



POLICY AND PRACTICE:

CUSTOMER SERVICE IN ILLINOIS DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES LOCAL OFFICES

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National Center on Poverty Law
Ounce of Prevention Fund
Work, Welfare and Families

INTERVIEW SITES

Illinois Department of Human Services Local Offices
Englewood, Northern, Northwest, Roseland, and West Suburban

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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 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 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 and state 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 law and policy 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 and state 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 “Accessing 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, 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.

INTRODUCTION

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.¹ Periodic surveys on customer service in IDHS local offices provide information about customers' perceptions and experiences of service delivery. Such surveys are tools for obtaining feedback on the quality of service customers receive and the extent to which laws, regulations, and policies pertaining to customer service are being followed.

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 2003.² However, the TANF program has goals and obligations other than simply caseload reduction. For example, the federal government recently rewarded states with bonuses up to 5% of the state's total TANF Block Grant for achieving employment success and other TANF program goals.³ Illinois was one of nine states not to receive any bonus for fiscal year 2001. Had Illinois performed better, it could have received as much as \$30.1 million in bonus funds.⁴

Furthermore, reductions in TANF caseload do not mean that the number of eligible families in need of assistance is declining.⁵ 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.

¹ The Illinois Department of Human services provided data for the average monthly number of visitors (March to August 2003) to the five IDHS local offices included in this study. Daily averages are based on 22 workdays per month.

Local Office	Average visitors per month	Average visitors per day
Englewood	12,513	569
Roseland	8,471	385
Northern	7,885	358
W. Suburban	7,372	335
Northwest	6,411	291

² The next highest state is New York, with a 34.1% reduction. During the first quarter of 2003, the TANF caseload declined 6.7% in Illinois, the highest decline in the country; Illinois was followed by Louisiana with a decline of 6.1%. 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.

³ Nine states received the full 5% bonus. For details on the awards, see "TANF High Performance Bonuses," U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, September 23, 2003, <http://www.hhs.gov/news/press/2003pres/20030923.html>. Accessed September 26, 2003.

⁴ The TANF Block Grant to Illinois in 2001 was \$602 million. National Conference of State Legislatures, http://www.ncsl.org/statefed/welfare/TANF_Grant_Table1.htm. Accessed October 6, 2003.

⁵ "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.

Another byproduct of welfare reform and TANF caseload reduction is that there are now many more families receiving only Medicaid and Food Stamps. 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.⁶ 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.

Meeting these post-welfare reform expectations requires that the state provide IDHS with the leadership and resources to foster an environment in local offices that supports staff in their new roles. Although welfare reform has yielded increased workloads, decreasing resources for staffing and facilities impede reforms within local IDHS offices. And these reforms are necessary to ensure that families do not encounter customer service barriers to services and programs.

A grave shortage of caseworkers and managers currently impairs customer service in IDHS local offices. For the period March 2001 to March 2003, IDHS caseworkers on-board in local offices declined 28.5% from 3,046 to 2,177.⁷ 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.⁸ 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.⁹ 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 2003.¹⁰

⁶ Data provided by the Bureau of Research and Analysis, Illinois Department of Human Services.

⁷ For the same period, the number of allocated caseworkers declined from 3,325 to 2,618. Data provided by Illinois Department of Human Services. The closure of the Mount Auburn local IDHS office contributed to increases in caseloads between August and December 2002 at Englewood from 29,936 to 33,912; and at Roseland from 12,360 to 23,502. For a discussion of IDHS staff reductions and office closures and their effects on services, see "A Disaster in the Making: How DHS Budget Cuts are Placing Illinois Families in Jeopardy," Anne Irving, AFSCME, October 2002.

⁸ Data provided by the Illinois Department of Human Services.

⁹ Caseload information obtained by CIR through interviews conducted in August 2003 with Local Office Administrators (LOA) from four of the IDHS offices included in the survey. The Local Office Administrator is the highest-ranking IDHS staff person on site at a local office.

¹⁰ Operated by the Legal Assistance Foundation of Metropolitan Chicago, the Public Benefits Hotline is a telephone hotline (888-893-5327) for Cook County residents who have problems obtaining or retaining state and federal benefits because of improper implementation of laws and policies, sanction, termination, reapplication, or appeal determinations. The Legal Assistance Foundation provided the data on Hotline call volume.

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 organizations¹¹ 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.

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 information as a basis for advocating 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.

¹¹ 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.

METHODOLOGY

STUDY DESIGN

At the outset of the project, CIR formed a working group consisting of members from community human services agencies and advocacy organizations. 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 as well as assisted in crafting and advocating policy recommendations. CIR also obtained input on the survey design, local office procedures, and data interpretation from IDHS officials.

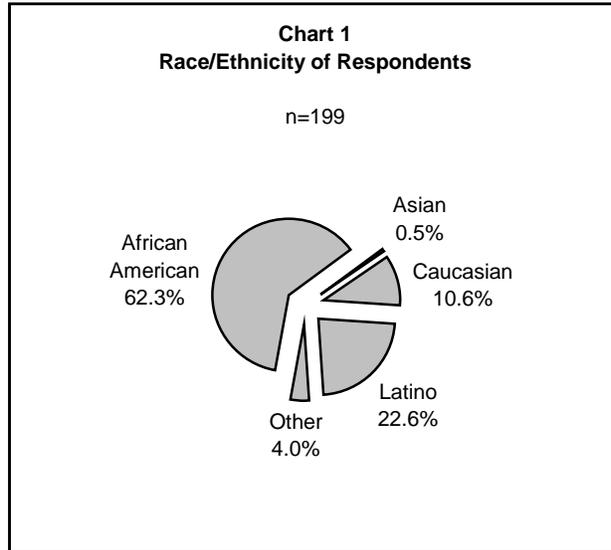
The surveys were administered by staff and interns of working group member agencies. Three of the interviewers are bilingual in English and Spanish. The surveys were conducted on Monday, July 28, 2003 in the reception and waiting areas of five of the busiest IDHS offices in Cook County: Englewood, Northwest, and Roseland in Chicago; Northern in Skokie; and West Suburban in Melrose Park. Survey respondents were interviewed at the conclusion of their visit to the office and received a five-dollar supermarket gift card if they completed the interview. A total of 206 interviews were conducted. However, it was later determined that seven respondents had not fully completed their visit at the time of the interview. Therefore, the sample under discussion includes 199 cases (Englewood 43; Northern 44; Northwest 34; Roseland 42; and West Suburban 36).

THE SAMPLE

- ▶ 62.3% of respondents were African American, 22.6% Latino, and 10.6% Caucasian.
- ▶ English was the first language of 78.6% of respondents; Spanish for 17.3%; and another language for 4.1% of respondents.
- ▶ Gender was identified for 75% of the sample, with 75.3% female and 24.7% male.
- ▶ Three-quarters of respondents were between the ages of 21 and 49, with an average age of 38.1 years of age.
- ▶ Over half of the respondents currently receive Food Stamps; 41.7% receive Medicaid; and 4.5% receive TANF.
- ▶ Respondents came for one or more of the following reasons: 45.7% to hand in paperwork or documents; 44.7% for a new application; 23.1% for a scheduled appointment; and 23.6% for another reason.

