



October 21, 2010

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Accuracy Focus Yields Results in Food Assistance Program

DES MOINES, Iowa – Despite sharply increased caseloads, eligibility workers for the Iowa Department of Human Services have cut the error rate by more than half for the food assistance program, formerly known as food stamps.

“Our cumulative error rate for the first eight months of the federal fiscal year is just 2.88 percent compared to 6.49 percent for the previous year,” said DHS Director Charles Krogmeier. “This ranks us among the most improved states in the country.”

Krogmeier said the error rate in Iowa hovered around the national average of about 6 percent for several years.

He said the need for improvement became clear when the national error rate dipped more than two percentage points below Iowa’s rate in the last two years.

There were several strategies for improving Iowa’s performance, such as additional training, better use of technology, and increasing the similarities in eligibility criteria for food assistance and other benefit programs.

The improved performance comes at a time when retirements and budget cuts have thinned the ranks of eligibility workers in county-based DHS offices. Simultaneously, the recession has driven up the number of Iowans eligible for government help, especially in food assistance.

In September, 162,000 Iowa households were receiving this benefit, an increase of 11 percent over the same month a year ago.

Eligibility workers, who process applications for food assistance and several other benefit programs, now have caseloads of about 630 each, an increase of 25 percent since the summer of 2009. There are 622 county-based income maintenance workers.

Error rates are based on a sampling formula used by USDA to determine state compliance with federal standards.