

Best practices for increasing access to the Food Stamp Program

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District of Columbia
Maryland
New Jersey
Pennsylvania
Virginia
Virgin Islands
West Virginia

USDA, Food and Nutrition Service Mid-Atlantic Region Christopher J. Martin, Administrator



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The Food Stamp Program is reaching about 62 percent of individuals who are eligible for program benefits. While participation is on the upswing, it is still significantly below 1994 levels, when more than 74 percent of eligible people were participating in the program. Many people do not fully understand that they may be eligible. This is due to ongoing misunderstandings about the program, as well as changes in eligibility criteria during the past several years.

To ensure that everyone has access to a healthy, nutritious diet, the Food Stamp Program, along with its cooperating partners - state and local agencies and community-based organizations - have implemented methods to improve the public's access to the Food Stamp Program. *Excellent Service for All* presents the access and outreach "best practices" of the eight states within the FNS, Mid-Atlantic Region. In Series 2, however, we have included ideas from states in other FNS regions as well as from community organizations.

We will continue to provide good ideas through *Excellent Service for All*. Its success will depend, in part, however, on your participation. We are very interested in your success stories, however big or small - someone else may consider your idea a "keeper." Please let us know of your best practices by contacting:

U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service Mid-Atlantic Region Food Stamp Program 300 Corporate Boulevard Robbinsville, NJ 08691

Attn: Marian Wig, Senior Program Specialist (609) 259-5059 (voice) (609)259-5062 (fax) marian.wig@fns.usda.gov

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Delaware, New Jersey and Pennsylvania



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Pre-screening Processes and Tips

Pre-screening tools are being brought to the public nationwide through various means and forms. And while not all provide an estimated benefit calculation, the goal of these devices is the same - to provide information on the benefits of applying for food stamps, determine potential eligibility and steer people to the nearest food stamp office.

Individuals can get the provisional eligibility answer by self-screening through the USDA web-based tool (www.foodstamps-step1.usda.gov) as well as through the website of numerous states. They also can be pre-screened by trained volunteers of non-profit entities such as churches, food pantries and community, vocational training and senior centers.

In this article we present the pre-screening process used and advice provided by four community organizations that have developed or obtained a pre-screening tool and trained volunteers to pre-screen. Each organization received a USDA grant in October 2002 to conduct outreach projects.

Greater Philadelphia Coalition Against Hunger

The Greater Philadelphia Coalition Against Hunger developed a handbook that covers basic policy such as determining household size, resources, income and deductions. Three staff members train small groups in two, two-hour sessions, plus they provide additional tips during the first actual screening conducted by each volunteer. Pre-screening takes 10 to 15 minutes if the volunteers assist with the application and occurs at various sites citywide and in targeted areas. The Coalition draws its faith-based and community volunteers from churches, social service agencies and network groups, word of mouth, newspaper and radio publicity, service learning programs and universities. Typically the volunteers are either already involved in feeding programs or some aspect of social service work.

ACORN Institute

Two staff members of the ACORN Institute provide training on pre-screening. Most of the trainees are themselves recipients of the Food Stamp Program. In 45 to 60 minutes, they are provided with information on eligibility criteria and instructed to ask these four basic questions when pre-secreening, which takes three minutes:

- Do you already receive food stamps?
- Are you elderly, pregnant or disabled?
- What is your family size?
- What is your monthly income?

Series 2, August 2003

Food Bank of Delaware

Groups and individuals trained at the Food Bank of Delaware also can expect 45 to 60 minutes of training. Their tool requires about 15 minutes to complete. For the Food Bank, simplicity has been the best way to get community organizations to participate in prescreening. To accommodate those that do not have a computer, the Food Bank developed a paper version of the automated pre-screening tool.

Maternity Care Coalition

The initial training by Maternity Care Coalition runs two to three hours. The goal of the training is to introduce the volunteers to pre-screening and the certification process. Over time, the trainers help the pre-screeners to develop expertise in the entire application process so that they can help applicants to understand it and assist them in successfully enrolling in the Food Stamp Program. Pre-screening service provided by the Coalition generally takes 40 minutes.