For the total sample, African Americans were the largest group, followed by Latinos and then Caucasians. However, the racial composition varied significantly by site, with one site having a majority of Latinos (Chart 1).

Of the 199 respondents at the 5 sites, 62.3% of respondents were African American, 22.6% Latino, 10.6% Caucasian, 0.5% Asian, and 4.0% other.



At Roseland, Englewood, and Northwest the majority of respondents were African American; the Northern office had 50% African American respondents; and the West Suburban office had 58.3% Latino respondents (Table 1).

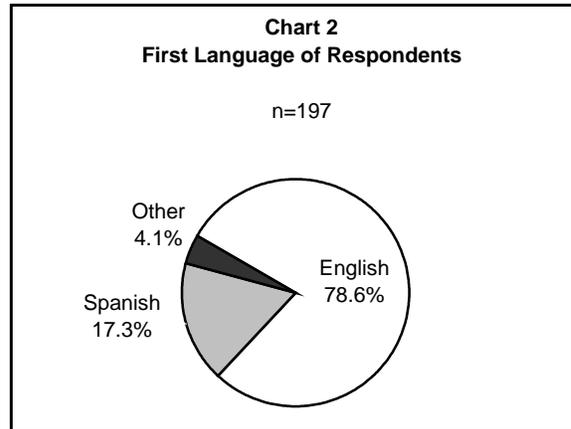
**Table 1
Race/Ethnicity of Respondents at Survey Sites**

	African American	Asian	Caucasian	Latino	Other
Englewood	76.7%	0.0%	7.1%	4.8%	2.4%
Northern	50.0%	2.3%	18.2%	18.2%	11.4%
Northwest	73.5%	0.0%	2.9%	23.5%	0.0%
Roseland	85.7%	0.0%	7.1%	4.8%	2.4%
West Suburban	22.2%	0.0%	16.7%	58.3%	2.8%

Over three-quarters of the respondents reported that English is their first language. (Chart 2).

For all the respondents, English was the first language of 78.6%, Spanish for 17.3%, and another language for 4.1%. The Northern office was the most diverse, with 70.5% of respondents reporting English as their first language, 15.9% reporting Spanish, and 13.6% reporting another language, including Creole, Mandarin, Russian, Ukrainian, Urdu, and Vietnamese. At the West Suburban office, 51.4% of respondents

reported Spanish as their first language, and 38.9% of total interviews there were conducted in Spanish. Overall, 78.9% of the interviews were conducted in English and 13.1% in Spanish, with a few Spanish interviews at each site except Roseland, where there were two Latino respondents, both of whom were fluent in English.



A majority of respondents were women, with some variation among the sites.

Gender was identified for only 75% of the sample, with 75.3% female and 24.7% male. Male and female respondents were closest in number at Roseland (56.4% female, 43.6% male, n=39 of a total 42), whereas at the Northwest office, 90% of respondents were female 10% were male (n=30 of a total 34).

Three-quarters of respondents were between the ages of 21 and 49.

The mean age was 38.1 years for the total sample, with the minimum age of 18 and a maximum age of 81, and minor variation among the sites. Three-quarters of respondents were between the ages 21 and 49; 16% were between the ages 50 and 64; 8% were age 20 and under; and 1% was over age 65.

The majority of respondents made no special arrangements to come to the office that day, and most of those who have children did not bring them to the office.

Of the total sample, 68.3% of respondents made no special arrangements to come to the IDHS office on the day they were surveyed. The mean travel time to the offices was 30 minutes, which did not vary by site. The longest trip was 150 minutes and the shortest was 3 minutes. Transportation issues were reported by 7.5%, taking off work or school by 5.5%, and not sleeping due to coming straight from the night shift by 1%.

Of the total sample, 78.9% did not bring any children with them to the office. Childcare was the most frequently cited type of arrangement that was made, and was reported by 12.6% of respondents.

Although children were with adults in all of the offices on the day of the survey, their low numbers indicate that adults prefer not to bring them. Two respondents commented specifically on the difficulty of arranging childcare when they had to come to the office for appointments. One respondent said that she missed an appointment last week because she was unable to find childcare and she was told that since she missed the appointment, she had to start the TANF application all over again. Another respondent said that she had arrived late for her appointment because she had to find childcare for her two children and then waited for transport.

One respondent, who had come to fill out an application and was waiting to be given a date and time for a return appointment, felt the office was not meeting her needs as a working woman: “If you’re married it’s a problem to get help. I’m married but that doesn’t mean we have money. I make \$9,000 and I’m going to school. I don’t have time to come here and wait. I’ll have to change my work schedule for my appointment.”

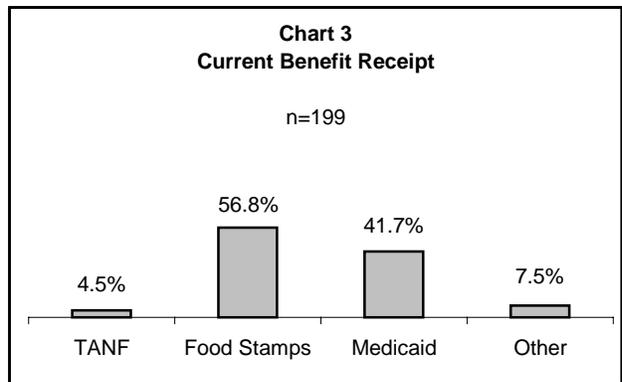
Over half of the respondents currently receive Food Stamps; 41.7% receive Medicaid; and 4.5% receive TANF (Chart 3).

Receipt of Food Stamps was reported by 56.8% of the respondents, with more than half of the respondents receiving Food Stamps at all sites except the Northwest office, where 41.2% receive them.

Medicaid is received by 41.7% of respondents, with the Northern office the only site where a majority of respondents receive Medicaid (65.9%).

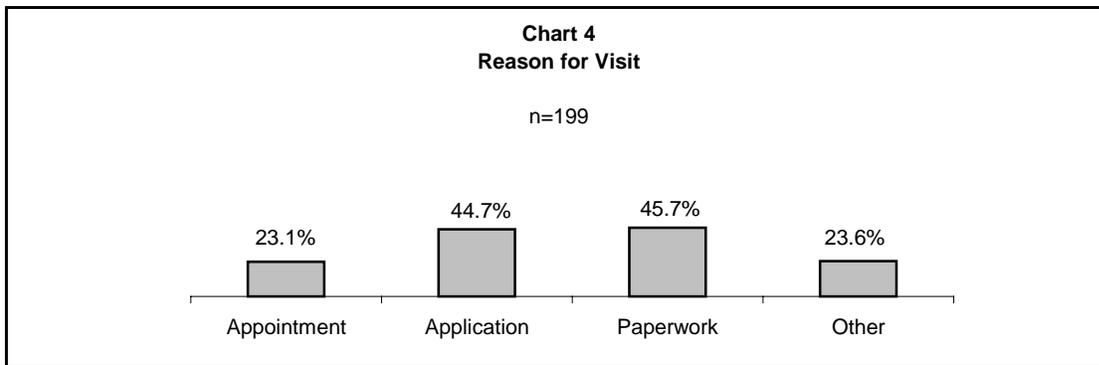
Although there was variation among the five sites, 4.5% of all respondents receive TANF. At Roseland, 11.9% reported TANF receipt; none of the respondents at the Northern office reported TANF receipt.

