

Access
Outreach
Payment Accuracy
Quality Control
Policy



Issue 3, November 2003

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

Performance Bonuses

The Farm Bill, signed into law by President Bush on May 13, 2002, established a \$48 million performance award system.

Cash awards will go to states that excel in the areas of high participation rates by eligible households; payment accuracy; and quality of service.

We will be able to provide incentive payments to states that have made significant progress in these areas, as well as to the states that have already achieved the highest performance standards, beginning with federal fiscal year 2003.

Participant Access Award

For this award, \$12 million will be divided and awarded to the four states that have the highest and the four states that have the most-improved participant access rate.

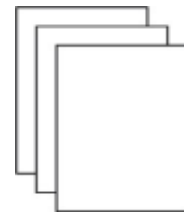
To determine which states will receive the award, we will use participation data from the (continued on page 8)

NEW

Look, Content and Style

We published *Excellent Service for All* twice previously this year. It had a different look and format, and the content focused on innovative outreach and access initiatives implemented by state and local agencies. We also published payment accuracy ideas through another venue.

In this business, providing excellent service for all means the reversing of perceptions that prevent individuals from applying for the Food Stamp Program. It's opening more avenues to the program, to feed more people. It's ensuring that all applicants and recipients are certified properly, according to rules and regulations, and provided the correct amount of benefits on time. It's about treating people fairly and equally. And it's about equipping us, the people who administer the program, to do our very best each day. (continued last page)



It's What's Inside

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Literature Literally At Your Fingertips

Here are some web sites that we think you'll find useful.

U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service

http://www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/public_advocacy/cover.htm

"The Nutrition Safety Net At Work for Families" is a straightforward guide to federal requirements for processing applications and determining eligibility for the program. Includes information on how states can work



within the existing law to simplify the application process and reach out to low-income families with children.

<http://www.fns.usda.gov/fsec/FILES/wecan.pdf>

"Together We Can" is a what, why and how handbook to help end hunger in local communities.

U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service

<http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/efan02013>

"Community Food Security Assessment Toolkit" provides standardized measurement tools for assessing various aspects of community food security.

U.S. Census Bureau

<http://factfinder.census.gov> (note: there is no www in this address)

The Community Profiles section of this web site is a great way to find information about any US city, county or reservation. The site also includes business and economic data and special thematic maps that graphically display population trends.

U.S. Government Printing Office

<http://www.gpoaccess.gov>

Legislative, executive and judicial resources such as congressional bills and records, Code of Federal Regulations and Federal Registers, Supreme Court link, on-line book store, plus more.

Office of Management and Budget

<http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb>

Legislative information such as Reports to Congress and Statements of Administration Policy.

Library of Congress

<http://thomas.loc.gov>

Congressional resource system that tracks legislation, committees and committee members.

Catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance

<http://cfda.gov>

Government-wide compendium of federal programs, projects, services, activities and financial information pertaining to all programs administered by federal agencies.

<http://www.fns.usda.gov>

Link to federal food stamp regulations, outreach materials, studies and evaluations, information on nutrition education, EBT and much, much more. *Make it a favorite!*



... Word Scramble from page 7

We knew you knew that!
If cases looked like this, we'd all have a lot easier time finding out what the information is all about and making sure the case records are accurate.

DOCUMENTATION

2★Excellent Service for All

Can't get food stamps if you own a car? Can get food stamps if you're a senior, but, don't expect much, and so on...

NJ Produces Eligibility Video, "Grocery Talk"

The New Jersey Department of Human Services developed a video to address some of the misconceptions about the Food Stamp Program. "Grocery Talk," which models a talk show format, is easy to watch and humorous, but more importantly, is an excellent vehicle for imparting a great deal of information about the program.

Most of the myths surround eligibility. Show host "Mary" discusses home and automobile ownerships with guests. A senior couple visits the set to chat about how many seniors receive MORE than, yes, more than, \$10 a month in benefits and other provisions that apply to seniors. The audience learns that immigrants are eligible for food stamps, and so are working people. And there's a discussion about only needing to report changes every six months unless income exceeds a specific amount.

"Grocery Talk" was filmed in English and shot a second time in Spanish. It is open-captioned in English and Spanish for use by deaf and hearing-impaired individuals.



