

# keys TO PAYMENT accuracy



**FNS** | **USDA**  
Food & Nutrition Service



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# Summary

Food stamp payment accuracy remains a priority for the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service. To assist State and local agencies in your efforts to continually improve and maintain high payment accuracy rates, the payment accuracy coordinators from each of the Food and Nutrition Service regional offices across the Nation have pulled together facts and tips on what they deem to be ten of the most important “Keys to Payment Accuracy.”

There are several important reasons payment accuracy is important:

- Accurate payments serve both clients and taxpayers well; and,
- Program integrity is needed to maintain public support for the program.

For more information on any of the “Keys,” feel free to contact your regional payment accuracy coordinator, listed on Page 23. Here is just a sampling of what you will find in this book.

**Top Leadership Commitment:** Dedication to program excellence, leads to excellence! Commitment to program integrity comes from all levels within the Food Stamp Program, from eligibility and support staff to the State Commissioner/Secretary. Top leadership must first articulate the payment accuracy message to all the stakeholders within an organization. State agencies where top leadership sets performance goals each year and demonstrates their commitment to make those goals a reality are on the road to success!

**Communication:** Good communication is an essential element in achieving payment accuracy. In fact, every payment accuracy best practice relies on communication. Read about how new technology and faster access to information has transformed the way we do business and has opened up a variety of new ways to facilitate communication into agency culture.

**Error Review Committees:** An Error Review Committee is a cost effective management tool a State can use to monitor and improve payment accuracy, enhance accountability, and demonstrate to eligibility staff the importance senior management places on payment accuracy. Error Review Committees take on slightly different forms and have different names in many States, such as Finding Review Committee, and typically consist of representatives from various stakeholders within the State agency, such as quality control, corrective action, policy, systems, training, and field operations. The Committees discuss quality control findings and review error prone elements, application of policy, and corrective action plans at the State and local level. See what an Error Review Committee can do for you.

**Data Analysis:** The foundation for corrective action planning is good data analysis. A thorough understanding of the root cause of the problem, when during the certification period the error occurred, and who or what caused the error is crucial. Without these essential pieces of information, at a minimum, you could be trying to fix something that really isn’t broken! Learn about the steps you should take to ensure a complete understanding of problem areas.

**Corrective Action Plans:** Corrective action planning is the process by which State and local agencies document initiatives to reduce or eliminate deficiencies in program operations and provide responsive service to eligible households. Documenting your corrective action initiatives and sharing the Plan confirms top-level commitment to improve or maintain payment accuracy to staff at all levels. Developing a corrective action plan doesn't have to be complex. Learn some simple yet effective steps for preparing your agency's corrective action plan.

**Policy Options, Waivers and Initiatives:** The Food Stamp Program was established through the Food Stamp Act by Congress in 1977 as a means to "provide improved levels of nutrition among low income households." The Program continues to grow in the number of participants served and to improve with the processes utilized. Policy options and initiatives help to streamline the Program for both participants and State agencies. As policy options, new initiatives and waivers are developed by States, FNS or the Legislature, the goal is ultimately the same – to help improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the Program for both the individuals served and the State agencies responsible for determining eligibility. Learn what elements are suggested for implementation of new policy initiatives, options and waivers in order to improve program integrity and program access.

**Case Reviews:** One of the most successful tools in attaining and maintaining high payment accuracy is a good case review system. Many states mandate case reviews because they have proven to be an integral part of their overall management of the program by providing managers valuable information on the quality and timeliness of case determinations. Information gathered from case reviews allow states to determine the root cause(s) of errors and thereby identify specific areas needing corrective action, such as policy clarification, refresher training, changes in office procedures, improved case record documentation, system changes, etc. Read about different approaches to case reviews.

**Training:** It is essential to ensure that staff at all levels possess the knowledge and skills needed to provide timely and accurate benefits to those we serve. Ongoing refresher training for veteran staff is as important as thorough, timely training for new employees. However, while most states have recognized this need, many are finding that staffing and fiscal constraints are making it sometimes difficult to meet the demand. Read about some creative and, in many instances, low-cost methods to meet the never ending need for training:

**Employee Recognition:** Employee recognition is a major factor in staff retention, good customer service, and timely and accurate decisions. Job demands and stress have a negative impact on morale and job performance for every member of an agency's staff. It is important to recognize that the attitudes and enthusiasm of managers will be reflected in the work and morale of all levels of staff. A good manager always remembers that a positive attitude can be contagious and enthusiasm is hard to ignore. Learn about a few simple, inexpensive ways to improve your office environment.

