

Customer Service Workshop

Facilitator's Materials List

1. Facilitator's Manual
2. Participant's Manuals
3. Sign In Sheet
4. Participant Certificates
5. Chart Paper (sticky back)
6. Markers
7. Laptop
8. Overhead Projector
9. Electronic Copies:
 - a. Workshop PowerPoint
 - b. "Johnny The Bagger" PowerPoint

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Letter from the Executive Director

To all Family and Children's Services Employees:

Our mission is to provide the resources and support that help people build better lives. How we do this identifies how well we provide this vital service to the citizens of the State of Mississippi.

Good Customer Service- What is it?

It is service that each of us delivers in a way that:

- ❖ Makes customers feel important
- ❖ Makes customers feel heard
- ❖ Makes customers feel respected
- ❖ Responds to the need to the greatest degree possible
- ❖ Empowers customers through honest and trustworthy interactions

The main idea is that each of us customer should leave with a feeling of being well taken care of.

Good Customer Service applies to all of us!

Good customer service needs to come from all of us at all levels- internal and external. In each act of service, we need to apply the measures I listed above.

Good Customer Service even when we are saying no!

This is the time when listening, acknowledging, and responding in a caring way are the most important. We can't always deliver what people ask for or need, but we can choose to work with them in a way that says we care and are doing everything we can to respond.

Excellent Customer Service requires courage and innovation!

- ❖ We not only need to properly greet people, interact and be courteous, but we also need to be problem solvers.
- ❖ We need to listen, gather more information, and listen some more.
- ❖ We need to be experts in resources to solve problems- who to call to obtain. what our customers need.
- ❖ We need to be masters of "follow through" and do what we say we will do.
- ❖ We need to care for ourselves- to help ensure we are at our best.

Thank you for everything you do to ensure excellent customer service in the State of Mississippi!

Richard A. Berry
Mississippi Department of Human Services
Family & Children's Services

Objectives

This workshop will provide you with skills and tools which will empower you to:

- Recognize the value of quality customer service in child welfare
- Treat others with respect and value coworkers, community partners and resource parents as valuable members of the team
- Handle conflict with customers, should it arise
- Understand the importance of returning phone calls and communicating with customers in a timely and reliable manner
- Provide optimal service delivery to resource families thus leading to the recruitment of more families and the retention of current families
- Offer resource families the necessary support that they may provide quality care for our children

Session 1:

Customer Service Basics



**“Someone calling themselves
a customer says they want
something called service.”**

Introduction

MDHS Family & Children's Services believes.....

- People are innately good and want to do their best work.
- Building relationships in our workplaces, with our customers, and in our lives is a primary goal
- We always have CHOICES in how we act and respond
- Everyone can make a difference, no matter what their job or position in life.
- Lifelong learning, creative thinking, and the gift of appreciation help us to be our best selves
- Enthusiasm is contagious
- We can all find meaning in our work and we are all here to serve

Every day you provide a valuable public service that:

- Benefits families and children
- Demonstrates high standards of personal integrity and professionalism
- Gains the trust and respect of our customers and co-workers

You're in a noble profession! Be proud of what you do and where you work.

At the Mississippi Department of Human Services, we work to create a culture centered on customer service that includes not only our external customers but our staff as well!

This handbook contains our customer service standards, customer service principles, and staff resources.

We hope this information, along with this customer service workshop, will provide each of you with a variety of valuable customer service tools.

Overview of the “Role of Customer Service”

Large Group Verbal Activity – Allow a few minutes for participants to give verbal responses to the following questions.

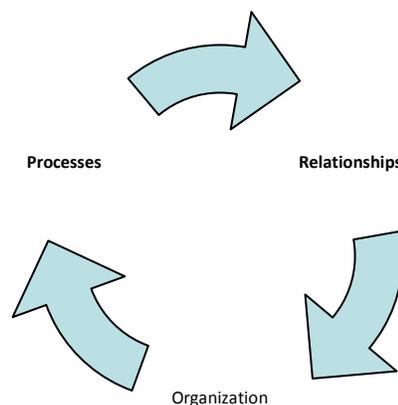
1. What is good customer service?
2. Give an example of good customer service you received from anywhere – a store, a restaurant, etc.
3. What made it memorable?

Show Video/Power Point: “Johnny the Bagger”

MDHS defines customer service as: “The customers’ perception of the way they are treated, the responsiveness to the needs identified and the extent to which they are engaged and valued in teamwork to meet the needs of children and families.”

In order to become a **PRO** (model from the National Resource Center for Recruitment and Retention of Foster and Adoptive Parents at AdoptUSKids) at servicing families and children effectively, you must practice the three core competencies of good customer service:

- 1. P – Processes**
 - a. Timely response and relevant services
 - b. Consistency and efficiency
- 2. R – Relationships**
 - a. Building mutual trust and respect
 - b. Family engagement
 - c. Creating partnerships
- 3. O – Organization**
 - a. Customer service is a strategic priority and everybody’s business
 - b. A culture that responds to staff & families’ needs



Planning for Quality Customer Service Implementation

So the question we must ask ourselves is: How do we implement a process for quality customer service?

1. Establish the vision for good customer service.
2. Assess the quality of our current customer service techniques and make recommendations for improvement.
3. Plan and design ways to enhance customer service quality for internal and external customers.
4. Pilot customer service improvements while striving for full scale improvements.
5. Consider ways to sustain your improvements.

*“Slow and steady
wins the race”*

Who Are Our Customers?

In order to decide how to best provide quality service to our customers, we must know who our customers are, because every child welfare employee interacts with many different types of customers on a daily basis. When defining who our customers are, we must consider both external and internal customers. *External Customer Service* is the way we treat the people we do business with and *Internal Customer Service* is the way we treat one another.

Large Group Activity – Verbal Activity

Have the group provide examples of external customers. Write their responses on chart paper and post around the training room. Next, have the group provide examples of internal customers. Write their responses on chart paper and post around the training room. Potential examples can be found below if the group needs help getting started.

Who are the customers in child welfare?

A. External Customers

1. Anyone we do business with including:

- Clients (children and birth families)
- Resource Families (during recruitment)
- Collateral Contacts
- Other Professionals (teachers, therapists, private -- agency staff)
- Community Stakeholders
- Legislators/elected officials
- Law enforcement
- Courts/Judges
- Media

b. Internal Customers

A. Anyone within the Agency including:

- Regional Directors
- Supervisors
- Field Staff/Resource Staff
- Foster Care Reviewers
- Office Staff (clerks, case aids, etc.)
- Resource Families (once licensed)

Mississippi’s Customer Service Principles

These principles can be referred to as:

The 5 R’s

Responsive: Reacting in a timely manner to meet responsibilities to address identified needs.

Reliable: Being honest and trustworthy in all interactions with customers and meeting commitments

Respectful: Interacting with customers in a way that makes them feel valued and promotes dignity and self-worth

Relationships: Valuing the role of every family, child, and staff member and working together as a team to achieve positive outcomes

Recognition: Showing appreciation for the contributions of each team member openly and frequently

Small Group Activity (35 minutes)

Divide the participants into 5 small groups. Give each group one sheet of chart paper and assign the group one of the customer service principles. Give each group 10 minutes to come up with a brief list of “what this looks like in practice” and “what is unacceptable.” Have a spokesperson from each small group present their list to the larger group. Post chart paper around training space.

Principle	What this looks like in practice	What is unacceptable
Responsive		
Reliable		
Respectful		
Relationships		
Recognition		

We are Responsive! Don't make excuses, instead adopt the motto: "It's my job."
Exceed expectations.

What *Responsiveness* looks like in practice:

- Phone calls are returned in a timely manner
- Worker meets the customer's needs- makes sure needs (if appropriate) are met
- When worker's don't know the answer, they say they don't know, but will find out (and do, and then answer later)
- Worker answers person's questions or tries to find the answer; tells the customer, "I will find out for you"

We are Reliable! Be honest. Make sure "everybody knows what everybody knows."

What *Reliability* looks like in practice:

- Resource parents are given all known information about a child placed in their home
- All available information is shared and done so in a timely and trustworthy manner
- Be honest with potential resource families about characteristics and needs of children in care
- Complete work timely and accurately (making referrals, mailing notices, etc)
- Workers meet commitments (they do what they say they will do)

We show Respect! Every customer who interacts with us is entitled to fair and courteous treatment. Respect, concern, courtesy, and responsiveness in meeting the needs of our customers are the key to all interactions.

What *Respect* looks like in practice:

- Use a warm/polite tone of voice
- Stay calm when dealing with angry customers
- Do not use first names unless given permission from the customer
- Workers pay attention to the customer
- Ensure that both internal and external customers have the opportunity to be heard

We build Relationships! We always use good people skills such as smiling and using a pleasant voice. Make customers feel important and use the “golden rule” of treating others as you would want to be treated. Allow the customer to feel heard.

What building *Relationships* looks like in practice:

- All parties are involved in decisions on the front end- not simply informed about the decisions
- Customers are included in the decision making and gathering of information as valued members of the team
- Workers coordinate with the family, they adapt and negotiate when needed
- All team members can voice a clear understanding of their own roles and responsibilities

Points to remember:

- Welcome your customers
- Use their name
- Acknowledge their emotions and empathize
- Reassure customers you can help
- Take care of their needs
- Thank customers and leave them with a positive comment. For example:
 - “Thank you for bringing in all this information; it helps out when you keep me so informed.”
 - “Thank you for bringing the kids here to visit their family. I can help more families when I don’t have to spend so much time on the road.”
 - “Thank you for being on time”

We Recognize Excellent Customer Service Skills! Everyone needs to know when their work is appreciated and effective. Take the time to:

- Watch for opportunities to recognize people doing well
- Watch for opportunities to model excellent customer service skills
- Share your compliments

What *Recognition* looks like in practice:

- County workers can explain and show value for what resource workers do and resource workers can explain and show value for what county workers do
- Worker demonstrates energy in her work and expresses positive attitudes toward her job
- Appreciation for what each person is doing is frequently expressed

Points to remember:

Maintain a positive attitude at all times. How you think about customers is how you will treat them.

- The number one thing that really matters to customers is how they are treated
- Keep your focus on what you can do to solve a customer's problem
- Exhibit a "glad I could help" attitude when dealing with customers
- Smile

It is important to remember that many of our customers are in crisis when they come into our office or call us on the phone. In order to be effective, we need to respect their assessment of the crisis.

Take the time to listen carefully and understand their viewpoint. Even if you have listened to the same type of crisis or complaint time and time again, each customer deserves to be heard.

We can't always fix everything, but keeping a few "customer service tools" handy can help in a pinch.

Delivering Quality Customer Service: L.A.S.T

Can't always think fast? Remember to use "L.A.S.T"!

- | | |
|-----------|---|
| Listen | Listening is one of the most important- and underrated- skills we possess. It's one thing to hear what someone is saying. It's another to truly listen. Don't interrupt! |
| Apologize | It's hard to apologize- especially if something isn't your fault! But, it comes with the territory and can help customers who may be angry or upset. |
| Solve | Solve the problem by working together- the important thing to demonstrate is that you, personally, are going to take responsibility to work with your customer to try and resolve whatever you can. |
| Thank | Leave your customer with the feeling that their problem (and your shared experience of solving it) has been worth it. |

Using constructive words that are solution-based rather than blame-based is another valuable customer service tool.

Large Group Activity (Verbal) – State each of the “Instead of Saying” phrases below and ask participants to think of alternate “How About Saying” phrases. Write the participants responses on chart paper. Give the following “How About Saying” phrases as examples if needed.

Instead of Saying....

I need (want) you to...

You have to...

I'll try.

We don't do that here.

Sorry.

I can't do that.

How About saying...

Would you be able to?

Are you willing?

I will personally look into your situation.

Let me give you a number...

I apologize for... (be specific)

I'm unable to because... (give a reason)

Delivering Quality Customer Service: Pay Close Attention

Quality Customer Service Means Paying Attention To:

- **Personal Space**- This is the distance that feels comfortable between you and another person. If another person approaches you and invades your personal space, you automatically move back without thought. You are uncomfortable. Leave adequate distance between you and your customer. Adequate space is important to making customers feel secure and unthreatened.
- **Posture**- Slumping in a chair or leaning against a wall while interacting with a client are sure signs you are not interested in him/her. Your pose or posture should express attention, friendliness, and openness. Lean forward, face the customer, and nod to let them know that you are interested.
- **Observation**- Notice how your customer behaves and what he/she reacts positively to while you are providing services.

We must keep in mind that seemingly small, interpersonal actions mean a great deal in the area of customer service. They can change customer perceptions and ultimately affect the success of your customer service efforts.

Notes:

Phone & Email Etiquette

It's not *what* you say - It's *how* you say it. The moment you pick up a telephone, body language and non-verbal communication disappears and your tone of voice becomes dominant. Almost the entire message you project to the customer over the phone is derived from tone of voice and attitude.

For example:

- A flat tone of voice says to the customer, "I don't like my job and would rather be somewhere else"
- Slow pitch and presentation say, "I am sad and lonely- don't bother me."
- A high pitch, rapid voice says, "I'm enthusiastic and excited!"
- A loud voice says, "I'm angry and aggressive."

Phone Etiquette The telephone may be the first and last place some customers come into contact with an organization or company. Being telephone friendly is one of the least expensive ways to deliver better customer service.

Answering the Phone How a company answers the phone depicts how they treat customers and employees. The correct phrase said in the right order and in a positive tone leaves a good impression and builds a successful agency-client relationship.

Pick up the phone in three rings. More than three rings signals chaos in your office and possible inattentiveness of the agency.

Greet the caller with a phrase such as, "Good Morning/Afternoon." Good manners demonstrate that you respect the caller.

Give your name, i.e. "Hi, my name is Emma." This is a courtesy that serves to personalize the customer service experience as well as allow the customer to hold you accountable for your level of service. The customer now has a point of reference and someone to contact when he/she calls back.

Ask the customer if or how you can help. Asking to help tells demonstrates to the customer that you are there to assist him solve any issues. This also leaves the customer with a positive impression.

Combine the above pointers and you have a good example:

"Good morning. Thanks for calling Family and Children's Services, my name is Emma, how may I help you?"

The greeting is crucial. It sets the tone and style of entire interaction.

Customer Service: Troubleshooting

Some things which may upset a customer are simply unavoidable. Here are some tips on how to best handle these situations.

Putting a Customer on Hold

Ask the customer if you can put them on hold. Wait for them to say “yes” or “no” and then explain it will only be for a short period of time. Explain to customers why you are putting them on hold. Thank customers for holding.

Transferring a Call

Ask the customer if he minds being transferred; wait for him to say “yes” or “no” and explain why they are being transferred and to whom. **Example: “Would you mind holding for a moment while I transfer your call to Veronica’s extension?”**

Taking a Message

Explain your co-workers absence in a positive light but do not be too specific. Explain that your co-worker is in a meeting, conference, briefing, or training. Do not say he/she is gravely ill, too hung over to come to work, never called in today, can’t be found, that you do not know where he/she is, or that he or she “was just here.”

If you are able, give a reasonable estimate of when the co-worker will return. If you are unsure, give the caller the name of the worker’s supervisor in case he or she needs to call back.

Offer to help the caller, take a message, or transfer to another staff member. If a co-worker is on vacation and will not return to the office for some time, it is permissible to say that he or she is on vacation. However, avoid details such as, “Raymond is at the beach and I am sure he is having a great time.” While such details may seem innocuous and even humorous, they give the wrong impression to those seeking services.

Ending the Call

A good customer service representative ends the call on a positive note, repeating any actions agreed to be taken and what is going to be done to help or serve the customer. **Example: “Thank you for bringing this to our attention. I will be forwarding your concerns to my supervisor.”**

Quality Customer Service: E-Mail

Respond to your business emails quickly!