Courtesy of NJ Dept. of Human Services

The video is the core of the outreach presentations made by the Human Services department, and it will be distributed to the 21 local agencies, homeless shelters and other venues that serve individuals who are potentially eligible for the Food Stamp Program.

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

Employee Incentives

Do Give Credit When Credit is Due

What incentives do you use to motivate your employees? In the public sector, we cannot always afford to award cash bonuses for good performance. Obviously there are many reasons to give an award, such as, completing accurate case work, maintaining near-perfect attendance, providing special assistance to elderly or disabled applicants, volunteering for special assignments, suggesting an innovative way to reduce payment errors, reaching out to immigrants.

Here are 20 ways to recognize supervisors, eligibility specialists and administrative assistants.

- Post-it notes appropriate to personality of awardee
- Thank-you note to employee's family when overtime involved
- Free parking or special parking spot for month
- Extra time off
- Article on agency intranet site
- Certificate
- Verbal commendation from top-level official
- Personalized business cards
- Plaque in lobby
- Appointment to committee
- In-house luncheon
- Snacks, chocolate kisses
- Bouquet of flowers or balloons
- Movie tickets
- Personalized mouse pad
- Personalized mug
- Nameplate for work station
- Engraved clock
- Pen and pencil set
- Color copies of this newsletter in special binder



Translated and On-line Applications Equal Improved Access to Food Stamp Program

In the states within the Mid-Atlantic Region, the New Jersey Department of Human Services leads the way in providing the food stamp application in multiple languages:

- Spanish
- Portuguese
- Korean
- Haitian-Creole
- Arabic
- Gujarati
- Polish

The applications of the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare and the West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources can be completed on-line, not just downloaded. The Virginia Department of Social Services and the New Jersey Department of Human Services are working toward this goal.

To swap information, contact: Marybeth Schaedel, New Jersey Department of Human Services, (609) 588-2197, mary.schaedel@dhs.state.nj.us; Nancy Poindexter, Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare, (717) 772-7906, npindexter@state.pa.us; Angela Beachy, Virginia Department of Social Services, (804) 726-7374, angela.beachy@dss.virginia.gov; and Sue Buster, West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources, (304) 558-3796, sbuster@wvdhhr.org



Serving the Latino Community

Outreach Project, Convenient for Customers, Rewarding for Eligibility Staff

The Prince George's County Department of Social Services (DSS) in Maryland initiated a project this year to provide better service to its Latino population.

Several eligibility specialists and a supervisor provide their time one evening each month at a community center in the northern part of the county. They help applicants to complete the paperwork needed to obtain food stamps and medical, energy and emergency assistance. The DSS staff who speak Spanish also interview the applicants or provide an appointment for an interview at another time.

It wasn't unusual to get volunteers for the two-hour shift at the Adelphi/Langley Park Family Support Center because DSS staff normally serve customers once a month in the evening at all DSS locations.

The public was informed of the availability of DSS through flyers provided to the community and distribution of media advisories.

DSS staff say the project is helping to demystify and clear up aspects of the Food Stamp Program, improving their image in the community, reaching Latinos and other immigrants and increasing the community's ability to have direct contact with people from the agency. Comments from the applicants also are very positive, as indicated by customer surveys; on the whole, customers remarked that having staff at the center was very helpful.

From the initiation of the outreach project in February, through October, 70 applications were completed for food stamp benefits. There was an increase in food stamp applications filed in September; DSS officials attribute it to the notice on eligibility, which they sent home with school children.

To swap information, contact: Theresa Melton, Maryland Department of Human Resources, (301) 909-7029, tmelton@dhr.state.md.us



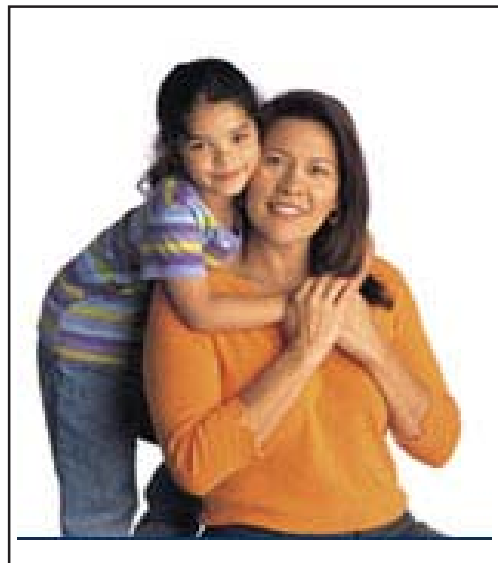
Los Cupones para Alimentos le Pueden Ayudar Ahora

Food Stamps Can Help You Now

Los niños legalmente inmigrados ahora califican para recibir los beneficios del programa.

