

We Are Listening to You!

Kathy Huey
Change Management Team
Leader

One of the most powerful pieces of the "USDA Service Center Skills: Working Together for Customers" training is a collection of the barriers to working together across agency

lines and providing quality customer service. These barriers, identified by training participants, are shared with the leaders of the National Food and Agriculture Council (FAC), State FAC, the Service Center Implementation Team (SCIT), Customer Service

continued on next page

We Asked Service Center Customers "How Are We Serving You?"...Here's What They Said

Len Covello
Quality Customer Service Team
Leader

Editor's Note: In the August Service Center News, we started covering highlights of the 1997 National Customer Service Survey preliminary results. In the next two months, we will cover more of the interesting findings of this survey. In this issue, we will cover customer visits to service centers and customer sources of program information.

The results of the 1997 Service Center customer survey are in and they show an overall positive view of service delivery and several indicators of what matters to customers. In early February of this year, we sent out

surveys to Service Center customers from randomly selected samples of producers and Single Family Housing (SFH) borrowers. This included separate, randomly selected samples of minority program recipients.

Customer Visits to the Service Centers

No change in time spent getting to and doing business at Service Centers -- The vast majority of customers spent the same amount of time in 1996 as in 1995 getting to the Service Centers and conducting their business.

Fewer trips to Service Centers. Some of our customers expect fewer visits to the Service Center in 1997 compared to 1996. Over 30 percent of our producers

continued on next page

Service Center News On Web

Tired of waiting for your copy of the *Service Center News* to find its way to your desk? Now you can read it on the new Service Center web site at: <http://www.usda.gov/servicecenter/>. Just click on the "Information" button and you can choose to download the *Service Center News*
continued on page 3

Service Quality Feedback System Pilot Planned

Efforts continue to prepare for pilot testing of the Service Quality Feedback System this month. The objective is to

continued on page 3



Customer Survey...

continued from page 1

and approximately 70 percent of borrowers anticipate at least one visit less in 1997 than 1996.

Visits to customers not preferred -- Very few of our customers think Service Center staff should come to their home or farm to conduct some business. Only 3 percent of producers suggested this as one alternative way to conduct business; approximately 5 percent of borrowers thought it was an acceptable alternative.

“No more than 1 percent of our customers identify the Internet as a reliable source of program information.”

Customer suggestions for getting help when office closed and staff not there -- Although over 94 percent of our customers said that a staff person was always there to help when they came to the Service Center in 1996, they did have ideas for making the office or staff even more available. They suggested: customer appointments, schedule some time when office is always open and staffed, publicize a schedule of office hours and staff availability, provide general program requirements, and provide forms and materials.

Sources of Program Information

Customers value newsletters -- Approximately 60 percent of producers rely on newsletters as a primary source of information for program participation decisions. Also, nearly 70 percent of producers believe newsletters are actually one of the most helpful ways to deliver program information to

them. Although few borrowers (less than 3 percent) currently rely on newsletters for this information, at least 36 percent think this would be a helpful way to receive program information.

Producers rely on Service Center employees -- Approximately 50 percent of producers say they also rely on Service Center employees for program participation information and about 40 percent say it is a helpful way of getting such information.

SFH borrowers rely on friends and neighbors -- Over 50 percent of SFH borrowers say they rely on friends and neighbors for information on making their decision to participate. But only about 10 percent say relying on friends and neighbors is the most helpful way to get needed information.

Internet is not a popular source of program information -- No more than 1 percent of our

continued on page 5

We're Listening...

continued from page 1

Working Team, and the Business Process Reengineering Teams. Using information reported by service center employees about barriers to working together and providing quality customer service, the teams develop processes to remove these same barriers.

The following are the most significant barriers reported by service center employees.

Mission Clarity

Employees are unsure and concerned about the future of the

three agencies and exactly where they are headed.

