

DHHS POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

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| Section III: | Communications |
| Title: | Customer Service Communications Guidelines |
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Purpose

The purpose of this policy is to establish Customer Service Communications expectations for the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS).

Policy

The goal of this policy is to provide the best possible service to the people of North Carolina and all of our customers both internal and external. In support of this goal, the department has adopted the following customer service vision statement:

“The community of DHHS employees take pride in improving the lives of North Carolina citizens by providing effective, resourceful and caring services while inspiring the highest level of customer trust.”

Implementation

1. Division/facility/school directors shall be responsible for ensuring that this customer service communications policy is implemented.
2. Work plans for all employees will include an expectation of good customer service.
3. All departmental communications shall be conducted in a professional and courteous manner, responsive to the needs of the internal and/or external customer.
4. It is expected that all DHHS employees shall adopt the communication behaviors outlined in the attached guidelines.
5. The attached guidelines are not meant to be all inclusive and additional behaviors, which support the goal of providing good customer service, should be encouraged and supported by the division/facility/school.

Attachment

1. CUSTOMER SERVICE POLICY FOR THE TELEPHONE

All telephone calls shall be answered promptly and in a professional and courteous manner in accordance with the DHHS guidelines for responding to telephone calls.

A. Guidelines for the Telephone

Please remember that when “the telephone rings three, it rings for thee.” Answering the telephone is every employee’s responsibility throughout the DHHS. As a general rule, telephones should be answered within three (3) rings and it becomes each employee’s job to answer it.

When answering the telephone, use a friendly, professional manner. Our greeting is the first thing heard by callers, you are setting an example and making the first impression for the department. Speak distinctly, with a warm welcoming tone. Let your caller know which office he or she is talking with, by identifying the division/agency and telling him or her your name. Imagine that you are the caller, and answer in the way that you would want to be treated.

1. Here are sample greetings to use when answering office lines:

- *“Good Morning. DHHS Public Affairs, Jane Doe speaking. May I help you?”*
- *“Hello. Division of Facility Services. May I help you?”*
- *“Good Morning. Division of Aging, Jane Doe. May I help you?”*
- *Good Morning, Division of Child Development.*

2. Here are sample greetings for individual lines:

- *“Hello. This is Jane Doe. May I help you?”*
- *“Hello. This is Jane Doe in the Secretary’s Office.”*

Sometimes callers are in a hurry. They may interrupt you and seem rude. You should remain cool, friendly and cooperative.

Become a better listener. Stop talking and focus your attention on the caller. Avoid distractions. Concentrate on what the other person is saying. Show interest and concern to the reason for the call.

Find out what the caller needs. Don’t be afraid to ask the caller questions to

find out his or her concerns. Do not needlessly transfer the person because you did not listen to his/her question or problem. If you have determined you are not the person they should talk to, apologize to the caller and briefly explain why you are unable to assist him or her. Make sure you have the caller's approval before transferring the caller to the appropriate person. Give the caller the correct telephone number and the person's name to which you are transferring him or her.

3. Here is a sample response:

- *“Ms. Smith, I am really sorry you are having a problem receiving your child support payment; however, I am not the person you should talk to about this issue. I do know whom you should talk to and if it is all right with you, I am going to transfer you to her. So that you have the correct information, her number is 552-1234 and her name is Susie Doe.”*

B. Putting Callers “On Hold”

The telephone should never be answered with an immediate request for the caller to hold. Always ask the caller first if he or she minds holding and wait for his or her reply. When you initially put a caller on hold, never leave him or her on hold for more than thirty seconds.

1. Here is a sample greeting to use in this type of situation:

- *“DHHS Facility Services. Do you mind holding?”*

When getting back with the caller, who is on hold, always thank the caller for his or her patience. If you need to research information for the caller's inquiry, give him or her the option to either hold or you will get back with the caller when you have obtained the information. If the caller chooses to remain on hold, two minutes on hold is the maximum amount of time without returning to the caller for updates. If the caller prefers that you call him or her back, indicate the timeframe in which the caller may expect your call. Always thank the caller for waiting and use the person's name.

