervisor with James City County Social Services, provided the new partners training on the state on-line pre-screening and application tools. They provided a demonstration and conducted some role-playing, starring as food stamp applicants. Angela Beachy, outreach coordinator for the Virginia Department of Social Services, and creator of the original training module for the e-tools, provided advice to the novice users.

An additional benefit of the two-hour session was enthusiastic agreement by all to collaborate on opportunities for providing community service collectively. For example, later in December, Tom and his staff helped pre-screen for potential eligibility, take applications and distribute information at a food distribution event for 300 people. The affair was hosted by the Williamsburg/James City County Community Action Agency. “It was very successful and contributed to the all-time high number of food stamp applications received in January 2007,” says Tom. “From July through December 2006, we received on average, 82 food stamp applications per month. In January 2007 we received 134 food stamp applications.” (From January through May 2007, food stamp applications averaged 100 per month.)

Working together to develop a food assistance plan

The training session also turned out to be the kick-off for the creation of the Williamsburg Food Assistance Network, which was organized to facilitate working relationships among various community groups serving low-income families. During the first meeting of the network this past January, the group worked together on the draft food assistance outreach plan, which Tom says gave a broad cross-section of the community a sense of ownership and a stake in helping it succeed. Since then, the network has grown from a group of 20 people representing a dozen agencies to more than 40 individuals and 30 local service providers, such as the American Red Cross, Virginia Employment Commission, Department of Health, Food Bank of Virginia Peninsula and the Salvation Army.



Assessing service

Evaluation is an integral part of the food assistance outreach plan. James City County is collecting data on the number of applications received, approved, denied, reasons for denial, number of households and individuals and amount of issuance.

“Looking at reasons applications were denied raised a flag when we noticed a high incidence of applications abandoned by customers not showing up for scheduled intake appointments. In April we implemented a ‘call back’ procedure to remind food stamp applicants of scheduled appointments a couple of days in advance. Since then, our ‘no-show’ rate for intake appointments has decreased to 33 percent.”

Reaching more people

Tom encourages local food stamp offices to get involved in partnering efforts. “Take advantage of the networks that exist and use those contacts to bring more people in. It’s been great getting all these other resources involved to help us reach people in need. We even have an e-mail distribution list now.”

To swap information, contact: Tom Little,
James City County Social Services, (757)
259-3147, tlittle@james-city.va.us.

FOOD STAMP PROGRAM Products★Services

Radio Campaign

The Food and Nutrition Service will broadcast its food stamp advertisements again in August and September. These are the locations and the radio stations within the Mid-Atlantic Region:

Baltimore	Philadelphia
WBAL-AM	KYW-AM
WERQ-FM	WBEB-FM
WLIF-FM	WDAS-FM
WPOC-FM	WOGL-FM
WWIN-FM	WRNB-FM
Pittsburgh	Roanoke
KDKA-AM	WSLC-FM
WAMO-FM	WSLQ-FM
WDSY-FM	WVBE-FM
WDVE-FM	WYYD-FM

All of the messages for the stations listed above will be in English and provide the national toll-free number of the Food Stamp Program (1-800-221-5689). (Note: Other locations within the Mid-Atlantic Region will benefit as well. For example, folks in New Jersey will hear the ads that run in Philadelphia and New York City.)

To read the scripts: www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/outreach/radio/default.htm.

Ready-to-Use Public Service Announcements

Public service announcements for television and radio are available in English and Spanish for state and local outreach providers to use in their outreach efforts. For more information:

(TV) - www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/outreach/psas.htm

(radio) - www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/outreach/radio/default.htm.

Stand-alone Pre-Screening Tool

If your state does not have a pre-screening tool, or you can only use it by accessing the Internet, check out this convenient outreach resource!

The CD of the new *stand-alone* version of the FNS Step 1 Pre-screening Tool in English/Spanish can be ordered free via the food stamp outreach on-line order form: www.ntis.gov/foodstamp/default.aspx, or downloaded from: www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/outreach/stand-alone.htm.

The attraction of the tool is portability. Without the need for Internet access, users can pre-screen potential food stamp customers in faith- and community-based locations, homeless shelters, migrant camps, private homes, parks, job sites, etc.

The Step 1 Pre-screening Tool will be updated each fiscal year to provide the new income guidelines and allotment amounts.

Excellent Service for All

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