Receipt of other types of benefits was reported by 7.5% of respondents. These include Aid to the Aged, Blind, or Disabled (AABD), General Assistance, Social Security, and Supplemental Security Income (SSI). None of these cases were located at Englewood, but each of the other sites had a few respondents reporting receipt of these other types of benefits.



Most respondents came to the IDHS offices for scheduled appointments, to make new applications, and to turn in paperwork and documents. Some came for more than one of these reasons. The other most frequently reported reason for visiting was to fix problems with or to obtain a new Link card (Chart 4).

Respondents came to the office for a variety of purposes, and often for more than one. For the total sample, 45.7% came to hand in paperwork or documents, 44.7% came for a new application, 23.1% of respondents reported coming for a scheduled appointment, and 23.6% came for another reason.¹² Of those respondents visiting for another reason, 48.9% came because of problems with or to obtain a new Link card (for electronic benefits transfer card), and 25.5% came because of a question or problem with their case.



Of the respondents who came to make new applications, over three-quarters were applying for Food Stamps, nearly one-half for Medicaid, and about one-third were applying for TANF.

Most respondents were applying for one or more of the following programs: Food Stamps (78.4%); Medicaid (45.5%); and TANF (30.7%). Besides coming to apply for these main three programs, only three respondents reported that they were at the office to apply for something else (job training, rent assistance, and WIC). A larger proportion of respondents came to apply for TANF applications at the Roseland and Northwest offices; the proportion of Food Stamps applications was about the same across the sites; and Medicaid applications were higher at the Northwest and West Suburban offices.

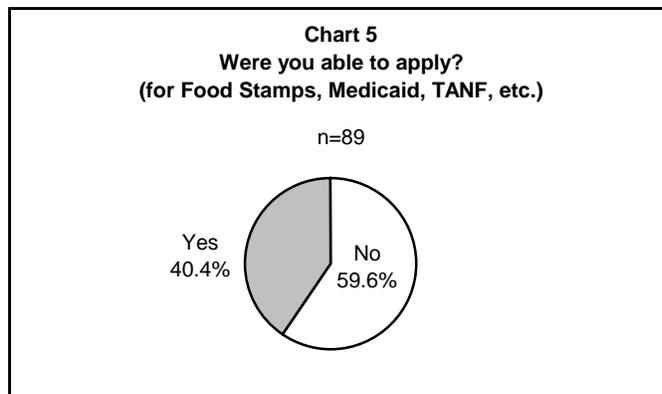
¹² The majority of respondents were interviewed in the morning. If the surveys were conducted in the afternoon, the proportion replying they that came for an appointment might have been higher because by the afternoon more of the people who came to apply and were unable to do so would have already left or been sent away. Furthermore, several of these local offices schedule caseworkers to see existing clients who come without appointments in the late morning or by appointment later in the day.

FINDINGS

Three-fifths of the 89 respondents who came to apply for one or more programs were not able to apply on the day of their visit; two-fifths began an application that day, although this varied by site (Chart 5).

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.¹³ 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.

Although 59.6% of the 89 survey respondents who reported they came to apply for programs were unable to do so, there was considerable variation among offices with a high of 89.5% and a low of 28.6%.¹⁴ A little more than half of the respondents who were not able to apply (53.7%) were given return appointments. This did not vary much across the sites. 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. The date of the return appointments was between one and 11 working days later, with a mean of 4.9 working days.



¹³ 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.

¹⁴ Respondents who said they came to the office and were unable to apply today: 89.5% of 19 in Roseland; 72.2% of 18 in Northwest; 69.2% of 13 in West Suburban; 40% of 25 in Englewood; and 28.6% of 14 in Northern.

Respondents who came in to apply for programs such as Food Stamps, Medicaid, and TANF reported a wide range of experiences in the different offices. One respondent said no one was there to see her and she was told to return the next day at 8 A.M. Another said that when the caseworker “was nasty,” she called the supervisor, who “was nice,” to explain that since she’s head of household she should be allowed to apply. A respondent was told she could not be given an application, and asked to speak to the supervisor: “I couldn’t talk to a supervisor or caseworker, but I wanted to tell them I waited in line over an hour. I asked again and was finally given an application.” Another respondent said he was told to put the application in the drop box but he can’t read very well and wasn’t offered any assistance filling it out.

One respondent suggested that the office hand out numbers for people coming in to apply, another was dissatisfied with “the quota for new applicants and that you have to come back if you can’t get an interview that day.” In contrast to those who felt that they did not make any progress on their applications, one respondent was very positive and not disturbed by not being able to apply, saying that she was grateful they told her to return tomorrow, which to her means that she “did not wait all day for nothing.”

A couple of respondents at different offices specifically mentioned difficulties at the front desk. One noted, “the caseworker is nice but the problem is getting to the caseworker through the receptionist.” Another made a similar observation and added a suggestion: “The caseworker was very helpful but the front desk was very unorganized. They should have different lines.”

In interviews with CIR, Local Office Administrators reported a variety of approaches for handling the volume of people coming in to make new applications as fairly and efficiently as possible. Most offices have a procedure that allows a certain number of people to meet with an intake worker each day. For example, on any given day if the number of people exceeds the designated capacity for the day, the names of people who came after the cutoff go onto the “overflow” list. They are told to return no later than opening time on another specified day, usually the next working day but sometimes a couple of working days hence. On that day, their name is called out and they meet with someone for intake. If they do not appear as instructed, they lose their turn.

Nearly one-third of all respondents (32.7%) reported that they had come to the IDHS office before for the same reason they were there the day of the survey.

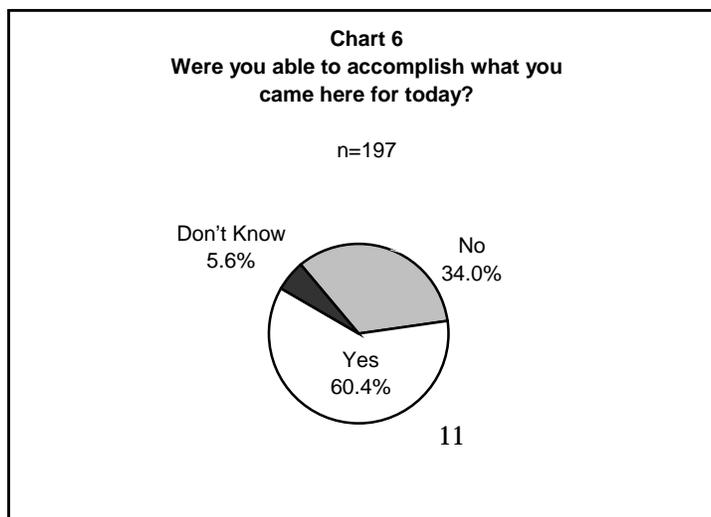
As stated above, customers have the right to apply on the first day they come to do so; not allowing them to apply is a violation of state and federal law.