Answering your business emails promptly should be a priority for all businesses. Not only is email an important communication line with your customers, it is often used by them to gauge that you are trustworthy.

If a customer sends you an e-mail with a simple question, and you delay responding to him, what does that say about the rest of your agency? The customer should never feel like he is not a priority as a result of our inefficiency.

Business e-mail should be answered within one business day. **No exceptions.**

If you really want your customer service to shine, you should consider answering your business e-mail a minimum of twice per day with a 12 hour interval.

Be cautious of addressing sensitive issues via email. Tone of voice and body language are not included in electronic messages. Others may easily misinterpret your tone, message, or intent through e-mail, especially when difficult topics are being addressed.

Large Group Activity: Have 3 participants come to the front of the room. Have one be the 'clerk,' one be the 'worker,' and the other be the 'customer.' Have the 'staff' participants model excellent customer service for the rest of the group. The 'customer' is to play the role of a potential resource parent calling the Agency to get an update on the status of her resource application.

The Scenario: Someone calls the office inquiring about the status of their resource application. The caller cannot remember the name of her Resource Specialist. The resource workers are **all** out of the office, so the clerk transfers the call to a county worker to assist the prospective resource parent.

Notes:

Delivering Quality Customer Service: First Impressions

Making a Good First Impression

The reality is we prefer doing business with people we like and trust. The impressions that we make are key to developing trust and confidence with the customer. As the old saying goes, “You will never get a second chance to make a first impression.” This is why the first impression is extremely important and can set the tone for all future interactions.

Many times you may be meeting a customer for the first time as you are assessing a report of abuse or neglect. Choosing a positive attitude and making a good first impression may enhance your working relationship with the customer, should services be required.

Here are some ways of creating positive impressions, some of which have already been discussed:

- Thoughtfulness in meeting a customer’s needs
- Personal responsibility for the customer
- Quick problem solving for the customer
- Offering immediate assistance
- Friendliness
- Using the customer’s name in conversation
- Pleasant tone of voice
- Polite and courteous manners
- Neatness
- A genuine smile

Here are some factors that create a negative impression:

- Making the customer wait
- Not answering the phone promptly
- Not saying “please” and/or “thank you”
- Speaking loudly or condescendingly to customers or colleagues
- Making faces, frowning, acting distant, not smiling
- Looking disheveled or like you do not care about your appearance
- A poor handshake
- Focusing on another task while addressing or servicing a customer

Remember, impressions stay with those you meet, especially customers, and once registered, negative impressions are difficult to overcome.

Delivering Quality Customer Service: Do's and Don'ts

Ten Major Do's and Don'ts of Customer Service

Every day, customer service representatives face situations when what they say makes or breaks a service interaction. Below are ten phrases that should never be used because they frustrate and anger customers, especially clients and resource families.

- “No.”
- “I don’t know.”
- “That’s not my job/That’s not my unit”
- “You are right- that is bad”
- “Calm down”
- “I’m busy right now”
- “Call me back”
- “That’s not my fault”
- “You’ll need to take that up with my supervisor”
- “You want it by when?”

“No” No one likes the word “no.” It is de-motivating, discouraging, and disinteresting. You will hear this word throughout your life as a customer and as a service provider. “No” is equivalent to “bad service.” “No” is easy, cheap, unproductive, and negative- it means failure. Unfortunately, “no” is the word we most often hear when a new idea, new request, or new concept is introduced. Admittedly, there are times when you will have to say “no,” but focus on what you can do for the customer; accentuate the positive and not the negatives of the situation. It is better to say, “What I can do is...” and demonstrate that you care and want to provide quality service despite your current limitations.

“I don’t know” Good service means never saying, “I don’t know.” When a customer hears, “I don’t know,” they hear, “I don’t feel like finding the information you need.” It is better to say, “I’ll find out” or “Let me look into this and get back to you ASAP.”

“That’s not my job/That’s not my unit” When a customer asks you to do something that you do not know how to do or do not have the authority to do, become a catalyst by leading the customer to the person or department who can help him/her solve the problem. It is better to say, “Let me transfer you to the person who can immediately help you with this problem.”

“You’re right- that is bad” Many inexperienced customer service representatives think that by empathizing with the customer’s plight, he/she will win the customer over rather than actually do something to solve the customer’s problem. If a customer expresses annoyance or frustration, do not make it worse by commiserating with the customer; rather, seek to solve the issue.

Likewise, it does not do the Agency any good to criticize co-workers or other units within the Agency to the customers. All interested parties end up looking unprofessional and inept. Try your best to accommodate the customer. Do not promise anything you cannot deliver but do try to serve the customer well. It is better to say, “I understand your frustration; let’s see how we can solve this problem.”

“Calm down” When customers are upset or angry let them vent (within reason), and they will eventually calm down. Telling them to “calm down” is belittling, and often serves only to infuriate them further. It is better to say, “I’m sorry.” This is one of the ideal phrases for customer service- it helps to placate the angriest of customers and allows you to begin the process of solving a customer complaint or request and meet the client half way.

Apologizing does not mean that you agree with the customer, but it is a way to validate the customer’s feelings and move beyond the emotion of the moment.

“I’m busy right now” It is not easy to juggle customers. You are often helping one customer when another calls or visits. Asking a customer to be patient or politely asking them to wait is very different from putting them off and telling him/her that you are too busy to help. Leaving the customer to wait or be put on hold are two of the mortal sins of customer service. “Being too busy” is equivalent to saying that you do not care and that the customer is not important. Let the customer know that he/she is important and that you are aware of his/her presence. It is better to say, “I’ll be with you in one moment” or “please hold and I’ll be right with you.”

“Call me back” This expression conveys little interest on the part of the customer relation’s employee for the needs and wants of the customer. You should always call the customer back because you want their business and are responsive to their requests. Being proactive is part of good customer service.

“That’s not my fault” If an angry customer accuses you of creating a problem, right or wrong, the natural reaction is to defend oneself. However, this is not the best course of action. The customer has a problem that needs to be solved. By resisting the need to defend yourself and focusing on the needs of the customer, you can resolve the problem faster with less stress and confrontation. It is better to say, “Let’s see what we can do about this issue.”

“You need to take that up with my supervisor” This cliché of bad customer service has angered and frustrated customers for decades. Clients often ask for things outside the scope of your work or authority- maybe even outside the services provided by your agency. While passing off these requests to your manager is a tempting option, it is better if you attempt to solve the problem yourself or go to your supervisor directly to find a solution. You become a service hero for the customer and the supervisor. It is better to say, “Let me find that out for you.”

“You want it by when?” Clients often make unrealistic demands, especially when it comes to time. Your first reaction may be annoyance and you may want to make a snide or sarcastic comment. However, the best approach is to hold off on displaying a negative attitude and making a poor impression. It is better to say, “I will call you right back after I find out if that is feasible.”

Delivering Quality Customer Service: Helpful Reminders for Polite and Friendly Responses and Unsatisfied Customers

Wrong Approach	Polite Alternative
“I don’t know.”	“I’ll find out”
“No.”	“What I can do is…”
“That’s not my job.”	“Let me find the right person who can help you”
“You’re right- this is bad.”	“I understand your frustrations”
“That’s not my fault.”	“Let’s see what we can do about this”
“You want it by when?”	“I’ll try my best”
“Calm down.”	“I’m sorry”
“I’m busy right now.”	“I’ll be with you in just a moment”
“Call me back.”	“I will call you back, what is your telephone number?”

Communicating with the Unsatisfied Customer

How many times have you as a customer run into the problem of excuses? You have a problem and the sales person, technician, or customer service representative is making lame excuses. Namely:

- The computer system was down half the day
- It's the clerk's fault
- I never got the message
- That's out of my control
- I just do as I'm told
- That's just the way it is

Sometimes it feels as if nothing is anybody's fault or is in anybody's department. This is poor customer service. Good customer service means accountability, responsibility, and taking action to satisfy the customer.

Delivering Quality Customer Service: Helpful Reminders for Polite and Friendly Responses and Unsatisfied Customers cont.

Having discussed the importance of knowing how the customer feels and what NOT to say, let's address the notion of how to communicate with an unsatisfied customer.

If your customer is unsatisfied (understandably or not), you will have to use some of the many techniques of customer services to win their support and continued loyalty. When coming into contact with a customer, communicating with him/her, or analyzing problems, do not forget to use the following methods or qualities of the customer service professional.

Methods for Dealing with the Unsatisfied Customer

Listen: It is of primary importance when dealing with an unsatisfied customer to listen attentively to his/her complaint, frustration, or grievance. Be patient, attentive, and friendly.

Express your apologies:

“We are sorry for this mistake/problem.”

“We are terribly sorry for this inconvenience.”

“How can we work together to solve this problem?”

“I can imagine how frustrated you must feel.”

Do not argue and do not interrupt: This will only worsen the situation, especially if the customer is angry. Let the client speak before you try to discuss the issue.

Do not lose your self-control: If you remain calm, clients will calm down.

Point out the facts: Listen carefully- and write everything down. Do not make any comments until the customer is finished talking.

Admit the problem: If you can suggest a solution, do it. If not, tell the customer what actions you will take and what actions you will follow. Never make the mistake of promising something you are not able to accomplish.

Involve the customer in problem solving: Suggest to the customer alternative solutions, if they exist. Customers appreciate the opportunity to choose the ways (methods) of problem solving.

Notes:

Excuses, Excuses...

We all give lame excuses from time to time when we don't know how to meet the needs of a customer or just don't have the energy to address their concerns at that moment.

Large Group Verbal Activity – Have group answer aloud

What are some lame excuses you have given in the past or have heard other workers use?

Large Group Activity – Role Play (20 minutes) SEE ATTACHMENT A

Let's practice good customer service with internal and external customers!

Although the previous internal scenario can be viewed more in the category of 'conflict resolution,' it is important to understand that the way employees treat each other is also a very important aspect of customer service. Not only is it important to "treat colleagues with respect," per the NASW Code of Ethics, but treating our colleagues with respect and coming to a resolution peacefully also allows us to practice how we will interact with our clients in frustrating situations. NASW Code of Ethics, 2.01 'Respect' under "1.05 Cultural Competence and Social Diversity."

Session 2:

Quality Customer Service & Resource Families



Delivering Quality Customer Service: Why We Say “Resource Families”

Foster families. Adoptive families. Relatives who provide kinship care. MDHS and an increasing number of agencies nationwide, refer to these individuals as “resource parents.” This term refers to anyone who provides a safe, stable, loving home for a child when the child’s birth parents are not able to do so.

Why use this term? We need to think more broadly about potential families and children’s needs. All kinds of families are needed for children in foster care. Sometimes children need families who can play multiple roles over time. Instead of dividing families into categories (such as foster or adoptive) we are choosing to use a term that leaves the possibilities as open as possible.

MDHS certifies every family (including relatives) to provide both foster care and adoptive services for children through a single licensure process. Should a foster child become freed for adoption, when appropriate, this policy grants the opportunity for the resource family to establish legally permanent connections with the child or children in a timely manner.

Notes:

Delivering Quality Customer Service: Data Analysis

What are Resource Families saying about the Quality of Customer Service from MDHS?

During on a review of Mississippi Foster Care Services Assessments completed October 13, 2009, resource families were asked about their interactions and experiences with MDHS staff, many noted issues related to:

- Confusion of roles/responsibilities after placement regarding support of resource families
- Confusion of roles/responsibilities of COS, COR, Resource Workers, Private Agency Workers
- Inconsistent licensing practices from region to region
- Toll free adoption hotline answered by voicemail
- Resource parents feeling like babysitters
- Follow up to inquiries --initial contact-- being impersonal (example: mailing letters/packets rather than calling)
- Lack of respect to resource family by county staff
- Continual mismatch of child/family (families being encouraged to take children outside of the age range they feel comfortable with, larger sibling groups than they feel comfortable with, children with behavior issues they are not comfortable with, etc.)
- Lack of communication regarding placement process
- Workers often do not know the children they are placing with a family (and often do not seek and/or share additional information about the children early in the placement)
- Tension between county workers and resource workers (and sometimes private agency workers)
- Children placed without needed medication and no information is given to the resource family on how to obtain the prescription
- Workers withhold (or downplay) important information about a child's behaviors for fear of resource family's rejection of the placement
- Resource families not feeling a part of the team/valued; sometimes invited to court, Family Team Meetings, etc. but often do not feel engaged
- Delays in board payments
- Delays in initial clothing allowances
- Issues with travel reimbursement

Questions Raised by this Data

Large Group Activity (Group Discussion) – Read the following questions aloud to the participants. Give the group 4-5 minutes to discuss each question aloud.

- When children first come in to custody, it is often impossible for a worker to know detailed information about a child immediately. What is the process of gaining needed information? How is this information shared with resource families and in what time frames?
- Do workers omit or downplay certain information about a child’s behaviors or special needs for fear a family may not accept the much needed placement?
- Is there a delay in getting psychological/medical/mental health assessments and screenings completed?
- What is the availability and quality of therapeutic care within the Region? Statewide?
- Do county workers routinely review the resource family’s home study **prior** to placing a child in the home to ensure an appropriate match has been made? If no, how do we ensure matches between resource families and foster children are appropriate?

Notes:

Viewing Resource Families as Partners

Resource Families as MVPs

Resource parents should be viewed as some of the most valuable players (MVPs) on the child welfare team. When staff is empowered to include resource families as team members, resource families are empowered to include birth families as part of the team, which empowers birth families to care for their children.

Empowering staff to include resource families as team members



Empowers resource families to include birth families as part of the team



Empowers birth families to care for their children appropriately

Notes:

Resource Families: Partners, Not Employees

A common assumption people make is that resource families are employees of the agency that supervises them (either DHS, a private agency, or both). This is understandable, since on the surface of things, resource parents might seem to fit the definition of an employee- someone hired to perform a job in exchange for financial compensation. After all, once these families undergo the interviews and scrutiny of the licensing process and have children placed in their homes, resource parents receive a board payment check each month. And, like other DHS employees, resource parents are bound by the same expectations of protecting the clients' confidential information, are expected to work with birth family, therapists, teachers, and MDHS staff to meet the needs of the children in their home.

Even though resource parenting is a job with specific duties, the idea of resource parents as agency employees does not hold water. The money these families receive each month is not wages for their "work" but a partial reimbursement that enables them to meet the needs of the children in their care. This is underscored by the fact that as a rule, state and federal governments do not consider monthly foster care reimbursements as taxable income (NFPA, 2007). A few other characteristics that make resource parents different from other agency employees include:

- They do not get benefits received by agency employees (e.g. health insurance, paid time off and sick days, worker's compensation, unemployment benefits, pension, etc.)
- They are always on the job, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

But if resource parents aren't employees, what are they?

The answer, of course, is partners: people who join with others to pursue a common interest or goal. In their case- and ours- that common goal is the welfare of children and their birth families. If we explain things well enough in marketing materials, orientations, and pre-service training, resource parents enter into partnership with our agency voluntarily and fully-informed about the various roles they will play, which include one or more of the following:

1. Caring for and nurturing children in foster care until they can be reunited with their parents
2. Working as reunification partners with birth families (i.e., engaging in shared parenting and maintaining connections)
3. Serving as members of the team: working closely with MDHS to ensure the child's safety and well-being
4. Becoming a permanent family for the child, if reunification isn't possible (i.e., engaging in concurrent planning)

When you add all of this up- the hours, the pay, and the benefits (or lack thereof), the multiple and complex roles they play- it is clear that resource families make a remarkable commitment when they decide to join in partnership with MDHS.