2. Here are samples:

- *“Thank you for waiting.” or “I really appreciate your patience, Ms. Smith.”*
- *“I will need to check out that information for you. Do you mind holding for a few minutes or would you prefer I call you back?”*

C. Transferring Calls

Callers should not be transferred directly to a voice mailbox without first asking the caller if that's okay. Give the caller the correct telephone number and the name of the person to whom he or she should talk. Briefly explain to the caller why you are unable to assist him or her yourself.

1. Here is a sample response:

- *“The person you need to speak with is Jane Doe and she is not in her office right now. I can transfer you to her voice mailbox so you can leave her a message. Let me give you her phone number so you will have it.”*

If the call is for someone else and you find that the person being called is not available, DO NOT put a call through directly to a voice mailbox without first talking to the caller and asking if that is what he/she wants to do.

2. Here is a sample response:

- *“Jane Doe isn't in her office right now, but I'll be glad to transfer you to her voice mailbox or I will take a message.”*

D. Callers with Limited or No English (LEP – Limited English Proficiency)

You may have a caller who speaks limited English or no English and he or she speaks only Spanish. If your agency has bilingual staff or an interpreter, you should transfer the caller to that person.

- *“Un Momento Por Favor” (then transfer the caller to the appropriate person)*

If your agency doesn't have bilingual staff or an interpreter, you should refer the caller to the Office of Citizen Services, CARE-LINE at (919) 733-4261 or 1-800-662-7030. (Voice/Spanish.)

- *“Un Momento Por Favor” (then transfer the caller to CARE-LINE).*

In cases other than Spanish, you would need to have the Department make arrangements with an interpreter agency so that you can assist the caller. You need to get the caller's name and telephone number so that you can call him or her back. The Center for New North Carolinians (TCNNC) in Greensboro may be an option to use to provide interpreter services. Note: TCNNC provides interpreters for eight different languages.

E. TTY Calls

You may have deaf or hard of hearing callers. If you do not have a dedicated TTY line, then you should transfer the caller directly to Office of Citizen Services, CARE-LINE TTY dedicated line at (919) 733-4851 or 1-877-452-2514.

2. CUSTOMER SERVICE POLICY FOR VOICE MAIL

Voice mail personal greetings shall be professional, kept current, and updated when necessary. Personal greetings shall indicate the staff member's name, position, frequency with which messages will be checked, and a provision for contacting someone in person. Voice mail shall be checked frequently and calls shall be returned promptly. Voice mail shall be used in accordance with the voice mail guidelines.

A. Guidelines for Voice Mail

Voice mail can be a valuable tool if used correctly. Used incorrectly, it may cause anxiety and even anger. The system can be the caller's first and last impression of your agency.

The DHHS voice mail policy is designed to ensure that callers do not become frustrated but receive prompt and quality customer service. Instead of getting a busy signal or no answer, the caller can leave a message in voice mail and from the personal greeting will know when to expect a call back or be given an option to speak to someone else.

North Carolina State law requires that callers to state agencies be given the choice to opt out of the automated system and speak directly with a live person. All DHHS agencies must comply with this regulation.

B. Personal Greetings

Your personal greeting for your voice mailbox should be current and updated daily. It should tell callers when you're going to be out of the office and unable to return phone calls. Let callers know when you will return calls and always give them an option of someone else whom they may call.

Personal greetings shall indicate the staff member's name and provide any relevant information you would like if you were the caller. An option for reaching a live person should be stated.

Speak clearly and make your greetings friendly but professional.

1. Here are some sample personal greetings:

- *“This is Jane Doe in the DHHS Office of Public Affairs. If you don’t want to leave a message on voice mail, dial “O” for assistance. Today is August 29th. Sorry you are getting my voice mail, but I’ll be checking my messages and I will call you back. Please leave your name, number and a brief description of what you need so I can help you when I call you back.”*
- *“This is Jane Doe at the Division of Facility Services. I’ll be out of the office until September 3rd. If you want to leave a message, I will be glad to return your call then. But if you need immediate assistance, please call John Smith at extension 243 in my office and he will be glad to help you.”*
- *“This is Jane Doe in the DHHS Office of Public Affairs. You can dial “O” if you don’t want to leave a voice mail message. Today is August 29th. I’ll be in a series of meetings for much of the day, but I will check my messages and return phone calls around 10:00 a.m. and 4:00 p.m. Please leave your name, number and details.”*

C. Messages

Your voice mailbox should be checked frequently for messages and it should never fill up. It is your responsibility to check your messages and to change your greeting to reflect your schedule.