**Change Centers:** Change centers have become more common in States and project areas around the country. The centers can be used exclusively to process reported changes, but they are also sometimes used for a variety of other purposes, including processing alerts, handling customer phone calls or conducting call-backs. Learn about the different types of change centers in use around the country and some of the characteristics/guidelines for utilizing them.

## Top Leadership Commitment

Dedication to program excellence, leads to excellence! Commitment to program integrity comes from all levels within the Food Stamp Program, from eligibility and support staff to the State Commissioner/Secretary. However, for the message of payment accuracy to be articulated to all the stakeholders within an organization, the commitment must be embraced at the top. State agency leadership that set performance goals each year and has the commitment of leaders and staff to make the goals a reality, are on the road to success!

Below are various strategies that relate to a State agency's commitment to payment accuracy:

- Top leadership recognizes the importance of achieving a low error rate and sets performance goals for the State. A plan to achieve the goals is developed and articulated to staff.
- Performance goal or target is expressed to staff at all levels. From eligibility workers to trainers to quality control workers, all staff is aware of the food stamp payment accuracy target and the means for reaching the goal.
- Staff is held accountable for the error rate. The top leadership meets regularly with staff to review error rate trends and supports error review committee meetings.
- Staff is acknowledged and rewarded for payment accuracy improvements and excellence.
- Top leadership is receptive to and appreciates new ideas for administering the program from all levels within the State agency.
- Corrective action plans are targeted and there is buy-in and understanding of what must be accomplished at all levels. Top leadership fully supports corrective action.
- Top leadership is aware of error rate causes and trends that result from quality control reviews. The Commissioner supports and encourages open communication among State agency staff (policy, quality control, training, systems and corrective action) to ensure that error causes are eliminated.
- Top leadership supports system changes necessary to reduce or eliminate error rate causes (such as system changes for new policy options) and makes these changes a priority.

## Communication

Good communication is an essential element in achieving payment accuracy. In fact, every payment accuracy best practice relies on communication. As new technology and faster access to information transforms the way we do business, it opens up a variety of new ways to facilitate communication into agency culture. However, it is important to remember the basics.

### **Agency leadership must communicate a clear vision, objectives, and performance expectations to all areas and levels in the organization.**

As an example, State leadership makes payment accuracy one of their top priorities and demonstrates this commitment by meeting weekly with senior management to review error trends and discuss corrective action strategies. Staff throughout the Department will understand this priority and the impact it has on their performance ratings. Utilization of this approach in various agencies has resulted in significant reductions in the State's payment error rate.

### **Administrators must monitor performance and have a process for communicating feedback to staff.**

One example is how a Performance Center is effectively used as a means within a State to communicate feedback on performance on a regular basis. Detailed reports are developed based on measurements discussed during Performance Center meetings and are shared with executive staff. The reports include an overview, background information, results, analysis, and other pertinent information. Multimedia presentations are prepared using these reports. Bringing the decision makers together in this way enables them to develop better working relationships and improves collaborative problem solving.

Error Review Committees are another effective tool used by many States to monitor performance and provide feedback to staff. Error Review Committees are usually comprised of senior level staff representing corrective action, quality control, policy, systems, training and field operations. The Committee closely reviews cases that State QC has found to be in error, determine the root cause of the error and determine what can be done to prevent the error from reoccurring. They have been successful in alerting staff of new error trends and providing feedback that is useful in identifying the need for policy changes or clarification, procedural adjustments, system changes, etc. States with Error Review Committees have found that the different entities working together on the Committee form a better working relationship and thereby improve communication between the groups, which ultimately has a positive effect on payment accuracy. You can find more information about Error Review Committees in the next "Key".

**Through various means of communication, management must convey to staff that they consider them to be knowledgeable partners and stakeholders in payment accuracy and their views are valued in moving the organization toward achieving their goals and objectives.**

For instance, the Executive Director reviews each case QC determines is error free and sends a personal letter to the eligibility worker who handled the last case action prior to the review month. The letter thanks the worker for a job well done. Each letter is personalized with a description of the case situation and any unusual circumstances that made the case difficult. Workers who have received these letters are pleased that their good work is being recognized.