So, who trained the trainers? They received intensive instruction on pre-screening and certification policy from the folks who know the Food Stamp Program inside and out - staff of their state and/or local food stamp office.

Tips on Pre-screening and Training

The four USDA grantees offer this advice for those considering the idea of conducting pre-screening:

- Develop a covenant between the volunteer and the project.
- Require a minimum time commitment from volunteers, and offer training for different levels of commitment.
- Consider training students because they learn quickly.
- Make the process simple by assigning low-risk tasks to volunteers. Match personalities with activities because some people are better at delivering flyers and posters than approaching potential applicants.
- Conduct pre-screening at sites where there is a high volume of people because the return will be greater and volunteer satisfaction will be best. Include supermarkets as pre-screening sites because they offer a wider range of hours for volunteers and shopper/applicants.
- Stress the need for volunteers to maintain a good attitude, especially with negative people, and to approach potential applicants instead of waiting for them to ask questions.
- Provide follow-up assistance (for example, help applicants to gather documentation).
- Have a computer and a paper version of the pre-screening tool.

The grantees say, people volunteer to pre-screen because they know personally of the benefits provided by the Food Stamp Program and the importance of nutrition. Connecting people to benefits can be very rewarding for the volunteers.

For more information, contact: Kate Atkins, ACORN Institute, (973) 645-1377, njacorn@acorn.org; Brenda Owens, Food Bank of Delaware, (302) 292-1305, bjano@fbd.org; Tanya Thampi Sen, Greater Philadelphia Coalition Against Hunger, (215) 430-0555, tthampi@hungercoalition.org; Natalie Sondheimer, Maternity Care Coalition, (215) 972-0700, natalie@momobile.org, and/or Faith Hill, (610) 586-7489, fhill@momobile.org

Georgia Gwinnett County



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Outreach to the Masses

After the last Amen is said, Spanish-speaking parishioners in Gwinnett County learn how they can end food insecurity. And the presentations provided after Mass are welcomed with joy and thankfulness.

So much so, that possibly 20 to 30 percent of the listeners have applied or reapplied for food stamps, says Jaime Velasquez of the Gwinnett County Department of Family and Children Services. Jaime, who is the creator and presenter of the outreach approach in churches, explains, many parishioners had applied for food stamps in the past and were turned down because they did not meet the eligibility criteria. For the most part there was a matter of ignorance regarding the right to apply for benefits and embarrassment was part of the equation. And then there was the fear of INS involvement.

During his 15-minute presentations, Jaime emphasizes that the program is underutilized by Hispanics and presents facts about recent policy changes, particularly as they relate to non-citizens. He explains that the County has no connection with immigration, and the lack of legal documents should not stop parents from depriving their children of benefits to which they are legally entitled now.

Jaime has been delivering his sermon periodically in five Catholic churches since October 2002. He uses USDA pamphlets and posters to reinforce the message and stays after the presentations for as long as it takes people to understand the information.

The outreach approach has been very successful in increasing the number of Hispanics who apply for food stamps, says Jaime. The recipients of the message tell him, they are glad someone from their culture came to explain the program and their children born here, qualify to receive benefits. In turn, they will inform their friends and neighbors so they can apply for their children.

$$2 + 2 = 700$$

More recently, the Gwinnett County Department of Family and Children Services contracted with two individuals to conduct outreach, and during their first two months on the job, they netted 700 applications for food stamps.

Department officials say the success of the Spanish-speaking duo is attributed to their availability at locations where potential applicants are comfortable and secure, speaking the native language of applicants and providing factual information to allay applicants' fears concerning immigration.

[For additional information, contact Jaime Velasquez, Gwinnett County Department of Family and Children Services, (770) 339-5184, jvgwinnett@hotmail.com

Indiana Allen County, Fort Wayne Office



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Inexpensive Communication Tools

Staff of the Allen County Division of Family and Children have very clever, inexpensive ways to communicate with applicants who speak Bosnian, French, Spanish, Vietnamese and Burmese.