To support resource families and fulfill their side of the partnership, MDHS should:

- Ensure that all staff members understand the connection between the overall success of the Agency and the Agency's ability to attract, train, support, and retain qualified resource families.
- Apply family-centered principles of partnership when interacting with resource families:
 - Everyone desires respect
 - Everyone needs to be heard
 - Everyone has strengths
 - Judgments can wait
 - Partners share power
 - Partnership is a process

The Core of Concurrent Planning

Resource families are critical partners in pursuing all of the possible permanency goals for children in care:

- Resource families play the central role in preserving family ties, supporting children during separations, and coaching birth families to enable reunification.
- About 60% of children adopted from foster care are adopted by their resource family (AFCARS Report 12).
- After children themselves, resource families are the best source for child-specific recruiting. They can help us in identifying important support people in a child's life who could provide a permanent placement.

Building Relationships with Resource Families

- **Get to know the resource families** who care for the children in your custody. Be sure that you understand what foster, adoptive, and kinship families do, and make it clear to them that you understand the importance of their role. One way to get to know a few things about resource families is to read their home study in MACWIS.
- **Be friendly to resource families.** Model positive, respectful interactions with resource families when you see them in the building, at meetings, in public, and especially when in their home.
- **Be available to speak with families upon request.** Front line workers should be responsible for most exchanges with resource families and for building the trust that is necessary for a successful working relationship. However, it can be reassuring to both workers and resource families to know that supervisors are always available if outside brainstorming is needed or to help problem solve a specific situation. At the same time, supervisors should avoid over-involvement- if a supervisor is too involved, a direct worker can be disempowered.
- **Give out your contact information.** Any time you have contact with a foster, adoptive, or kinship family, give them your contact information so they can reach you directly for help if necessary.
- **Consider resource families in all you do,** from writing policy to writing a memo. Include the foster, adoptive, and kinship family perspective in all materials you produce, all speeches you give, all meetings you have with those you supervise, and any time you interact with the community.

Resource Families as Recruiters

Working in collaboration with resource parents to increase recruitment should improve retention as well:

- Numerous studies have found that retention is significantly affected by how valued resource parents feel and how much they are treated like partners by their agencies (cited in Rhodes et al., 2001; Rodger et al., 2006; NRCSNA, 2003). Creatively involving resource parents in an agency's efforts to find and maintain other resource parents can build a collaborative, mutually respectful relationship.
- Support by other resource parents also plays a crucial role in resource parents' decision to continue fostering (Seaberg & Harrigan, 1999). While you involve resource parents in recruitment, they are able to establish supportive relationships with each other from the very beginning.
- Sharing experiences
- Providing parts of pre-service and ongoing trainings
- Following- up with new resource family applicants with an in-person visit or phone call
- Organizing support groups or foster parent associations
- Organizing recognition/appreciation efforts and events
- Providing individualized mentoring for new resource parents

Satisfied resource parents are the single best tool for recruitment. This statement is worth repeating – ***your best recruiters are your current foster, adoptive, and kinship parents.***

- One state reported in a federal survey that more than 50% of its successful resource parent recruiters are referred by other resource parents, compared to a 10% recruitment rate for general recruiting (USDHHS, 2002).
- Another study of 650 resource parents found that only 21% had found out about fostering through media sources, while 58.5% did so because of the connections they had with other resource parents or children in foster care (Rodger, Cummings, & Leschied, 2006).

Celebrating Diversity

Federal law and best practice dictate that agencies should diligently recruit potential foster and adoptive families who reflect the ethnic and racial diversity of children for whom homes are needed (P.L. 104-188).

The Multiethnic Placement Act (MEPA)

The following information was taken from an article entitled “Overview of the Multiethnic Placement Act (MEPA)” by Joan Heifetz Hollinger. Joan Heifetz Hollinger has also written, A Guide to the Multiethnic Placement Act of 1994 as amended by the Interethnic Provisions of 1996 (ABA Center on Children and the Law, 1998).

MEPA is one of the laws aimed at removing barriers to permanency for children in the child welfare system. Studies have shown that African American and other minority children are disproportionately represented in out-of-home care and wait longer for permanent homes.

The specific intentions of MEPA are to:

- Decrease the length of time children wait to be adopted
- Facilitate the recruitment and retention of resource parents who can meet the needs of children awaiting placement
- Eliminate discrimination on the basis of race, color, or national origin of the child or prospective resource family

MEPA – Agency Requirements:

- The agency is prohibited from delaying or denying a child’s foster care or adoptive placement on the basis of the child’s or prospective resource parent’s race, color, or national origin
- The agency is prohibited from denying to any individual the opportunity to become a resource parent on the basis of the prospective resource parents’ or the child’s race, color, or national origin
- The agency must diligently recruit resource and adoptive parents who reflect the racial and ethnic diversity of the children in need of such homes.

MEPA requires decisions to be on a case-by-case basis and in the best interest of the individual child. Joan Heifetz Hollinger provides the following example:

In a case involving an older child whose consent to a proposed adoption is required and who has lived exclusively with caregivers who share his racial background, it is not unlawful for the agency to attempt to comply with the child's request for a same-race placement. By contrast, in a case involving a younger child who has been emotionally harmed by ethnic slurs and bullying at her school, the agency should not assume that only a caregiver from the same ethnic background could help her deal with this situation. Although this child has a specific need based on her ethnicity, it is a need that can be taken care of by many different prospective parents, not just by someone with the same ethnic background.

MEPA - What does this all mean?

MEPA can seem very complicated and can be confusing, but here are a few things to keep in mind when thinking about how MEPA affects decisions when placing a child in a resource or adoptive home.

1. Race, color, or national origin of a child or family cannot be routinely considered.
2. The agency cannot make placement decisions based on the birth parent's preferences on racial or ethnic factors.
3. The agency cannot establish a list of placement preferences based on racial or ethnic factors.
4. The agency must evaluate all applicants' capacities to raise children, including children with special needs, and cannot limit this evaluation to applicants of certain racial or ethnic backgrounds.

When families from diverse backgrounds express an interest in becoming a resource family, allow for flexibility; recognize the challenges that different racial, ethnic, and cultural groups might face adjusting to rules and regulations to which they are not accustomed. One of the ways to help people feel comfortable in a new setting is to be aware of the language used.

Training for Cultural Sensitivity

Stay in touch with demographic trends in the communities you serve. To find and prepare resource families who can meet the needs of the children in foster care, it is important to be able to answer the following types of questions about the children's racial, ethnic, or cultural groups.

- What are the roles of men and women in this culture? What is the role of children, elders, and extended family members?
- What is the communication style of this culture? How does one show respect?
- How are the children disciplined?
- What is the role of religion or spirituality in this community?

You can educate yourself through formal training, your own research, and most of all, by learning directly from someone who belongs to the group in question.

Building Affirming Relationships across Lines of Difference

True partnership with prospective and current resource families depends on one-on-one relationships and building trust. Some guidelines for building relationships with people who are different from you include the following.

- Be flexible about time; different cultures view time differently
- Correct pronunciation shows respect: learn to pronounce each person's name
- Do not be offended if a client speaks to another person in their language
- Adjust your communication style as much as possible to the person's style in regards to tone, pauses, pace of speech, gestures, eye contact, personal space, and touching
- Understanding the person's interpretation of their culture; it is critical to recognize that everyone has his or her own personal belief system

10 Minute Participant Break

Delivering Quality Customer Service: The First Contact

When Families Initiate Contact

Many people think about fostering for a year or more and hear/see messages about foster care 7-9 times before making an initial inquiry call.

When people finally reach out to make that first call, your response needs to be warm, timely, and encouraging (AdoptUSKids, n.d.). From the beginning, each potential foster or adoptive family should be considered a precious resource, deserving personal attention and efficient service.

Remember, we need them much more than they need us!

Partnering with Your Resource Families to Make that Personal Connection

Don't have enough staff to do home visits to all new callers? This can be a great role for experienced resource families. Or you can ask new callers if they would like a phone call from a current resource family to answer more of their questions.

Worried about what your current resource families might say? Think again. It's better for families to know the real story from the beginning and hear from a current resource family that MDHS is going to be there to offer support.

Notes:

Delivering Quality Customer Service: Personal Filters

Keeping Our Own Preferences in Check

For many of us, the ideal family looks a lot like our own. Of course, this kind of bias—often unconscious and unintentional—occurs in all professions and types of people. We tend to feel most comfortable with people who are most like us (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995; Phelps, et al. 2000). However, when making life-altering decisions about finding homes for children, this kind of bias needs to be brought into the light and challenged.

Some families who wish to foster or adopt may be so different from the social worker that it is hard to see their strengths. A family with limited formal education may seem lacking to a social worker from a middle class, college-educated background. A non-traditional family may seem inappropriate to a worker from a very traditional family. But are these families the only ones with characteristics and skills needed to provide the best care for the type children we have in MDHS custody? Simply because certain families do not adhere to our accustomed way of living does not make them unsuitable matches for our children.

True, we need resource families who can support themselves without an over-reliance on the small reimbursement provided for taking care of children from the child welfare system. Yet often there is a values-based decision about what is needed for a child to live happily with a family.

It's not that finances shouldn't play a part in home study process; it's just that we need to recognize our own biases about money, social class, and lifestyle. A family may not be just right for you personally, but they may be just right for a child in need of a home.

Notes:

Delivering Quality Customer Service: Personal Filters cont.

Examining Our Assumptions about Money and Motivation

Some child welfare professionals are “put off” when one of the first questions a prospective resource family asks is in regards to financial compensation. Although social workers may feel concerned, a family’s primary reason for wanting to foster is not always financially motivated. This is a good example of a time when it is important to evaluate personal biases. Given that many people deliberate a long time before calling the agency, it is possible that they have discovered the answers to their other questions (e.g., is their house large enough, how long is pre-service training, etc). It may be that financial questions are among the few they have not yet answered.

The point? Even if someone’s first question is about money, do not assume they are just “in it for the money.” Remember the principle of partnership is one that says “judgments can wait.”

Notes:

Delivering Quality Customer Service: Regional Directors

Key Players in Resource Family Recruitment and Retention: Regional Directors

Why Regional Directors Should Focus on Resource Family Recruitment & Retention

Outcomes for children. Most of the outcomes we seek for children in care are directly related to having an array of well-trained and well-supported resource families. These outcomes all center on the best interests of the child.

How Resource Families Affect CFSR Outcomes

Well trained and highly supported resource families assist us in meeting several Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) Outcomes related to safety, permanency and wellbeing of children in care. Let's take a few minutes to brainstorm ways in which resource families help us in meeting our goals.

Small Group Activity – Divide the participants into small groups. Give each group a piece of chart paper and a marker. Assign each group one or more CFSR Item(s) (depending on number of small groups) from the left side of the chart. Give the group 10 minutes to brainstorm how the CFSR Item is related to The Resource Family Role. Have each small group present their ideas to the larger group. Post chart paper around the training room.

Delivering Quality Customer Service: CFSR

SUGGESTED RESPONSES

CFSR ITEM	THE RESOURCE FAMILY ROLE
<p>Safety Outcome 1: Children are protected from abuse and neglect</p>	<p>Resource families provide safe, nurturing homes for children in care.</p>
<p>Permanency Outcome 1: <i>Children have permanency and stability in their living arrangements</i></p>	<p>Resource families maintain children in their homes despite great challenges and sometimes minimal services. They provide crucial stability and support while children and birth families work towards reunification. They are the most likely to adopt children in foster care whose parental rights are terminated (60% in FY 2006, AFCARS Report #14).</p>
<p>Permanency Outcome 2: <i>The continuity of family relationships and connections is preserved for children</i></p>	<p>Resource families facilitate contact with family members, often provide homes for sibling groups, and maintain life books and important parts of children’s histories.</p>
<p>Well-Being Outcome 1: <i>Families have enhanced capacity to provide for their children’s needs</i></p>	<p>Resource families can provide crucial modeling and mentoring for birth parents. Their efforts with children and birth families are vital in achieving more timely and successful reunifications.</p>
<p>Well-Being Outcome 2: <i>Children receive appropriate services to meet their educational needs</i></p>	<p>Resource families often identify educational problems and serve as front-line responders for children and schools.</p>
<p>Well-Being Outcome 3: <i>Children receive appropriate services to meet their physical and mental health needs</i></p>	<p>Resource families often identify medical and emotional problems and serve as front-line responders for children and treatment providers.</p>

Supporting and Maintaining Resource Families

Who's Job Is It?

In some child welfare agencies there is an unspoken cultural divide: If you license and recruit resource homes, then resource families are your business. If you do investigations and/or foster care, then the children are your business, not the resource parents.

Unfortunately, this split means that many resource families do not receive the information, support, and follow-up they need to maintain placements and continue to foster or adopt. The direct result: resource family turnover, more disrupted placements, greater negative impact on children, and fewer homes available for them.

Supporting Resource Families during Resource Report Investigations

Any level of repeat maltreatment in foster care is unacceptable. Nationally, relatively few children experience repeat maltreatment while in foster care; however, resource parents themselves are at high risk of ALLEGATIONS of child maltreatment.

Every year many innocent resource parents endure the anguish of a resource investigation. How these assessments are handled by the agency has a major impact on whether those foster parents continue or quit fostering even if the report is unsubstantiated. While children's safety is always the first concern, MDHS worker also play a critical role in minimizing unnecessary placement disruptions and trauma for children in care, and in keeping good resource homes available.

Here are some tips to help you support resource families during investigations:

- Just as we strive to do for all families, maintain open communication, gather all the facts before making judgments.
- Keep resource parents informed about the resource investigation process, their rights, and the Agency's plans related to follow up home visits, etc.
- The family's resource worker can help inform and educate the family about the process in partnership with you. This is why it is vital to inform the resource worker of the report and make every effort to coordinate a time for the home visit when both the investigator and resource specialist can be present.

Administrative and Fiscal Staff - Key Strategies for Supporting Resource Families

- **Process paperwork and payments efficiently and without delay.** Help workers complete forms correctly on the front-end. It is crucial to retention and placement stability that children get needed services and resource families get needed reimbursements timely.
- **Look for patterns and problems with paperwork, eligibility, and funding issues.** These issues impact the services children and families receive. Problem-solve and troubleshoot to keep the system running smoothly!
- **Facilitate connection.** If you receive a phone call from a foster, adoptive, or kinship parent, transfer the call to someone who can help them immediately with their issue or need.
- **Pitch in.** Participate in recruitment and retention events not only by attending but in planning, fundraising, and set up/clean up.
- **Say “Thanks.”** If you see a resource parent in your building or in the community, thank them for what they do for our children.

Notes:

How Caseworker's Can Help

Perhaps no other team member has more impact on resource family satisfaction than the child's caseworker. The caseworker plays a crucial role in keeping resource families informed, valuing their unique insights and knowledge about each child, and responding to problems that could lead to placement disruption. In fact, resource parents often cite the following issues among their top reasons for requesting their home to be closed: (Gibbs & Wildfire, 2007; NCFC, 1991; Rhodes et al., 2001):

- Poor communication with caseworkers
- Inadequate consultation and support from workers
- Poor agency response to crises
- Disrespect, not being treated as team member/partner

In Mississippi, word of mouth is the number one way people gain and trust information. When resource families have negative interactions with our Agency, they are telling their friends and family about their experiences. The Agency's reputation in the community becomes diminished, and it becomes even more difficult to recruit new resource families.

For every experienced resource family who leaves the Agency, two more families must be recruited and trained to make up for the level of experience lost when an experienced family closes their home.

Notes:

How Supervisors Can Help

As a supervisor, you set the tone for your units. Workers will not know that everyone is expected to partner with and support resource families unless you talk about it and model it.

Encourage workers to review the home studies of families who are caring for children on their workload. The home study provides a variety of information about resource families including their family background, available supports, work schedules, and more. Workers will be better able to relate to and partner with resource families once they have some basic background information.