Always return phone calls promptly. Callers may get very frustrated when they leave a message and do not receive a response in a timely manner. If the caller’s message will require a lengthy follow-up but you don’t immediately have the time and/or the answer, place a short phone call to let him/her know that you have received the message and will call back to talk more fully later.

Let other staff members know when you will be out of the office, especially for extended periods of time. This will prevent staff members from transferring a caller to your voice mail.

D. Internal Use of the Voice Mail System

The voice mail system may be used to correspond with others (internal customers) in your agency. If you need specific information from someone in your agency, you can use voice mail, along with e-mail and personal contact, to communicate with others. When you leave a recorded message, make sure you explain why you are calling and when you need a response.

3. CUSTOMER SERVICE POLICY FOR WRITTEN COMMUNICATION

Communication in the form of a letter or memorandum shall be written in a professional and courteous manner. The written response to internal or external correspondence shall be clear, informative and timely. The response shall be done in accordance with the DHHS guidelines for written communication.

A. Guidelines for Written Communication

Written communication can be a very effective way to respond to internal and external customers. Care should be taken to ensure that all responses provide the appropriate information to the customer and that the DHHS employees are accountable for the quality of service that is provided.

Letters and memoranda should be written in a professional format with the standard style, font and size used by the individual agency or division. All letters and memoranda should be proofread carefully, not only for spelling and punctuation, but also for consistency and accuracy.

The appropriate letterhead for the DHHS division or agency should be used. The letter should include the following: date, recipient's complete name and address, salutation, the response in the body of the letter, the complimentary closing, typed signature, writer and typist (PB:vl), and the "enclosure" or "attachment" notation and "copy – cc:" notation (if applicable). The final paragraph of the letter should include a person's name and telephone number to call if additional information is needed or if the recipient has more questions.

Memoranda should include the following: date, recipient's name, sender's name, and the subject in the heading; and the response in the body of the memorandum.

The NC Governor and the DHHS Secretary determine the format for correspondence that is written for their signatures. Refer to the DHHS Secretary's and NC Governor's office for format instructions.

4. CUSTOMER SERVICE POLICY FOR ELECTRONIC MAIL (E-MAIL)

Communication via e-mail shall be conducted in a professional and courteous manner. The e-mail response shall be clear, informative and timely. The response shall be written in accordance with the DHHS guidelines for communicating via e-mail.

A. E-mail

The e-mail can be another very effective and quick communication method to use when corresponding with internal and external customers. The DHHS e-mail policy is designed to ensure that all e-mail messages are handled appropriately and that the DHHS employees are accountable for the quality of services provided.

Communicate in a professional manner when using the e-mail system. Never put anything in an e-mail message that would be viewed as offensive or inappropriate for the business environment. Remember that all information contained in the e-mail message is considered public information.

The e-mail response should give complete and clear information with the option to use e-mail or call if there are questions. A letter format with a salutation and a complimentary closing should always be used when responding to inquiries. Always check for spelling, punctuation, and formatting errors prior to sending the e-mail message. Care should also be taken to ensure that all responses provide the appropriate information to the customer by checking for consistency and accuracy.

1. Here is a sample response:

- *“Ms. Brown, I received your e-mail message dated November 5, 2001. You had questions regarding child care assistance for your child Tommy. We contacted Sue Smith in the Forsyth County Department of Social Services. We were pleased to learn that you will begin receiving the child care assistance effective November 15, 2001. If you have additional questions about your child care assistance, please contact Sue Smith at your county social services office at (919) 123-4567 or contact me, Lynn Jones, at (919) 789-1011. Thank you.”*

Your electronic mailbox should be checked frequently for messages. It is your responsibility to always check your electronic mailbox for messages just like you check your voice mailbox. Always read your e-mail messages very carefully and respond in a timely manner. People may get frustrated when they send an e-mail message expecting a response and don't receive a response

back within an appropriate timeframe.

