

POLICY AND PRACTICE:

CUSTOMER SERVICE IN ILLINOIS DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES LOCAL OFFICES

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In a single month, as many as 6,400 to 12,500 people visit each of the busiest of the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) local offices. Since welfare reform in 1996, TANF caseloads in Illinois have declined precipitously. In the midst of the current economic recession with its attendant high levels of unemployment, Illinois ranks first in the United States with a reduction in its TANF caseload of 39.5% for period March 2001 to March 2003.¹ However, reductions in TANF caseload do not mean that the number of eligible families in need of assistance is declining.² Nor do they mean that the workload of local offices has been decreasing at the same rate as TANF caseloads. On the contrary, welfare reform policies have made the management of the remaining TANF caseload a time consuming and labor intensive process.

Another byproduct of welfare reform and TANF caseload reduction is that there are now many more families receiving only Medicaid and Food Stamps. IDHS data show that between March 2001 and March 2003, the Medicaid caseload (Family Medical Assist) increased by 55,385 or 14.6% to 434,288; the caseload of Food Stamp households increased by 52,160 or 14.0% to 423,955 over the same period. These types of cases have complicated requirements that increase the workload of caseworkers and supervisors. Changing patterns of benefits receipt and emphasis on employment have also altered expectations about interactions between staff and customers in local offices. Instead of a more mechanical approach to administering benefits, staff are now expected to be proactive in assisting families to obtain and retain benefits and in making referrals to services for supporting employment.

As of August 2003 for the five local offices in this study, caseworker staffing was 23.7% less than the allocated level and supervisor staffing was 28.6% less than allocated. These staff reductions resulting in caseloads in Cook County offices as high as 700 to 1,200 per caseworker negatively impact the kind of service that families encounter when they try to apply for and retain benefits. Commenting on the critical shortage of staff, one Cook County Local Office Administrator said, "I've been around a long time and it's very bad now. There are long lines and long waits. The volume is very detrimental to providing efficient services."

Over the past two years, members of community-based organizations and advocacy groups have expressed concern about the increasing number of reports of problems facing people who go to Chicago area IDHS offices for public benefits such as Food Stamps, Medicaid, and TANF. For example, the volume of calls to the Public Benefits Hotline has increased from 7,054 calls for the period August 2001 through July 2002 to 8,418 calls for the period of August 2002 through July 2003. During 2003, call volume has continued to expand, with 43% more calls in August 2003 than in January 2003.

In response to the need for current data about customer service in IDHS offices, the Center for Impact Research (CIR) collaborated with community human services agencies and advocacy organizations³ in conducting a one-day survey to document the experiences of customers in five of the busiest local IDHS offices in Cook County. IDHS assisted with logistics, instructing local offices to allow CIR to conduct the

survey in the waiting areas. Working group members conferred on research design and survey development, attended training in survey administration, and participated in administering the survey. Working group members also participated in discussions to interpret research findings and develop policy recommendations. CIR obtained input on the survey design, local office procedures, and data interpretation from IDHS officials.

Although the scope of the survey is limited—information about 199 customers in 5 offices on one day in July 2003—the findings offer important indicators of strengths and weaknesses in service delivery. These findings are being used to inform stakeholders such as elected officials, state agencies, community leaders and organizations, and the media about the quality of service delivery. CIR and its partners are also using this report to inform advocacy for increased resources to support service delivery and to ensure that IDHS is able to fulfill its commitment to serving the needs of Illinois families.

KEY FINDINGS

First, the good news: findings on customer service in terms of respondents' perceptions of their treatment by staff were positive.

- ▶ 68.4% of the 79 respondents who brought papers or documents to turn in reported being treated politely by the person they met to discuss their paperwork; 25.3% neutrally; and 6.3% rudely.
- ▶ 76.3% of the 38 respondents with appointments reported being treated politely; 11% neutrally; and 13.2% rudely.

However, the survey also found that customers in local offices are not receiving services that are specified in IDHS policies pertaining to application rules, Expedited Food Stamps, Teen Parent Services, and access to interpreters for limited English persons.

- ▶ Three-fifths of the 89 respondents who came to apply for Food Stamps, Medicaid, or TANF were unable to apply during their visit to the office.