We all know how close we can become to the kids we work with. Getting to know their resource families and building a trusting relationship with the resource parents can help reduce your own anxieties about the safety and wellbeing of the children entrusted to your care.

Notes:

How ALL DFCS Staff Can Support Resource Families

- **Return Phone calls.** All the picnics and appreciation certificates in the world cannot compare to someone responding when you need help. Whether the caregiver is handling a crisis, hoping for respite, or just needing to vent, the few minutes you devote to a timely response can save you many hours down the road trying to preserve a placement that's falling apart. Give families alternate numbers for supervisors, etc.
- **Be responsive.** When there is a crisis or concern, be responsive. Return the call, go to the home, and find the service they need as soon as possible.
- **Be creative** in how you might partner with resource families. Are they part of agency committees or implementation teams? What expertise, strengths, or community connections might a resource family have that could further the agency's work?
- **Encourage all child welfare staff attend PATH trainings.** This will give them a greater understanding of the resource family role and how they can support it. This also helps set the tone for future interactions between field staff and resource families.
- **Encourage and provide incentives for all staff to participate in recruitment and retention events:** community speaking events, orientations, pre-service training (PATH), in-service training, resource parent meetings, recognition events, etc. We know there is rarely money for these types of incentives, so be creative!
- **Consider collaboration on training and support a win-win:** Our Agency can increase positive outcomes for children if everyone is actively involved recruiting, developing and maintaining good homes for them. For example, if a county worker participates in an in-service training on managing difficult behaviors, she may meet a resource family willing to foster a teen currently placed in another county or in a group home. Getting to know and building relationships with resource families is key!
- **Give them information.** Provide full disclosure regarding the background and needs of the child. Keep resource families informed about the child's situation and provide updated information about the child's needs in a timely manner.
- **Keep families informed** about the case plan, court happenings, and other important events in a child's case. Be creative about how to do this when you have a large caseload: ask families to call you for updates after court dates or use e-mail. For example, if resource families understand the full picture of a child's case plan and the birth family's goals, as well as how case decisions are made by DHS and judges, they are less likely to be blind-sided and distraught about changes. Resource families do not get to decide what happens to children in care, but they deserve to be kept informed and prepared.

- **Include resource parents in permanency planning for the child.** Resource parents should be included in discussions and meetings to share ideas about possible permanent families for the child. Invite them to court hearings, child and family team meetings, other meetings, and reviews.
- **Be flexible in making appointments with and for resource families.** Work with resource parents when planning home visits, meetings, or appointments for the child. Resource families have schedules, too!
- **Gather information about the child from the resource parents.** Resource parents are the best informants about the day-to-day needs of the child. Ask them to give you information that can help identify the best family for the child and make the child's transition smoother if the child needs to be moved for any reason.
- **Promote stable placements.** Provide ongoing support, planned respite, and needed services to families to prevent a disruption or crisis from happening before it is too late
- **Help resource parents adopt if that is the plan.** Many children are adopted by their resource parents. They will need the help of the adoption worker in making that big decision.
- **Be sensitive to resource parents when a child is leaving.** Even if resource parents are glad the child will be returning home or have decided not to adopt, they still care about the child and will likely be emotional when the child leaves their home.
- **Educate and support your coworkers.** Enhance the experience of resource families by contributing to efforts to ensure all agency staff are on the same page when it comes to resource families.
- **Realize that every person you encounter in your work could be a current or potential foster or adoptive parent.** The tone you help set for the Agency through your customer service and attitude influences whether resource families feel respected and welcome.
- **Keep a stack of brochures or agency business cards handy** to give out to people during your work day and around the community. You never know what seeds you plant that could bear fruit for a child in need of a home.
- **Recruit and build support for foster care in your own community.** You may belong to a place of worship, civic group, or club that could provide essential support to the Agency's efforts to care for children.
- **Follow up with interested families.** When a family expresses an interest in fostering or adopting, get back to them as soon as possible.

Delivering Quality Customer Service: *Smiling- It Will Only Get You So Far*

So, as you can see, providing quality customer service isn't just about smiling and being polite. The more respected and valued our customers feel, the more likely they are to partner with us to achieve positive outcomes for children and families. This, at the end of the day, is the reason we are all here.

We believe in the safety and wellbeing of children and their families. By instituting the principles of customer service set forth by the Mississippi Department of Human Services, we all have an opportunity to enrich the experiences of those around us and increase positive outcomes for those we work with.

Family & Children's Services Customer Service Pledge

Large Group Verbal Activity: Have participants read pledge aloud in unison.

Today and every day, I commit myself to providing quality customer service by:

Understanding customers come first

Delivering a smiling, helpful, positive, professional outlook and attitude

Treating everyone with respect, fairness, and dignity

Listening to our customers with a caring demeanor

Returning phone calls within one business day

Providing knowledgeable answers, and resolving issues promptly and accurately

Keeping customers informed about their concerns

Thanking and acknowledging our customers

Continually exceeding customer expectations

Understanding customer satisfaction is a direct reflection of our effectiveness as an organization

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Treat Them Like Gold: A Best Practice Guide to Partnering with Resource Families. North Carolina Division of Social Services, Child Welfare Services Section. Raleigh, North Carolina (2009).

This workshop was created by MDHS, Family & Children’s Services as part of its Diligent Recruitment and Retention grant, with technical assistance provided by the NRCRRFAP at AdoptUSKids.

Workshop materials developed by:

Jessica T. Michael, LMSW, MS GRITS Project Director

Meredith M. Mayo, MDHS Graduate Social Work Intern, University of Alabama



“The Diligent Recruitment & Retention Grant is funded by the Children’s Bureau, Administration on Children, Youth, & Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, under grant 90-CO-1052.”

Large Group Activity – Role Play (20 minutes)

Directions: Ask half of the group to arrange their chairs into a small circle facing outward, leaving at least two feet of space between each chair. Now have the other half of the group arrange their chairs on the outside of the small circle so that they will be facing the person sitting in the larger circle. There should be 2 circles of chairs and the chairs should be facing each other.

External Scenario: You have a resource parent who calls you 3 times a day wanting to vent about her foster child's birth parents. You don't always have the time to talk to her, but you want to maintain your working relationship with her because she is a valuable asset to the agency. What do you do?

Present the external customer scenario to the group which includes the two characters (the customer and the employee). For this scenario, the individuals on the outside of the circle are the resource parent and those on the inside are the DFCS employee.

Ring a bell (or say go) to initiate the role play.

After 3 minutes, ring the bell again, and have each person sitting on the inside of the circle move one chair to the right. The person on the outside of the circle should stay seated. Each group member will repeat the role play with their new partner. The individuals sitting on the outside of the circle are now the DFCS employee and those sitting on the inside are now the resource parent.

After 3 minutes, ring the bell again, and have each person sitting on the inside of the circle move one chair to the right. The person on the outside of the circle should stay seated.

Present the internal customer scenario to the group which includes two characters (both DFCS employees). The individuals sitting on the outside of the circle are the employees with a concern (the resource worker) and the individuals sitting in the inside of the circle are the employees who are going to provide quality customer service (the caseworker).

Internal Scenario: A Resource worker found some physical home environment concerns in a licensed resource home. She has addressed those concerns with the resource family but they do not seem to be taking the concerns seriously. Because of this, she wants to close the home and would like the children to be moved immediately.

The caseworker, after having worked with these children for the last 14 months, feels that it would be detrimental to the children's emotional health to move to another placement. Both workers agree that the children are not at any immediate risk for serious harm.

How do you handle this situation?

After 3 minutes, ring the bell again, and have each person sitting on the inside of the circle move one chair to the right. The person on the outside of the circle should stay seated. Each group member will repeat the role play with their new partner. The individuals sitting on the outside of the circle are now the employees who are going to provide quality customer service, and the individuals sitting in the inside of the circle are now the employees with a concern.

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Letter from the Executive Director

To all Family and Children's Services Employees:

Our mission is to provide the resources and support that help people build better lives. How we do this identifies how well we provide this vital service to the citizens of the State of Mississippi.

Good Customer Service- What is it?

It is service that each of us delivers in a way that:

- ❖ Makes customers feel important
- ❖ Makes customers feel heard
- ❖ Makes customers feel respected
- ❖ Responds to the need to the greatest degree possible
- ❖ Empowers customers through honest and trustworthy interactions

The main idea is that each of us customer should leave with a feeling of being well taken care of.

Good Customer Service applies to all of us!

Good customer service needs to come from all of us at all levels- internal and external. In each act of service, we need to apply the measures I listed above.

Good Customer Service even when we are saying no!

This is the time when listening, acknowledging, and responding in a caring way are the most important. We can't always deliver what people ask for or need, but we can choose to work with them in a way that says we care and are doing everything we can to respond.

Excellent Customer Service requires courage and innovation!

- ❖ We not only need to properly greet people, interact and be courteous, but we also need to be problem solvers.
- ❖ We need to listen, gather more information, and listen some more.
- ❖ We need to be experts in resources to solve problems- who to call to obtain. what our customers need.
- ❖ We need to be masters of "follow through" and do what we say we will do.
- ❖ We need to care for ourselves- to help ensure we are at our best.

Thank you for everything you do to ensure excellent customer service in the State of Mississippi!

Richard A. Berry
Mississippi Department of Human Services
Family & Children's Services

Objectives

This workshop will provide you with skills and tools which will empower you to:

- Recognize the value of quality customer service in child welfare
- Treat others with respect and value coworkers, community partners and resource parents as valuable members of the team
- Handle conflict with customers, should it arise
- Understand the importance of returning phone calls and communicating with customers in a timely and reliable manner
- Provide optimal service delivery to resource families thus leading to the recruitment of more families and the retention of current families
- Offer resource families the necessary support that they may provide quality care for our children

Session 1:

Customer Service Basics



**“Someone calling themselves
a customer says they want
something called service.”**

Introduction

MDHS Family & Children's Services believes.....

- People are innately good and want to do their best work.
- Building relationships in our workplaces, with our customers, and in our lives is a primary goal
- We always have CHOICES in how we act and respond
- Everyone can make a difference, no matter what their job or position in life.
- Lifelong learning, creative thinking, and the gift of appreciation help us to be our best selves
- Enthusiasm is contagious
- We can all find meaning in our work and we are all here to serve

Every day you provide a valuable public service that:

- Benefits families and children
- Demonstrates high standards of personal integrity and professionalism
- Gains the trust and respect of our customers and co-workers

You're in a noble profession! Be proud of what you do and where you work.

At the Mississippi Department of Human Services, we work to create a culture centered on customer service that includes not only our external customers but our staff as well!

This handbook contains our customer service standards, customer service principles, and staff resources.

We hope this information, along with this customer service workshop, will provide each of you with a variety of valuable customer service tools.

Overview of the “Role of Customer Service”

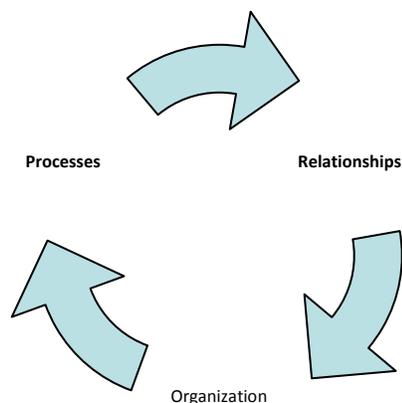
1. What is good customer service?
2. Give an example of good customer service you received from anywhere – a store, a restaurant, etc.
3. What made it memorable?

Video/Power Point: “Johnny the Bagger”

MDHS defines customer service as: *“The customers’ perception of the way they are treated, the responsiveness to the needs identified and the extent to which they are engaged and valued in teamwork to meet the needs of children and families.”*

In order to become a **PRO** (model from the National Resource Center for Recruitment and Retention of Foster and Adoptive Parents at AdoptUSKids) at servicing families and children effectively, you must practice the three core competencies of good customer service:

- 1. P – Processes**
 - a. Timely response and relevant services
 - b. Consistency and efficiency
- 2. R – Relationships**
 - a. Building mutual trust and respect
 - b. Family engagement
 - c. Creating partnerships
- 3. O – Organization**
 - a. Customer service is a strategic priority and everybody’s business
 - b. A culture that responds to staff & families’ needs



Planning for Quality Customer Service Implementation

So the question we must ask ourselves is: How do we implement a process for quality customer service?

1. Establish the vision for good customer service.
2. Assess the quality of our current customer service techniques and make recommendations for improvement.
3. Plan and design ways to enhance customer service quality for internal and external customers.
4. Pilot customer service improvements while striving for full scale improvements.
5. Consider ways to sustain your improvements.

*“Slow and steady
wins the race”*

Who Are Our Customers?

In order to decide how to best provide quality service to our customers, we must know who our customers are, because every child welfare employee interacts with many different types of customers on a daily basis. When defining who our customers are, we must consider both external and internal customers. *External Customer Service* is the way we treat the people we do business with and *Internal Customer Service* is the way we treat one another.

Who are the customers in child welfare?

A. External Customers

1. Anyone we do business with including:

B. Internal Customers

1. Anyone within the Agency including:

Mississippi's Customer Service Principles

These principles can be referred to as:

The 5 R's

Responsive: Reacting in a timely manner to meet responsibilities to address identified needs.

Reliable: Being honest and trustworthy in all interactions with customers and meeting commitments

Respectful: Interacting with customers in a way that makes them feel valued and promotes dignity and self-worth

Relationships: Valuing the role of every family, child, and staff member and working together as a team to achieve positive outcomes

Recognition: Showing appreciation for the contributions of each team member openly and frequently

Principle	What this looks like in practice	What is unacceptable
Responsive		
Reliable		
Respectful		
Relationships		
Recognition		

We are Responsive! Don't make excuses, instead adopt the motto: "It's my job."
Exceed expectations.

What *Responsiveness* looks like in practice:

- Phone calls are returned in a timely manner
- Worker meets the customer's needs- makes sure needs (if appropriate) are met
- When worker's don't know the answer, they say they don't know, but will find out (and do, and then answer later)
- Worker answers person's questions or tries to find the answer; tells the customer, "I will find out for you"

We are Reliable! Be honest. Make sure "everybody knows what everybody knows."

What *Reliability* looks like in practice:

- Resource parents are given all known information about a child placed in their home
- All available information is shared and done so in a timely and trustworthy manner
- Be honest with potential resource families about characteristics and needs of children in care
- Complete work timely and accurately (making referrals, mailing notices, etc)
- Workers meet commitments (they do what they say they will do)

We show Respect! Every customer who interacts with us is entitled to fair and courteous treatment. Respect, concern, courtesy, and responsiveness in meeting the needs of our customers are the key to all interactions.

What *Respect* looks like in practice:

- Use a warm/polite tone of voice
- Stay calm when dealing with angry customers
- Do not use first names unless given permission from the customer
- Workers pay attention to the customer
- Ensure that both internal and external customers have the opportunity to be heard

We build Relationships! We always use good people skills such as smiling and using a pleasant voice. Make customers feel important and use the “golden rule” of treating others as you would want to be treated. Allow the customer to feel heard.

What building *Relationships* looks like in practice:

- All parties are involved in decisions on the front end- not simply informed about the decisions
- Customers are included in the decision making and gathering of information as valued members of the team
- Workers coordinate with the family, they adapt and negotiate when needed
- All team members can voice a clear understanding of their own roles and responsibilities

Points to remember:

- Welcome your customers
- Use their name
- Acknowledge their emotions and empathize
- Reassure customers you can help
- Take care of their needs
- Thank customers and leave them with a positive comment. For example:
 - “Thank you for bringing in all this information; it helps out when you keep me so informed.”
 - “Thank you for bringing the kids here to visit their family. I can help more families when I don’t have to spend so much time on the road.”
 - “Thank you for being on time”

We Recognize Excellent Customer Service Skills! Everyone needs to know when their work is appreciated and effective. Take the time to:

- Watch for opportunities to recognize people doing well
- Watch for opportunities to model excellent customer service skills
- Share your compliments

What *Recognition* looks like in practice:

- County workers can explain and show value for what resource workers do and resource workers can explain and show value for what county workers do
- Worker demonstrates energy in her work and expresses positive attitudes toward her job
- Appreciation for what each person is doing is frequently expressed

Points to remember:

Maintain a positive attitude at all times. How you think about customers is how you will treat them.