They use a visual aid, something akin to flashcards, when applicants apply for benefits. The tool, which they call "cue cards," asks basic questions like:

- What is your name?
- What is your address?
- What is your telephone number?
- What is your birth date?
- What is your Social Security number?
- Who lives with you?

The questions are printed on $8-1/2'' \times 11''$ card stock and secured together with a key ring.

Allen County also has translated the form that clients use to report changes. It is available in the same languages as the cue cards, and will be available soon in Arabic, Swahili and French. Additionally, the EBT training tapes and written materials will be translated to Bosnian, Burmese and Vietnamese. For the most part, the translations were made by volunteers from these nations so that the materials read and sound more like "normal business conversation."

The cue cards, the idea of which originated at a local medical center, were adapted by case worker Fred Gilbert out of a desire to assist applicants better and lessen the feelings of helplessness when staff are not able to communicate with non-English-speaking customers. Fred, who speaks Turkish and German, also took it upon himself to learn how to welcome clients to the eligibility interview, in four other languages.

Clients are very grateful when efforts are taken to use their language, because this does not happen often in places where they do business, says Fred.

[For more information, contact: Karen Snodgrass, Allen County Division of Family and Children, (260) 458-6301, ksnodgrass@fssa.state.in.us



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Massachusetts

Banding Together

The Massachusetts food stamp participation rate is 43 percent. Lagging at 49th nationally, the Department of Transitional Assistance was tasked by its Commissioner to increase it to 50 percent in about a year's time.

Nearing the deadline, Department officials say they have already exceeded the goal by 4 percent and remain optimistic of a continued increase. So how did the state and local offices do it? The state set goals for each local office, which is not a new concept for them. In the spirit of healthy competition, as well as the incentive of the USDA performance measurements, each of the 30 local offices aimed to increase participation based on the rates of each community in the Commonwealth.

The state convened quarterly meetings in December 2002 to discuss access and participation issues with representatives from its policy, research, computer, legal, financial and field units. They identified and implemented strategies that involved the use of FNS national outreach campaign materials; developed a network to distribute food stamp applications and/or outreach information; developed an instructional CD to help partners in providing information about the implementation of numerous changes allowed by the Farm Bill; encouraged the mailing of applications to local offices and subsequent phone interviews, when warranted; provided application information as a menu option for callers; and proposed MIS enhancements to streamline the application and recertification process.

Along with the local offices, the state contacted a few hundred community-based organizations; all expressed a willingness and enthusiasm to assist by distributing pamphlets and applications and/or conduct outreach meetings.

☐ For more information, contact: Cescia Derderian, Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance, (617) 348-8415, cescia.derderian@state.ma.us

Minnesota Washington County, Stillwater Office



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Paging All Case Workers

Clients of the Stillwater Office of Washington County, Minnesota, know their needs and emergencies are taken seriously when their case workers provide them assistance within 10 minutes of their arrival at the office, regardless of the reason for the contact.

Since January 2002, the office has used a pager system, and with it, office policy has been for the receptionist to page the case worker first when someone wants to see she or he, and if there is no response to the page, a supervisor is contacted.

Washington County officials say the pager system was implemented to improve customer service and lessen the frustration of reception staff who were very busy and not always able to reach case workers quickly. They add, staff appreciate being able to leave their desk areas yet still be reachable by the receptionists and available for their customers. Additionally, the inexpensive pagers have improved response time as well as the quality of communications in the office. The pagers are a foolproof means of letting the case workers know they are needed in the reception area.

The pagers were free with the service. The County has 28 of them, and the service for each costs \$3.50 per month, which is less than \$100 per month. It has been well worth it, say Washington County officials.

[For more information, contact: Kim Carolan, Washington County Community Services, (651) 430-4160, kim.carolan@co.washington.mn.us



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New Jersey

Everyday People Use Food Stamps Everyday

Everyday People Use Food Stamps Everyday. It's more than a catchy slogan. It's part of a media plan to help erase the social stigma that surrounds food stamps, and at the same time, empower people who receive benefits by depicting them as they are – ordinary people in the midst of daily life.

Launched in June 2003, the four-month media campaign by the New Jersey Department of Human Services, spreads the word about the availability and benefits of the Food Stamp Program through advertisements placed on buses and grocery carts and in pharmacies and newspapers.