Respondents were asked to describe what had happened before that required them to return for the same reason today. Some said that they had been turned away within the past week and were instructed to return that day; they were given dates within the next two weeks to return for an appointment. For example, one respondent said, “I came last Friday [July 25] to apply for cash, Food Stamps, and medical, and was told to return today. Today [July 28] I was given an appointment for August 7.” Another respondent said, “I came last week and was told to come today. I read the list of tips given by the receptionist and brought my documents but they didn’t review them.” Two respondents said they had come before at 9 A.M. but it was too late and they were told to return another day. Another respondent followed the instructions about returning but still did not meet with anyone: she was told “last Friday to be at the office by 8:00 today because they only take a few per day and that she’d be put on the list for today, but was not able to see anyone.”

Several respondents said that they had come in four or more times trying to apply, but each time they were unsuccessful. One elaborated saying, “I’ve had four previous visits in a run-around to try to get Food Stamps and medical benefits now that I am pregnant and off my parents’ insurance.” And another commented, “I’ve been here 10 or 20 times in past 10 months. I had to fill out another application, got a new caseworker, but never got my appointment in the mail.”

Respondents already receiving benefits have to come repeatedly to the office to comply with program requirements. One recipient said that it was necessary to return “every month to see my caseworker about continuing to receive benefits”; another TANF recipient reported coming in to discuss her situation because she had been in the “Work Experience program, then switched to the Work First program and was told not to turn down any jobs, and was now working at a job she wasn’t comfortable with.” A Food Stamps recipient reported that although her case had been reactivated, this was the fourth visit trying to find out why she still was not receiving them. The respondent said she was “told that the supervisor needed to enter them into computer.” Two respondents noted that they had come in before for the same paperwork; one because the “caseworker keeps switching” and the other because “the caseworker keeps her going back and forth with paperwork – she tries to call but can’t get through and she has to come in.”

Three-fifths of all respondents (60.4%) reported that they felt they accomplished what they came for that day; one-third (34.0%) felt they did not; and 5.6% said they did not know (Chart 6).



Response to this question, however, varied depending on the purpose of the visit. For those who came for only one of the following purposes, 46% of those who came to apply (n=15) said they did not accomplish what they came for; 28.1% of those who came to turn in papers (n=32); and 37.5% of those who came for an appointment (n=9).

Respondents were invited to comment on accomplishing what they came to do. At offices with separate lines for tasks such as recertifying for Food Stamps or getting a replacement Link Card, respondents reported rapid service. For example, one Food Stamps recipient who came to recertify said, “ I was treated very well, it was very quick.” Another said, “I got everything done in two minutes.”

However, other Food Stamps customers were less satisfied with the service they received. One customer who came about problems said he was “hopeful but not confident” that the matter was resolved because it was the third visit in one week for the same problem. Another customer who had not received Food Stamps for the month of July successfully resolved the problem “only because I told them I wasn’t leaving the office until it was taken care of.” Two customers said they did not accomplish what they came for because their caseworkers were unavailable; one was told that the caseworker was on vacation and another was told the caseworker was at lunch at 10:30 A.M. Another reported that the “caseworker said my pay stubs weren’t good enough and he will call my employer and get back to me in seven working days.” Another respondent said the supervisor told him that “he would check into it but he didn’t have the computer on. He said he would check and call client.”

Customers who came in to apply for programs reported a variety of reasons they were unable to accomplish what they came to do. As noted above in the discussion about coming to the office for the same reason on a previous visit, respondents reported having been turned away without meeting with anyone. Two said they were told that they had arrived after the “cut off time” and would have to return the following day. Another respondent said, “I was told to come back Wednesday at 8 A.M. They’re all filled for today.” A respondent who “just had a newborn” commented, “I knew what I wanted—medical, Food Stamps, cash, if eligible.” She did not accomplish what she had hoped to “because she [the front desk worker] said there is no caseworker to see me. I must come back tomorrow with an appointment. I will need to find a babysitter again. I don’t understand.” Another respondent reported that he was told “to return with his elderly father who is 78.”

Of the respondents who came in to make an application and were not currently receiving Food Stamps, about one-half reported that they were assessed for Expedited Food Stamps¹⁵ on the day of their visit.

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.¹⁶

¹⁵ Expedited Food Stamps are also referred to by customers as Emergency Food Stamps.

¹⁶ 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.

Of the respondents there for new applications, 69% did not currently receive Food Stamps. Of these 58 respondents, 51.7% reported that they were not assessed for Expedited Food Stamps on the date of their visit; 37.9% said they were assessed; 10.4% said they did not know.

Some caveats must be kept in mind when reviewing data on responses to this question. Respondents expressed some uncertainty about being assessed for Expedited Food Stamps since they may or may not have been asked directly about them. The survey also questioned respondents whether they had been asked about income, rent, and utilities, initial screening questions for Expedited Food Stamps. Some respondents who reported that they had been asked these questions said either they did not know if they had been assessed for Expedited Food Stamps, or that they had not been assessed. Furthermore, 30% of respondents who came to make an application and were current food stamp recipients reported being assessed for Expedited Food Stamps.

In their comments to this question, respondents express a range of experiences, including a lack of information and confusion about Expedited Food Stamps. One respondent said that she was not asked about Expedited Food Stamps but that she “would have liked to know about it.” Someone else simply said, “I don’t know anything about it.” One woman commented that she did not obtain Food Stamps right away when she came in last week, and she “was trying to get emergency Food Stamps or any kind of Food Stamps.” And another respondent who wanted to apply for Expedited Food Stamps said the receptionist hurried her away and when she went back and asked, “the receptionist said I couldn’t get them.”

The information that several respondents reported receiving about Expedited Food Stamps from IDHS staff 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.” One woman said that she qualified and could “get emergency Food Stamps in three days and they will be \$13, because I have no kids at home.” Another respondent who had inquired about Expedited Food Stamps said, “She only told me that I had to be disabled according to Social Security.”

Of the 27 people wanting to make a new application for TANF, 2 began the application process.

Respondents made a range of comments about TANF application, indicating a high level of uncertainty about program requirements and receipt of information from IDHS staff that runs counter to policy. For example, one respondent said that her caseworker told her “to get cash again, I would have to come everyday for job search for 45 days.” Another respondent was told “to quit school and come to their job program.” Another respondent reported being told “to go to Job Club before receiving assistance, and to do 10 job searches a day.”

A number of respondents trying to apply for TANF reported that they did not obtain any useful information. One said, “I was told nothing, there were not enough workers to interview me.” Another was told that the “caseworker didn’t have my file, and I would have to come back.” Someone else said they were told, “Don’t wait in line next time, go up front and say you’re a TANF case.” Another said, “They didn’t tell me anything, said I have to get the papers before I can get anything.” Another was told by the receptionist, “my best bet would be to stay with someone because I couldn’t get the cash.”

None of the teens that came into the office were referred to Teen Parent Services or a teen specialist.

Teen Parent Services (TPS) 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 TPS 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.¹⁷

Of the eight teen respondents (under age 20), none reported having been referred to a teen specialist, referred to TPS, told they were required to go to TPS, or given brochures about TPS.¹⁸ 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.

Teens had a range of comments to the question of whether they were able to accomplish what they came to do. One respondent said, "I came last Friday to apply for cash, Food Stamps, and medical and was told to return today. Today I was given appointment for August 7." Another teen said that she completed her application and was told she will receive a letter in 3 weeks. Other teens made less progress on their cases: one said she was told at desk to come back Thursday since she lives with her aunt; another said, "They told me the worker was not here"; and a third teen reported that she was told she came too late and "they stop at 8:30." A pregnant teen said that she "finally got medical resolved." She said that she came four times in past two weeks; first she needed proof of pregnancy for the medical card, then she was told could not receive it because she was not on her parent's insurance, and she was told she needed proof of residence. However, she was able to enroll in Expedited Food Stamps about a week ago.