**The organization must provide front line staff with tools to improve payment accuracy.**

Many states and localities publish newsletters on a regular basis to highlight activities and achievements in their social service programs, including the Food Stamp Program. The newsletters contain payment accuracy tips and reminders, provide mini-training on error prone policy issues and motivate employees. They help reduce the communication barriers between state office staff and local office staff.

Other states use electronic bulletins to post policy tips and to clarify rules and procedures for front-line staff. For example, Vermont utilizes monthly "QTIPS." QTIPS, the acronym for Quality Tidbits, Ideas and Practical Stuff, provide helpful hints and reminders on sticky policy issues. These one page QTIPS are issued monthly to food stamp eligibility workers and focus on one specific error prone area. The QTIPS are not limited to payment accuracy issues; they can also be used to discuss program access and application processing issues.

## Error Review Committees

An Error Review Committee is a cost effective management tool a State can use to monitor and improve payment accuracy, enhance accountability, and demonstrate to eligibility staff the importance senior management places on payment accuracy. Error Review Committees take on slightly different forms and have different names in many States, such as Finding Review Committee. Typically, Error Review Committees consist of representatives from various stakeholders within the State agency, such as quality control, policy, corrective action, systems, training, and field operations. The Committees generally meet twice a month to discuss quality control findings and review error prone elements, application of policy, and corrective action plans at the State and local level.

Error Review Committees have been found to be most effective when:

- The members are senior staff, who see first hand the type of errors being made on a recurring basis.
- Both active and negative error cases are reviewed by the Committee.
- Eligibility workers and supervisors are usually required to participate in Committee meetings, either in person or by phone, when a case they are responsible for is found by quality control to be in error. If an eligibility worker and their supervisor disagree with QC's findings, they should discuss their position with State policy experts before the Error Review Committee formally meets and they have the right to appeal a Committee decision directly to the State Food Stamp Director. Eligibility workers participate to point out circumstances and paperwork that they are familiar with; this is not the time to provide documentation that they should have previously provided that would impact the results of the review of the case. Workers participation can result in their understanding the importance of payment accuracy. Furthermore, eligibility workers' input helps in the development of corrective actions to prevent the reoccurrence of the problem(s) that were the root cause of the errors.
- The State agency requires the office responsible for the error to prepare a Corrective Action Plan (CAP) after the Committee review is final. The CAP details specific actions the office will take to correct the root cause of the problem and prevent it from reoccurring, as well as an implementation timeline.
- The Committee makes recommendations for State and County level corrective actions based on the root causes and error trends they have identified through the error review process.
- State leadership holds staff accountable for their performance.



Care should be taken in the administration of error review committees that no actions are taken which could be perceived to bias the Quality Control work. No actions should be taken to treat the cases selected for QC review differently than any other cases. No additional contacts should be made with clients relative to the treatment of the sample month. Any follow up work that is needed because of circumstances not adequately explored during the QC review must be done by QC staff.

Below are some results States with Error Review Committees have experienced:

- ❖ Better working relationships and improved communication with an increased understanding of the quality control review process (including knowledge of the FNS 310) among the divisions that are represented in the Error Review Committee.
- ❖ Clear commitment to improving payment accuracy demonstrated to staff by all levels of the agency.
- ❖ Improved payment error rates and negative error rates.
- ❖ Recommendations from the Error Review Committee for performance awards based on sustained performance.

## Data Analysis

The foundation for corrective action planning is good data analysis. A thorough understanding of the root cause of the problem, when during the certification period the error occurred, and who or what caused the error is crucial. Without these essential pieces of information, at a minimum, you could be trying to fix something that really isn't broken! Below are several steps you should take to ensure a complete understanding of problem areas:

- **Gather data from all available sources**, such as:
  - ✓ Quality Control
  - ✓ Supervisory Case Reviews
  - ✓ Other Case Reviews, i.e. Peer Reviews, Special Review Team, etc.
  - ✓ Customer Complaints
  - ✓ Fair Hearings
  - ✓ Overpayments
  - ✓ Data Match Hits
  - ✓ Management Evaluation
  
- **Be sure you know your data well.** Understand the definition of QC's error finding codes. Meet with QC periodically to discuss what each code means. For example, if an unreported household member with earnings was discovered by QC during their review, would they code this as a household composition error or an earnings error? The correct answer should be household composition because if the member had been reported there is a good chance the earnings would have also been reported or discovered during matches.
  