We understand that an organization's strategic direction is the focus for all of its energy and resources. It can also provide insight for employees about what is important and, in times of significant change, it can also provide an element of comfort if it is clear and long term. The Service Center Implementation Team is working diligently to ensure that employees have a clear picture of the future. A USDA Service Center Strategic Plan is currently in draft and should be distributed to employees in the near future. This plan is a five-year working document of USDA's operating principles, services, and products through the year 2002.

Customer Service

Employees have told us that their understanding of their agencies' strategic plan doesn't seem to sufficiently drive customer service excellence. The Service Center Strategic Plan focuses clearly on the Secretary's vision of USDA as a "place where our customers are going to know and want to know about a broad variety of things" and that "our first responsibility is the effective delivery of our programs to our customers." In addition, the SCIT's Customer Service, Service Center Customer Interface Teams, and the USDA Customer Service-Program Delivery Team are devoted to reengineering the way we do business and providing extraordinary customer service.

Communication

Employees have told us in various ways that communication between agencies in most collocations is generally dysfunctional.

continued on page 4

A Wonderful Place To Work!

Christina Coulon
NRCS State Public Affairs
Specialist -- Michigan

Perhaps the remote region of Michigan's Upper Peninsula is the last place you'd expect to find a Service Center on the cutting edge. It could be that limited resources forced creativity, cooperation in an isolated area made sense, or just simply because it is a good idea. Whatever the reason, the Marquette Interagency Conservation Center (MICC) has existed for two years and the people working there couldn't be happier. Cyndy Rankinen, Administrative Assistant for the Marquette County Soil and Water Conservation District, sums up the sentiment felt by those who work there stating, "It's a wonderful place to work!"

The building housing the Conservation Center itself is unique. Owned by the Hiawatha National Forest Service, the Center is situated on seven acres along Lake Superior in Marquette. Inside, the paneled walls highlight the region's various woods such as red oak, yellow birch, sugar maple, white pine, American elm, black ash, black walnut, and black cherry. However, even more important than the physical surroundings of the

Conservation Center is the partnership taking place inside. Five agencies, including the local, State and Federal levels, are housed in the Conservation Center. These agencies include the Natural Resources Conservation Service, Forest Service, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Marquette County Soil and Water Conservation District, and the Michigan Department of Agriculture. Other entities located near MICC include Northern Michigan University, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the

Michigan Department of Natural Resources.

The advantages of so many agencies co-located include sharing of expertise, equipment, and ideas, and cost-effectiveness. But, the most significant advantage of

working together is the improved communication and enhanced relationships developed between the different agencies. These benefits provide the foundation of the USDA Service Center initiative, with MICC taking it to the next level. Conservation Center personnel used such terms as "diverse, one-stop shopping, growth, shared expertise, combined resources, melting pot, and comprehensive" to describe their service. Dennis Robinson, Soil Scientist with the Michigan Department of Agriculture says, "Of all the offices where I have been located in the past twenty years (State,

Federal, university, and local government), this facility offers the best opportunity for shared expertise and professional growth. A tremendous potential exists here for interagency cooperation in serving the public and the resources."

As we move into the next century of conservation, cooperative efforts such as those exemplified by the Marquette Interagency Conservation Center will be the norm. By looking ahead the MICC is providing a template for the success of conservation agencies. Mike LaPointe, Resource Conservationist for the Natural Resources Conservation Service, brings this point home by stating, "The diversity of staff, along with their expertise, definitely provides the customer with quality 'one-stop' service."

Is there something that you feel *your* service center does particularly well?

Drop us a line and let us know about it. Send your story to: Fred Jacobs, USDA, National FAC, *Service Center News*, Stop 0199, Room 4422-S, Washington, DC 20250-0199, or e-mail: fjacobs@wdc.fsa.usda.gov. Or, give me a call with your story idea at 202-690-0177.

Web Site...

continued from page 1

as a .PDF file or read it as text.

