



Excellent Service for All

Innovation in the Food Stamp Program

Access, Outreach, Payment Accuracy, Certification Policy & Quality Control

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

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U.S. - Mexico Partnership for Nutrition Assistance Initiative

Many Mexican-Americans and Mexican nationals living in the United States may be unaware of their potential eligibility for or the avenues to access information on nutrition assistance programs.

In July 2004, the USDA Secretary and the Secretary of Foreign Affairs for Mexico signed the U.S. – Mexico Partnership for Nutrition Assistance Initiative. Under the provisions of the partnership, the Mexican Embassy and 45 consulates in the United States will provide information on the food assistance programs administered by the Food and Nutrition Service, including the Food Stamp Program, Women, Infants and Children (WIC), National School Lunch Program, School Breakfast Program and Summer Food Service Program for Children.

Within the Mid-Atlantic Region there are Mexican consulates in Philadelphia (serving Pennsylvania, Delaware and southern New Jersey), Washington, DC (serving the District, Maryland, Virginia and West Virginia) and Puerto Rico.

In the early part of this fiscal year, staff from the Mid-Atlantic Region met with representatives of the Mexican consulates of Puerto Rico, Philadelphia and Washington, DC, and provided an overview of FNS programs and discussed the best ways to approach members of the Mexican community. They also provided information on food stamp and WIC eligibility during a “mobile” consulate event in Avondale, Pennsylvania, and another in Richmond, Virginia. Carmen Nieves of the Chester County Assistance Office in Thorndale, Pennsylvania, and Valerie Harris with the Virginia Department of Social Services assisted during the gatherings.

“We learned a lot about Mexican culture during our various meetings with consulate staff,” says Margarita Maisterrena, public affairs director for the Mid-Atlantic Region. “It is culture that makes people reticent to apply for government benefits. This new knowledge will help us reach out to the Mexican population in the U.S.,” she says. →

Yvette Jackson Regional Administrator Mid-Atlantic Region



Yvette Jackson (right) was sworn-in April 4, 2005, as regional administrator of the Mid-Atlantic Region, by USDA Under Secretary Eric Bost. Reverend Louisa Groce participated in her daughter's induction ceremony.

Yvette Jackson was named recently as the regional administrator of the Mid-Atlantic Region.

Ms. Jackson brings a wealth of experience in government and the private sector. Most recently, she was appointed to the Board of the United Way of Central Pennsylvania, and was the National Health and Human Services Practice Lead for Bearing

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More recently staff from the Mid-Atlantic Region participated in a discussion with community leaders from Washington, DC, Maryland, Virginia and West Virginia. Lucy Rodríguez of the Chesterfield County Department of Social Services in Chesterfield, Virginia, participated in the event.

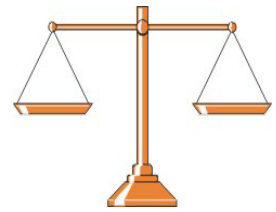
“At the discussion, participants learned about our programs and about us. Lucy Rodríguez gave an excellent presentation on food stamp benefits and requirements and did much to dispel misconceptions,” Margarita says.

Upcoming Events

We appreciate the time that staff of state and local agencies have provided to further this important initiative and hope we can call upon you to participate in upcoming activities with the Mexican consulates. So far, the plans of the Mid-Atlantic Region and the consulates include: participation in the Philadelphia consulate’s bi-national health week and a federal fair on government programs targeted to that population. We also have plans underway to promote our programs by publishing information on the web site of the Institute for Mexicans Abroad, a page designed for Mexicans in the U.S.

For more information on the partnership between the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the government of Mexico, access this web site of the Food and Nutrition Service: www.fns.usda.gov.

Camden County, New Jersey



Reversed Fair Hearing Data

We all know that analyzing Quality Control data and providing the results to administrators and eligibility supervisors and specialists should be an integral part of a corrective action system. There also are other data sources that can help to flesh-out the root causes of errors, such as the results of management evaluation reviews. Another resource is fair hearing decisions, which are fairly accessible, easy to use and result in a better understanding of policy.