Department officials sought the expertise of an advertising firm to develop the plan, which had to fit their budget and reach a diverse audience, identified as African-Americans, Hispanics and seniors who have an annual income below \$25,000.

After careful study of information produced by a mapping system, the contractor pinpointed the location of where the target audience lives – in cities like Newark, Elizabeth, Plainfield, Camden, Asbury Park, Trenton, and rural areas in northern and southern counties, to name a few.

The close proximity of the state to New York and Philadelphia, which are the most and fourth-most costly media markets in the country, respectively, had a bearing on the types of media selected as did the culturally-specific media habits of the target audience. As a result, the main form to get the message moving is the transit system. King-size posters written in English and Spanish are appearing on the exterior of buses, while a smaller version is posted inside. The next most important element is advertisement in newspapers. Half-page ads are running, and a single-sheet is being inserted in newspapers for ethnic groups and seniors. A grassroot effort rounds out the plan with posters in pharmacies and inserts on shopping carts in supermarket chains.

Tips to Develop A Media Campaign

The following information provides food for thought on selecting different types of media and other far-reaching outlets. It was extracted from the media campaign plan of the Department of Human Services, developed by Winning Strategies Advertising.

Transit Advertisement

Advertisement on buses can be an effective tool to reach various target groups, with no appreciable overlap. These "billboards" move the message at eye level through urban areas of the densest population where residents are difficult to capture using traditional media.

Newspaper Advertisement

Newspapers that cater to communities, ethnic groups and seniors are an inseparable part of the neighborhood. Usually they are free to readers and deliver news geared specifically to the needs and concerns of particular communities, groups, etc. A strength of community newspapers, and of those known as "shoppers," is zoning capabilities. These weekly newspapers are direct-mailed or carrier-delivered to all homes in the zip codes that the advertiser chooses; therefore, inserts and advertisements can be targeted to specific areas.

According to the Newspaper Advertising Bureau, only 34 percent of newspaper readers are older than 55 years old; therefore, if the majority of the target audience is younger, advertising in daily newspapers could be ineffective and financially unrealistic.

Radio and Television Advertisement

The cost to air an effective media schedule on New York and Philadelphia television and radio stations was cost prohibitive for the New Jersey budget. Concerning cable television, the household groups targeted were least likely to be subscribers.

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



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New Mexico

Promotion Packets

The New Mexico Department of Human Services began distributing outreach packets throughout the state in April 2003, in an effort to reach the elderly, those who have a fixed income, the disabled and non-citizens.

The eye-catching, comprehensive literature, which was given to community organizations, includes an application for food stamps, TANF, Medicaid, LIHEAP and General Assistance, an overview of each program, timelines to receive benefits, the phone numbers of the state assistance programs and an explanation of rights and responsibilities.

The initiative was undertaken by the state to improve the health and well-being of its residents, of which 18.4 percent fall below the federal poverty level, say state officials. The New Mexico staff also plan to provide the packets to their local offices.

For more information contact, contact: Michael Rogers, New Mexico Department of Human Services, (505) 827-7265, michael.rogers@state.nm.us



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Ohio

Eggs, Toast and More

Needy Ohioans can find out how to apply for food stamps when they reach for a carton of eggs at food banks.

Through a market clearing initiative, a grant was provided by the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services, to the Ohio Association of Second Harvest Foodbanks. The grant was for the purchase of food products from Ohio producers, growers and processors. One of the suppliers - the Ohio Poultry Association - volunteered to print food stamp information, free of charge, on their egg cartons.

The message on the outside of the cartons is:

Could you use food stamps? Apply! You may be able to receive food stamps!

If you have been turned down before, or no longer receive cash assistance,

You may still be able to receive food stamps!

Call your local County Department of Job and Family Services! Their telephone number is located in your telephone book in the blue pages.

Don't' delay! Remember, it doesn't hurt to apply.