- The number one thing that really matters to customers is how they are treated
- Keep your focus on what you can do to solve a customer's problem
- Exhibit a "glad I could help" attitude when dealing with customers
- Smile

It is important to remember that many of our customers are in crisis when they come into our office or call us on the phone. In order to be effective, we need to respect their assessment of the crisis.

Take the time to listen carefully and understand their viewpoint. Even if you have listened to the same type of crisis or complaint time and time again, each customer deserves to be heard.

We can't always fix everything, but keeping a few "customer service tools" handy can help in a pinch.

Delivering Quality Customer Service: L.A.S.T

Can't always think fast? Remember to use "L.A.S.T"!

- Listen** Listening is one of the most important- and underrated- skills we possess. It's one thing to hear what someone is saying. It's another to truly listen. Don't interrupt!
- Apologize** It's hard to apologize- especially if something isn't your fault! But, it comes with the territory and can help customers who may be angry or upset.
- Solve** Solve the problem by working together- the important thing to demonstrate is that you, personally, are going to take responsibility to work with your customer to try and resolve whatever you can.
- Thank** Leave your customer with the feeling that their problem (and your shared experience of solving it) has been worth it.

Using constructive words that are solution-based rather than blame-based is another valuable customer service tool.

Instead of Saying....

I need (want) you to...

You have to...

I'll try.

We don't do that here.

Sorry.

I can't do that.

How About saying...

Delivering Quality Customer Service: Pay Close Attention

Quality Customer Service Means Paying Attention To:

- **Personal Space**- This is the distance that feels comfortable between you and another person. If another person approaches you and invades your personal space, you automatically move back without thought. You are uncomfortable. Leave adequate distance between you and your customer. Adequate space is important to making customers feel secure and unthreatened.
- **Posture**- Slumping in a chair or leaning against a wall while interacting with a client are sure signs you are not interested in him/her. Your pose or posture should express attention, friendliness, and openness. Lean forward, face the customer, and nod to let them know that you are interested.
- **Observation**- Notice how your customer behaves and what he/she reacts positively to while you are providing services.

We must keep in mind that seemingly small, interpersonal actions mean a great deal in the area of customer service. They can change customer perceptions and ultimately affect the success of your customer service efforts.

Notes:

Phone & Email Etiquette

It's not *what* you say - It's *how* you say it. The moment you pick up a telephone, body language and non-verbal communication disappears and your tone of voice becomes dominant. Almost the entire message you project to the customer over the phone is derived from tone of voice and attitude.

For example:

- A flat tone of voice says to the customer, "I don't like my job and would rather be somewhere else"
- Slow pitch and presentation say, "I am sad and lonely- don't bother me."
- A high pitch, rapid voice says, "I'm enthusiastic and excited!"
- A loud voice says, "I'm angry and aggressive."

Phone Etiquette The telephone may be the first and last place some customers come into contact with an organization or company. Being telephone friendly is one of the least expensive ways to deliver better customer service.

Answering the Phone How a company answers the phone depicts how they treat customers and employees. The correct phrase said in the right order and in a positive tone leaves a good impression and builds a successful agency-client relationship.

Pick up the phone in three rings. More than three rings signals chaos in your office and possible inattentiveness of the agency.

Greet the caller with a phrase such as, "Good Morning/Afternoon." Good manners demonstrate that you respect the caller.

Give your name, i.e. "Hi, my name is Emma." This is a courtesy that serves to personalize the customer service experience as well as allow the customer to hold you accountable for your level of service. The customer now has a point of reference and someone to contact when he/she calls back.

Ask the customer if or how you can help. Asking to help tells demonstrates to the customer that you are there to assist him solve any issues. This also leaves the customer with a positive impression.

Combine the above pointers and you have a good example:

"Good morning. Thanks for calling Family and Children's Services, my name is Emma, how may I help you?"

The greeting is crucial. It sets the tone and style of entire interaction.

Customer Service: Troubleshooting

Some things which may upset a customer are simply unavoidable. Here are some tips on how to best handle these situations.

Putting a Customer on Hold

Ask the customer if you can put them on hold. Wait for them to say “yes” or “no” and then explain it will only be for a short period of time. Explain to customers why you are putting them on hold. Thank customers for holding.

Transferring a Call

Ask the customer if he minds being transferred; wait for him to say “yes” or “no” and explain why they are being transferred and to whom. **Example: “Would you mind holding for a moment while I transfer your call to Veronica’s extension?”**

Taking a Message

Explain your co-workers absence in a positive light but do not be too specific. Explain that your co-worker is in a meeting, conference, briefing, or training. Do not say he/she is gravely ill, too hung over to come to work, never called in today, can’t be found, that you do not know where he/she is, or that he or she “was just here.”

If you are able, give a reasonable estimate of when the co-worker will return. If you are unsure, give the caller the name of the worker’s supervisor in case he or she needs to call back.

Offer to help the caller, take a message, or transfer to another staff member. If a co-worker is on vacation and will not return to the office for some time, it is permissible to say that he or she is on vacation. However, avoid details such as, “Raymond is at the beach and I am sure he is having a great time.” While such details may seem innocuous and even humorous, they give the wrong impression to those seeking services.

Ending the Call

A good customer service representative ends the call on a positive note, repeating any actions agreed to be taken and what is going to be done to help or serve the customer. **Example: “Thank you for bringing this to our attention. I will be forwarding your concerns to my supervisor.”**

Quality Customer Service: E-Mail

Respond to your business emails quickly!

Answering your business emails promptly should be a priority for all businesses. Not only is email an important communication line with your customers, it is often used by them to gauge that you are trustworthy.

If a customer sends you an e-mail with a simple question, and you delay responding to him, what does that say about the rest of your agency? The customer should never feel like he is not a priority as a result of our inefficiency.

Business e-mail should be answered within one business day. **No exceptions.**

If you really want your customer service to shine, you should consider answering your business e-mail a minimum of twice per day with a 12 hour interval.

Be cautious of addressing sensitive issues via email. Tone of voice and body language are not included in electronic messages. Others may easily misinterpret your tone, message, or intent through e-mail, especially when difficult topics are being addressed.

Notes:

Delivering Quality Customer Service: First Impressions

Making a Good First Impression

The reality is we prefer doing business with people we like and trust. The impressions that we make are key to developing trust and confidence with the customer. As the old saying goes, “You will never get a second chance to make a first impression.” This is why the first impression is extremely important and can set the tone for all future interactions.

Many times you may be meeting a customer for the first time as you are assessing a report of abuse or neglect. Choosing a positive attitude and making a good first impression may enhance your working relationship with the customer, should services be required.

Here are some ways of creating positive impressions, some of which have already been discussed:

- Thoughtfulness in meeting a customer’s needs
- Personal responsibility for the customer
- Quick problem solving for the customer
- Offering immediate assistance
- Friendliness
- Using the customer’s name in conversation
- Pleasant tone of voice
- Polite and courteous manners
- Neatness
- A genuine smile

Here are some factors that create a negative impression:

- Making the customer wait
- Not answering the phone promptly
- Not saying “please” and/or “thank you”
- Speaking loudly or condescendingly to customers or colleagues
- Making faces, frowning, acting distant, not smiling
- Looking disheveled or like you do not care about your appearance
- A poor handshake
- Focusing on another task while addressing or servicing a customer

Remember, impressions stay with those you meet, especially customers, and once registered, negative impressions are difficult to overcome.

Delivering Quality Customer Service: Do's and Don'ts

Ten Major Do's and Don'ts of Customer Service

Every day, customer service representatives face situations when what they say makes or breaks a service interaction. Below are ten phrases that should never be used because they frustrate and anger customers, especially clients and resource families.

- “No.”
- “I don’t know.”
- “That’s not my job/That’s not my unit”
- “You are right- that is bad”
- “Calm down”
- “I’m busy right now”
- “Call me back”
- “That’s not my fault”
- “You’ll need to take that up with my supervisor”
- “You want it by when?”

“No” No one likes the word “no.” It is de-motivating, discouraging, and disinteresting. You will hear this word throughout your life as a customer and as a service provider. “No” is equivalent to “bad service.” “No” is easy, cheap, unproductive, and negative- it means failure. Unfortunately, “no” is the word we most often hear when a new idea, new request, or new concept is introduced. Admittedly, there are times when you will have to say “no,” but focus on what you can do for the customer; accentuate the positive and not the negatives of the situation. It is better to say, “What I can do is...” and demonstrate that you care and want to provide quality service despite your current limitations.

“I don’t know” Good service means never saying, “I don’t know.” When a customer hears, “I don’t know,” they hear, “I don’t feel like finding the information you need.” It is better to say, “I’ll find out” or “Let me look into this and get back to you ASAP.”

“That’s not my job/That’s not my unit” When a customer asks you to do something that you do not know how to do or do not have the authority to do, become a catalyst by leading the customer to the person or department who can help him/her solve the problem. It is better to say, “Let me transfer you to the person who can immediately help you with this problem.”

“You’re right- that is bad” Many inexperienced customer service representatives think that by empathizing with the customer’s plight, he/she will win the customer over rather than actually do something to solve the customer’s problem. If a customer expresses annoyance or frustration, do not make it worse by commiserating with the customer; rather, seek to solve the issue.

Likewise, it does not do the Agency any good to criticize co-workers or other units within the Agency to the customers. All interested parties end up looking unprofessional and inept. Try your best to accommodate the customer. Do not promise anything you cannot deliver but do try to serve the customer well. It is better to say, “I understand your frustration; let’s see how we can solve this problem.”

“Calm down” When customers are upset or angry let them vent (within reason), and they will eventually calm down. Telling them to “calm down” is belittling, and often serves only to infuriate them further. It is better to say, “I’m sorry.” This is one of the ideal phrases for customer service- it helps to placate the angriest of customers and allows you to begin the process of solving a customer complaint or request and meet the client half way.

Apologizing does not mean that you agree with the customer, but it is a way to validate the customer’s feelings and move beyond the emotion of the moment.

“I’m busy right now” It is not easy to juggle customers. You are often helping one customer when another calls or visits. Asking a customer to be patient or politely asking them to wait is very different from putting them off and telling him/her that you are too busy to help. Leaving the customer to wait or be put on hold are two of the mortal sins of customer service. “Being too busy” is equivalent to saying that you do not care and that the customer is not important. Let the customer know that he/she is important and that you are aware of his/her presence. It is better to say, “I’ll be with you in one moment” or “please hold and I’ll be right with you.”

“Call me back” This expression conveys little interest on the part of the customer relation’s employee for the needs and wants of the customer. You should always call the customer back because you want their business and are responsive to their requests. Being proactive is part of good customer service.

“That’s not my fault” If an angry customer accuses you of creating a problem, right or wrong, the natural reaction is to defend oneself. However, this is not the best course of action. The customer has a problem that needs to be solved. By resisting the need to defend yourself and focusing on the needs of the customer, you can resolve the problem faster with less stress and confrontation. It is better to say, “Let’s see what we can do about this issue.”

“You need to take that up with my supervisor” This cliché of bad customer service has angered and frustrated customers for decades. Clients often ask for things outside the scope of your work or authority- maybe even outside the services provided by your agency. While passing off these requests to your manager is a tempting option, it is better if you attempt to solve the problem yourself or go to your supervisor directly to find a solution. You become a service hero for the customer and the supervisor. It is better to say, “Let me find that out for you.”

“You want it by when?” Clients often make unrealistic demands, especially when it comes to time. Your first reaction may be annoyance and you may want to make a snide or sarcastic comment. However, the best approach is to hold off on displaying a negative attitude and making a poor impression. It is better to say, “I will call you right back after I find out if that is feasible.”

Delivering Quality Customer Service: Helpful Reminders for Polite and Friendly Responses and Unsatisfied Customers

Wrong Approach	Polite Alternative
“I don’t know.”	“I’ll find out”
“No.”	“What I can do is…”
“That’s not my job.”	“Let me find the right person who can help you”
“You’re right- this is bad.”	“I understand your frustrations”
“That’s not my fault.”	“Let’s see what we can do about this”
“You want it by when?”	“I’ll try my best”
“Calm down.”	“I’m sorry”
“I’m busy right now.”	“I’ll be with you in just a moment”
“Call me back.”	“I will call you back, what is your telephone number?”

Communicating with the Unsatisfied Customer

How many times have you as a customer run into the problem of excuses? You have a problem and the sales person, technician, or customer service representative is making lame excuses. Namely:

- The computer system was down half the day
- It's the clerk's fault
- I never got the message
- That's out of my control
- I just do as I'm told
- That's just the way it is

Sometimes it feels as if nothing is anybody's fault or is in anybody's department. This is poor customer service. Good customer service means accountability, responsibility, and taking action to satisfy the customer.

Delivering Quality Customer Service: Helpful Reminders for Polite and Friendly Responses and Unsatisfied Customers cont.

Having discussed the importance of knowing how the customer feels and what NOT to say, let's address the notion of how to communicate with an unsatisfied customer.

If your customer is unsatisfied (understandably or not), you will have to use some of the many techniques of customer services to win their support and continued loyalty. When coming into contact with a customer, communicating with him/her, or analyzing problems, do not forget to use the following methods or qualities of the customer service professional.

Methods for Dealing with the Unsatisfied Customer

Listen: It is of primary importance when dealing with an unsatisfied customer to listen attentively to his/her complaint, frustration, or grievance. Be patient, attentive, and friendly.

Express your apologies:

“We are sorry for this mistake/problem.”

“We are terribly sorry for this inconvenience.”

“How can we work together to solve this problem?”

“I can imagine how frustrated you must feel.”

Do not argue and do not interrupt: This will only worsen the situation, especially if the customer is angry. Let the client speak before you try to discuss the issue.

Do not lose your self-control: If you remain calm, clients will calm down.

Point out the facts: Listen carefully- and write everything down. Do not make any comments until the customer is finished talking.

Admit the problem: If you can suggest a solution, do it. If not, tell the customer what actions you will take and what actions you will follow. Never make the mistake of promising something you are not able to accomplish.

Involve the customer in problem solving: Suggest to the customer alternative solutions, if they exist. Customers appreciate the opportunity to choose the ways (methods) of problem solving.

Notes:

Excuses, Excuses...

We all give lame excuses from time to time when we don't know how to meet the needs of a customer or just don't have the energy to address their concerns at that moment.

It is important to understand that the way employees treat each other is also a very important aspect of customer service. Not only is it important to "treat colleagues with respect," per the NASW Code of Ethics, but treating our colleagues with respect and coming to a resolution peacefully also allows us to practice how we will interact with our clients in frustrating situations. NASW Code of Ethics, 2.01 'Respect' under "1.05 Cultural Competence and Social Diversity."

Session 2:

Quality Customer Service & Resource Families



Delivering Quality Customer Service: Why We Say “Resource Families”

Foster families. Adoptive families. Relatives who provide kinship care. MDHS and an increasing number of agencies nationwide, refer to these individuals as “resource parents.” This term refers to anyone who provides a safe, stable, loving home for a child when the child’s birth parents are not able to do so.

Why use this term? We need to think more broadly about potential families and children’s needs. All kinds of families are needed for children in foster care. Sometimes children need families who can play multiple roles over time. Instead of dividing families into categories (such as foster or adoptive) we are choosing to use a term that leaves the possibilities as open as possible.