All 21 local agencies in New Jersey receive fair hearing decisions routinely from the state fair hearing office. Let’s take a look at how the results of fair hearings are used as an error reduction tool by one of these local agencies.

During general meetings, the eligibility staff of the Camden County Board of Social Services discuss the fair hearing decisions that were *reversed*. They view the data as a tool from which to learn and prevent the repetition of mistakes in determining eligibility and benefits.

“Using reversed decisions points out actual mistakes, whereas looking at all fair hearing decisions could be useful as a training review, but would not target error rates,” says Barry Baum, assistant administrative supervisor for the Camden County Board of Social Services.

In this south Jersey agency, which handles the third largest food stamp caseload in the state, of late the fair hearing discussions have centered on resources. One example - the value of a second motor vehicle was based on the vehicle being in “fair” condition, and the customer successfully argued to the fair hearing officer that the vehicle was in “poor” condition, which in turn pointed out the need for staff to explore vehicle condition carefully before assigning a value to it, Barry says. One of the more unusual reversals was a voluntary quit closure in which the judge reversed the closure because the client was working for a temp agency, and, therefore, was considered always to have worked and was between jobs, he says.

For more information on how the fair hearing process works, check out the federal regulations at 7 CFR 273.15, which offer several pages of precise instructions and options.

In simple terms, if customers believe that they have been wrongfully denied benefits or given too few benefits, they may request a fair hearing. A fair hearing officer - someone who was not involved directly with the initial case decision - reviews all the facts surrounding the case, documents, etc., compares the information with regulations and decides whether or not the decision of the local office was correct.

To swap information, contact: Barry Baum, Camden County Board of Social Services, (856) 225-7790, bbaum@oel.state.nj.us.

Note: New Jersey uses \$9,500 for the fair market value test.

Food Stamp Outreach Campaign for 2005

The Food and Nutrition Service is continuing its campaign this year to raise awareness of and increase participation in the Food Stamp Program. It will focus on the working poor, elderly and immigrants. The campaign seeks to position the Food Stamp Program as a nutrition assistance and work support program, overcome welfare stigma, inform un-enrolled Americans of where and how to apply and highlight a commitment to ensure that eligible people receive benefits with dignity and respect. It will include radio advertisements again, and several new items. Among the components:

Radio Advertisements

There will be two new advertisements recorded in English, and this year the campaign will include two advertisements in Spanish. Each will run during April, May, August and September. Because the campaign contractor is negotiating for bonus time, the ads may air in some locations between May and August and after September.

The messages in English will be heard through 31 media markets and four state networks. The Spanish ads will air through 10 of these 31 media markets. Within the Mid-Atlantic Region, the radio ads recorded in English will broadcast in Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Norfolk and Baltimore on the following stations and will provide the national toll-free number of the Food Stamp Program:

Philadelphia - KYW-AM; WBEB-FM; WDAS-FM; WJJZ-FM
Pittsburgh - KDKA-AM; WAMO-FM; WDSY-FM; WDV-FM;
WSHH-FM
Norfolk - WGH-FM; WKUS-FM; WOWI-FM; WWDE-FM;
WXEZ-FM
Baltimore - WBAL-AM; WERQ-FM; WLIF-FM; WPOC-FM;
WWIN-FM

Examples of the other media markets that will air the radio advertisements: Phoenix, Los Angeles, Las Vegas, Albuquerque, Little Rock, Miami, Savannah, Tampa-St. Petersburg, Kansas City, Denver, Chicago, Cleveland, Boston and New York City.

Outreach/Media Toolkits

There will be a toolkit for state and local agencies and another for community groups, and they will provide "how to" information on outreach and the media.

State and Local Agency Toolkit

As of this writing, these are some of the proposed items for the state and local agency toolkit:



- *Templates for flyers, brochures, recipe cards and proclamations of events*
- *Tips on developing community partnerships to further outreach goals*
- *Answers to frequently-asked questions about the Food Stamp Program*
- *Resource list for obtaining materials, such as brochures, posters and web sites*

We will advise you later on the availability of the toolkits and how to obtain them.