Si usted es un inmigrante adulto y ha vivido en los Estados Unidos por 5 años, también podría ser elegible.

Llame a su oficina local de cupones para ver si es elegible o al 1-800-221-5689...



Children who are legal immigrants are now eligible for food stamp benefits.

If you are an adult legal immigrant and have been in the United States for 5 years you may also be eligible.

Contact your local food stamp office to see if you are eligible or call 1-800-221-5689...

We recently distributed more than 500,000 flyers, mostly printed in Spanish, to advise the public of the Farm Bill change* that enabled legal immigrants under the age of 18 to participate in the Food Stamp Program regardless of the date they entered the country.

The colorful 11" x 8-1/2" insert was included within the newspapers of top Latino markets (see list in next column).

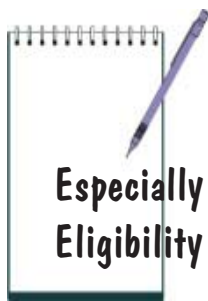
We also provided the flyers to our faith- and community-based partners.

Other regional offices of FNS joined in and distributed the insert to newspapers in North Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Arizona, Colorado, Illinois, New Mexico, Nevada, Texas, New York, Louisiana and Massachusetts, bringing the number of flyers distributed to nearly 4 million.

**Section 4401 of the Farm Bill was effective October 1, 2003.*

- El Sol Philadelphia - Philadelphia
- Al Dia – Philadelphia
- Hola Berks, Reading, Pennsylvania
- El Especial – north Jersey
- El Especialito – north Jersey
- Mensaje, north Jersey
- El Tiempo Latino – DC and Virginia areas
- La Nacion USA – DC
- Washington Hispanic – DC
- El Pregonero, DC

Excellent Service for All★5



**Especially for
Eligibility Specialists**



Note:
These new income reporting policies do not affect households on simplified reporting.

New Food Stamp Rule:

Here's What We Did, Here's What You Do



On April 29, 2003, the Food and Nutrition Service issued a rule that affects how you anticipate income and require changes to be reported. “*Food Stamp Program: Anticipating Income and Reporting Changes*,” was to be implemented no later than November 1, 2003. We think you’ll like what we did for you and your customers.

Background: This rule revises the current requirement that households report a change of more than \$25 in monthly gross income by increasing the reporting threshold for unearned income to \$50 and by allowing states two choices for reporting requirements concerning changes in the amount of earned income. It also provides states the option of establishing a quarterly reporting system for all nonexempt households and excludes a technical amendment that addresses procedures for the handling of certain recurring income in a retrospective budgeting system.

Having said all of that, below is an easy-to-follow explanation of the new rule...

Income Averaging

7 CFR 273.10(c)(3)(i)

Prior to the issuance of this new rule, change-reporting households could choose to have their income averaged. You used their anticipation of monthly income fluctuations over the certification period. Now, the new rule requires that your state agency choose the categories of households most appropriate for income averaging. In turn, you should inform the households of the averaged amount that was used to determine the allotment. This is beneficial to change-reporting households because it makes the instructions simpler concerning reporting and provides a consistent level of benefits for the certification period.

Reporting Unearned Income

7 CFR 273.12(a)(1)(i)(A)

This section increases the reporting threshold for unearned income from \$25 to \$50, excluding changes in public assistance or jointly-processed general assistance. (These are excluded from reporting requirements because you are aware of the increase or decrease in the grant when this change occurs.) Again, this rule benefits recipients and cuts down on your work.

Reporting Earned Income

7 CFR 273.12(a)(1)(i)(C)

This part of the rule offers states two choices for reporting earned income and allows flexibility when setting the certification period of change-reporting households:

- Households are to be certified for no more than six months. The state has the flexibility to set certification periods.
- The reporting threshold for earned income reporting was raised from \$25 to \$100. Now, change-reporting households are required to report changes in earned income only when the income is different by more than \$100 in any month.