MDHS certifies every family (including relatives) to provide both foster care and adoptive services for children through a single licensure process. Should a foster child become freed for adoption, when appropriate, this policy grants the opportunity for the resource family to establish legally permanent connections with the child or children in a timely manner.

Notes:

Delivering Quality Customer Service: Data Analysis

What are Resource Families saying about the Quality of Customer Service from MDHS?

During on a review of Mississippi Foster Care Services Assessments completed October 13, 2009, resource families were asked about their interactions and experiences with MDHS staff, many noted issues related to:

- Confusion of roles/responsibilities after placement regarding support of resource families
- Confusion of roles/responsibilities of COS, COR, Resource Workers, Private Agency Workers
- Inconsistent licensing practices from region to region
- Toll free adoption hotline answered by voicemail
- Resource parents feeling like babysitters
- Follow up to inquiries --initial contact-- being impersonal (example: mailing letters/packets rather than calling)
- Lack of respect to resource family by county staff
- Continual mismatch of child/family (families being encouraged to take children outside of the age range they feel comfortable with, larger sibling groups than they feel comfortable with, children with behavior issues they are not comfortable with, etc.)
- Lack of communication regarding placement process
- Workers often do not know the children they are placing with a family (and often do not seek and/or share additional information about the children early in the placement)
- Tension between county workers and resource workers (and sometimes private agency workers)
- Children placed without needed medication and no information is given to the resource family on how to obtain the prescription
- Workers withhold (or downplay) important information about a child's behaviors for fear of resource family's rejection of the placement
- Resource families not feeling a part of the team/valued; sometimes invited to court, Family Team Meetings, etc. but often do not feel engaged
- Delays in board payments
- Delays in initial clothing allowances
- Issues with travel reimbursement

Questions Raised by this Data

- When children first come in to custody, it is often impossible for a worker to know detailed information about a child immediately. What is the process of gaining needed information? How is this information shared with resource families and in what time frames?
- Do workers omit or downplay certain information about a child's behaviors or special needs for fear a family may not accept the much needed placement?
- Is there a delay in getting psychological/medical/mental health assessments and screenings completed?
- What is the availability and quality of therapeutic care within the Region? Statewide?
- Do county workers routinely review the resource family's home study **prior** to placing a child in the home to ensure an appropriate match has been made? If no, how do we ensure matches between resource families and foster children are appropriate?

Notes:

Viewing Resource Families as Partners

Resource Families as MVPs

Resource parents should be viewed as some of the most valuable players (MVPs) on the child welfare team. When staff is empowered to include resource families as team members, resource families are empowered to include birth families as part of the team, which empowers birth families to care for their children.

Empowering staff to include resource families as team members



Empowers resource families to include birth families as part of the team



Empowers birth families to care for their children appropriately

Notes:

Resource Families: Partners, Not Employees

A common assumption people make is that resource families are employees of the agency that supervises them (either DHS, a private agency, or both). This is understandable, since on the surface of things, resource parents might seem to fit the definition of an employee- someone hired to perform a job in exchange for financial compensation. After all, once these families undergo the interviews and scrutiny of the licensing process and have children placed in their homes, resource parents receive a board payment check each month. And, like other DHS employees, resource parents are bound by the same expectations of protecting the clients' confidential information, are expected to work with birth family, therapists, teachers, and MDHS staff to meet the needs of the children in their home.

Even though resource parenting is a job with specific duties, the idea of resource parents as agency employees does not hold water. The money these families receive each month is not wages for their "work" but a partial reimbursement that enables them to meet the needs of the children in their care. This is underscored by the fact that as a rule, state and federal governments do not consider monthly foster care reimbursements as taxable income (NFPA, 2007). A few other characteristics that make resource parents different from other agency employees include:

- They do not get benefits received by agency employees (e.g. health insurance, paid time off and sick days, worker's compensation, unemployment benefits, pension, etc.)
- They are always on the job, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

But if resource parents aren't employees, what are they?

The answer, of course, is partners: people who join with others to pursue a common interest or goal. In their case- and ours- that common goal is the welfare of children and their birth families. If we explain things well enough in marketing materials, orientations, and pre-service training, resource parents enter into partnership with our agency voluntarily and fully-informed about the various roles they will play, which include one or more of the following:

1. Caring for and nurturing children in foster care until they can be reunited with their parents
2. Working as reunification partners with birth families (i.e., engaging in shared parenting and maintaining connections)
3. Serving as members of the team: working closely with MDHS to ensure the child's safety and well-being
4. Becoming a permanent family for the child, if reunification isn't possible (i.e., engaging in concurrent planning)

When you add all of this up- the hours, the pay, and the benefits (or lack thereof), the multiple and complex roles they play- it is clear that resource families make a remarkable commitment when they decide to join in partnership with MDHS.

To support resource families and fulfill their side of the partnership, MDHS should:

- Ensure that all staff members understand the connection between the overall success of the Agency and the Agency's ability to attract, train, support, and retain qualified resource families.
- Apply family-centered principles of partnership when interacting with resource families:
 - Everyone desires respect
 - Everyone needs to be heard
 - Everyone has strengths
 - Judgments can wait
 - Partners share power
 - Partnership is a process

The Core of Concurrent Planning

Resource families are critical partners in pursuing all of the possible permanency goals for children in care:

- Resource families play the central role in preserving family ties, supporting children during separations, and coaching birth families to enable reunification.
- About 60% of children adopted from foster care are adopted by their resource family (AFCARS Report 12).
- After children themselves, resource families are the best source for child-specific recruiting. They can help us in identifying important support people in a child's life who could provide a permanent placement.

Building Relationships with Resource Families

- **Get to know the resource families** who care for the children in your custody. Be sure that you understand what foster, adoptive, and kinship families do, and make it clear to them that you understand the importance of their role. One way to get to know a few things about resource families is to read their home study in MACWIS.
- **Be friendly to resource families.** Model positive, respectful interactions with resource families when you see them in the building, at meetings, in public, and especially when in their home.
- **Be available to speak with families upon request.** Front line workers should be responsible for most exchanges with resource families and for building the trust that is necessary for a successful working relationship. However, it can be reassuring to both workers and resource families to know that supervisors are always available if outside brainstorming is needed or to help problem solve a specific situation. At the same time, supervisors should avoid over-involvement- if a supervisor is too involved, a direct worker can be disempowered.
- **Give out your contact information.** Any time you have contact with a foster, adoptive, or kinship family, give them your contact information so they can reach you directly for help if necessary.
- **Consider resource families in all you do,** from writing policy to writing a memo. Include the foster, adoptive, and kinship family perspective in all materials you produce, all speeches you give, all meetings you have with those you supervise, and any time you interact with the community.

Resource Families as Recruiters

Working in collaboration with resource parents to increase recruitment should improve retention as well:

- Numerous studies have found that retention is significantly affected by how valued resource parents feel and how much they are treated like partners by their agencies (cited in Rhodes et al., 2001; Rodger et al., 2006; NRCSNA, 2003). Creatively involving resource parents in an agency's efforts to find and maintain other resource parents can build a collaborative, mutually respectful relationship.
- Support by other resource parents also plays a crucial role in resource parents' decision to continue fostering (Seaberg & Harrigan, 1999). While you involve resource parents in recruitment, they are able to establish supportive relationships with each other from the very beginning.
- Sharing experiences
- Providing parts of pre-service and ongoing trainings
- Following- up with new resource family applicants with an in-person visit or phone call
- Organizing support groups or foster parent associations
- Organizing recognition/appreciation efforts and events
- Providing individualized mentoring for new resource parents

Satisfied resource parents are the single best tool for recruitment. This statement is worth repeating – ***your best recruiters are your current foster, adoptive, and kinship parents.***

- One state reported in a federal survey that more than 50% of its successful resource parent recruiters are referred by other resource parents, compared to a 10% recruitment rate for general recruiting (USDHHS, 2002).
- Another study of 650 resource parents found that only 21% had found out about fostering through media sources, while 58.5% did so because of the connections they had with other resource parents or children in foster care (Rodger, Cummings, & Leschied, 2006).

Celebrating Diversity

Federal law and best practice dictate that agencies should diligently recruit potential foster and adoptive families who reflect the ethnic and racial diversity of children for whom homes are needed (P.L. 104-188).

The Multiethnic Placement Act (MEPA)

The following information was taken from an article entitled “Overview of the Multiethnic Placement Act (MEPA)” by Joan Heifetz Hollinger. Joan Heifetz Hollinger has also written, A Guide to the Multiethnic Placement Act of 1994 as amended by the Interethnic Provisions of 1996 (ABA Center on Children and the Law, 1998).

MEPA is one of the laws aimed at removing barriers to permanency for children in the child welfare system. Studies have shown that African American and other minority children are disproportionately represented in out-of-home care and wait longer for permanent homes.

The specific intentions of MEPA are to:

- Decrease the length of time children wait to be adopted
- Facilitate the recruitment and retention of resource parents who can meet the needs of children awaiting placement
- Eliminate discrimination on the basis of race, color, or national origin of the child or prospective resource family

MEPA – Agency Requirements:

- The agency is prohibited from delaying or denying a child’s foster care or adoptive placement on the basis of the child’s or prospective resource parent’s race, color, or national origin
- The agency is prohibited from denying to any individual the opportunity to become a resource parent on the basis of the prospective resource parents’ or the child’s race, color, or national origin
- The agency must diligently recruit resource and adoptive parents who reflect the racial and ethnic diversity of the children in need of such homes.

MEPA requires decisions to be on a case-by-case basis and in the best interest of the individual child. Joan Heifetz Hollinger provides the following example:

In a case involving an older child whose consent to a proposed adoption is required and who has lived exclusively with caregivers who share his racial background, it is not unlawful for the agency to attempt to comply with the child's request for a same-race placement. By contrast, in a case involving a younger child who has been emotionally harmed by ethnic slurs and bullying at her school, the agency should not assume that only a caregiver from the same ethnic background could help her deal with this situation. Although this child has a specific need based on her ethnicity, it is a need that can be taken care of by many different prospective parents, not just by someone with the same ethnic background.

MEPA - What does this all mean?

MEPA can seem very complicated and can be confusing, but here are a few things to keep in mind when thinking about how MEPA effects decisions when placing a child in a resource or adoptive home.

1. Race, color, or national origin of a child or family cannot be routinely considered.
2. The agency cannot make placement decisions based on the birth parent's preferences on racial or ethnic factors.
3. The agency cannot establish a list of placement preferences based on racial or ethnic factors.
4. The agency must evaluate all applicants' capacities to raise children, including children with special needs, and cannot limit this evaluation to applicants of certain racial or ethnic backgrounds.

When families from diverse backgrounds express an interest in becoming a resource family, allow for flexibility; recognize the challenges that different racial, ethnic, and cultural groups might face adjusting to rules and regulations to which they are not accustomed. One of the ways to help people feel comfortable in a new setting is to be aware of the language used.

Training for Cultural Sensitivity

Stay in touch with demographic trends in the communities you serve. To find and prepare resource families who can meet the needs of the children in foster care, it is important to be able to answer the following types of questions about the children's racial, ethnic, or cultural groups.

- What are the roles of men and women in this culture? What is the role of children, elders, and extended family members?
- What is the communication style of this culture? How does one show respect?
- How are the children disciplined?
- What is the role of religion or spirituality in this community?

You can educate yourself through formal training, your own research, and most of all, by learning directly from someone who belongs to the group in question.

Building Affirming Relationships across Lines of Difference

True partnership with prospective and current resource families depends on one-on-one relationships and building trust. Some guidelines for building relationships with people who are different from you include the following.

- Be flexible about time; different cultures view time differently
- Correct pronunciation shows respect: learn to pronounce each person's name
- Do not be offended if a client speaks to another person in their language
- Adjust your communication style as much as possible to the person's style in regards to tone, pauses, pace of speech, gestures, eye contact, personal space, and touching
- Understanding the person's interpretation of their culture; it is critical to recognize that everyone has his or her own personal belief system

Delivering Quality Customer Service: The First Contact

When Families Initiate Contact

Many people think about fostering for a year or more and hear/see messages about foster care 7-9 times before making an initial inquiry call.

When people finally reach out to make that first call, your response needs to be warm, timely, and encouraging (AdoptUSKids, n.d.). From the beginning, each potential foster or adoptive family should be considered a precious resource, deserving personal attention and efficient service.

Remember, we need them much more than they need us!

Partnering with Your Resource Families to Make that Personal Connection

Don't have enough staff to do home visits to all new callers? This can be a great role for experienced resource families. Or you can ask new callers if they would like a phone call from a current resource family to answer more of their questions.

Worried about what your current resource families might say? Think again. It's better for families to know the real story from the beginning and hear from a current resource family that MDHS is going to be there to offer support.

Notes:

Delivering Quality Customer Service: Personal Filters

Keeping Our Own Preferences in Check

For many of us, the ideal family looks a lot like our own. Of course, this kind of bias—often unconscious and unintentional—occurs in all professions and types of people. We tend to feel most comfortable with people who are most like us (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995; Phelps, et al. 2000). However, when making life-altering decisions about finding homes for children, this kind of bias needs to be brought into the light and challenged.

Some families who wish to foster or adopt may be so different from the social worker that it is hard to see their strengths. A family with limited formal education may seem lacking to a social worker from a middle class, college-educated background. A non-traditional family may seem inappropriate to a worker from a very traditional family. But are these families the only ones with characteristics and skills needed to provide the best care for the type children we have in MDHS custody? Simply because certain families do not adhere to our accustomed way of living does not make them unsuitable matches for our children.

True, we need resource families who can support themselves without an over-reliance on the small reimbursement provided for taking care of children from the child welfare system. Yet often there is a values-based decision about what is needed for a child to live happily with a family.

It's not that finances shouldn't play a part in home study process; it's just that we need to recognize our own biases about money, social class, and lifestyle. A family may not be just right for you personally, but they may be just right for a child in need of a home.

Notes:

Delivering Quality Customer Service: Personal Filters cont.

Examining Our Assumptions about Money and Motivation

Some child welfare professionals are “put off” when one of the first questions a prospective resource family asks is in regards to financial compensation. Although social workers may feel concerned, a family’s primary reason for wanting to foster is not always financially motivated. This is a good example of a time when it is important to evaluate personal biases. Given that many people deliberate a long time before calling the agency, it is possible that they have discovered the answers to their other questions (e.g., is their house large enough, how long is pre-service training, etc). It may be that financial questions are among the few they have not yet answered.

The point? Even if someone’s first question is about money, do not assume they are just “in it for the money.” Remember the principle of partnership is one that says “judgments can wait.”

Notes:

Delivering Quality Customer Service: Regional Directors

Key Players in Resource Family Recruitment and Retention: Regional Directors

Why Regional Directors Should Focus on Resource Family Recruitment & Retention

Outcomes for children. Most of the outcomes we seek for children in care are directly related to having an array of well-trained and well-supported resource families. These outcomes all center on the best interests of the child.

How Resource Families Affect CFSR Outcomes

Well trained and highly supported resource families assist us in meeting several Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) Outcomes related to safety, permanency and wellbeing of children in care. Let's take a few minutes to brainstorm ways in which resource families help us in meeting our goals.

Delivering Quality Customer Service: CFSR

CFSR ITEM	THE RESOURCE FAMILY ROLE
<p>Safety Outcome 1: Children are protected from abuse and neglect</p>	
<p>Permanency Outcome 1: <i>Children have permanency and stability in their living arrangements</i></p>	
<p>Permanency Outcome 2: <i>The continuity of family relationships and connections is preserved for children</i></p>	
<p>Well-Being Outcome 1: <i>Families have enhanced capacity to provide for their children’s needs</i></p>	
<p>Well-Being Outcome 2: <i>Children receive appropriate services to meet their educational needs</i></p>	
<p>Well-Being Outcome 3: <i>Children receive appropriate services to meet their physical and mental health needs</i></p>	

Supporting and Maintaining Resource Families

Who's Job Is It?