- **Mimic your analysis of other data sources**, such as those listed above, to match the QC analysis as much as possible. The additional data can then serve as a supplement to the QC data giving a bigger picture of potential problem areas and allowing you to identify emerging trends very early.
  
- **Monitor data on a continual basis** to:
  - ✓ Look for emerging error trends;
  - ✓ Target corrective action/reinvestment initiatives;
  - ✓ Determine effectiveness of corrective action/reinvestment activities; and,
  - ✓ Identify the need for specific options/waivers.

- **Identify the source of the problem.** You need to investigate the cause of the error until you discover the root cause. For example, here are just a few problem areas that could have caused a “Policy Incorrectly Applied” error:
  - ✓ Does the worker not understand the policy?
  - ✓ Does the worker know how to use the on-line manual efficiently and effectively to research policy? Is the on-line manual up to date?
  - ✓ Is there a paper manual available if needed? Is it kept up to date?
  - ✓ Is the policy written clearly?
  - ✓ Did the worker ask questions of their supervisor or another worker? Was the answer correct?
  - ✓ Does the worker know the proper way to enter the information into the computer system, using the correct codes, etc.?
  - ✓ Did the worker ask the right questions during the interview to get all the needed information to make a good policy decision?
  - ✓ Was the information that was entered into the computer system proofread to ensure it was data entered accurately?
  
- **Review your analysis reports to determine their effectiveness.** As part of the Food Stamp Quality Control automated system, many analysis reports are available. In addition, many States have created their own analysis reports. Below are some key categories of information you should analyze:
  - ✓ Error Element (i.e., wages & salaries, shelter costs, vehicles, etc.)
  - ✓ Nature Code – the circumstances surrounding the error
  - ✓ Cause – A good starting point as to what went wrong. Remember, error cause alone is too broad a category to assist in developing meaningful corrective actions. It explains what happened, but not why the error occurred.
  - ✓ When the Error Occurred – (Before, At or After the most recent action)
  - ✓ County, Unit and/or Worker responsible for the error – This category can help you to better target the corrective action strategy. Many times retraining everyone is not the answer.
  - ✓ How or Where QC Found the Error – In the case record, through the client interview or through a collateral source.
  - ✓ Finding – overissuance, underissuance or ineligible (i.e., in the case of underissuances that are client caused, why didn't the client report the loss of a job? Did the customer understand how their food stamp allotment was calculated and what they should report in the way of changes?)

## Corrective Action Plans

Corrective action planning is the process by which State and local agencies document initiatives to reduce or eliminate deficiencies in program operations and provide responsive service to eligible households. Documenting your corrective action initiatives and sharing the Plan confirms top level commitment to improve or maintain payment accuracy to staff at all levels.

Preparing a thorough yet easy to implement corrective action plan can be as simple or as complex as you want it to be. The write-up for each corrective action initiative should contain the following information:

- ✓ A thorough description of the deficiency, including the associated error element and the root cause.
- ✓ The magnitude of the deficiency (number of cases and dollars found in error) and the geographic extent (i.e., a statewide problem, one or more project areas, a unit within a project area).
- ✓ The data source(s) used to identify the deficiency and the magnitude (QC, supervisory reviews, etc.).
- ✓ A complete description of the corrective action initiative developed to resolve the deficiency.
- ✓ The tasks, time frames and person(s) responsible for each step of implementation of the corrective action initiative.
- ✓ A description of the plan to monitor implementation of the corrective action initiative.
- ✓ A description of the plan to evaluate the effectiveness of corrective action initiative and the expected outcome.
- ✓ The current status of the initiative (include this in all Corrective Action Plan Updates submitted until the initiative has been fully implemented and evaluated).
- ✓ The name and title of the person who has overall responsibility for the Corrective Action Plan.

A sample format sheet is included. Feel free to use this format for documenting your corrective action initiatives. A separate sheet should be used for each initiative to ensure clear documentation of each problem area and each corrective action initiative.