Community Group Toolkit

As of this writing, the proposed items for the community toolkit will include some from the list above, plus tips on placing public service announcements, obtaining donated or reduced-cost advertisements, building a media list, pitching to the media, preparing spokespeople for interviews, defining and pitching community calendar listings, meeting with editorial boards and tracking and sharing progress and success.

Informational/Inspirational Video

Also new this year, a video will highlight how community partners and local food stamp offices come together to help inform low-income families about the Food Stamp Program, and it also will focus on the importance of the eligibility specialist.

It will include interviews with staff of the Loudoun County Department of Social Services in Leesburg, Virginia, Taylor Street Service Center in Washington, DC, Capital Area Food Bank, Food Marketing Institute and the National League of Cities.

We will advise you later on the availability of the video and how to obtain it.

Certification Interviews By Community Groups

The Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare was granted a waiver from the Food and Nutrition Service, allowing representatives of 19 faith- and community-based organizations to conduct the interview for initial certification.

This initiative to help households composed of all elderly and/or disabled people who do not have earned income, will benefit the applicants both in time and money saved, and it should better utilize the time of eligibility staff as well, particularly since caseloads have been increasing greatly and resources have been reduced, say state officials.

Presently and for the past several years, the 19 groups have each received a grant from the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare to conduct food stamp outreach. Many of them have been pre-screening customers and helping them to complete the food stamp application at various venues. While a number of them already had a good working knowledge of food stamp policy before the waiver was implemented, they all received an overview of food stamp policy and application completion and a copy of the manual, state officials say.

If additional information is needed, is questionable or inconsistent, the community partners will provide the information to eligibility staff of the Department, who will review it and conduct the

interview by telephone. Without exception, the eligibility staff of the Department will review the applications and make the eligibility determination.

The state must grant a face-to-face interview if it is requested by the household or its authorized representative. The waiver applies only at initial certification, and after one year, the state must provide an interim report, including payment error rate data on households affected by the waiver. This will be used to determine if the waiver has caused any adverse impact.

The waiver, number 2050007, was approved for a two-year period. A Quality Control hold-harmless period was not granted.

According to data from the FNS-388 report, since this past September, Pennsylvania eligibility specialists have been serving more than 1 million customers monthly. Pennsylvania is one of six states nationwide with a true on-line application, and its Participant Access Rate for 2003 was 67 percent, which was 6 percentage points higher than the national average.

To swap information, contact: Donna Roe, Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare, (717) 772-7906, droe@state.pa.us.

Eligibility Guide



How Do I?

Determine monthly income when it varies? Determine future income? Handle retroactive or sick leave when calculating income? Calculate shelter costs when the applicant says the rent will increase in two months? Handle capitation taxes? Handle utility and phone expenses that are split among more than one household? Allow utility deductions when the applicant has not paid the utility bills?

In Delaware, all of the above questions and many more are answered in the new desk guide for eligibility specialists, *(How Do I...?) Guide: Food Stamp Procedures*.

The Delaware Department of Health and Social Services developed the colorful, laminated desk guide of four double-sided pages, with the Center for the Support of Families.

Within the desk guide, eligibility specialists can find concise tips and policy citations for each of the dominant error elements: earned income, unearned income, shelter expenses and utility costs.

The guide, first distributed to eligibility staff in August 2004, has been incorporated in the training given to eligibility specialists.

Feedback from users indicates that the guide is very helpful and easy-to-use, and the cited references are handy for further research.

Delaware officials say they are optimistic that the desk guide will help to increase efficiency in case processing and reduce agency errors.

To swap information, contact: Ruth Campbell, Delaware Department of Health and Social Services, (302) 255-9612, ruth.campbell@state.de.us.

Service for Spanish-Speaking Customers

Immigrants may find themselves not only in unfamiliar surroundings and a culture in which their language is not predominant, but also in need of nutrition and other forms of assistance.

Richmond City, Virginia experienced a large influx of Spanish-speaking immigrants. The Hispanic population in Richmond during 1990 was just shy of 1,900 individuals, and in 2000, it jumped to more than 5,000 people, according to 2000 data from the Census Bureau.