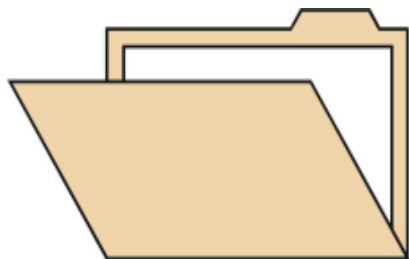
Defining “Known to Household”

7 CFR 273.12(a)(2)

This is in regard to the 10-day reporting requirements for a change in income. Each state has a choice of how to define the term, “known to the household.” It can be defined as, when the household is aware that its income will change; when the household begins or ends the activity that causes the change; or when the household begins to receive income as the result of a

If you look at this for some time, you'll probably figure out what it says. Unfortunately, this is sometimes what a case record looks like.

M O U D C A T O I N E N T



Does Your Case Record Speak for Itself?

If case records are organized and documented properly, it's a lot easier for others (including supervisors and QC reviewers) to determine the basis for and accuracy of the eligibility specialist's actions and be assured the household has been offered the options to which it is entitled.

Some eligibility specialists may feel they don't have the time to document their records adequately, but actually, they don't have the time

...Here's What You Do

change. Your agency should let you know what its policy is concerning "known to the household."

Action on Changes

7 CFR 273.12(c)

According to the new rule, if a household reports a change in income, you should take action on the change only if it is expected to continue for more than one month.

Quarterly Reporting

7 CFR 273.12(a)(4) and 7 CFR 273.12(b)(2)

Currently, none of the states in the Mid-Atlantic Region require households to report changes quarterly; therefore, this part of the new rule is not applicable.

not to do it. Documentation saves time, lessens aggravation, and, in the long run, really cuts the amount of work the eligibility specialist and agency have to do. It can mean the difference between a QC error and a correct case.

Supervisors, you can help your staff to produce better documentation. Give them some examples to follow and tell them where the documentation should be made in the case record. Together you can develop forms that address areas of policy that need to be documented, like employment, expedited service, the utility standard.

The main thing to remember: documentation needs to be simple and concise, yet sufficient enough to help anyone find out what has been done to the case today AND six months from today.

Remember, furnishing good documentation saves everyone time and helps support the reasonableness of eligibility and benefit determinations or ineligibility.

See page 2 for answer to word scramble.

Ways to ensure the case record will speak for itself:

- Document "date received" on all documents.
- Document date pay is RECEIVED and its frequency.
- Document client and agency efforts to verify information when using client statement as best available source.
- Record household statements as given.
- Maintain copies of all documentation used.
- When verifying questionable information, record the reason it was questionable.
- Record all outside sources of verification used, dates seen and appropriate names.
- Record name of collateral contact, phone number, date and information provided.
- Record method of all computations.
- Do not document on documents; use separate worksheet.
- Only document relevant facts.

Case Summary Report

Getting the Most Out of Quality Control



State Quality Control reviewers prepare reports on the errors they find when reviewing case records. These notices should provide enough information for eligibility staff to confirm the findings or refute them. The more meaningful the information is, obviously the better the chance to understand what happened, why and how to keep from making the mistake again.

Here are some suggestions for the types of information that case summary reports should include.



Clear, concise and factual information...

- Cause of the error;
- Whether the error occurred before, at the time of or after the most recent action/certification;
- Error element (examples: household composition, shelter, child support payment);
- Whether the case was processed timely;
- Explanation of policy involved and policy citation;
- Whether pertinent facts, for example, computer information, were available to the eligibility specialist in time to prevent the error;
- How the error was found, for example, while conducting the home visit, wage match;
- What could prevent the error from recurring;
- Why a system or procedure, for example, supervisory review, failed;
- Information that did not cause an error in the sample month but may in the future.



If you're not getting all the information you need, talk with the Quality Control staff to make improvements. Likewise, if you're satisfied, let them know you appreciate their efforts.

...Performance Bonuses



FNS-388 reports and the Census Bureau for calendar years 2002 and 2003. The average monthly participation reported by state agencies will be divided by Census Bureau counts of people who were below 100 percent of the federal poverty level. In all likelihood, this performance award for 2003 will be announced in September 2004. (Each March, the Census Bureau conducts its Current Population Survey, which is an "abbreviated" Census; this data is not available, however, until September of the following year.)