In some child welfare agencies there is an unspoken cultural divide: If you license and recruit resource homes, then resource families are your business. If you do investigations and/or foster care, then the children are your business, not the resource parents.

Unfortunately, this split means that many resource families do not receive the information, support, and follow-up they need to maintain placements and continue to foster or adopt. The direct result: resource family turnover, more disrupted placements, greater negative impact on children, and fewer homes available for them.

Supporting Resource Families during Resource Report Investigations

Any level of repeat maltreatment in foster care is unacceptable. Nationally, relatively few children experience repeat maltreatment while in foster care; however, resource parents themselves are at high risk of ALLEGATIONS of child maltreatment.

Every year many innocent resource parents endure the anguish of a resource investigation. How these assessments are handled by the agency has a major impact on whether those foster parents continue or quit fostering even if the report is unsubstantiated. While children's safety is always the first concern, MDHS worker also play a critical role in minimizing unnecessary placement disruptions and trauma for children in care, and in keeping good resource homes available.

Here are some tips to help you support resource families during investigations:

- Just as we strive to do for all families, maintain open communication, gather all the facts before making judgments.
- Keep resource parents informed about the resource investigation process, their rights, and the Agency's plans related to follow up home visits, etc.
- The family's resource worker can help inform and educate the family about the process in partnership with you. This is why it is vital to inform the resource worker of the report and make every effort to coordinate a time for the home visit when both the investigator and resource specialist can be present.

Administrative and Fiscal Staff - Key Strategies for Supporting Resource Families

- **Process paperwork and payments efficiently and without delay.** Help workers complete forms correctly on the front-end. It is crucial to retention and placement stability that children get needed services and resource families get needed reimbursements timely.
- **Look for patterns and problems with paperwork, eligibility, and funding issues.** These issues impact the services children and families receive. Problem-solve and troubleshoot to keep the system running smoothly!
- **Facilitate connection.** If you receive a phone call from a foster, adoptive, or kinship parent, transfer the call to someone who can help them immediately with their issue or need.
- **Pitch in.** Participate in recruitment and retention events not only by attending but in planning, fundraising, and set up/clean up.
- **Say “Thanks.”** If you see a resource parent in your building or in the community, thank them for what they do for our children.

Notes:

How Caseworker's Can Help

Perhaps no other team member has more impact on resource family satisfaction than the child's caseworker. The caseworker plays a crucial role in keeping resource families informed, valuing their unique insights and knowledge about each child, and responding to problems that could lead to placement disruption. In fact, resource parents often cite the following issues among their top reasons for requesting their home to be closed: (Gibbs & Wildfire, 2007; NCFC, 1991; Rhodes et al., 2001):

- Poor communication with caseworkers
- Inadequate consultation and support from workers
- Poor agency response to crises
- Disrespect, not being treated as team member/partner

In Mississippi, word of mouth is the number one way people gain and trust information. When resource families have negative interactions with our Agency, they are telling their friends and family about their experiences. The Agency's reputation in the community becomes diminished, and it becomes even more difficult to recruit new resource families.

For every experienced resource family who leaves the Agency, two more families must be recruited and trained to make up for the level of experience lost when an experienced family closes their home.

Notes:

How Supervisors Can Help

As a supervisor, you set the tone for your units. Workers will not know that everyone is expected to partner with and support resource families unless you talk about it and model it.

Encourage workers to review the home studies of families who are caring for children on their workload. The home study provides a variety of information about resource families including their family background, available supports, work schedules, and more. Workers will be better able to relate to and partner with resource families once they have some basic background information.

We all know how close we can become to the kids we work with. Getting to know their resource families and building a trusting relationship with the resource parents can help reduce your own anxieties about the safety and wellbeing of the children entrusted to your care.

Notes:

How ALL DFCS Staff Can Support Resource Families

- **Return Phone calls.** All the picnics and appreciation certificates in the world cannot compare to someone responding when you need help. Whether the caregiver is handling a crisis, hoping for respite, or just needing to vent, the few minutes you devote to a timely response can save you many hours down the road trying to preserve a placement that's falling apart. Give families alternate numbers for supervisors, etc.
- **Be responsive.** When there is a crisis or concern, be responsive. Return the call, go to the home, and find the service they need as soon as possible.
- **Be creative** in how you might partner with resource families. Are they part of agency committees or implementation teams? What expertise, strengths, or community connections might a resource family have that could further the agency's work?
- **Encourage all child welfare staff attend PATH trainings.** This will give them a greater understanding of the resource family role and how they can support it. This also helps set the tone for future interactions between field staff and resource families.
- **Encourage and provide incentives for all staff to participate in recruitment and retention events:** community speaking events, orientations, pre-service training (PATH), in-service training, resource parent meetings, recognition events, etc. We know there is rarely money for these types of incentives, so be creative!
- **Consider collaboration on training and support a win-win:** Our Agency can increase positive outcomes for children if everyone is actively involved recruiting, developing and maintaining good homes for them. For example, if a county worker participates in an in-service training on managing difficult behaviors, she may meet a resource family willing to foster a teen currently placed in another county or in a group home. Getting to know and building relationships with resource families is key!
- **Give them information.** Provide full disclosure regarding the background and needs of the child. Keep resource families informed about the child's situation and provide updated information about the child's needs in a timely manner.
- **Keep families informed** about the case plan, court happenings, and other important events in a child's case. Be creative about how to do this when you have a large caseload: ask families to call you for updates after court dates or use e-mail. For example, if resource families understand the full picture of a child's case plan and the birth family's goals, as well as how case decisions are made by DHS and judges, they are less likely to be blind-sided and distraught about changes. Resource families do not get to decide what happens to children in care, but they deserve to be kept informed and prepared.

- **Include resource parents in permanency planning for the child.** Resource parents should be included in discussions and meetings to share ideas about possible permanent families for the child. Invite them to court hearings, child and family team meetings, other meetings, and reviews.
- **Be flexible in making appointments with and for resource families.** Work with resource parents when planning home visits, meetings, or appointments for the child. Resource families have schedules, too!
- **Gather information about the child from the resource parents.** Resource parents are the best informants about the day-to-day needs of the child. Ask them to give you information that can help identify the best family for the child and make the child's transition smoother if the child needs to be moved for any reason.
- **Promote stable placements.** Provide ongoing support, planned respite, and needed services to families to prevent a disruption or crisis from happening before it is too late
- **Help resource parents adopt if that is the plan.** Many children are adopted by their resource parents. They will need the help of the adoption worker in making that big decision.
- **Be sensitive to resource parents when a child is leaving.** Even if resource parents are glad the child will be returning home or have decided not to adopt, they still care about the child and will likely be emotional when the child leaves their home.
- **Educate and support your coworkers.** Enhance the experience of resource families by contributing to efforts to ensure all agency staff are on the same page when it comes to resource families.
- **Realize that every person you encounter in your work could be a current or potential foster or adoptive parent.** The tone you help set for the Agency through your customer service and attitude influences whether resource families feel respected and welcome.
- **Keep a stack of brochures or agency business cards handy** to give out to people during your work day and around the community. You never know what seeds you plant that could bear fruit for a child in need of a home.
- **Recruit and build support for foster care in your own community.** You may belong to a place of worship, civic group, or club that could provide essential support to the Agency's efforts to care for children.
- **Follow up with interested families.** When a family expresses an interest in fostering or adopting, get back to them as soon as possible.

Delivering Quality Customer Service: *Smiling- It Will Only Get You So Far*

So, as you can see, providing quality customer service isn't just about smiling and being polite. The more respected and valued our customers feel, the more likely they are to partner with us to achieve positive outcomes for children and families. This, at the end of the day, is the reason we are all here.

We believe in the safety and wellbeing of children and their families. By instituting the principles of customer service set forth by the Mississippi Department of Human Services, we all have an opportunity to enrich the experiences of those around us and increase positive outcomes for those we work with.

Family & Children's Services Customer Service Pledge

Today and every day, I commit myself to providing quality customer service by:

Understanding customers come first

Delivering a smiling, helpful, positive, professional outlook and attitude

Treating everyone with respect, fairness, and dignity

Listening to our customers with a caring demeanor

Returning phone calls within one business day

Providing knowledgeable answers, and resolving issues promptly and accurately

Keeping customers informed about their concerns

Thanking and acknowledging our customers

Continually exceeding customer expectations

Understanding customer satisfaction is a direct reflection of our effectiveness as an organization

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This workshop was created by MDHS, Family & Children’s Services as part of its Diligent Recruitment and Retention grant, with technical assistance provided by the NRCRRFAP at AdoptUSKids.

Workshop materials developed by:

Jessica T. Michael, LMSW, MS GRITS Project Director

Meredith M. Mayo, MDHS Graduate Social Work Intern, University of Alabama



“The Diligent Recruitment & Retention Grant is funded by the Children’s Bureau, Administration on Children, Youth, & Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, under grant 90-CO-1052.”

Mississippi Department of Human Services Family & Children's Services

Customer Service Workshop

Session I

Customer Service Basics

Letter from the Executive Director (p.2)

- A message from Richard A. Berry, Executive Director, Division of Family & Children's Services



Objectives (p.3)

- **This workshop will provide you with skills and tools which will empower you to**
 - Recognize the value of customer service in child welfare
 - Treat others with respect and value coworkers, community partners and resource parents as valuable members of the team
 - Handle conflict with customers, should it arise
 - Understand the importance of returning phone calls and communicating with customers in a timely and reliable manner
 - Provide optimal service delivery to resource families thus leading to the recruitment of more families and the retention of current families
 - Offer resource families with the necessary support that they may provide quality care for our children

Introduction (p.5)

- **MDHS Believes:**
 - People are innately good and want to do their best work
 - Building relationships in our workplaces, with our customers, and in our lives is a primary goal
 - We always have choices in how we act and respond
 - Everyone can make a difference, no matter what their job or position in the agency

Introduction, cont. (p.5)

- **MDHS Believes:**
 - Lifelong learning, creative thinking, and the gift of appreciation help us to be our best selves
 - Enthusiasm is contagious
 - We can all find meaning in our work, and we are all here to serve. (-Barbara Glanz)

Introduction, cont. (p.5)

- **Everyday you provide a valuable public service that:**
 - **Benefits families and children**
 - **Demonstrates high standards of personal integrity and professionalism**
 - **Gains the trust and respect of our customers and co-workers**

**You're in a noble profession.
Be proud of what you do and where you work!**

The Role of Customer Service (p. 6)

- What is good customer service?
- Give an example of good customer service you received from somewhere – a store, a restaurant, etc.
- What made that experience memorable?

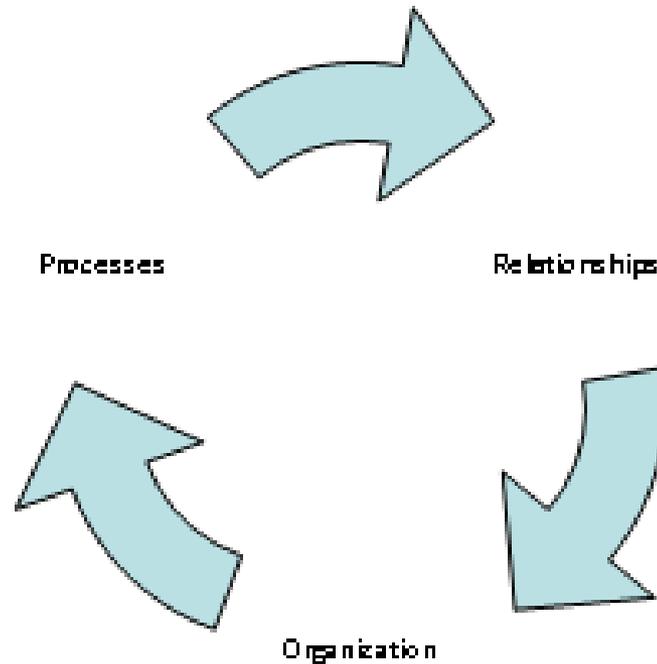
“Customer Service” as defined by MDHS (p.6)

- **Customer service is the customers’ perception of the way they are treated, the responsiveness to the needs identified, and the extent to which they are engaged and valued in teamwork to meet the needs of children and families.**

Customer Service “PRO” (p. 6)

- **P – Processes**
 - Timely response and relevant services
 - Consistency and efficiency
- **R – Relationships**
 - Building mutual trust and respect
 - Family engagement
 - Creating partnerships
- **O – Organization**
 - Customer service is a strategic priority and everybody’s business
 - A culture that responds to staff & families’ needs

Customer Service "PRO", cont. (p. 6)



Planning & Implementing: Quality Customer Service (p. 7)

- **Establish a vision for good customer service**
- **Assess the quality of our current customer service techniques and make recommendations for improvement**
- **Plan and design ways to enhance customer service quality for internal and external customers**
- **Attempt customer service improvements while striving for full scale improvements**
- **Consider ways to sustain your improvements**

Defining our “Customers” (p.7-8)

- **Who are the customers in child welfare?**
 - **External Customers (anyone we do business with)**
 - **Internal Customers (anyone within the Agency)**

Mississippi's Customer Service Principles

"The 5 R's" (p.9)

- **Responsive**
 - Reacting in a timely manner to meet responsibilities to address identified needs
- **Reliable**
 - Being honest and trustworthy in all interactions with customers and meeting commitments
- **Respectful**
 - Interacting with customers in a way that makes them feel valued and promotes dignity and self-worth
- **Relationships**
 - Valuing the role of every family, child, and staff member and working together as a team to achieve positive outcomes
- **Recognition**
 - Showing appreciation for the contributions of each team member openly and frequently

Mississippi's Customer Service Principles

"The 5 R's", cont. (p.9)

- **Responsive**
- **Reliable**
- **Respectful**
- **Relationships**
- **Recognition**

What does this look like in practice?

What is unacceptable?

Mississippi's Customer Service Principles

"The 5 R's", cont. (p.10)

- **We are Responsive!**

- **Responsiveness in practice:**

- Phone calls/e-mails are returned in a timely manner
 - Worker meets the customer's needs – makes sure needs (if appropriate) are met
 - When worker's don't know the answer, they say they don't know, but will find out (and do, and then answer later)
 - Worker answers the customer's questions or tries to find the answer; tells the customer, "I will find out for you."

Mississippi's Customer Service Principles

"The 5 R's", cont. (p.10)

- **We are Reliable!**

- **Reliability in practice:**

- Resource parents are given all known information about a child placed in their home
- All available information is shared in a timely and trustworthy manner
- Be honest with potential resource families about the characteristics and needs of children in care
- Complete work timely and accurately (making referrals, mailing notices, etc.)
- Workers meet commitments – they do what they say they will do

Mississippi's Customer Service Principles

"The 5 R's", cont. (p.11)

- **We show respect!**
 - **Respect in practice:**
 - Use a warm/polite tone of voice
 - Stay calm when dealing with angry customers
 - Do not use first names of external customers unless given permission
 - Workers pay attention to the customer
 - Ensure all customers have the opportunity to be heard

Mississippi's Customer Service Principles

"The 5 R's", cont. (p.11)

- **We build relationships!**
 - **Building relationships in practice:**
 - All parties are involved in decisions on the front end – not simply informed about decisions
 - Customers are included in the decision making and the gathering of information as valued members of the team
 - Workers coordinate with the family; they adapt and negotiate when needed
 - All team members can voice a clear understanding of their own roles and responsibilities

Mississippi's Customer Service Principles

"The 5 R's", cont. (p.12)

- **We recognize excellent customer service skills!**
 - **Recognition in practice:**
 - County workers recognize the value of what resource workers do and resource workers recognize the value of what county workers do
 - Worker demonstrates energy in her work and expresses a positive attitude towards her job
 - Appreciation for what each person is doing is frequently and openly expressed

Customer Service Tips to Remember (p.12)

- **Maintain a positive attitude at all times. What you think about customers is how you will treat them.**
 - The number one thing that really matters to customers is how they are treated
 - Keep your focus on what you can do to solve a customer's concern
 - Exhibit a “glad I could help” attitude when dealing with customers
 - Smile

L.A.S.T. (p.13)

- We can't always fix everything, but keeping a few “customer service tools” handy can help in a pinch
 - **Listen**
 - **Apologize**
 - **Solve**
 - **Thank**

Using Solution-Based Language (p.13)

Using constructive words that are solution-based rather than blame-based is another valuable customer service tool.