The Richmond City Department of Social Services and the City of Richmond have implemented several provisions to bring community resources to Spanish-speaking residents there and directly provide them access to the Food Stamp Program.

Department of Social Services

At the Southside Office of the Richmond City Department of Social Services, four eligibility specialists and a customer service representative, all of whom are fluent in Spanish, assist the Spanish-speaking customers in this location where the majority of Spanish-speaking reside.

At the agency's other two offices, bilingual staff from co-located departments translate for their sister agency.



On-Site Assistance

Besides assisting its customers on-site, the Southside Office takes the Food Stamp Program to a nearby apartment complex twice a month, providing program access to the tenants. Approximately 90 percent of the tenants speak Spanish. For more than a year, one of the bilingual eligibility specialists or the customer service representative has taken applications and verifications and answered questions there on the various programs operated by their agency.

The agency conducts its business, along with other agencies and organizations, in an unused apartment and advertises services in the rental office, which was arranged by the Richmond City Hispanic Liaison Office.

The on-site accommodation is a good tool to reach the Hispanic community, and in the near future, agency staff will conduct interviews there interactively through a computer connected to the eligibility system of the state, says Michael Muse, director of the Richmond City Department of Social Services.

To swap information, contact: Michael Muse, Richmond City Department of Social Services, (804) 646-3178, musemj@ci.richmond.va.us.

City of Richmond

The City of Richmond instituted the Hispanic Liaison Office (HLO) this past year to promote community information and education, citizen participation and other initiatives that meet the needs of the culturally-diverse population, and it supports Richmond City agencies in the development of internal capacities to strengthen cross-cultural relationships with the community.

Resource Guide

Among its accomplishments to date, HLO developed and posted a resource guide on its web site: www.richmondgov.com/citizen/multi_lang/index.asp. It provides a wide variety of useful information and materials in Spanish and English; for example, the food stamp, TANF and medical application, which can be printed, the phone number of the Richmond City Department of Social Services and an EBT pamphlet. →

"A lot of times, new customers come in and don't understand the programs that are available to them," Michael says. "When someone who knows all the programs can speak to them in a language they understand, they gain a feeling of comfort and relaxation. It puts the clients at ease. They breathe a sigh of relief."

...Richmond Services & Resources

According to Tanya Gonzalez of the Hispanic Liaison Office, the on-line guide has proved its worth. During the month of January 2005, the guide registered more than 2,000 visits - an average of 66 each day. Tanya says the popularity of the e-resource will spur the inclusion of more information on the web site.

HLO also provides a foreign language representative who advises callers regarding the steps that they need to take for obtaining various forms of assistance. If someone needs to interact with an agency that does not have resources in Spanish, HLO staff will facilitate the initial communication with the agency. Other areas of assistance provided by HLO include information about English language classes, employment, health care, U.S. systems and laws, taxes, public safety and youth resources.

During the first six months in operation, HLO fielded more than 2,000 queries from Spanish-speaking residents.

To swap information, contact, Tanya Gonzalez, Richmond City Hispanic Liaison Office, (804) 646-0145, gonzaltn@ci.richmond.va.us.

...Regional Administrator Yvette Jackson

Point, a global IT and business consulting firm.

Prior to this, Ms. Jackson was with the Social Security Administration, where she served as the deputy commissioner for Finance, Assessment and Management, and chief financial officer.

No stranger to the Food and Nutrition Service, she was appointed deputy administrator for the Food Stamp Program in December 1994, and was the administrator from September 1997 to May 1998.

From April 1991 to December 1994, Ms. Jackson held senior-level positions with the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare.

She began her social services career as an eligibility specialist in the City Philadelphia.

Ms. Jackson holds a bachelor's degree in Social Welfare from Temple University and a master's degree in Social Welfare with a concentration in Administration from Rutgers University.

Join us in welcoming Yvette!

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Federal and State Management Evaluation Reviews

Management Evaluation reviews are required by the federal regulations at 7 CFR 275. They are conducted in local agencies by state agencies and in state and local agencies by the Food and Nutrition Service.