Below are some basic, easy to follow tips for corrective action planning:

- The first step to corrective action planning is detailed data analysis. Ideas for good data analysis are addressed in the “Data Analysis” Key. Getting to the root cause of the problem is essential.
- Involve staff at all levels in the corrective action process, including support staff. Pull together a corrective action committee to discuss problem areas identified in your data analysis. Staff is usually very willing to help. Asking for their assistance in solving a problem helps to build team work, shows staff you believe their input is valuable and ensures buy-in at all levels when implementing a corrective action initiative.
- Brainstorm corrective action ideas with the group. Don’t automatically exclude new or different ideas before some exploration of their merits.
- Be realistic about the number and scope of corrective action initiatives undertaken at any one time.
- Focus your efforts on the areas most likely to yield the biggest payoff in error reduction, either by reducing the error cases down to a few or reducing the error dollars by a meaningful amount.
- Always assign target completion dates and the person(s) responsible for each step necessary to implement an initiative. Make the target dates reasonable so you can stay on track but don’t allow so much time that the activity never gets implemented.
- Monitoring to ensure implementation of the initiative is going according to schedule and that the steps are being carried out correctly is important to the success of the initiative. Monitoring implementation should be done as simply as possible.
- Plans for monitoring and evaluating need to be developed **at the same time** as the corrective action initiative.
- The evaluation process is very different than the monitoring process. Evaluation is done at the end of the trial period for the corrective action initiative to determine if it was successful in reducing or eliminating the targeted error(s).

**FOOD STAMP CORRECTIVE ACTION PLAN**

(Type additional information on a separate sheet of paper.)

**Agency:**

**Date:**

**Office(s) and/or Unit(s) implementing this plan:**

**Description of deficiency, including associated error element and root cause:**

**Magnitude and geographic extent of deficiency and data sources used:**

**Complete description of activity developed to resolve deficiency:**

**Tasks/steps, time frames and person(s) responsible for each task/step:**

Description of Task/Step	Person Responsible	Target Completion Date

⇒ **O  
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**Agency:**

**Description of plan to monitor implementation tasks/steps and time frames:**

**Description of plan to evaluate effectiveness of activity to resolve deficiency:**

**Expected outcome: \_\_\_\_\_ percent reduction in error rate during next \_\_\_\_\_ months.**

**As of the date of this plan/update, the status of performing tasks/steps, meeting time frames and effectiveness of initiative to resolve deficiency:**

**Name and title of person who has overall responsibility for this plan:**

## Policy Options, Waivers and Initiatives

The Food Stamp Program was established through the Food Stamp Act by Congress in 1977 as a means to “provide improved levels of nutrition among low income households.” The Program continues to grow in the number of participants served and to improve with the processes utilized. Policy options and initiatives help to streamline the Program for both participants and State agencies. As policy options, new initiatives and waivers are developed by States, FNS or the Legislature, the goal is ultimately the same – to help improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the Program for both the individuals served and the State agencies responsible for determining eligibility.

One of the greatest examples of a policy option that has had a tremendous impact on the Food Stamp Program, resulting in improved payment accuracy, is semi-annual reporting. As States realized the potential impact taking this option could have, many States across the country embraced the policy. States that achieved the greatest improvement as a result of implementing this option provided thorough, timely training to staff and to clients just prior to or at the time of implementation.

In order for new policy initiatives, options and waivers to improve program integrity and program access, the following elements are suggested for implementation:

- **Information:** New policy is always being considered, debated and implemented. To stay up to date on the most current policy news available to determine which options or waivers may best support your agency’s performance goals:
  - ✓ Log onto the FNS website ([www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/](http://www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/)) frequently;
  - ✓ Log onto the FNS Payment Accuracy/Quality Control Partner web ([www.fnspartner.usda.gov/](http://www.fnspartner.usda.gov/))
  - ✓ Communicate often with your FNS Regional office staff; and,
  - ✓ Partner with sharing agencies such as APHSA (American Public Human Services Association).
- **Communication:** When policy options or waivers are being considered by your agency, it is essential for all stakeholders (policy, quality control, corrective action, systems, field operations, etc.) to debate the merits of the option. They must weigh how the policy initiative will impact the error rate and program access.
- **Training:** Staff and clients must be made aware of new policy and how it will impact them. For example, States found that training clients and providing them with written information on how semi-annual reporting will affect them was a critical step in effectively implementing that option.



## Case Reviews

One of the most successful tools in attaining and maintaining high payment accuracy is a good case review system. Many states mandate case reviews because they have proven to be an integral part of their overall management of the program by providing managers and supervisors valuable information on the quality and timeliness of case determinations. Information gathered from case reviews allow states to determine the root cause(s) of errors and thereby identify specific areas needing corrective action, such as policy clarification, refresher training, changes in office procedures, improved case record documentation, system changes, etc.