The message on the inside of the cartons is:

Gross Monthly Income		Maximum Amount of Food Stamps	
Family Size:		Family Size:	
1	\$ 960	1	\$139
2	\$1,294	2	\$256
3	\$1,628	3	\$366
4	\$1,961	4	\$465

These are only guidelines. It doesn't hurt to apply.

State policy staff worked with the Ohio Association of Second Harvest Foodbanks on the development and correctness of the information, which began appearing on the egg cartons in October 2002.

[For more information, contact: Marilyn Braun, Ohio Department of Job and Family Services, (614) 466-6814, braunm@odjfs.state.oh.us

Pennsylvania Berks County



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Rapid Response Team

In September 2002, 800 residents of Berks County, Pennsylvania, were affected by the closing of a major distribution center.

Thanks to the Rapid Response Team, however, the hardship was lessened for many. For example, bilingual case workers from a core member of the team - the Berks County Assistance Office - distributed food stamp applications, pre-screened individuals for food stamps and provided information on Medicaid and TANF to the affected workforce, 80 percent of whom spoke Spanish. As a result of their outreach effort, food stamp applications increased by 260 for the month, say County officials.

The Rapid Response Team, which was developed out of the Federal Workforce Investment Act of 1998, provides a proactive, one stop approach to help displaced workers.

[For more information, contact Robin Blankenbiller, Berks County Assistance Office, (610) 736-4252), rblankenbi@state.pa.us

Virginia Hanover County



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Pinpointing Caseloads

Georeferencing describes the process of locating an entity in "real world" coordinates, by determining its latitude and longitude. The Hanover County Department of Social Services used this technology in May 2002 to identify exactly where its food stamp, TANF and Medicaid recipients were located.

Using only addresses and the age of the heads of the households, an engineering group identified pockets of clients. As it turns out, they resided primarily in the same community where the social services office is located and in areas 15 to 20 miles away. The color-coded maps provided by the consultants also showed the highest percentage of elderly customers in this outlying location where public transportation is not available.

Long-range planning conducted by the Department had identified where itinerant offices or outstations seemed to be needed. However, the georeferencing technology drew a perfect picture of where to locate another office in this mostly rural locality. As a result, the Department plans to open an itinerant office in October 2003, say Hanover officials.

Georeferencing also presented useful documentation for the county's strategic planning, board and budget presentations and mass mailing, they add.

[For more information, contact: Ginny Ferguson, Hanover Department of Social Services, (804) 752-4118, <u>gdf085@central.dss.state.va.us</u>

Virginia Washington County



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Outreach for the Out-of-Work

Plant closings, layoffs, job losses and economic slowdown can bring more customers to local food stamp offices. But rather than wait for folks affected by employment changes to take the first step towards obtaining assistance, the Washington County Department of Social Services reaches them first.

The County social services staff, with Virginia Employment Commission, Adult Education Program and Job Placement workers, visit affected industries as soon as they learn of an impending plant closing or mass layoff. The Rapid Response Team informs those who are laid off and terminated of how to apply for food stamps, employment and dislocated worker benefits and enroll in GED, college degree or certificate programs.

Folks out of work are concerned about having adequate health insurance and providing food for their families. Because most of them lose their health insurance coverage as soon employment ends, they have questions about Medicaid and Children's Health Insurance, and then come the questions about food stamps, says a Washington County team member. For the most part, these people never had to apply for public assistance of any type, so understandably there is a degree of embarrassment. They tend to ask, "is it true" questions, such as, "Can I own a home and receive food stamps?"

It has been a real joy for us to answer questions and dispel myths, County officials say. The new food stamp publications produced by the U.S. Department of Agriculture have been an invaluable tool during the information-sharing sessions. Our case workers say the publications have lessened the stigma still associated in some areas with applying for food assistance. We have seen many of the people who attended the Rapid Response sessions in our office applying and being found eligible for food stamp benefits, they add.

☐ For more information, contact: Barbara Farmer, Washington County Department of Social Services, (276) 645-5000, bbf191@western.dss.state.va.us



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Virginia

Governor's Outreach Message

Hola, Les habla el gobernador Mark Warner.

Hi, I'm governor Mark Warner.

¿Le da trabajo obtener suficiente comida para su familia porque no tiene suficiente dinero?