Teens applying for TANF were asked why they were seeking their own cash grant. One respondent said that she had been on her mother's Food Stamps and Medicaid until recently. She now lives separately from her mother; she works part-time but needs TANF too. Another teen said, "Last time they said that my aunt who I live with makes too much money. But my aunt doesn't want to provide for children that aren't hers, she has other expenses."

In commenting on why they were not applying for TANF, one teen said she did not want to apply "because the questions are even more intrusive and irrelevant, especially about the father of child, than they are for medical and Food Stamps." Another said she couldn't participate in the teen program because she did not have transportation.

Four of the eight teen respondents said they had been asked about the child's father; three said they felt the caseworker asked the question disrespectfully. Two teens specifically commented that they had not

¹⁷ 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, 14-12-05, PM 21-02-00, PM 21-03-00, PM 21-04-00, and PM 21-05-00.

¹⁸ 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 "Accessing TANF Assistance: A Survey of Low-Income Young Mothers in Chicago," Helene Marcy, Center for Impact Research, March 2002, <http://www.impactresearch.org/documents/chicagotanfreport.pdf>

been asked respectfully about the child's father.¹⁹ One said, "He died December fifteenth last year"; and another reported, "They were very rude, saying, 'Who is the guy you're pregnant by?' It's a place of business, they should be more professional."

Interpreter services are not uniformly offered to limited English persons as required by policy.

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 will be provided by IDHS. Policy also states that an application must not be delayed due to unavailability of an interpreter.²⁰

About one-half of the limited English group (13 of 28) completed the section of the survey about needs for interpreter services. Seven respondents reported that they did not need an interpreter because their caseworkers spoke Spanish. Six respondents reported receiving written materials in their language.

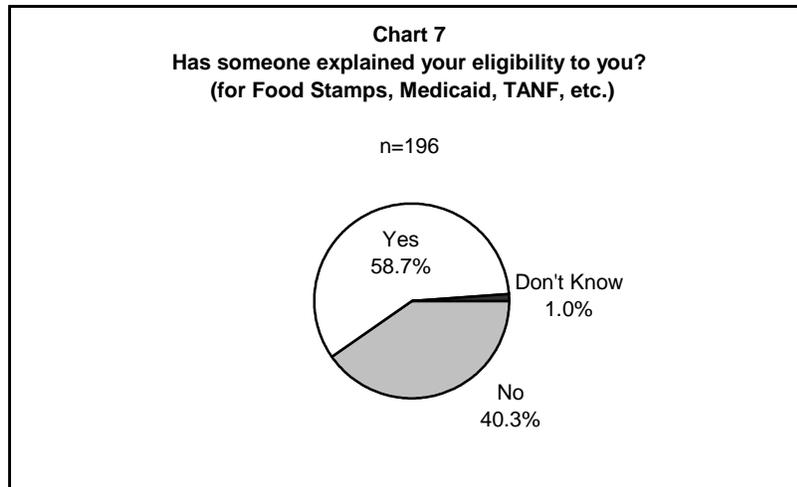
A Vietnamese-speaking respondent needed an interpreter and reported having taken her son out of school to assist her in the IDHS office. An 81-year-old woman who spoke Mandarin and needed an interpreter brought her adult daughter with her to interpret. One woman reported the staff being angry with her for not speaking English, and that a Spanish-speaking caseworker was not available: "Even inside no one spoke Spanish. They should have and they don't, and if they do they're not available."

Three-fifths of respondents reported that someone explained their eligibility for programs such as TANF, Food Stamps, and Medicaid to them (Chart 7). Most of those who had eligibility explained to them, said they understood what was communicated.

People reported learning about eligibility from a variety of sources in addition to IDHS, including family, friends, reading posters, the Internet, and shelter workers. Of 196 respondents, 58.7% reported that someone explained their eligibility to them; 40.3% said it hadn't been explained; and 1% did not know. The question did not specify whether this was explained to them in the past or on this visit. Of those who had their eligibility explained to them by IDHS, 95.7% reported understanding what was explained; 1 person did not (0.9%); and 6 did not know (3.4%).

¹⁹ These comments on the child support questions reflect findings reported in "Teen Parents and Welfare Reform in Illinois: A Public Policy Report." Teen parents find the paternity and child support questions particularly offensive; asking them effectively requires caseworker awareness of and sensitivity to issues related to adolescent development.

²⁰ Relevant IDHS Policy Manual references for limited English persons are: PM 22-13-00, PM 22-13-01, and PM 22-13-01-a.



Comments related to being explained programs and eligibility came up in different contexts during the interview. Several respondents explicitly commented that they felt programs were well explained to them by IDHS staff. One said, “I came in and was helped, they were very helpful, I was met each time by a Spanish-speaking worker.” A second satisfied respondent said, “Everything was explained very well.” Another said, “Today, everything was explained to me by the caseworker, which was not done before.” When seeking information about Medicaid, one respondent said, “The caseworker was rude on phone, but was helpful when face to face and explained medical card and spend down.”

Other respondents commented that their caseworkers did not adequately explain the programs to them. One noted, “The caseworker doesn’t explain any of that stuff. I meet all the requirements, no work, no job, no money.” One woman with four children said she needs TANF and does not understand why she cannot receive it. Another respondent with children also expressed uncertainty about eligibility, saying, “It is all confusing. Every office is different. What disqualifies you from keeping your benefits when you have children? The purpose is to help children.” A respondent whose Food Stamps had stopped was uncertain what to do and said, “My questions haven’t gotten answered, nobody calls back.” Another respondent was unable to understand because “they talk too fast for me.” A Food Stamps applicant said she was told that she would have to volunteer 20 hours a week and “they gave no reason, only a declaration.” One respondent said, “They don’t explain, for example, if you make X amount of money they don’t give you cash; it’s without explanation, the same goes for the medical card.”

The majority of respondents report understanding their eligibility for TANF, Food Stamps, and Medicaid.

Over one-half of respondents (51.5%) report understanding their eligibility for TANF; 77.6% report understanding Food Stamps eligibility; and 74.3% report understanding Medicaid eligibility. These figures do not vary significantly across sites.

Three-quarters of respondents said they knew how to obtain and keep benefits.

Of the 188 respondents who reported whether they knew how to obtain and keep the benefits they were eligible for, 77.1% said yes; 19.7% said no; and 3.2% did not know. Respondents reported that they obtained information about benefits in a variety of ways, including caseworkers, posted information, the Internet, word of mouth, and shelter caseworker.

In interpreting this finding, it must be kept in mind that comments throughout the survey suggest that some respondents who feel they are informed and understand eligibility and requirements may well lack information or be misinformed about program requirements. The respondents who said they did not know how to obtain and keep benefits reported a range of experiences. One simply said, “I don’t understand what I need to do to get benefits.” Another expressed confusion about Food Stamps and the Link card saying he had Food Stamps before the Link card was introduced and now is “not sure of new eligibility or procedures.” Another respondent said, “I read all the papers—they didn’t explain anything to me, not even how to use emergency Food Stamps.”