There are a number of different approaches to case reviews:

- **Short Term Projects** – Case reviews conducted on a targeted sample of the caseload usually focused on specific error prone elements of the case record for a short period of time. These projects are generally undertaken to gather information needed to address a particular problem(s).
- **Case Sweeps** – This type of case review can be targeted toward the most error prone cases, such as earned income cases, or it can be a review of most or all, cases in the caseload. Sweeps have shown to be effective when there is a high error rate that is not localized to a particular geographic area or particular policy. When conducting a case sweep, all staff that can be spared is temporarily diverted to complete case reviews for the project. Case sweeps ensure a large number of error-prone cases are corrected. However, to keep these cases correct, the extensive findings data collected must be analyzed immediately to obtain a clear understanding of the root cause of the errors so corrective actions can be implemented.
- **Peer Reviews** – Case reviews conducted by another eligibility worker within the same unit or, in some instances, units within the same office switch cases for review. Peer reviews are generally conducted prior to benefit approval or very shortly after benefits have been issued. Most workers would prefer to have a co-worker find their mistakes than their supervisor. Peer reviews provide another set of eyes to catch missed information reported but not included in the eligibility determination, helps to reinforce policy knowledge and finds and corrects errors in a large number of cases.
- **Supervisory Case Reviews** – Either targeted or thorough case reviews conducted by supervisors. Generally there is a mandate that supervisors conduct a required number of reviews each month following a prescribed procedure. These reviews are an excellent management tool for supervisors to track the accuracy and timeliness of benefit issuance. They provide information on staff that may be behind in work or need additional training and contribute to the overall accuracy of the unit, office, project area and State.

- **Third Party Reviews** – A re-review of a sample of case reviews to determine the accuracy of the reviews being completed by workers, supervisors or a special team of reviewers. All effective case review systems include a third-party review process. A third party review ensures that those conducting initial case reviews have an accurate understanding of policy and are spending the time needed to conduct a thorough and accurate review. These re-reviews maintain the integrity and consistency of the review process.
- **New Worker Reviews** – This involves a thorough review of all cases completed by new employees, prior to benefit approval, to ensure they have a thorough understanding of the program and are determining benefits accurately. These reviews are generally conducted by the immediate supervisor for the first 6 to 12 months of employment.
- **Targeted Case Reviews** – Reviews focused on specific error prone cases and/or elements of the case. They are effective in isolating and correcting specific types of errors within an office or State. The specific error prone elements are generally identified through other types of case reviews.

Through case review it is possible to gather real-time data needed determine the types of errors being made and the root cause of those errors. The results from the reviews are most beneficial when they are made available to management within a one to two month timeframe after the case review is complete to allow for a proactive approach in finding solutions to address the causes of errors. Case reviews alone, without analysis and understanding of the causes of the errors and trends, is non-productive. It simply becomes a “find and fix” and the next time the case is touched, the same error could easily be repeated. This data provides vital information for correcting cases and identifying problem areas. It is also an important step to holding staff accountable for their work.

Tips for conducting case reviews:

- Develop a case review sheet that collects detailed findings information.
- Implement a system to track cases found to be in error to ensure corrections are made timely and accurately.
- Analyze the findings in a timely manner – the sooner the better.
- Determine the root cause of the error. For example, it is common to assume that because there are a lot of errors occurring related to a particular piece of policy, the workers need to receive refresher training. Before settling on that conclusion, check first to be sure the policy is clearly written, the computer system is properly programmed to handle the policy, and there are no procedures in place that could be causing the errors.
- Develop and implement corrective actions immediately once the root cause has been discovered.
- Conduct a targeted review 6 to 12 months after implementing the corrective action to ensure the problem has been effectively resolved.

## Training

It is essential to ensure that staff at all levels possess the knowledge and skills needed to provide timely and accurate benefits to those we serve. Ongoing refresher training for veteran staff is as important as thorough, timely training for new employees. However, while most states have recognized this need, many are finding that staffing and fiscal constraints are making it sometimes difficult to meet the demand.