Over the years the Management Evaluation system has provided a structure to address a wide variety of issues that can impact the Food Stamp Program.

The reviews provide a systematic method of monitoring and assessing program operations; basis for local offices to improve and strengthen program operations by identifying and correcting deficiencies; constructive conversation between the three levels of government; and increased knowledge of promising practices.

Targeted Areas

Each federal fiscal year, the Food and Nutrition Service advises state agencies of the program areas that should be targeted for review. For 2005, payment accuracy and program access are among the target areas for reviews conducted by state agencies and the Food and Nutrition Service.



Be assured, the federal reviewers try hard to make the review experience pleasant and meaningful for you and appreciate your efforts to make their stay comfortable and informative.

Program Access Target

Unhindered access to the Food Stamp Program is of paramount importance to the Food and Nutrition Service, and, therefore, has been a target area of the management evaluation process for years.

The reviewers from the Policy and Evaluation Unit here determine whether food stamp offices are following federal regulations that pertain to access, and they identify and share promising practices implemented to minimize barriers to participation.

The reviewers usually need three to four days to conduct the review. A month or so before the review, they randomly select cases that were approved, denied, terminated and due for recertification during a particular month, and they contact community groups to get their opinions on the visibility of the particular food stamp office and positive and negative experiences that clientele of the community organizations may have had with the office.

The reviewers examine 75 to 100 cases for timeliness and accuracy. In addition, they interview managers, supervisors, eligibility staff and receptionists, as well as customers.

They issue a report to the state within 60 days, outlining the good points, findings and recommendations for improvement.

To swap information, contact: Joe Yehl, (609) 259-5069, joseph.yehl@fns.usda.gov.

Program Access Reviews

Common Problem Areas

- Not all applicants are screened for entitlement to expedited service on the same day they apply.
- Not all applicants who want an application by mail are provided an application by mail.



Payment Accuracy Target

Payment accuracy also has been a review target for many years. The Payment Accuracy Unit here conducts these reviews. The reviews of state agencies tend to take about two days, while local agencies can expect a day-long review.

You can bet the reviewers will ask in-depth about your processes and procedures for developing, implementing, monitoring and evaluating corrective actions, analyzing all types of data and more.

Following the review, a report is provided to the state agency within 60 days, detailing the results, providing recommendations and suggestions for improvement, and, of course, kudos for notable efforts. The jurisdiction is asked to reply, and if sufficient, the review will be closed.

To swap information, contact: Diane Gething, (609) 259-5033, diane.gething@fns.usda.gov.

Payment Accuracy Reviews

Common Problem Areas

- Findings from all types of case reviews are not collected and analyzed.
- Corrective action plans do not include how activities will be monitored and evaluated, who is responsible for the completion of each activity and the target date for completion.
- Policy memoranda is not quite clear.
- Sufficient training is not provided on the on-line policy manual.
- Training staff do not receive error analyses.
- Analysts of Quality Control data do not have a clear understanding of Quality Control coding.

Video Training on EBT

Rhode Island did a great deal of planning as it prepared to convert to Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT). Focus groups convened and staff provided low-income households with training about the differences between EBT and traditional paper coupons. Although the process initially appeared smooth and successful, a more careful look at reports on EBT yielded some surprising information, including: many elderly food stamp customers were not using the benefits.

“That’s when I realized that most of our educational efforts had been directed toward cash assistance customers,” says Bob McDonough, Family and Adult Services administrator for the Rhode Island Department of Social Services. “Putting two and two together, I realized that we needed to go out and do the training all over again,” he says.

The agency then mapped out a video that would be inexpensive to produce and would let elderly people know about EBT and what their appetite for participation and information on nutrition.

During the past three years, the 30-minute video tape has been used in a variety of settings. For example, agency staff went to senior housing sites and centers throughout the state and showed the film, presented information on nutrition, what customers can buy, even with just an additional \$10, and answered questions about how to apply for and use benefits. Cable channels provided another means to air the video tape.

★ *Excellent Service for All*

Assisting Seniors

It took about eight months to develop the video tape, which was recorded in English and Spanish. The agency benefited from the expertise of a staff person who was experienced in producing training videos.