A couple of respondents commented specifically on using the Internet to obtain information about programs. One said she found the information on eligibility for all the programs on the Internet and commented, “It is a good resource with all the information I needed.” Another had obtained information from “the Internet, not here at the office. They [IDHS office staff] tell you you’re ineligible.”

A large number of respondents said the appeal and grievance process had not been explained to them.

IDHS Policy on the Grievance Process states that customers or their representative deserve to be treated with courtesy and respect. They have the right to file a complaint if they think they were not treated fairly.²¹ IDHS Policy on Appeal Rights and Fair Hearing states that it is the right of a person who applies for or receives benefits from the Department to be informed about the hearing process and their right to appeal and to receive a fair hearing.²²

Of the total sample, 41.4% of respondents said that the appeal and grievance process had been explained to them. This figure may capture people who knew about it from sources besides IDHS. Including other respondents who noted in their comments that they knew about the appeal and grievance process indicates that 50.3% of the sample knew about it from some source, and this may be higher.

This question elicited a range of comments. One woman said she was informed on today’s visit by the security guard. Another respondent said she was going to call the Public Benefits Hotline to ask about the process: “I would really like to register a grievance about the disrespectful way they are handling my case and about them wasting my time telling me to bring in all the wrong papers at first.” Another respondent reported having an upcoming grievance hearing regarding a caseworker and supervisor.

²¹ Relevant IDHS Policy Manual reference on the Grievance Process is: PM 01-01-06.

²² Relevant IDHS Policy Manual reference on Appeal Rights and Fair Hearing is PM 01-07-00.

The mean length of a visit to the IDHS on the day of the survey was about 2 hours, although this varied by purpose of visit and by site.

The mean length of all respondents' visits was 1 hour and 54 minutes. This varied among sites with a 1 hour and 17 minutes at the Northern office as the shortest mean length of visit and 2 hours and 36 minutes at the Englewood office as the longest. For the total sample, the shortest visit was 4 minutes and the longest was 7 hours and 40 minutes.

However, the length of a visit also varied depending on the visit's purpose (Table 2). The local office's specific scheduling practices also can affect the length of a visit. Furthermore, it must be kept in mind that many of the respondents already had come to the office and waited on one or more previous occasions for the same reason they were at the office for on the day of the survey.

**Table 2
Length of Visit**

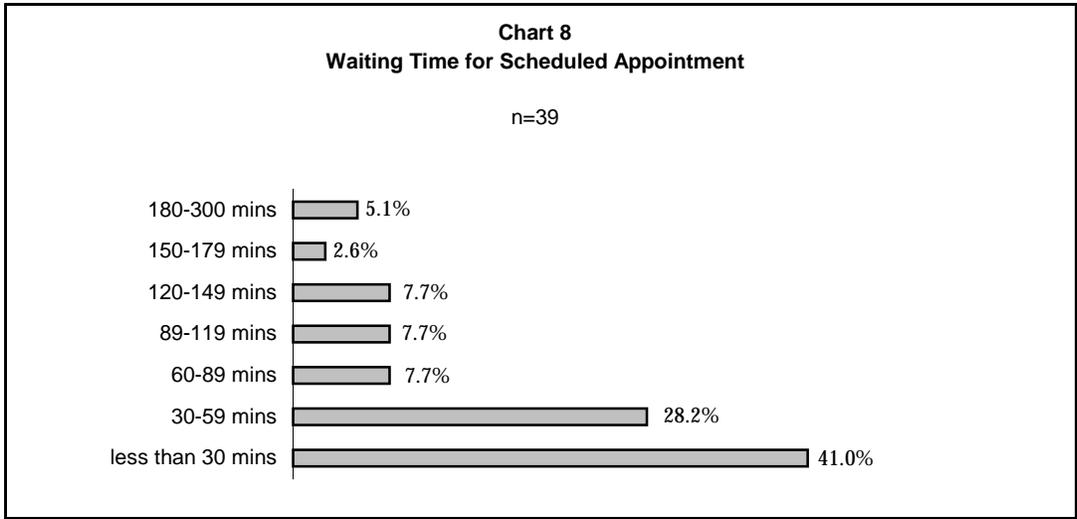
	Application Only n=15 mean 2 hrs 1 min	Appointment Only n=9 mean 2 hrs 29 min	Leave Papers Only n=32 mean 1 hr 36 min	Appointment & Leave Papers n=25 mean 1 hr 42 min
Less than 30 minutes	26.7%	11.1%	12.5%	8.0%
30 min to 1 hour	33.3%	11.1%	15.6%	16.0%
1 to 2 hours	6.7%	11.1%	43.8%	44.0%
2 to 3 hours	33.3%	33.3%	15.6%	12.0%
More than 3 hours	0.0%	33.3%	12.5%	20.0%

Respondents were not asked specifically to comment on their length of visit. However, it came up in other contexts, particularly if the wait was long and the customer felt it had not yielded productive results.

Of the respondents who came to the local office for an appointment, over two-thirds did not see someone at the time they were scheduled (Chart 8). The mean waiting time for those with an appointment was 50 minutes.

Of the respondents who came in for an appointment, 68.3% did not meet with someone at the scheduled time. The mean waiting time was 50 minutes with a minimum of 0 (no waiting time) and a maximum of 5 hours. Of the five offices, the shortest mean waiting time for a scheduled appointment was 20 minutes at the Northern office (n=4); and the West Suburban office had the longest at 64 minutes (n=8).²³

²³ The mean waiting times for a scheduled appointment at the other offices were: 56 minutes at Englewood (n=10); 51 minutes at Roseland (n=8); and 41 minutes at Northwest (n=9).



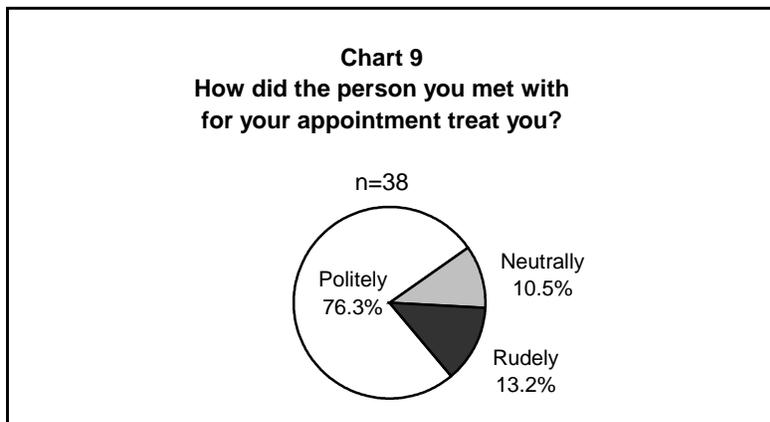
Several of the Local Office Administrators (LOA) noted that the Visitor Information System—a tool that all of the five offices have for notifying caseworkers electronically when their clients arrive for appointments—has reduced the waiting time for appointments. If a customer already has a caseworker, their information is entered in the Visitor Information System when they arrive. It notifies the caseworker with a message saying who is here and why. The caseworker is supposed to come out and acknowledge the customer within 20 minutes of receiving the message, although they might not be able to provide service at that time. The system is also designed to alert a supervisor if a customer is waiting more than 30 minutes for an appointment. One LOA, whose office had recently begun using the Visitor Information System was enthusiastic about the results: “It’s an enormous improvement and has streamlined the amount of time people wait. Before someone had to walk back and forth among the caseworkers and clients to say who was here and what they wanted.”

