

Application Processing

To assist clients in setting priorities in general, and make the application process less overwhelming by breaking it into manageable components.

Section 3

Application Processing

Simplified Food Stamp Application

Oregon

The pilot food stamp outreach committee in East Multnomah County, Oregon decided to simplify the food stamp application as part of a test project. Because of statewide pressure and interest, the committee was expanded and the simplified application will go statewide in July 2000. The application is 4 pages long and combines eligibility for food stamps, child care, emergency assistance, and medical programs. A cover page explains the process and lists what to bring to appointments. Only one sheet needs to be added for TANF. The goal is to remove barriers to applying for food stamps. People are often overwhelmed with the 15 pages of application and addenda now distributed. With the four-page format and a good cover sheet on what to bring to the appointment, applicants can sit down and fill out the application and submit it on the spot to reduce the time it actually takes to begin receiving benefits.

South Carolina

In 1995, the Food and Nutrition Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture entered into an agreement with the South Carolina Department of Social Services to implement a demonstration project to improve the delivery of food assistance to elderly and disabled Supplemental Security income (SSI) recipients. This project was designed to use a single application to enroll clients in both SSI and the Food Stamp Program (FSP). To ensure food stamp eligibility, only one-person SSI households were eligible to participate.

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Decreased Waiting Time for Clients

Arkansas

Timely application processing enhances the community's view of agency responsiveness and effectiveness, and encourages requests for applications. In Craighead County timely processing of applications is a team effort facilitated by:

- 1) Monday Supervisor/Worker individual meetings to spend "quality time" discussing applications pending and no shows. If a case is pending information return, ways that may help the client or staff obtain the information are discussed. The goal is to process all cases as soon as the information is available, to avoid holding them until due dates arrive. Knowing that early return of information facilitates early processing motivates clients.
- 2) Every worker is assigned a "buddy" who helps process applications when a worker is absent. Close attention to leave and holidays is paid to determine if cases need reassignment to the buddy.

Since clients are receiving their benefits sooner, the number of complaints has dropped. The process has helped Craighead County reduce the number of applications going over 25 days. The workers are involved in group activities such as pot luck, eating out, and other get-togethers at least three times a year. This helps the workers feel more connected, and helps enhance the buddy system.

Kansas

The Wichita, Kansas office has a procedure where clients walk in and are seen by an eligibility worker within 20 to 30 minutes. Clients do not have to schedule their appointments for certification for another day, which could cause a barrier to participation. This is of great benefit to clients entering the workforce and trying to balance family needs as smoothly as possible.

Every Monday evening, the office stays open until 7:00 p.m. Clients do not need an appointment and only see one worker for what that they need. The most recent innovation was the reconfiguring of the traffic flow for the three floors of the building used by the Department of Integrated Service Delivery. Clients no longer clog up the entry lobby waiting to check in as they are directed by signs or workers to help them find the appropriate areas. The goal was to make the office traffic run more smoothly and efficiently, to

create a more professional environment.

Clients have reported through surveys that they most appreciate having one worker who helps them get what they need to survive and be successful. They praise the help their worker provides with paperwork and the fact that they keep the same worker. They also appreciate getting help within the week it is requested, and they feel that their workers listen to them.

Michigan

To improve customer service and lessen waiting times, a sign is located in the waiting area in the Wayne County/Medbury-Concord, Michigan office informing all individuals to let the receptionist know if they have been waiting for more than a half hour. Applicants and recipients believe that they will receive service within a relatively short period of time, and if they do not, they know whom they should talk to.



Saginaw County, Michigan – Contact: Diane Drouin, Family Independence Agency – Saginaw County Office, 411 East Genesee, Saginaw, Michigan 48605, (989) 758-1591.

Tracking Waiting Times. The Office uses cards to track the time it takes for applicants and participants to see eligibility workers. Applicants and participants are given tracking cards that indicate the time that prescreening interviews or contacts with receptionists are finished. Cards are then given to staff and when workers call for the client, the times are recorded. The difference between the times indicates how long it takes for workers to call clients. This was instituted as a continuous improvement measure to determine a baseline of how long it takes for customers to go through the application process and to see their workers. If the procedure determines that the wait time is too long, then changes may be implemented in the office to reduce waiting times to improve customer service

Minnesota

There are signs in the Hennepin County, Minnesota office, advising clients to approach the desk if their waiting time is in excess of 20 minutes. This is to alert caseworkers of the amount of time clients have been waiting and to possibly speed up the process.

North Carolina

The County Director for Johnston County, North Carolina insists that a potential applicant be seen within 30 minutes. A stick-on badge is provided to all potential applicants and/or recipients when they come into the office showing arrival time. Supervisors monitor the time it takes for clients to be seen. Clients are able to plan a visit since they know that they will be seen within 30 minutes.