Dedicated staff around the country has responded to these difficult times by developing creative and, in many instances, low-cost methods to meet the never ending need for training:

- **Train-the Trainer:** This type of training can range from classroom to a web-based course that is offered to supervisors and/or local training staff to share new training techniques or modules for delivering training to their local staff. This helps to provide consistency in training statewide.
- **Centralized Training Centers:** Staff in centralized training centers is responsible for developing training materials and providing training to all staff in all programs statewide. These centers are generally used for training new eligibility staff as well as refresher training to veteran staff as time and need dictates. Centralized training ensures consistency in training.
- **Training Advisory Teams:** These advisory teams are comprised of representatives from management, management evaluation, systems, eligibility workers and supervisors, corrective action, and staff development. The purpose of the team is to provide input from their respective areas to effectively target and prioritize training needs. The teams generally meet quarterly.
- **Regional Training Specialist:** In many states organized by Region, they have established Regional Training Specialist positions. The training specialists provide training to staff throughout their region for all programs and on statewide issues as well as issues and needs specific to their region based on quality control and/or case review findings. Larger states have found this to be cost effective by reducing travel costs.
- **“Take 5/15” Training:** These are mini-training modules that can be presented during unit meetings or placed on the State intra-net for all workers to use. The mini-training modules cover error prone food stamp policies as well as topics suggested by the Training Advisory Team. The modules are kept up to date by the training staff and new subjects are added as needed.

- **Quarterly Newsletter:** Many States and/or county agencies produce monthly or quarterly newsletters that provide policy updates, payment accuracy tips and best practices, accomplishments, error rate and data analysis information, emerging error trends and new areas of concern identified by management evaluation and/or quality control, and policy quizzes or crossword puzzles to challenge staff. Newsletters are distributed in several different ways: paper copies, e-mail, or placed on an agency website.
- **Computer-Based Training or CBT (also known as On-line Refresher Training):** CBT can consist of short quizzes or somewhat longer training modules that automatically check or provide the answers to workers on complex or error prone topics. Most States provide this training through the agency website or intranet, while others with less sophisticated equipment and systems provide the training modules on a compact disk (CD) to each office or unit. This type of training is frequently overlooked but highly effective in reinforcing skills and knowledge and can be relatively inexpensive. The mini-training sessions are generally targeted to error prone policy, procedures or customer service topics. To monitor the use and effectiveness of this type of training, counters are used to track usage and results.
- **Conference Training:** Workshops included as part of annual agency conferences that provide policy updates and clarifications, error reduction strategies, quality control and error analysis, system updates and refresher training, supervisory training such as how to do a good case review, etc.

# Employee Recognition

Employee recognition is a major factor in staff retention, good customer service, and timely and accurate decisions. Job demands and stress have a negative impact on morale and job performance for every member of an agency's staff. It is important to recognize that the attitudes and enthusiasm of managers will be reflected in the work and morale of all levels of staff. A good manager always remembers that a positive attitude can be contagious and enthusiasm is hard to ignore.

The agency's staff is its most valuable resource and managers should strive to boost morale through a system of recognition and/or rewards. The following are a few simple and inexpensive ways to improve a unit's or an office's environment:

- **“Mental Health Day”** – Have an activity for the staff away from the office. A lunchtime picnic in the park or an early morning breakfast is a way to enhance a group identity.
- **Individual Certificates/Notes From Management** – A simple note or a little more formal certificate of appreciation acknowledging a job well done is motivational. To enhance this act, always note that a copy has been sent to the agency's administration and placed in the employee's personnel record. This increases the workers pride knowing that others are aware they are doing a good job.
- **Improvement Campaign** – Create a campaign to improve the office performance using competition between the units. A little competition between units helps to motivate staff and create unity in the work groups. The units' performances should be charted and the good performances recognized in monthly postings throughout the office and other methods of communication (e.g., newsletters, e-mails).
- **Milestone Awards** – Establish individual or unit goals. When the goal is attained, reward the staff or individual with a “milestone” award. The award should be unique and symbolize the milestone that was reached (e.g., a hand-painted rock). The awards should be presented during staff meetings or small ceremonies to celebrate achievements.
- **Unannounced Rewards** – Reward and recognition is deserved when the office, as a whole, performs beyond the work requirements or expectations. An office that willingly works extra hours to serve the customers or commits itself to providing service during difficult times (e.g., staff shortages, disasters, etc.) deserves support from management. A supervisor/manager sponsored luncheon is a proven morale booster to assure the staff they play a major part in achieving the agency's goals and are appreciated.