However, the Visitor Information System is not a panacea for long waiting times, staffing shortages, and excessively heavy caseloads. For example, one respondent with an appointment for renewal of Food Stamps was kept in the caseworker’s office for two hours because the caseworker was taking phone calls from other clients. This customer concluded, “There aren’t enough people working at the office and they shouldn’t have laid off workers.”

All but one respondent were able to meet with someone for their appointment, and nearly all of these respondents met with their caseworker. Over three-quarters of respondents with appointments reported being treated politely (Chart 9).

The only respondent with an appointment who did not meet with someone was told the caseworker was out of town. Of the remaining respondents, 97.5% met with their caseworker and one met with the supervisor.

A large majority of respondents (76.3%) reported polite treatment. Responses on this question varied by site, with polite treatment reported by 100% of respondents at West Suburban (n=7); 77.8% at Northwest (n=9); 75% at Northern (n=4); 70% at Englewood (n=10); and 62.5% at Roseland (n=8).



Several respondents commented on the polite treatment received during the appointment. One noted, “I was very nicely treated and the caseworker was helpful. She volunteered information to help me along.”

However, as might be expected, respondents who reported being treated rudely during their appointment had more to say about the exchange than those who felt they had been treated politely or neutrally. For example, one respondent said that she was told “she would be better off getting a job, and must go to job club even before they find out if she is eligible.” She was also told “they didn’t give childcare or carfare unless she was working.” Another respondent said that the caseworker “doesn’t encourage me to do anything good. She says you need to work, you can’t go to school, your cash is going to run out. It is just bad. She frowns at me. It is uncomfortable. It makes me not want to come here.” A third respondent noted that the caseworker she met with “was busy, and didn’t want to do too much, but was going to try to do something.”

A large majority of respondents did not have problems obtaining the documents they were required to bring in and were able to keep either copies or originals of their documents.

Of 88 respondents, 80 (90.9%) reported that it was not a problem to obtain the required documents or papers. All but one of the 49 respondents (98%) reported that they were able to keep either copies or originals of their documents. Many respondents reported that their caseworker or other office staff routinely made copies of the original documents.²⁴

A few respondents commented on the specific problems they had with bringing in required papers. One noted she had difficulties because she never received the Food Stamps renewal letter. Another said, “They changed their minds on what they needed. They told me a different set of papers originally and

²⁴ Although the IDHS Worker’s Action Guide instructs workers to “give the original to the applicant and place the copy in the case record,” it is unclear as to who is responsible for making the copy (WAG 02-07-02).

when I brought them in they said they didn't need any of those." Another said, "I told the receptionist that I couldn't get the medical paperwork they need because it's hard to obtain it from the doctor."

Respondent's comments about copies of documents being made by the office indicate uneven practices regarding the originals and copies of documents. Several respondents said that the caseworker automatically makes copies and returns the originals. Others said that they bring in their originals along with copies to hand in. Other respondents noted difficulty in obtaining copies and retaining the originals. One said that although she wanted to keep the originals, the supervisor took them and gave her the copies." One respondent said she was told, "Either wait until 2:30 P.M. or make copies, they gave me the option." Another said that she "could not wait for copies, I had to leave, my ride was here. I was very frustrated and am filing a grievance."

Over three-quarters of the respondents gave their papers to their caseworker or another staff person. One-ninth respondents reported they were bringing in paperwork that had been lost by IDHS.

Of the 84 respondents who came to the office to hand in papers, 76.2% gave their papers to a staff person. Of this group, 85.9% gave their papers to their caseworker; 2.4% reported being asked to leave their papers in a drop box. One-ninth of 72 respondents reported they were bringing in paperwork they had brought before but had been lost by IDHS. The mean length of visit for 32 respondents who came only to turn in papers was 1 hours and 36 minute.

Although most respondents reported having no problems handing in their papers and that they were not handing in papers that had been previously lost or misplaced by IDHS, several did have problems with documents. One said that the office had "lost the copy of the temporary custody papers for her nephew's TANF, and it took a lot to clear up." Someone else said that she had brought in the documents and gave them to a social worker, but two weeks later she was told that she had not brought them. Two respondents said their case was closed and they had to reapply because their documents had been lost by IDHS.

Two-thirds of respondents were able to talk to their caseworker about papers or documents they were bringing in, although this varied by site.

The majority of respondents were able to talk to their caseworker about papers or documents they were bringing in, although this varied by site. Of the respondents who came to turn in paperwork or documents, 67.1% were able to talk with their caseworker about their papers. An additional 4.7% spoke to a supervisor, and 23.5% spoke with the receptionist. The proportion who spoke with their caseworker varied by site, with over 90% at Roseland and West Suburban, and 47.6% at Englewood.

Further information is needed regarding whether customers are instructed by IDHS staff that they have to wait in order to personally give their documents to their caseworker; or whether customers wait to hand documents to caseworkers because they consider this the best way to reduce the chances that documents will be lost or misplaced by IDHS.

Over two-thirds of respondents reported being treated politely by the person who discussed their paperwork with them, one-quarter reported neutral treatment, and a small number reported rude treatment.

Of the 79 respondents who answered this question, 68.4% said they received polite treatment from the person who discussed their paperwork; 25.3% reported neutral treatment; and 6.3% reported rude treatment.

The respondents who reported rude treatment had a variety of comments. One said, “The caseworker was bossy, had an attitude. He told me not to ask any questions, I should just answer and sign where he says. He said he didn’t need certain papers, snapped at me.” Another respondent said she was told she could have called, but this didn’t work because the phones weren’t working.” A third respondent said the staff person was “hollering at me, telling me to sit down.” When she asked how long it would take, she was told “however long it takes.”

STAFFING AND FACILITIES AT THE FIVE SURVEY SITES

Issues of staffing and caseloads were discussed in interviews with Local Office Administrators (LOA) of four of the Chicago area IDHS offices that were included in survey. IDHS also provided information on allocated and actual (on-board) staffing as of August 2003 for the five offices where the survey was conducted (Table 3).

**Table 3
Staffing Levels in the Survey Sites (IDHS Local Offices)**

	Englewood	Northern	Northwest	Roseland	W. Suburban	Total
Allocated caseworkers	108	115	64	89	88	464
On-board caseworkers	92	71	52	70	69	354
Allocated supervisors	10	11	11	9	8	49
On-board supervisors	10	4	8	7	6	35

One LOA noted that during the eight-month period of January to August 2003, the office’s caseload increased from 32,000 to 39,000 but there was no expansion of staff. Another LOA said its office staff of 45 handles a caseload of 24,000. At a third office, the LOA said that on a typical day there are 95 staff members for a caseload of 34,000. The staffing shortage also affects supervision of caseworkers, for example one LOA reported a single supervisor overseeing up to 8,800 cases of 12 caseworkers.

One of the five offices in the study uses the Total Integration System, in which all client service representatives are trained to do all tasks for the different programs. This staffing approach increases the number of staff available to do intake work. Each one is supposed to handle at least two new applications in the morning and work the rest of the day on their active caseload that runs from 700 to 740 cases. The LOA of this office said, “This generalist system is keeping us afloat but caseworkers need a lot of knowledge to run the different programs.”