8★*Excellent Service for All*

Timely Processing Award



Basically, the measurement for this award is how well states meet the 7- and 30-day processing standards for providing **eligible** households the opportunity to participate.

For federal fiscal year 2004, cases that are processed outside the 30-day standard, but are properly pending, will not be counted.

Six million dollars will be divided among the six states that processed the highest percentage of cases timely.



Products and Services

...brought to you by:

U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service...

National Pre-Screening Tool

<http://www.foodstamps-step1.usda.gov>

This web address will take you to the eligibility pre-screening tool, launched this past June by FNS. Individuals can learn whether they may be eligible for food stamp benefits through accessing the pre-screener. The e-gov resource provides an estimated range of benefits that they may be eligible to receive, based on household composition and financial situations. You can take advantage of this product as well, along with your faith- and community-based partners. FNS is working on the development of stand-alone and Spanish versions of the pre-screener. Try it today.

Free Posters and Flyers

<http://www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/outreach/order-form.htm>

Click and order free food stamp flyers and posters to complement your outreach campaign and those of your faith- and community-based partners.

Free Food Stamp Information in 35 Languages

<http://www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/outreach/translations.htm>

You can get downloadable food stamp publications in 35 languages* through this web address: general eligibility, immigrant eligibility, elderly eligibility, public charge and verification documents. *(Albanian, Amharic, Arabic, Burmese, Chinese, Croatian, English, Farsi, French, Greek, Haitian-Creole, Hebrew, Hindi, Hmong, Igbo, Italian, Japanese, Khmer, Korean, Kurdish, Laotian, Lithuanian, Macedonian, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, Serbo-Croatian, Somali, Spanish, Tagalog, Thai, Turkish, Urdu, Vietnamese and Yoruba). Free. Don't delay – download today.

Payment Accuracy Rate Award

The seven states that have the best combined payment accuracy rate and the three with the most improved combined payment accuracy rate will share \$24 million, divided according to caseload size.

Improvement for this award will be measured between federal fiscal years 2002 and 2003, as determined by data from Quality Control.



Negative Error Rate Award

Again, data from Quality Control will determine the four states that have the lowest rate and the two states that are most-improved in this category. A total of \$6 million will be divided among these achievers.



Note: States will not receive a bonus for "best" AND "most-improved." The "next-best" state would receive the bonus. However, a state could receive a bonus in different categories, for example, payment accuracy and participation. If this does NOT happen, as many as 30 states could receive a bonus.

Hispanic Radio Network

FNS contracted with the Hispanic Radio Network, a wholesaler of radio shows with 200 – 300 affiliates, to air 60-second messages in Spanish during this past March and April. The spots encouraged people to apply for food stamps and promoted the FNS national toll-free number for food stamp information, 1-800-221-5689. Since then, the number of calls from Hispanics to the hot-line increased significantly. Additionally, FNS Administrator Roberto Salazar and staff of the Mid-Atlantic Region – Margarita Maisterrena, public affairs director, and Jaime Rivera, director of the Caribbean Area Office – presented information on food stamps during the network's weekly show, *Welcome to America*.

Nutrition Network

USDA is establishing a partnership with the Mexican Embassy to improve access to nutrition programs throughout the country. A consular network will: inform Mexicans in the US of the eligibility criteria for the 15 food assistance programs administered by FNS; exchange information on nutrition assistance programs and the health benefits of a nutritious diet; collaborate on community-based activities and events; and establish a framework for future collaborative efforts utilizing consulate community-based offices and USDA offices and an affiliated partner network.

Targeted for this initiative are:

Mexican-Americans in metropolitan areas;
Mexican nationals legally working in the US;
Rural-based migrant communities;
Mexican-American border communities;
Working poor who are legal immigrants;
Immigrant children and families;
Elderly legal immigrants.



Participant Access Projects

New Jersey, Virginia, Oklahoma, Rhode Island and Wisconsin were awarded a total of \$5 million by FNS this past June, to support the development and implementation of simpler food stamp application and eligibility determination systems or measures to improve access to the Food Stamp Program.

The key components of the project being conducted by the New Jersey Department of Human Services include a pre-screening tool and capacity to complete the food stamp application on-line in English or Spanish and send it electronically to the appropriate local agency. By the end of the second year of the project, availability will be expanded to 10 languages.

The Virginia Department of Social Services will create an on-line application that will be transmitted electronically to the appropriate local agency, increase use of its pre-screening tool and provide on-line access to the nutrition support services provided by all government and private entities within the state.