A local television anchor also was involved. “A recently-retired news anchor from one of our major TV stations here in Providence was the perfect choice to narrate the tape,” Bob says. “He had a huge amount of credibility with our population, and he narrated the film at no cost. He emphasized some basic but important themes: not only are food stamps good, but now they are easier to access because of EBT; they benefit the economy, and the money stays in the community; and the Food Stamp Program is just as important as some other programs with which they might be more familiar, like the G.I. Bill,” says Bob.

Although the state does not have a formal way to measure the success of the outreach tool, EBT reports, monitored on a regular basis, indicate that elderly food stamp recipients feel much more comfortable using the EBT card and certainly not as many recipients are allowing their benefits to go dormant, Bob says.

“We think the video tape has helped elderly people to understand the program,” he says. “Seniors have told us about their favorite parts of the video tape. They point out the part on talking to the store manager, or that it’s okay to own your own home, for example. We always are left with the sense that some very beneficial learning took place.

“I just wish we had addressed this right at the beginning while we were converting to EBT,” Bob says. “We originally thought that one-size-fits-all and that’s really not true. It’s important to remember that the elderly need some special attention and good training from the beginning.”

To swap information, contact: Bob McDonough, Rhode Island Department of Human Services, (401) 462-6835, bmcdonough@dhs.ri.gov.

Maine

Outreach Project

The Food and Nutrition Service invited states in 2001 to compete for a grant to conduct two-year Elderly Nutrition Pilot projects. Collectively six states received more than \$2 million to test ways of increasing participation among the elderly.

One of three approaches was implemented by each state for the Elderly Nutrition Pilot projects: simpler eligibility determination rules (Florida), commodities instead of food stamps (Connecticut and North Carolina) and one-on-one application assistance (Arizona, Michigan and Maine).

Maine was one of four states that received a performance bonus from the U.S. Department of Agriculture this past year for most-improved Participant Access Rate in 2003. Let’s take a look at Food Assistance Connecting Eligible Seniors (FACES), the Elderly Nutrition Pilot conducted in Waldo County, Maine, where

Assisting Seniors

project officials say, elderly participation increased significantly during the two-year operation.

Prior to the implementation of FACES in 2002, representatives of various governmental, educational and non-profit organizations had formed a statewide advisory council to serve seniors. The network of managers worked on developing ways to best meet the needs of Waldo's citizens age 60 and older who represented 6,000 of the 38,000 residents in this coastal area of Maine.

They initially found that accessibility was a primary concern because in this very rural setting, you may have to travel up to 65 miles roundtrip to the main food stamp office (for others, there may be a satellite office located more closely). The advisory council also was responsible for putting together the grant proposal for FACES.

FACES was operated by the Waldo Community Action Partners (WCAP). At the beginning of the pilot, WCAP staff went to every conceivable location – towns, senior sites, churches and interest groups – and gave short presentations on the Food Stamp Program and how it can help seniors. Additionally, three elderly citizens, hired by WCAP, used real estate books to completely canvas the towns, trying not to miss anyone, even those seniors

who were completely home-bound. This was followed with direct application assistance, almost 90 percent of which was provided one-on-one in applicants' homes. The three staff persons explained the program, dispelled myths, answered questions, helped applicants to fill out their applications and assemble documentation and made sure that the applications arrived at the central office for processing.

The pilot project and funding ended in February 2004. While funding can certainly be a major concern when implementing and continuing an initiative like FACES, "I would say, don't even hesitate to do it," says Holly Ingraham, resource center director for WCAP.

"Funding is an issue because there are so many budget cuts in social services, but the FACES project is a win-win – you just can't lose. We found that the benefits for individuals amounted to about four times the amount of money we spent on program overhead. People are living healthier, and everyday there's something positive that comes out of our efforts," says Holly.