There's an abundance of other information at the service center web site relating to all facets of service center implementation, so visit our new web site soon.

Feedback...

continued from page 1

establish a customer defined, trustworthy service quality feedback system for 1998. The cornerstone of the effort is a self-mailer customer comment card distributed via a combination free-standing/wall-mounted take-one rack. The pilot test States include Arizona, Indiana, and Connecticut, and possibly Rhode Island, South Carolina, or Florida.

We're Listening...

continued from page 2

They claim that they see very little cooperation or coordination between offices at the National, State, and county level. Employees at col-locations do not seem to want to communicate with those from other agencies in the same Service Center.

We have listened to what these employees are saying and are exploring ways to ensure a more cooperative and coordinated approach to communicating within all the service center partner agencies. State FAC Chairs have identified communications coordinators in their States to ensure that communications products such as the monthly *Service Center News*, fact sheets, press releases, etc., reach all service center employees. A Service Center web site at: <http://www.usda.gov/servicecenter/> has also been established, where employees can read *Service Center News*, as well as other important service center information.

Training

The need for cross-training in order for employees to cooperate more fully and coordinate activities more effectively has consistently been identified as a barrier throughout the process. The following are cross training needs reported by service center employees: Lack of employee understanding of what other agency employees do, on a daily basis, negatively impacts on the quality of service; lack of cooperation and coordination between agencies frustrates external customers; and lack of employee understanding of other agency operations results in fear, mistrust, and turf problems between agencies.

This serious problem has not

only been identified by employees during the Service Center Skills Building training but also by the Business Process Reengineering teams. In addition to developing and implementing cross-training on programs administered by the three service center agencies, the Change Management/Training and Business Process Reengineering Teams have also identified many other training needs for service center employees.

Consistency and Flexibility

Employees indicated there are major inconsistencies in service and operations-related goals, policies, and procedures. Scheduling time, for example, is different for each agency because of their diverse services. This can create confusion for external customers and give them the impression that agencies are not customer-focused. The manager, on the other hand, perceives procedures to be service-oriented. Employees also reported customers feel that policies and procedures are too rigid and that the agency requires too much paperwork.

The FAC, with the help of the SCIT, is working hard to overcome these inconsistencies. The USDA Customer Service - Program Delivery BPR and the USDA Customer Interface BPR teams have recommended ways to improve our service to the customer. The Administrative Management Team has recommended ways to create common administrative processes for all service center agencies.

Information Technology

Employees have repeatedly told us that a common computing environment is critical to attaining the service center goals of one-stop shopping, quality customer service, cost reduction, partnership, and service

center implementation overall.

Changes on this order of magnitude are never quick and easy. We can assure you, however, that changes are coming. The LAN/WAN/Voice installations are currently underway and the Data Sharing Team is identifying requirements and developing plans for the next phase of work.

It becomes obvious after listening to service center employees for a while that we can easily identify barriers -- everyone is very willing to let us know what the problems are as service center implementation progresses. The most challenging aspect of barrier identification, however, has been to develop a system to get the information to the people who can do something about it. Throughout this collection effort, service center employees have expressed frustration over the sense that these issues have been raised before but no observable action was or has been taken to fix them.

For that reason, we have worked with the facilitators and coordinators to create a process where each facilitator will share "barriers" flip charts with their coordinator. Identified barriers, that can be addressed at the local level, are given to the State FAC; however, all barriers -- including local -- will be sent to headquarters for resolution through the SCIT and the National FAC.

We work to first resolve those barriers that are repeatedly identified as posing difficulty for our employees and customers. We will report on the progress of what is being done to resolve these issues in the *Service Center News* and via the new service

continued on page 5

We're Listening...

continued from page 4

center home page: <http://www.usda.gov/servicecenter/> under Customer Service and Change Management.

Let us know how we are doing with our communication effort and keep your comments and suggestions coming.