- **Annual Awards Luncheon** – Have an annual covered dish luncheon to recognize staff for an array of work measurements. The measurements should be established at the beginning of each year to encourage a total buy-in and commitment by staff. The awards should recognize quality performances in work accuracy, timeliness of service, customer service, office support, and other appropriate areas.
- **Office Participation in Community Activities** – Organize a committee to research opportunities for group participation in community functions. Establish a schedule of activities that groups can volunteer to participate in as agency representatives (e.g., walk-a-thon for charities, Habitat for Humanity building programs, holiday toy collection drives, etc.). These activities will reinforce the “agency team” concept and build staff loyalty and morale.

These are just a few examples of how your agency can recognize employees for special efforts. Rewards and recognition don't have to be expensive. Some small rewards you might consider are a special parking space for a month, a time-off award (a free day or half day off), or a gift certificate to a local sub shop or fast-food restaurant. The staff understands the tight budget constraints most agencies are under and appreciate any method of recognition or reward.

Remember, everyone enjoys being recognized for a job well done, no matter how big or small the reward.

## Change Centers

Change centers have become more common in States and project areas around the country. The centers can be used exclusively to process reported changes, but they are also sometimes used for a variety of other purposes, including processing alerts, handling customer phone calls or conducting call-backs.

Change centers can help reduce errors caused by unreported changes, high workloads, unanswered phones/voice mail messages, and/or un-worked alerts. Benefits derived from implementing a change center include task specialization, prompt customer service, measurable work performance, dedicated phone lines, and the ability to reinforce change reporting with one phone number for clients to remember.

There are many different types of change centers—some are highly automated, while others are less sophisticated. In one state, change centers handle the majority of case work; while in another project area, the unit handles only changes. With decreased changes as a result of Simplified Reporting, some states are considering using the centers to conduct recertification interviews via telephone (where allowed).

The more automated the unit, the more work the unit is able to accomplish and the greater the impact on both payment accuracy and customer service. Investing a relatively small amount in phone and automated systems that handle calls and populate automated system screens can make change centers highly effective. Here are some characteristics/guidelines for utilizing change centers:

- Change centers work best with automated systems. If change center staff is able to access cases in an automated system, they can then make changes, check information already on the system, access the client's automated case record, and/or initiate changes.
- Change centers can be staffed with full-time or part-time staff. As long as proper training is provided, change center staff can be rotated in and out of the unit. In some offices, working in the change center is considered a treat and temporary escape from routine work. And in other offices, only the highest performing staff are permitted to work in the change unit.
- Change centers can operate effectively on both a statewide or countywide basis. Change centers can be small scale, two-person units, or larger scale, 15-person units, depending on your needs.
- In order for centers to be effective, case workers must cooperate by ensuring that clients know to call the change center to report changes or ask questions about their cases. If caseworkers refuse to yield control of their cases, the potential impact of the center will be lessened. In some offices/states with centers, participation was mandatory and workers were prohibited from accepting changes.

- When creating a change unit, a variety of low-cost methods for communicating this change in procedure to clients can be employed. Multiple messages appear to be most effective. Providing flyers, magnets and other materials with the new number and the types of calls that should be directed to the unit are essential to ensuring the success of the unit.
- Creating performance standards (number of calls received, duration of calls, etc.) is essential to ensuring that the center is effective. In short time, a baseline can be established that provides accurate and usable information on which to base standards.
- Through workload specialization, change units reduce workloads. Eligibility workers indicate that they are better able to concentrate on initial certifications or recertifications without the interruptions of phone calls or clients stopping by with questions or to provide information on changes.
- The mere presence of a change unit reinforces the responsibility clients have to report required changes.
- With the advent of simplified reporting, there have been questions as to the usefulness of change units; however, no office that currently has a unit is considering disbanding its unit. Though the number of changes clients are required to report has fallen, units still handle a lot of calls with questions about cases and they still handle those changes that clients do report—whether required to do so or not. Many change centers have also begun handling alerts and computer matches.



# Regional Payment Accuracy Coordinators

***Feel free to contact your Regional Payment Accuracy Coordinator for more information on any of the “Keys to Payment Accuracy.”***

**Mid-Atlantic Region** (Delaware, District of Columbia, Maryland, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Virginia, Virgin Islands, West Virginia)

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NOTE: An electronic copy of this document can be downloaded from the FNS Payment Accuracy/Quality Control **Partner Web** along with additional information on payment accuracy best practices: [www.fnspartner.usda.gov/](http://www.fnspartner.usda.gov/)

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