Instead of saying....

- I need (want) you to..
- You have to...
- I'll try...
- We don't do that here...
- Sorry...
- I can't do that...
- You are required to...
- You need to...
- You must...
- Don't you want to be a better parent?

How about saying...

Pay Close Attention (p.14)

- **Personal Space**
- **Posture**
- **Be observant**

Small, interpersonal interactions mean a great deal in the area of customer service! They can change customer perceptions and ultimately affect the success of your customer service efforts.

Phone & Email Etiquette (p.15)

- It's not *what* you say; it's *how* you say it.
 - A flat tone of voice says, "I don't like my job and would rather be somewhere else."
 - Slow pitch and presentation say, "I am sad and lonely- don't bother me."
 - A high pitch, rapid voice says, "I'm enthusiastic and excited!"
 - A loud voice says, "I'm angry and aggressive."

Phone Etiquette (p.15-16)

- **Answering the phone**
 - “Good morning. Thanks for calling Family & Children’s Services, my name is Emma, how may I help you?”
- **Troubleshooting**
 - Putting a customer on hold
 - Transferring a call
 - Taking a message
 - Ending the call

E-mail (p.17)

- Respond to your business emails quickly!
 - Business e-mail should be answered within one day. **No exceptions.**
 - Be cautious of addressing sensitive issues via email correspondence

First Impressions – You only get one!

(p.18)

- **Making a Good First Impression**
 - Thoughtfulness in meeting a customer's needs
 - Personal responsibility
 - Quick problem solving
 - Offering immediate assistance
 - Friendliness
 - Using the customer's name in conversation
 - Polite and courteous manners
 - Neatness
 - A genuine smile

First Impressions – You only get one! cont.

(p.18)

- **Factors that create a negative impression:**
 - Making the customer wait
 - Not answering the phone promptly
 - Not saying “please” and/or “thank you”
 - Speaking loudly or condescendingly
 - Making faces, frowning, acting distant, not smiling
 - Looking disheveled or like you don’t care about your appearance
 - A poor handshake
 - Focusing on another task while addressing or servicing a customer

10 Major Do's and Don'ts of Customer Service

(p.19-21)

- “No”
- “I don't know.”
- “That's not my job/That's not my unit.”
- “You are right – that is bad”
- “Calm down”
- “I'm busy right now”
- “Call me back”
- “That's not my fault”
- “You'll need to take that up with my supervisor”
- “You want it by when?”

Polite and Friendly Responses (p.21)

Wrong Approach

- “I don’t know.”
- “No.”
- “That’s not my job.”
- “That’s too bad.”
- “That’s not my fault.”
- “You want it by when?”
- “Calm down!”
- “I’m busy right now.”
- “Call me back.”

Polite Alternative

- “I’ll find out.”
- “What I can do is...”
- “Let me find the right person to help you.”
- “I understand your frustrations.”
- “Let’s see what we can do about this.”
- “I’ll try my best.”
- “I’m sorry.”
- “I will be with you in a moment.”
- “I will call you back.”

Communicating with the Unsatisfied Customer (p.22)

- **Lame excuses we've all heard when we were the customer:**
 - “The computer system was down half the day.”
 - “It's the clerk's fault.”
 - “That's out of my control.”
 - “I never got the message.”
 - “That's just the way it is.”

Communicating with the Unsatisfied Customer, cont.

(p.22-23)

- **Express your apologies.**
- **Do not argue and do not interrupt.**
- **Do not lose your self-control.**
- **Point out the facts.**
- **Admit the problem.**
- **Involve the customer in problem solving.**

Good Customer Service: Let's Practice!

(p.24)

- **External Customers** – anyone outside of the Agency
- **Internal Customers** – each other; resource parents
 - Although the internal customer scenario can be viewed more in the context of “conflict resolution,” it is important to understand that the way employees treat each other is also a very important aspect of customer service. Not only is it important to “treat colleagues with respect,” per the NASW Code of Ethics, but treating our colleagues with respect and coming to a resolution peacefully also allows us to practice how we will interact with our clients in frustrating situations.

Session 2

Quality Customer Service
& Resource Families

Why we say “Resource Families”

(p.26)

- *Foster families. Adoptive Families. Relatives.*
- Resource Family refers to anyone who provides a safe, stable, loving home for a child in care.
- Why use this term?
 - Children need families who can play multiple roles over time.

What are Resource Families Saying?

(p.27-28)

- **MS Foster Care Service Assessment**
 - **October 2009**
- **Questions Raised by the Data**
 - **What is the process of gaining needed background information for children in care? How is this information shared with resource families?**
 - **Do workers omit or downplay certain information about a child's behaviors or special needs for fear a family may not accept the placement?**
 - **Is there a delay in getting needed assessments and screenings completed?**
 - **What is the availability/quality of therapeutic care in the Region?**
 - **Do workers make every effort to review the resource family's home study prior to making a placement?**

Resource Families - MVPs (p.29)

Staff

- Empowers **staff** to include resource families as team members...

RF

- Empowers **resource families** to include birth families as part of the team ...

BF

- Empowers **birth families** to care for their children.

Resource Families: Partners, Not Employees

(p.30)

- Resource families do have a **job** to do; however, they do not “**work**” for MDHS. We are not their boss.
- Resource families are partners who join with MDHS in the pursuit of welfare for children and their birth families.
- Multiple Roles:
 - Nurture for children in care until they can be reunited with their parents.
 - Work with birth family towards reunification.
 - Serve as members of the team working closely with MDHS.
 - May eventually adopt the children into their home.

Resource Families: Partners, Not Employees

cont. (p.31)

- **Supporting Resource Families**
 - Understand the connection between the overall success of the Agency and the ability to attract, train, support and maintain qualified resource families.
 - Apply family-centered principles of partnership when interacting with resource families:
 - Everyone desires respect
 - Everyone needs to be heard
 - Everyone has strengths
 - Judgments can wait
 - Partners share power
 - Partnership is a process

The Core of Concurrent Planning

(p.32)

- **RFs play a role in preserving family ties, supporting children during separations, and coaching birth families to enable reunification**
- **About 60% of children adopted from foster care are adopted by their resource family**
- **After the children themselves, resource families are the best source for child-specific recruiting**

Building Relationships with Resource Families

(p.32)

- **Get to know the resource families**
- **Be friendly to resource families.**
- **Be available to speak with resource families upon request.**
- **Give out your contact information.**
- **Consider resource families in all you do.**

Resource Families as Recruiters

(p.33)

- Satisfied resource parents are the single best tool for recruitment.
- Working in collaboration with resource parents to increase recruitment should improve retention as well.
- Resource parents can aid in recruitment by:
 - Sharing experiences
 - Providing parts of pre-service/in-service trainings
 - Following up with new applicants
 - Organizing support groups
 - Organizing recognition/appreciation events
 - Provide individualized mentoring for new resource parents

Celebrate the Diversity of Resource Families

(p.34)

- **The Multiethnic Placement Act (MEPA)**
 - Federal law and best practice dictate that agencies should diligently recruit potential foster and adoptive families who reflect the ethnic and racial diversity of children for whom homes are needed.
 - MEPA is one of the laws aimed at removing barriers to permanency for children in the child welfare system.

Intentions of MEPA (p.34)

- **Decrease the length of time children wait to be adopted**
- **Facilitate the recruitment and retention of foster/adoptive parents who can meet the needs of children awaiting placement**
- **Eliminate discrimination on the basis of race, color, or national origin of the child or the prospective foster/adoptive family**

Agency Requirements of MEPA (p.34)

- The Agency is prohibited from delaying or denying a child's foster care or adoptive placement on the basis of the child's or prospective foster/adoptive parent's race, color, or national origin
- The Agency is prohibited from denying to any individual the opportunity to become a foster/adoptive parent on the basis of the applicant's race, color, or national origin
- The Agency must diligently recruit resource and adoptive parents who reflect the racial and ethnic diversity of the children in need of such homes.

MEPA - What does this all mean?

(p.35)

- Race, color, or national origin of a child or family cannot be routinely considered.
- The Agency **cannot** make placement decisions based on the birth parent's preferences on racial or ethnic factors.
- The Agency cannot establish a list of placement preferences based on racial or ethnic factors.
- The Agency must evaluate all applicant's capacities to raise children, including children with special needs, and cannot limit this evaluation to applicants of certain racial or ethnic backgrounds.

Supporting Resource Families During Resource Investigations (p.36)

- **Maintain open communication**
- **Gather facts before making judgments**
- **Keep resource family informed about the process**
- **Partner with the family's Resource Specialist and visit with the family together whenever possible**

Cultural Sensitivity (p.36)

- **Demographic Trends**
 - Male/Female family roles
 - Children/Elder/Extended family roles
 - Communication styles
 - Discipline techniques
 - Religion/Spirituality
- **Building Affirming Relationships across Lines of Difference – Establishing Mutual Trust**

Engaging Resource Families - From the First Contact (p.37)

- Many people think about foster for a year or more and hear or see messages about foster care 7-9 times before making an initial inquiry call.
 - Your response should be warm, timely, and encouraging.
 - Treat every applicant as a precious resource, deserving personal attention and efficient service.
 - We need them more than they need us!

Engaging Resource Families, cont.

(p.37-39)

- **Partner with resource families; make personal connections.**
- **Keep your own preferences in check.**
- **Examine your own assumptions about money and motivation.**

RDs: Key Players in Recruitment and Retention

(p.40)

- **Why should Regional Directors focus on Recruitment and Retention?**
 - **Most of the outcomes we seek for children in care are directly related to having an array of well-trained, well-supported resource families.**

How Resource Families Affect CFSR Outcomes

(p.41)

CFSR Item	The Resource Family Role
Safety Outcome 1: Children are protected from abuse and neglect	
Permanency Outcome 1: Children have permanency and stability in their living arrangements	
Permanency Outcome 2: The continuity of family relationships and connections is preserved for children	
Well-Being Outcome 1: Families have enhanced capacity to provide for their children's needs	
Well-Being Outcome 2: Children receive appropriate services to meet their educational needs	
Well-Being Outcome 3: Children receive appropriate services to meet their physical and mental health needs	

How Resource Families Affect CFSR Outcomes

(p.41)

CFSR Item	The Resource Family Role
Safety Outcome 1: Children are protected from abuse and neglect	Resource families provide safe, nurturing homes for children in care.
Permanency Outcome 1: Children have permanency and stability in their living arrangements	Resource families maintain children in their home despite great challenges and sometimes minimal services. They provide stability and support. Often adopt after TPR.
Permanency Outcome 2: The continuity of family relationships and connections is preserved for children	Resource families facilitate contact with family members, often provide homes for sibling groups, and maintain life books and other historical documents for children.
Well-Being Outcome 1: Families have enhanced capacity to provide for their children's needs	Resource families can provide crucial modeling and mentoring for birth parents. Partnerships in parenting are vital in achieving more timely and successful reunification.
Well-Being Outcome 2: Children receive appropriate services to meet their educational needs	Resource families often identify educational problems and serve as front-line responders for children and schools.
Well-Being Outcome 3: Children receive appropriate services to meet their physical and mental health needs	Resource families often identify medical and emotional problems and serve as front-line responders for children and treatment providers.

Supporting and Maintaining RFs (p.42)

- **Who's job is it?**
 - **The cultural divide**
 - Frontline Staff <> Resource Staff

Unfortunately, when this divide is present, many resource families do not receive the information, support, and follow-up they need to maintain placements and continue to foster or adopt.

The direct result: resource family turnover, more disrupted placements, greater negative impact on children, and fewer homes available for them.

How Admin./Fiscal Staff Can Contribute

(p.43)

- **Key Strategies for Supporting Resource Families (Administrative and Fiscal staff)**
 - Process paperwork and payments efficiently and without delay.
 - Look for patterns and problems with paperwork, eligibility, and funding.
 - Facilitate connection.
 - Pitch in.
 - Say “Thanks.”

How Caseworkers Can Help (p.44)

- **Caseworkers have an opportunity to make a major, positive impact on resource family satisfaction**
- **Caseworkers play a crucial role in keeping resource families informed, valuing their unique insights and knowledge about each child, and responding to problems that could lead to placement disruption.**

How Caseworkers Can Help, cont. (p.44)

- **Top Reasons Resource Families cite for requesting their home be closed:**
 - Poor communication with caseworkers
 - Inadequate consultation and support from workers
 - Poor agency response to crisis
 - Disrespect, not being treated as a team member/partner

These are issues each one of us has the power to change without any additional funding or resources. All we have to do is practice good customer service!

How Supervisors Can Help (p.45)

- **You set the tone for your units.**
 - Talk about and model the expectation of good customer service and support for resource families.
 - Encourage workers to review home studies for families who are caring for children on their workload.
 - Build relationships with the resource families in your county and encourage your workers to do so.

How DFCS Staff Can Support RFs

(p.46-47)

- Be creative
- 24-hour call back policy
- Attend PATH & other RF training opportunities
- Participate in R&R events
- Consider collaborations as win-win
- Extend invitations to FTMs to ensure their understanding and that they have a chance to provide input
- Keep them informed
- Consistently practice good customer service
- Keep a stack of brochures and/or business cards handy
- Recruit and build support for foster care in your own community

Smiling will only get you so far...

(p.48)

- **Quality customer service isn't just about smiling and being nice.**
- **The more respected and valued our customers feel, the more likely they are to partner with us to achieve positive outcomes for children and families.**

We are all here because we believe in the safety and wellbeing of children and families. By instituting the principles of customer service set forth by MDHS, we all have an opportunity to enrich the experiences of those around us and increase positive outcomes for those we work with!

Customer Service Pledge (p.48)

Today and everyday, I commit myself to providing quality customer service by:

Understanding customers come first

Delivering a smiling, helpful, positive, professional outlook and attitude

Delivering a smiling, helpful, positive, professional outlook and attitude

Treating everyone with respect, fairness, and dignity

Listening to our customers with a caring demeanor

Returning phone calls within one business day

Providing knowledgeable answers, and resolving issues promptly and accurately

Keeping customers informed about their concerns

Continually exceeding customer expectations

Understanding customer satisfaction is a
direct reflection of our effectiveness as an organization.

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THANK YOU!

Thank you for your participation today!



This workshop was created by MDHS, Family & Children's Services as part of its Diligent Recruitment and Retention grant, with technical assistance provided by the NRCRRFAP at AdoptUSKids.

Workshop materials developed by:

Jessica T. Michael, LMSW, MS Grits Project Director
Meredith M. Mayo, MDHS Graduate Social Work Intern, University of Alabama

"The Diligent Recruitment & Retention Grant is funded by the Children's Bureau, Administration on Children, Youth, & Families, Administration for Children & Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, under grant 90-CO-1052."

**Mississippi Department of Human Services
Family & Children's Services
"Customer Service Star"**



This certificate is awarded to

**In recognition of his/her pledge to provide
Quality Customer Service in Mississippi!**



Signature _____

Date _____

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