If you don't have an immediate answer and/or it may require a lengthier follow-up than normal, acknowledge receipt of the e-mail message, but note that you need additional time to research and respond.

If the e-mail message requires a response from someone else, acknowledge that you have received the e-mail message and note that you are going to forward it to the appropriate person who should handle the request. Include the person's name and e-mail address in your e-mail response. Always include a closing sentence in your e-mail message, giving them options to contact you if he or she needs additional assistance.

2. Here is a sample e-mail response:

- *“Thank you for your e-mail regarding your daughter’s problems with the child support enforcement system. I understand your concern about your daughter’s situation as a single working parent and your interest in supporting her through such a difficult time. However, I do not work with the child support enforcement system; therefore, I am going to forward your e-mail inquiry to John Doe who does work with that system. His e-mail address is john.doe@ncmail.net. Please let me know if you have any questions or if I can be of further assistance to you.”*

B. E-Mail Set-Up While Away From the Office

When you are away from your office longer than a normal timeframe, your e-mail should reflect that schedule. Using the Personal Account Manager (PAM) on the NCMail Messaging Service, you should enter an automatic reply that states your schedule. You can personalize the reply by typing in the message box. Please ask your supervisor or LAN Manager for instructions on how to use this function.

If you work out of your home and do not want to leave too many details on your e-mail, just leave the automated reply that you are away from your office at the moment.

1. Here is a sample message:

- *“I will be out of my office for vacation from July 1-7, 2002, but I will be happy to respond when I return on July 8th.”If you need assistance before I return on July 8th, please e-mail Sue*

Smith at her e-mail address, sue.smith@ncmail.net, or call her at (919) 733-1212.”

If you have someone else in your agency who can appropriately handle your e-mail responses while you are out, you can also use PAM to automatically forward your e-mail messages to that person so the sender is receiving the appropriate services in your absence. Please ask your supervisor or LAN Manager for instructions on how to use this function.

C. Confidential E-Mail Correspondence

If you should receive an e-mail inquiry that would require a response that could contain confidential information or if you need to attach documentation that is confidential, you should first respond to the e-mail message with a disclaimer statement. This statement would give the sender an option to have the information sent to them by regular mail through the U.S. Postal Service. The statement should read as follows:

- *“The information that you are sending through the state government e-mail address is considered public information. We can respond to your inquiry by e-mail but our response to you may contain information that is confidential. If you prefer a response to be sent to you by regular mail through the U.S. Postal Service, please submit your mailing address and specifically state that your response should not be sent through the state e-mail system.”*

If you need to put something or attach documentation in an e-mail message that could be viewed as highly confidential and sensitive, then you must always have a disclaimer statement in the e-mail message. The disclaimer statement would read as follows:

- *“The information contained in this e-mail message may include privileged and confidential information that is intended for the addressee only. If the reader of this message is not the intended recipient, you are duly notified that any dissemination, distribution or copy of this communication is strictly prohibited. If you have received this e-mail communication in error, please return to the sender immediately.”*

D. Web-Based Inquiries or Division/Department Web-Based E-Mail Messages

If a division or agency has an e-mail system that is designated for web-based inquiries, this type of inquiry should be set up to automatically generate a response that acknowledges receipt of the e-mail by indicating the sender

should receive a reply to his or her inquiry soon. This function should not be used for an individual's e-mail; it is designed for web-based inquiries only.

Here is an example of this type of web-based e-mail, which is designated for the CARE-LINE website in the Office of Citizen Services, care.line@ncmail.net. The automatic response for this e-mail states:

- *“The Office of Citizen Services is in receipt of your e-mail through the DHHS website. Your comments and /or questions are important to us. Be assured that you will receive a response to your inquiry as soon as possible. Thanks for contacting us and have a good day.”*

Remember that the mission of our department is to serve the people of North Carolina by enabling individuals, families, and communities to be healthy and secure, and to achieve social and economic well being. One of the first steps in achieving that mission is to show our interest in our customers by providing effective means of communication and doing so in a courteous, professional and effective manner.

For questions or clarification on any of the information contained in this policy, please contact [The Office of Citizen Services](#). For general questions about department-wide policies and procedures, contact the [DHHS Policy Coordinator](#).