

REQUEST FOR BOARD ACTION

**HENDERSON COUNTY
BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS**

MEETING DATE: March 20, 2013

SUBJECT: Social Services' Informational Update

PRESENTER: Gary Cyphers, Member, DSS Board

ATTACHMENTS: Yes

SUMMARY OF REQUEST:

The DSS Board is providing monthly three-minute informational updates to the Board of Commissioners regarding various Social Services issues. The March 2013 update, provided by DSS Board Member Gary Cyphers, pertains to NC FAST.

BOARD ACTION REQUESTED:

No Board action requested. This item is for information only.

Suggested Motion:

No motion suggested.

Imagine that you are driving on Upward Road during the major widening construction. While the new lanes and bridge will eventually make driving quicker and more enjoyable, construction frequently can cause delays, longer trips, and aggravation. This is similar to what the Henderson County Department of Social Services staff and clients are experiencing currently.

Since late October 2012, DSS has been shifting to a new computerized processing system called NC FAST (North Carolina Families Accessing Services through Technology). Starting with the Food Stamp Program, this state-issued intake, eligibility-determination, and case processing system will eventually encompass all programs in DSS. These include Medicaid, Work First, Child and Adult Protective Services, and Child Care Services. It is replacing long-outdated technology that is more than 30 years old.

The NC Dept. of Health and Human Services (DHHS) is sponsoring NC FAST and asserts that it is designed to improve the way the state and counties conduct business. "NC FAST introduces new technological tools and business processes that will enable staff to spend less time performing administrative tasks and more time assisting families". The vision for NC FAST includes the following elements:

- **Efficient, effective assessment:** automated tools for workers to assess needs and determine eligibility.
- **Comprehensive case management:** tools to help workers track cases, share information, and coordinate services across programs.
- **Better outcomes and evaluation information:** comprehensive data for evaluating outcomes and ensuring accountability across programs.

Benefits for families will include: "one-stop shopping" with one-time communication of their information and needs; and, confidence that their benefits will be determined in an expedited, consistent manner from any place in the state. County DSSs and their employees will have:

- Tools to help them share information and track cases across program areas and county lines.
- More time to assist families as administrative tasks are automated.
- Increased ability to work with families within existing resources.
- Enhanced partnerships with employers, service providers, and other support organizations.
- Enhanced ability to identify clients' needs.

Like the construction on Upward Road, the transition for new Food Stamp applicants is requiring considerably longer waiting and interview times. A new applicant who walks in the door will wait an average of 60-90 minutes for an interview that takes on average about 80 minutes. These times are roughly double what was required under the old data system. When these clients return every six months for recertification, however, the time will be greatly shortened through NC FAST. At present, Henderson County DSS is averaging 400 new applicants a month.

In March 2013, the recertification of Food Stamp households opened prior to late October 2012 will begin using NC FAST. This also will entail a much longer conversion interview at the first recertification. Subsequent recertification interviews should be streamlined and much shorter. Currently, Henderson County DSS is averaging 600 recertification interviews each month.

The second major DSS program to transition to NC FAST is Medicaid. Staff expects that this will begin in May 2013, as part of the implementation of the Affordable Care Act. Although the NC General Assembly is

discussing what, if any, role the state will play in national health care reform, Medicaid cases will be converted to NC FAST. For clients that also receive Food Stamps, this conversion should be relatively expedited. For clients that do not receive Food Stamps, an initial conversion interview will take much more time than previously. Henderson County DSS currently has almost 15,000 Medicaid clients.

With any such major new computerized data processing system, glitches and problems are inevitable. The DSS staff and Board of Social Services are committed to identifying and resolving problems encountered. Since NC FAST is a state-wide system, resolution usually rests with NC DHHS. Accordingly, in December 2012 the Board of Social Services sent a strong letter to the state outlining our problems with and suggested solutions for the conversion. We then convened a meeting with five NC FAST representatives from Raleigh on Feb. 11, 2013. DSS staff from Buncombe and McDowell counties also participated. The meeting was very productive, and we are optimistic that identified corrections and improvements will make the NC FAST conversion better and better. The staff and Board will remain vigilant and assertive in ensuring that the process works as optimally as possible for Henderson County residents.

Sandy Morgan, Program Administrator for Food Stamps and Medicaid, remains optimistic about NC FAST. As she said in an October *Times-News* article, "once the painful implementation process is complete, the finished product should benefit all clients, especially people who use more than one DSS service. The software is designed to bring down the walls between each service. Instead of having clients fill out separate applications for each program, a staff member can determine, from a single application, the services for which a client is eligible. After implementation, NC FAST is designed to streamline all the access points for DSS clients for receiving services and assistance."

The next time you drive on Upward Road, appreciate the ultimate benefits of all the road improvements, but don't forget the necessary temporary delays and slow-downs those improvements required. DSS staff and Board are very hopeful that NC FAST will provide a similar information highway to better services for Henderson County residents.