IDHS policies state that any person wanting assistance has the right to apply during normal working hours; and that an application must be accepted even if it has only a name, address, and signature.⁴ Customers have the right to apply on the first day they come to do so; not allowing them to apply is a violation of state and federal law.

A little more than half of the respondents who were not able to apply (54%) were given return appointments. Of the two-fifths of the respondents who were able to make an application that day, many already had come in one or more previous times trying to apply.

- ▶ Of the 58 respondents who came in to make an application and were not currently receiving Food Stamps, 52% reported that they were not assessed for Expedited Food Stamps on the day of their visit; 38% said they were assessed; 10% said they did not know.

Federal Law requires that an application for Food Stamps must be taken on the date the customer first comes to apply. IDHS policy states that for all customers who come in to apply for Food Stamps, their application should be reviewed to see if they qualify for Expedited Food Stamps. Those who do qualify for expedited services are to be interviewed on the day of application or the next workday.⁵

The survey also found that several respondents reported receiving information about Expedited Food Stamps from IDHS staff that was not accurate. For example, one woman said, “I would be given emergency Food Stamps in two weeks, but I needed them on that day.” Another person said, “It will take me 45 days to get emergency Food Stamps. Sometimes it takes two or three depending on which caseworker you get.”

- ▶ None of the eight pregnant and parenting teen respondents in the survey were referred to Teen Parent Services or a teen specialist, were told they were required to go to Teen Parent Services, or were given brochures about Teen Parent Services.⁶

Teen Parent Services is a program to assist young parents applying for or receiving TANF, Food Stamps, Medicaid, and other public benefits to complete their high school education or its equivalent and to reduce subsequent pregnancies. Participation in Teen Parent Services is an activity requirement for a custodial parent under age 20 applying for or receiving TANF, if they do not have their high school diploma or GED.⁷

Of the two teens that said they came to apply for TANF that day, both reported having been able to do so. Four of the eight teens said they did not accomplish what they came for; three said they did; one did not know.

- ▶ Limited English persons are not uniformly provided with the assistance they need to apply for and retain benefits.

IDHS policies state that limited English persons should be informed through an interpreter that interpreter services are provided free of charge unless the client wishes to use another adult as an interpreter, and that if the interpreter provided by the client is ineffective, another interpreter who will be provided by IDHS. Policy also states that an application must not be delayed due to unavailability of an interpreter.⁸

Although the courtesy of IDHS staff is to be commended, these other findings as well as the high level of uncertainty respondents expressed about eligibility, the application process, and program requirements suggest that polite treatment does not necessarily mean that staff are providing accurate information in terms customers can understand or that customers are receiving services in accordance with policy.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to comply with laws and policies pertaining to application, Expedited Food Stamps, services for teens, and services for limited English persons, the following practices pertaining to service delivery practices in local IDHS offices are recommended:

- ▶ Ensure all customers are able to apply on the day they come to the office, which at a minimum requires the name, address, and signature on the application.
- ▶ Screen customers who come to apply for Food Stamps for Expedited Food Stamps on the day that they come in to the office.
- ▶ Ensure that all pregnant and parenting teens under the age of twenty that come to IDHS offices are referred to Teen Parent Services.
- ▶ Inform all limited English persons who come to the office that interpreter services are available free of charge unless the client wishes to use another adult as an interpreter; and make interpreters available to all limited English persons who request them. Ensure that in no circumstances is a child under the age of 18 used as a translator.

Other recommendations for that ensuring satisfactory customer service is provided in all IDHS offices include:

- ▶ Improve document management processes so that IDHS provides customers with a stamped and dated copy of all documents and materials that they bring or mail to the local offices.
- ▶ Provide ongoing training, support, and quality control to ensure supervisors and workers are providing customers with accurate information and services that comply with IDHS policy.

Survey responses indicate that in many cases customers are uncertain or misinformed about eligibility, program requirements and responsibilities, as well as policies regarding service delivery. In order to efficiently obtain services for which they are eligible and entitled, customers require that IDHS staff provide them with accurate information and timely service in accordance with laws and policies. Quality control should include the following activities to improve and obtain feedback on customer service:

- Monitoring waiting times for services and the effectiveness of the Visitor Information System.
- Administering periodic customer surveys in local offices upon completion of the visit.
- Using testers in local offices to obtain data on the quality of services and the thoroughness and accuracy of information provided by IDHS staff.
- Increasing staffing for the IDHS ombudsperson's office to meet demand, and providing a telephone in each local office for people to contact the ombudsperson's office when they encounter problems.