She continues, "We have many situations in which we know that food stamps made a big difference for seniors. One household that immediately comes to mind was a couple who

had lived a middle-class lifestyle and had been employed. Then in their senior life they both became quite ill; all their resources and assets were depleted, and they had become destitute. When my worker showed up, she found that they didn't have food for their next meal. The worker sat down and helped them with the application, and then she went to the food bank and brought them enough food to get through the next few days. A week later they had \$167 in food stamp benefits, which completely changed their situation. The wife told me, it was a joy when the worker came to their door because they were desperate."

In addition to providing food stamps – a much-needed nutritional support – the elderly also benefited in a number of other ways from their contact with the Elderly Nutrition Pilot.

According to Rick Morrow of the Maine Department of Human Services, people found out that someone cared about them and could provide assistance. The project helped to build communication and trust among the elderly population, he says.

To swap information, contact Holly Ingraham, Waldo Community Action Partners, (207) 338-3619, hingraham@waldocap.org; and Rick Morrow, Maine Department of Human Services, (207) 287-5093, rick.morrow@maine.gov.

Implementation of FACES was virtually problem-free, reports Holly. At first the community group was concerned about collaborating with the local food stamp office, she says, but face-to-face conversations and meetings built friendships and respect. "Everything and everyone just clicked."

Accuracy Focus

The San Joaquin County Human Services Agency launched a number of best practices to reduce its error rate from a high of 14.36 percent in early fiscal year 2002, to 4.30 percent in late fiscal year 2004.

Included among the tools-of-the-trade of the local agency in California are classic processes to detect and decrease errors:

- System for supervisors and eligibility specialists to review food stamp applications
- Discussions among review panel and eligibility specialists who were cited for errors
- Corrective action committee

San Joaquin County, CA

Positive Attitude

Another activity, *Positive Attitude Changes Errors* (PACE), was implemented two years ago as an additional means to keep the focus on accuracy. Equally important, it honors the agency's most valuable resource – the eligibility specialists.

Each month, the agency director graphs the progress of the agency by marking the cumulative error rate on a large chart that is displayed on a wall. During the event he also draws four names of staff members who correctly answered two questions posed by the PACE committee. Accurate responses to the questions, which are typically based on new policy or error trends identified by Quality Control, earn the winners a prize, such as a gift certificate. Whoever is quick to
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Buchanan County, Virginia

Eligibility Mentors

Not only must eligibility specialists master the food stamp regulations, it's likely they also implement the regulations of several other major assistance programs. Add to this, interviewing clients who may have complex life circumstances and urgent nutrition and health needs, and issuing the correct amount of benefits timely, with a smile. It's a tough job.

To prepare eligibility staff, many local agencies have the responsibility of providing them all-inclusive training and/or instruction that supplements state-provided training. At the Buchanan County Department of Social Services in Virginia, they receive training from the state, which gets them acclimated to the programs and policies, and then the local agency provides tailored lessons and an added bonus - a mentor.

Kathy Deel, eligibility supervisor for the agency, says mentoring is a very effective way to train and retain new eligibility specialists. There's something to it because very few eligibility specialists have quit the agency. Kathy explains, during the past 10 years, three eligibility specialists retired, three changed jobs and one moved away and obtained similar work at another social services agency.

For those who do not have prior work experience with assistance programs, their orientation to this new line of work can be overwhelming at first. For these individuals, mentoring is particularly beneficial because it is "real-time" learning, which is practical experience with customers, support staff and various computer systems, explains Kathy.



Mentors teach new eligibility staff how to find specific information in the manual of each program and how the programs are similar and dissimilar. The curriculum also includes implementing office procedures, interviewing, listening and enhancing interpersonal skills. Eventually the eligibility students shadow their personal mentor during interviews, and when ready to take on this function, their guides lend support, if needed, during the interviews.

Typically they are given a caseload after six months with the agency, and the rule of thumb for mentoring time is six to 18 months depending on how well the new employees pick up the job.

Actually, it doesn't sound like it really stops. Eligibility specialists usually develop an ongoing relationship with their experienced partner, says Kathy. They like having someone who they can depend on to help with problems and solutions, she says.