Although the local offices work broadly within the framework of “first come, first served,” each one adopts modifications to cope with the volume of customers coming through the doors each day. In the words of one LOA, “Every office handles this differently.” For example, a supervisor at one office explained: “Doors open at 8 A.M. to get people situated and seated so they’re ready when caseworkers arrive at 8:30.” They line up as the receptionist calls out names to separate into groups the people who had come the day before, people there for replacement Link Cards; and people who are there for single Food Stamps. Another LOA said their office opens its doors at 7:30 because “the line can stretch sometimes all the way down the block.”

In handling customers who come in without an appointment, one LOA said a top priority is screening for Expedited Food Stamps. She described the “overflow” process for people who were not able to see an intake worker on the day of their visit as a method whereby they can be “first come” a subsequent day by coming earlier in the morning. The goal is to ensure they are screened for Expedited Food Stamps within three days.²⁵ If they are not eligible for Expedited Foods Stamps, they are scheduled for an appointment within 14 days. Another LOA said at her office, “when there are long lines, we give people the option of waiting or coming back. We tell them, there are x number of people ahead of them and they can wait and see if they can meet with someone, or if come back early tomorrow, and be at the front of the line.” This LOA added that on many days the waiting room fills up, and “if it gets to standing room, I have my managers come to the front and manually ask people what they have come in for.”

The survey team arrived before opening time at each of the five offices (8 AM at all but West Suburban which opens at 8:30 A.M.). A heavy summer storm broke over Chicago on the morning of the survey. All of the offices showed consideration to their customers by opening their doors early so that people lined up outside could either wait in the vestibule or come into the reception area.

At 7:30 A.M., for all the sites the mean number of adults waiting in line was 39, with a maximum of 50 and minimum of 27. Many people had arrived before 7 AM to ensure a place near the front of the line. By 8:30 A.M., the mean number of adults in the waiting area was 72, with a maximum of 105 and minimum of 30. The number of adults in the waiting room stayed at a mean of 64, 69, and 68 at 9, 10, and 11 AM; at noon it dropped to a mean of 46. The mean number of people waiting in line to speak with the receptionist was 15, 9, and 12 at 8:30, 9, and 10 A.M. Staff at one of the sites commented that the line was shorter than usual and attributed it to the heavy rain.

The Roseland Local Office Administrator explained her office’s arrangements for persons with disabilities: they are seated in front near the receptionist and are not required to stand in line. There are also some office areas not far from the entrance where caseworkers they can meet so they don’t have to make their way to the back of the office.

The survey team leader at each of the local office survey sites answered a set of questions about the facilities and posted information. For three of the sites, the overall impression of the office’s facilities was “excellent”; it was “okay” for two sites; and none of the sites received the rating of “poor.” The restrooms at two of the sites were “excellent” and “okay” at three sites.

Two site leaders reported seeing the names of intake workers and supervisors posted. One site reported seeing the names of caseworkers posted.

²⁵ However, IDHS policy requires that customers be screened for Expedited Food Stamps the day they come to apply or the following day.

The following mandated posters were prominently displayed: Client Right to Service (discrimination prohibited) at one office; Food Assistance Program (federal) at three offices; Food Stamps Expedited Service at three offices; Food Stamps Rights Poster (federal) at four offices; Do You Have a Grievance at four offices; Justice for All (federal) at four offices. The poster, Food Stamps, the Quinones Lawsuit was not seen at any of the offices.

Interpreter services information was posted at four of the five sites. All four had information about the availability of interpreters in Spanish, Polish, Russian, Bosnian, Arabic, Vietnamese, and Chinese. One site also had information on interpreters for the hearing impaired. Offices also display a range of other posters. For example, one of the offices has three bulletin boards with information about the WIC program, mental health services, substance abuse services, the domestic violence helpline, child support regulations, and job training programs.

Only one site was noted as having special facilities for children. It was a playroom that was locked. The security guard informed the team leader that the LOA had ordered it to remain closed until further notice. Four offices reported that clients are allowed to bring in food to feed their children, but at one office this was a new policy instituted just a few months ago. At the office where food or drinks are not allowed, some children were eating anyway.

Survey team leaders noted additional observations on the site, staff, or events during the day of the survey. Generally they found IDHS staff courteous and helpful in facilitating access to customers for the survey. One comment related to traffic at the site, “Business appeared to be unusually slow today. The security guard told me it was slow because of the bad weather.”

There were several comments on how offices attempted to handle the volume of customers in the waiting area. One site leader noted, “The staff admitted many problems because of staffing shortage. The staff seems committed to clients, but can’t properly serve them with this shortage.” One of the sites had “one seating area designated for new appointments only. A client told us that this line gets cut off at 8:30 A.M., the security guard had informed the client about this.” At another site, “there is only one line for the receptionist, so people coming in with simple questions or requests, e.g., a broken Link card, have to wait in the long line with everyone.”

RECOMMENDATIONS

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

- ▶ 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.

Putting this recommendation into operation would make certain that office practices are in accord with policies that state that any person wanting assistance has the right to apply during normal working hours; that customers have the right to apply on the first day they come to do so; and that an application must be accepted even if it has only a name, address, and signature.²⁶

- ▶ Screen customers who come to apply for Food Stamps for Expedited Food Stamps on the day that they come in to the office.

This recommendation addresses the federal law that requires that an application for Food Stamps must be taken on the date the customer first comes to apply. It also addresses the policy that requires all Food Stamps applications to be reviewed so that those who qualify for expedited services are interviewed within the timeframe set out in the policy (the day of application or the next workday).²⁷

- ▶ Ensure that all pregnant and parenting teens under the age of twenty that come to IDHS offices are referred to Teen Parent Services.

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.²⁸ Furthermore, the complex eligibility rules applying to teen parents as well as the need to connect teens with specialized resources indicates a need for a Teen Specialist intake caseworker who would be trained in providing services for teens. Training should also cover issues pertaining to adolescent development and interacting with teen parents.

- ▶ 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

²⁶ 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.

²⁷ 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.

²⁸ 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, 14-12-05, PM 21-02-00, PM 21-03-00, PM 21-04-00, and PM 21-05-00.

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.

This recommendation addresses the policies stating that limited English persons have a right to effective interpreter services at no charge, that customers do not use a child as a translator, and that an application must not be delayed due to unavailability of an interpreter.²⁹

Other recommendations for 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.

This recommendation addresses difficulties arising when customers do not have a receipt for documents that have been brought or mailed to the IDHS office and are subsequently lost or misplaced by IDHS. It also might help to make deposit of documents in the drop box a more viable option and thereby reduce the amount of time customers bringing in documents wait so they can hand-deliver documents to caseworkers.

- ▶ 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.

²⁹ Relevant IDHS Policy Manual references for limited English persons are: PM 22-13-00, PM 22-13-01, and PM 22-13-01-a.

CONCLUSION

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 and state 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 law and policy 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 and state 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.³⁰ Testimony presented at this 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 IDHS policies so that all Illinois families have access to the services and benefits for which they are eligible.

³⁰ Hearing held in Chicago on October 15, 2003.