The goal of this research was to document the experiences of customers when they go to IDHS local offices for information and services. IDHS local offices operate in challenging conditions that arise from structural problems related to severe staffing shortages, the complexity of program regulations, and a lack of resources for training and facilities. In such conditions customer service inevitably suffers. The survey findings show that at the five offices in this study, strategies for managing the high volume of customers and workload are resulting in practices that violate federal law and IDHS policies.

CIR met with IDHS to discuss the findings and recommendations of this report. During this discussion, IDHS acknowledged the need to address the violations of federal law and state policies as well as the other customer service problems identified by the research. IDHS referred to efforts already underway to rectify the situation regarding Expedited Food Stamps so that all applicants are screened within the prescribed timeframe. However, IDHS noted that the department's budgetary constraints limit the improvements it can make to bring customer service practices in compliance with federal law and IDHS policies. IDHS has also responded to advocacy from community organizations by involving them in working ("workout") groups to obtain their input for prioritizing and solving customer service problems.

Community and advocacy organizations have brought their concerns about the negative effects on Illinois families of IDHS service delivery problems to the attention of legislators. As Chair of the House Human Services Committee, Representative William Delgado responded by convening a legislative hearing on Access to Human Services and Local Service Delivery in Illinois (October 15, 2003). Testimony presented at the hearing includes the findings and recommendations of this report as well as testimony from other community organizations. It is hoped that the legislature will act on this information and provide the leadership and resources for ensuring that the practices of IDHS are in accord with federal and state law and policies so that all Illinois families have access to the services and benefits for which they are eligible.

¹ During the first quarter of 2003, the TANF caseload declined 6.7% in Illinois, the highest decline in the country. See "Welfare Caseloads in 27 States Decline in First Quarter of 2003," Elise Richer, Hedieh Rahmanou, and Mark Greenberg, Center for Law and Social Policy, July 18, 2003, www.clasp.org/DMS/Documents/1058538793.25/view_html. Accessed September 16, 2003.

² "Falling TANF Caseloads Amidst Rising Poverty Should Be a Cause of Concern," Shawn Fremstad, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, September 4, 2003, <http://www.cbpp.org/9-4-03tanf.htm>. Accessed September 7, 2003. U.S. Census Current Population Survey data on poverty show that Illinois was one of nine states where the rate of poverty increased between 2000-2001 and 2001-2002, from 10.4% to 11.5%, <http://www.census.gov/2003/p60-222.pdf>. Accessed September 29, 2003.

³ Chicago Jobs Council, Heartland Alliance for Human Needs and Human Rights; Illinois Coalition on Immigrant and Refugee Rights; Illinois Caucus for Adolescent Health; Legal Assistance Foundation of Metropolitan Chicago; National Center on Poverty Law; Ounce of Prevention Fund; and Work, Welfare and Families.

⁴ Relevant IDHS Policy Manual (PM) and Worker's Action Guide (WAG) references on making applications are: PM 02-04-01, PM 02-04-04, PM 02-04-08, WAG 02-04-01, and WAG 02-04-02.

⁵ Relevant IDHS Policy Manual references for Expedited Food Stamps application are: PM 02-08-00, PM 02-08-01, PM 02-08-02, PM 02-08-02, and PM 02-08-02-b.

⁶ Although the number of teens in this survey is small, the problems indicated by their responses are consistent with studies focusing on teens in IDHS offices. See "Teen Parents and Welfare Reform in Illinois: A Public Policy Report," Illinois Caucus for Adolescent Health; and "Assessing TANF Assistance: A Survey of Low-Income Mothers in Chicago," Helene Marcy, Center for Impact Research, March 2002, <http://www.impactresearch.org/documents/chicagotanfreport.pdf>.

⁷ Relevant IDHS Policy Manual references for Teen Parent Services are: PM 14-12-00, PM 14-12-01, PM 14-12-02, PM 14-12-03, PM 14-12-04, PM 14-12-05, PM 21-02-00, PM 21-03-00, PM 21-04-00, and PM 21-05-00.

⁸ Relevant IDHS Policy Manual references for limited English persons are: PM 22-13-00, PM 22-13-01, and PM 22-13-01-a.