Responsible and steady the mentors are, chosen for their seniority, solid understanding of every program and non-judgmental, open-minded nature. The mentors also are fine examples of the agency's motto "make a difference," in going the extra mile to train new eligibility staff adequately while carrying a full caseload themselves.

To swap information: Kathy Deel, Buchanan Department of Social Services, (276) 935-8106, dkd027@western.dss.state.va.us.

Participation Grants

The Food and Nutrition Service is again offering \$5 million in participation grants this year for projects of state and local agencies and private non-profit organizations to simplify food stamp application and eligibility systems and improve access to food stamps. New this year, we hope to support at least one project that coordinates the application process of the Prescription Drug Benefit Program with the Food Stamp Program. As in the past, up to \$1 million of the \$5 million will be awarded to an otherwise acceptable proposal that involves a partnership between a state agency and one or more private non-profit organizations.

Solicitations can be found on-line at:

www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/government/grants/default.htm

or by contacting Monte Penney of the Food and Nutrition Service, monte.penney@fns.usda.gov, (703) 305-2404

or by accessing www.grants.gov.

If you have difficulty accessing the full announcement electronically, contact:

Lynn Rodgers of the Food and Nutrition Service, (703) 305-2760, fax - (703) 605-0363, or lynn.rodgers@fns.usda.gov.

Questions about the food stamp participation grants or the grant application process also should be directed to Lynn Rodgers.

The completed application package must be received at the Food and Nutrition Service on or before 5 p.m., April 26, 2005. There is no language in the Request for Application prohibiting current grantees under this program from applying for a FY 2005 food stamp participation grant.

FREE Outreach Materials

The Food and Nutrition Service continually provides a variety of outreach products and services for use by state and local agencies and community groups. The newest item is a bookmark that promotes the Food Stamp Program in English and Spanish. Quantities of the bookmark are available free through this web site of the Food and Nutrition Service: www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/outreach/general.htm. The bookmark provides the web addresses for the Food and Nutrition Service and its national pre-screening tool, and it includes the national toll-free number of the Food Stamp Program. It fits easily into a standard business envelope and could be provided at community fairs, in libraries, grocery bags, etc.

National Pre-Screening Tool

Anyone who does not have access to a pre-screening tool, can take advantage of the one provided by the Food and Nutrition Service. It was written on a 6th-grade level and helps users to find out whether they may be potentially eligible for food stamps and how much. Go to this web site of the Food and Nutrition Service: www.foodstamps-step1.usda.gov.

...Accuracy in San Joaquin County

raise a hand and has the correct answer to a scrambled-word puzzle, also receives a prize.

The chart-marking event closes with an expression of appreciation and encouragement. Certificates for excellent performance are presented to eligibility specialists who had a satisfactory evaluation during the previous rating period and at least 20 of their cases were reviewed by their supervisor during the previous month and none contained a dollar error.

The eligibility specialists also receive a pin for the exemplary service. The pin design and certificate color change monthly. Of the agency's 250 eligibility specialists, 25 to 30 earn a Certificate of Excellence each month.

The ability to provide attractive awards has been maintained through donations from agency managers, groups within the agency and the county chapter of the National Eligibility Workers Association, for example.

The PACE chart-marking event, in combination with other corrective action strategies, has been instrumental in significantly reducing the county error rate and maintaining that rate at an acceptable level. "PACE has been a valuable tool in raising awareness of the food stamp error rate and encouraging efforts to improve it," says Lynette Marston, Quality Control coordinator for the agency.

"The personal participation in this event by the agency director demonstrates clearly to staff that management has made maintenance of an acceptable error rate a top priority and that the efforts staff have made are appreciated. The many eligibility specialists who participate in the PACE event are receiving a monthly firsthand acknowledgement of the importance of their job and the quality of their work," Lynette adds.

To swap information, contact: Lynette Marston, San Joaquin County Human Services Agency, (209) 468-1777, lmarton@co.san-joaquin.ca.us.

Note: California received a performance bonus in the amount of \$6,819,955 from the U.S. Department of Agriculture for having one of the most-improved error rates in fiscal year 2003 (7.96 percent), which was determined by measuring the percentage points improved.



Food Stamps Make America Stronger

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