August Service Center News Corrections

The August issue of the *Service Center News* should have listed Sylvia Rainford, instead of Jody Christiansen, as the Communications Coordinator for Minnesota. Likewise, Dwain Phillips, instead of LouAnn Walker should have been listed for Oklahoma. The position in Pennsylvania is currently vacant.

The August *Service Center News* was issue number 11. The Service Center homepage version was corrected, but the paper copies were incorrectly listed as

issue number 12. We apologize for any confusion that may have resulted from these inadvertencies.

Customer Survey...

continued from page 2

customers identify the Internet as a reliable source of program information. A majority of our customers do not think the Internet would be useful. Only about 5 percent of producers and 10 percent of SFH borrowers view the Internet as helpful.

State of Our Union

Guest Editorial

by **G. Lance Smith**

Rural Development, Lubbock, Texas - American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE)

I picked the title, "State of The Union," for this guest editorial because as I talk to many of the employees in the partner agencies, I realize that many do not know what role the unions and the National Union Coordination Council (UCC) play in USDA Service Center Implementation.

In August 1995, the USDA National Food and Agriculture Committee signed a decision memorandum from the Service Center Implementation Team (SCIT), which invited the unions to actively participate in the USDA Service Center implementation process, so as to assure that labor issues and the field delivery of our programs were addressed at the local level and also to provide timely field input that would contribute to the implementation process. The memorandum also recognized the unions role in exercising their rights to bargain on service center issues. The unions are represented in at least ten states where union representatives, in addition to their regular duties, provide input to the National FAC Executive Officer. In this role, they provide a valuable communications link between field employees and national level USDA managers. The UCC also conducts monthly conference calls, participates on other partnership councils, and works closely with the SCIT. Recently, union representatives worked on each of the business process reengineering (BPR) teams to insure that the implementation plans were coordinated with union activities at USDA Service Centers. Team members have also participated on many of the past USDA BPR and customer service groups that were active since October 1995.

In April of this year, the UCC met personally with the Deputy Secretary of Agriculture Richard Rominger and members of the National FAC to discuss the current Service Center efforts. At that

continued on page 6

Unions...

continued from page 5

meeting, the UCC presented a proposed plan to implement the Service Centers nationwide that met the Secretary's vision of a "One Stop" Service Center. The plan also followed the directives of Vice President Gore's National Performance Review initiatives.

In July of this year, the UCC met with Secretary of Agriculture, Dan Glickman. At this meeting, the UCC's plan for implementing the Service Centers nationwide was also presented to the Secretary. The council spent well over an hour with the Secretary, who told the UCC members at the meeting, that "this was the most enjoyable hour that he had spent on this subject."

The Union Coordination Council Members

Don Gearing, Farm Service Agency (FSA) -- Washington, D.C., American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME)

G. Lance Smith, Rural Development -- Texas, AFGE

Teresa Bonaduce, FSA -- Arkansas, AFGE

Tom Rogers, FSA -- Montana, AFGE

Vicki Weiser, Rural Development -- Oregon, National Federation of Federal Employees (NFFE)

Gloria Bieker, FSA -- Kansas, AFGE

Tom Mazerbo, Rural Development -- New York, AFGE

Clyde Evans, FSA — New Jersey, AFGE

Sandy Smith, Rural Development — Washington, NFFE

Mary Moore, FSA — Colorado, AFGE

Mark Huntington, FSA — Oklahoma, AFGE

I don't think that I exaggerate when I say that the USDA employees who make up the union ranks are at the forefront of the "One USDA" service center implementation effort. They are bonded by the principles that are at the very core of the service center effort — fair, consistent, and equitable

treatment for all employees from all partner agencies. They serve as a living, working model of the cooperation and team work which must exist for the service center effort to succeed. The UCC has set the example that is best summed up by a quote from the President and Vice Presidents's *Blair House Papers* that states, "when labor and management work as partners, everybody wins."



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