Do you have trouble getting enough food for your family because you don't have enough money?

Usted podría calificar para beneficios de cupones de alimentos.

If so, you may qualify for food stamp benefits.

Estos beneficios suplementan su presupuesto de comida para que usted pueda proveer mejor nutrición para su familia.

These benefits supplement your food budget so that you can provide better nutrition for your family.

Si sus ingresos son bajos, o si está preocupado porque su familia no está recibiendo suficiente comida, por favor llame gratis al 1-800-221-5689.

If your income is low, or if you are worried that your family may not be getting enough nutritious food, please call 1-800-221-5689, toll-free.

O, simplemente visite el departamento de servicios sociales en su área para solicitar beneficios de cupones para alimentos.

Or, simply visit the department of social services in your area to apply for food stamp benefits.

This is the script for the outreach video that the Virginia Department of Social Services produced recently to increase participation. It will be aired by television stations based in the northern Virginia and the greater-DC metropolitan areas.

☐ For more information, contact Angela Beachy, Virginia Department of Social Services, (804) 692-2376, acb900@email1.dss.state.va.us



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Wyoming

QC Home Visits/Customer Surveys

The Wyoming Department of Family Services started conducting a customer service survey this past October during its Quality Control (QC) home visits.

The survey is helping them to identify the *real* needs of clients, say Department officials. There were several misconceptions with regard to customer preferences, for example, extension of business hours. The survey, however, is showing that current hours are meeting the needs of customers.

The 22-question survey, which takes about 20 minutes to complete, is voluntary, and so far, no one has elected not to participate. In fact, its creator, Nanette Vasey, Quality Control Manager, says the customers are very willing to provide input, are comfortable and direct when answering the questions and view the survey as a sign that the Department truly cares and values customer opinions.

QC home visits are conducted in food stamp households throughout every state. QC reviewers arrange interviews with randomly-selected households to determine whether the information in client case files is an accurate account of personal circumstances at the time the information was provided by clients. Ultimately, the results of QC home visits and reviews, along with a re-examination of a sample of client case files by federal QC reviewers, results in the payment accuracy rate of each state.

The comfort level of clients in Wyoming to answer additional questions during the QC home visits may be due, in part, to the work the QC staff has done during the past several years to change its image, says Nanette. She explains, currently, the role of the QC reviewers is more of an "advocate" rather than an "auditor." We have found this process to be very effective in completing thorough and accurate QC and customer service interviews.

Also helpful in drawing out responses, is the design of the customer survey. The QC team wrote it in a manner that is user-friendly. Each question provides multiple-choice answers, and the survey enables participants to add their personal comments. Here are some of the survey questions:

Survey Questions

- How many working days do you normally have to wait for an appointment? Does this system meet your needs?
- What hours would best meet your needs?
- How would you rate the treatment you received by the receptionist(s)?

- Approximately how much time did your worker spend with you the last time you visited the office? Do you feel the time spent was adequate?
- How well does your worker respond to your telephone calls?
- Do you feel that your right to privacy is protected during the interview/office visit?
- How many times did you have to return when you applied or recertified?
- Have you ever requested a fair hearing on a food stamp matter?
- What do you most appreciate about your worker? Office?
- What do you least appreciate about your worker? Office?

Wyoming conducts approximately 396 QC home reviews each federal fiscal year. That equals a lot of input for the survey. The Department tabulates the survey statewide and by individual field office. Administrators, field managers and the coordinator of management evaluation reviews are provided quarterly reports.

Field staff were concerned at first that the reports would be used in a negative manner, Nanette says. They have since found that the survey results provide a wide scope of how the agency is doing and is not a direct reflection of an individual worker. If a trend is identified for a particular field office or individual, however, the report will validate a concern and changes will be made.

The survey has given the QC staff an opportunity to provide data that directly impacts the quality of our service. Our Director also is thrilled with the project, she adds, because one of his major goals is to be #1 nationwide in customer service.

[For more information, contact: Nanette Vasey, Wyoming Department of Family Services, (307) 777-6101, <u>nvasey@state.wy.us</u>