Utah

A greeter/Information Specialist (IS) is used in the main waiting area as the first client contact in the Utah County Office to guide clients toward the appropriate services. As the receptionists are a major hub of information and responsibility, an IS might reduce the wait time for a client needing a simple brochure, directions, or an answer to a simple question. This has been a very useful tool in Utah. The purpose was to improve customer service and serve the needs of clients as quickly as possible. Utah has a zero wait time policy for client service upon entering an Employment Center (EC). IS's assist in making this happen.

The EC design incorporates all of what Utah felt to be better customer service procedures. The Information Specialist and zero wait time were part of that design. Although no data have been produced to show increased efficiencies due to the presence of Information Specialists, it is apparent upon entering an EC that clients are put at ease and given useful information immediately. This is also a point where applications are dispersed and clients can be directed to computer centers, resume writing information, or to employment or eligibility workers.

Although the IS staff is part of the EC design, it is transferable to any state's reception area, and can be easily implemented. It does not duplicate efforts of a receptionist, but rather enhances their ability to more effectively do their job. Using IS's may require a slight change in reception duties, but reduces client wait time and directs them to the proper resources immediately.

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Information and Verification Reminders

Alabama

In Autauga County, Alabama, quarterly visits are made by the Food Stamp supervisor to area Nutrition Centers for the handicapped and the elderly. The visits are designed to aid the residents of the centers in applying for food stamps and by reporting household circumstances.

Colorado

In El Paso County, Colorado, to ensure continuance of benefits, reminders are added to the bottom of all TANF notices of discontinuance encouraging clients to ask their workers about food stamps even though they are no longer eligible for TANF. This notice is on all Colorado notices of discontinuance. As a client service, this helps ensure that information is available to clients through a written reminder if not through a worker.

Mississippi

In Jasper County, Mississippi, when workers send appointment letters out to the clients, they remind clients of information and verification they will need to bring with them to the interview. This procedure was implemented to reduce the number of cases pending and the number of revisits to the local offices to complete the certification process. Also, it serves as a reminder to clients to bring the necessary information to the interview session to ensure that the certification process can be completed during the initial visit. The process reduces/eliminates clients' need to return to the local office to provide information that they may have forgotten if otherwise not given a reminder. The number of cases pending and the number of revisits to the

office is practically eliminated, and the interview process can be completed in a timely manner.

Nevada

A worker in the Owens office in Las Vegas, Nevada has developed a “red dot” system to facilitate applicants’ quicker receipt of food stamp benefits. Since food stamps usually require less verification than TANF, when the worker gives her clients a list of what she needs in order to process their applications, she puts red dots next to the food stamp requirements, and tells the clients that if they concentrate on the “red dots”, she will be able to process their food stamps right away. The “red dot” system also assists clients in setting priorities in general, and makes the application process less overwhelming by breaking it into manageable components.

New Mexico

Northeast Bernalillo, New Mexico has developed a “What You Still Need” form. This form alerts the client the verification information still needed for certification. The use of this form minimizes the number of visits to the local office for applicants, participants and assures they have full information advising them of any outstanding verifications.

Tennessee

In Nashville, Tennessee, each county is currently using a “verification envelope.” It is printed with suggestions and supplied to clients as a way of keeping up with documents needed at each appointment. The idea was developed by the statewide Family Assistance Advisory Team.

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Initial Screening Process

New Mexico

Efficient application processing enhances the community's view of agency responsiveness and effectiveness. It also encourages requests for applications and assures a full understanding of decisions and requirements. South Dona Ana, New Mexico developed an "Expedited Application Screening Form, FSP 134", which is provided to the client and specifies in writing that clients who do not agree with the office decision concerning expedited service may meet with a supervisor within 2 days to tell the supervisor why they think the decision is wrong. The form further explains that even if clients do not meet with the supervisor, the application will still be processed in the next 30 days. Clients are requested to sign the form and check the appropriate block as to whether or not they want to meet with a supervisor. This form gives clients the opportunity to tell the supervisor why they think the decision is wrong and establishes checks and balances to assure appropriate expedited decision-making.

CLIENT TRACKING SYSTEM



Fairfield County, South Carolina – Contact: Ann Langley,
Program Coordinator (803) 635-5502.

Client Tracking System. The County has developed a client contact tracking system for the Food Stamp Program that tracks the client's initial contact to the county office. Any program contacts are tracked, i.e., in person, telephone, or by mail. The tracking system measures the time from the initial contact to the date the application is filed to the actual day of the interview. In addition, the tracking system produces a monthly management report that is used to make necessary adjustments in the process of staff

assignment. This practice was developed as a result of the Fairfield County Assessment to improve increased client access to the Food Stamp Program.

Out-Stationed Employees



Detroit, Michigan (McNichols) Office – Contact: Gloria Lumetta, FIM, 2400 E. McNichols, Road, Detroit, Michigan 48212, (313) 852-239.

One employee is out-stationed in a small office located in a nearby housing complex. Office furnishings, equipment and supplies were provided for the small office which shares space with other civic organizations located in a housing unit within the complex. Plans are currently underway to establish computer access to this remote office location. This type of office is a step toward convenient one-stop services for customers who live in the area.