FNS National Toll-free Number

The number of personal operators who handle calls to the FNS national toll-free number was increased from three to four this year by FNS. These contractors question callers as to whether they would like to receive packets of information on the Food Stamp Program and their state's toll-free number. If the callers have specific questions about the program, a representative from the headquarters office of FNS returns a call.

Food Stamps Make America Stronger



Participation Data and Error Rates

Fiscal Year 2003

According to FNS-388 data, preliminary results show that participation in the Food Stamp Program increased 13.26 percent from October 2002 to September 2003, in the states within the Mid-Atlantic Region. Of the eight states, the Virginia Department of Social Services increased the highest. Also in the front-running are Pennsylvania, New Jersey and the District of Columbia. Nationwide, participation increased 12.80 percent.

Number of People Participating in the Food Stamp Program FNS-388 Data as Reported by State Agencies (Preliminary)

Month	DE	DC	MD	NJ	PA	VA	VI	WV
Oct. '02	43,749	79,130	242,879	324,938	770,819	370,508	12,430	241,332
July '03	48,564	84,641	259,090	350,694	855,887	405,581	13,362	247,911
Aug. '03	48,614	86,156	262,907	350,748	876,037	409,095	13,241	248,994
Sept. '03	48,055	87,267	261,674	360,244	888,645	453,022	13,307	250,093
% Change from 10/02 to 9/03	9.84%	10.28%	7.74%	10.87%	15.29%	22.27%	7.06%	3.63%

	FY 2002 Oct. '02 - July '02	FY 2003 Oct. '03 - July '03
Delaware	8.70%	5.54%
District of Columbia	8.27%	9.76%
Maryland	8.28%	7.26%
New Jersey	3.77%	2.19%
Pennsylvania	9.50%	8.44%
Virginia	6.68%	5.37%
Virgin Islands	6.25%	6.75%
West Virginia	6.45%	5.96%

Here are the *state* reported error rates for the first 10 months of fiscal year 2003.

The national average at this point in time is 6.54 percent, and as you can see, four states are above the national average.

Six states have lower error rates for the first 10 months of fiscal year 2003 than they had for the same time frame the previous fiscal year.

Hats off to New Jersey for continuing to reduce its error rate significantly!

...The New Excellent Service for All

Excellent Service for All still offers you ways to bring the Food Stamp Program to more people, and now it also provides ideas to improve and maintain payment accuracy. We are not stand-alone parts of the Food Stamp Program – the unit that handles intake or ongoing case work, the person who coordinates outreach efforts, the trainers who teach policy, the group tasked with developing corrective actions, the case reviewers. While all these functions may be in a different box on the organization chart of your agency, it takes a coordinated effort to administer and operate the Food Stamp Program.

It's good to increase participation. It's excellent to provide service for all, accurately and timely. We cannot compromise. If payment accuracy is not a significant part of your business plan today, a sanction may be tomorrow. While no one purposely aims in this direction, you can get there fast if you short-cut payment accuracy.

You can argue that a decreased budget does not provide for additional staff and is demoralizing because you cannot provide relief or a promotion to well-deserving staff. There is no simple answer or magical way to cope in this environment. So how can you provide excellent service for all?

We pledge to identify and communicate ideas to help you address these and other issues. *Excellent Service for All* will post to your e-mail in-box, three times per year. We encourage each of you to use the information to the fullest, to share the newsletter with the managers, eligibility specialists, administrative assistants, supervisors and administrators of your agency. We hope *Excellent Service for All* will stimulate thinking and help to create new ideas in your agency.

We also urge you to call, e-mail or mail us with ideas and suggestions for the newsletter (see column on right for who “we” are). We'd like to know what has been working well in your agency, of what you are most proud in terms of outreach, access, payment accuracy, nutrition education, quality control, policy, etc., innovative, meaningful ideas. We need you to help keep this newsletter both fresh and lasting.

What we have offered herein is a selection of payment accuracy, policy, quality control, outreach and access ideas, which, hopefully, do not portray “business as usual.” Whether you're in the market for new notions or just browsing for the future, please get in touch with the folks who are listed as contacts and ask them to sell you on their products. And give them an idea in return.

-Editor-in-Chief, *Excellent Service for All*

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Excellent Service for All



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