Eliminating Costly Federal Fines through Improved Customer Service and Management Training
State of Vermont

Background: Entelechy worked with the State of Vermont's Agency of Human Services (formerly known as PATH) in 2003 and 2004 to design, develop, and deliver the highly successful *Food Stamp Intensive Training (FSIT)*. Entelechy was selected from a number of vendors due not to its knowledge of food stamps (we had none), but to our ability to create engaging, effective, focused training and its capacity to then deliver it throughout Vermont. The training was considered by many participants the best they had ever received. More importantly, after delivering *FSIT*, Vermont's food stamp payment accuracy error rate plummeted to around 5% and stayed there for several years.

Download our paper, *What Made FSIT Work?*, which outlines 100 design, development, and delivery techniques applied specifically to *FSIT* to guarantee its success.

As a direct result of the successes of *FSIT*, the State of Vermont Agency of Human Services (an agency in the Economic Services Division — ESD) turned again to Entelechy in 2013 and 2014 when its error rates had again increased. The training we created — *3SquaresVT – Intensive Training* — included four modules focusing on the error-prone areas of income and wages, household income, self-employment, and Federal Medical Expense Deduction, among others. Supporting the policy training provided to workers, Entelechy also designed and developed *Interviewing Excellence*, helping workers hone interviewing skills and, thereby, improving the accuracy of the information they collect from applicants. And, supporting worker training and performance, Entelechy designed and developed *Managing Performance*, a one-day training to enhance supervisors' and managers' abilities to improve individual and team performance.

Challenge: In both 2003-2004 and 2013-2014, Vermont's ESD knew that training was but one part of the overall solution and needed a training company that worked more broadly than just as a provider of training. The approach to training needed to include:

- Needs analysis to identify not only WHAT errors were being made, but also WHY errors were being made.

- Solution analysis to identify the best solutions to those error-prone areas, whether the solution included policy clarification, knowledge transfer, application, desk aids, documentation, or supervisory support.

- Interfacing with workers, supervisors, management, and Quality Assurance to uncover and highlight issues negatively impacting — and solutions addressing — payment accuracy.

While the additional performance elements – policy clarification, documentation, supervisory support, etc. – underpin the overall goal of improving payment accuracy, training was seen as the key pivot point for both the 2003-2004 and 2013-2014 initiatives. And, the training needed to meet several critical hurdles:

- The training must be face-to-face with over 200 eligibility workers located throughout the state.

- The training must be geared for seasoned eligibility workers, many of whom had been doing this work for over 20 years!

- The training must be focused on food stamp errors.

- The training must be enjoyable yet practical.

- The training needed to work, or Vermont was going to be fined again!

Solution: Entelechy created a program — called *Food Stamp Intensive Training* — of five modules, each module focusing on a specific food stamp topic; three of the modules were 4-hour sessions and two were 6-hour sessions. The five modules were each delivered ten times throughout the state. In addition, to ensure that managers and supervisors had the capability to reinforce what eligibility workers learned, we customized *Coaching for Performance* and delivered it prior to any food stamp training.

For more information, download *Food Stamp Intensive Training Overview*, a detailed description of the program.

In 2013-2014 when Vermont was again experiencing high payment error rates, Entelechy was sole-sourced as a result of the resounding success Vermont experienced in 2004. We developed and delivered *3SquaresVT - Intensive Training*, a four-module program that was co-delivered by Entelechy and a subject-matter expert. Supporting *3SquaresVT - Intensive Training*, Entelechy created and delivered *Interviewing Excellence* (for workers) and *Managing Performance* (for supervisors and managers) to sustain the worker performance improvements.

Result: Both 2003-2004 and 2013-2014 trainings were considered by many participants the best they had ever received. More importantly, after delivering *Food Stamp Intensive Training* and *3SquaresVT - Intensive Training*, Vermont's food

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stamp payment accuracy error rate plummeted to around 5% and Vermont has eliminated the sanctions USDA had imposed. Due to the success of *FSIT* and *3SquaresVT - Intensive Training*, Vermont has tapped into Entelechy's engaging and effective training for General Assistance training, Supervisor and Manager training, and other critical initiatives.

Additionally, the following is a press release indicating Vermont's dramatically improved payment accuracy.

3SquaresVT Payment Error Rate Greatly Improves

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: May 20, 2015

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Essex Junction, VT — Department for Children and Families (DCF) Commissioner Ken Schatz reported today that Vermont's payment error rate for 3SquaresVT — a federally-funded program that provides food assistance to about 87,000 Vermonters — was well below the required standard in Federal Fiscal Year (FFY) 2014. In FFY 2013, our payment error rate stood at 9.66%. This rate dropped to 2.58% in FFY 2014, ranking Vermont top in the nation for most-improved rate. The current state-reported payment error rate for the first four months of FFY 2015 is under 1%.

"We know that good food, enough food and a sense of security about where your next meal is coming from are crucial components for the health and well-being of individuals, children, and families," said Agency of Human Services Secretary Hal Cohen. "DCF staff worked extremely hard to ensure this level of security for all Vermonters. The improvement in the 3SquaresVT error rate is an indication of that level of work and dedication."

The Food & Nutrition Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which oversees the program nationally, requires states to achieve a minimum accuracy rate of 94% when issuing benefits – or face penalties. This means that the percentage of total recipients who were either under or over paid (calculated as a Payment Error Rate) must be below 6% to be in compliance.

"The improvement in our payment error rate is the result of a lot of hard work on the part of staff," said DCF Commissioner Ken Schatz. "I thank and commend all employees of our Economic Services Division for their strong commitment and dedication to making 3SquaresVT work for Vermonters in need."

Several initiatives contributed to the dramatic turnaround in our payment error rate:

- Adding new eligibility workers;

- Delivering intensive staff trainings;

- Restoring ESD's training unit; and

- Consulting with national experts around best practices.

"We applaud the Department for Children and Families for their outstanding work to strengthen systems and resolve Vermont's challenges with payment errors in the 3SquaresVT program," said Executive Director of Hunger Free Vermont Marissa Parisi. "Thanks to these efforts, Vermonters can be assured they will receive accurate food benefits in their time of need, which is our best defense in preventing hunger and malnutrition in our state."