

Learning From Families in Our Program

Surveying DOR Customers

To find out what our customers *really* think about us we put together survey questions – with the assistance of the Center for Survey Research at the University of Massachusetts Boston (CSR) -- that got to the heart of our customers' experiences with us. CSR sent the surveys – one for custodial parents and the other for noncustodial parents -- in March of 2013. We were given detailed results in July of 2013.

During the course of our year-long contract with CSR, we learned that there is much more to survey design and development than meets the eye. First, we learned that customer input is essential to developing survey questions. To that end, CSR held two focus groups (one with custodial parents and the other with noncustodial parents) to give parents the opportunity to talk about their likes – and dislikes - as well as their understanding of how we communicate. With customer input, we were able to draft questions that were more meaningful to our customers and that gave us more specific information about their experiences.

We also had to have enough responses to be able to rely on the results. To maximize our chances of getting a good response, we sent out quite a few surveys (2500 to noncustodial parents and 1600 to custodial parents), a reminder postcard and a second survey to those that didn't respond. We also facilitated the response rate by making the survey form itself easy to read and by letting parents know *why* they were receiving the survey, *how* DOR was going to use the results and finally – and perhaps most importantly – *that* DOR would never know whether or how an individual responded.

The survey response rate not only exceeded our expectations, it was also high enough to allow us to use the information -- with confidence – to plan for and begin making some changes to better meet the needs of our customers.

What we Learned

Generally, the questions were designed to let us know whether our customers feel they are: treated courteously, respectfully and fairly when speaking to us over the phone and in person; given information– in person and in writing – that answers their questions and is easy to understand; and able to find the information they are looking for.

While the results tell us that the majority of parents are generally satisfied with how we communicate, they also tell us more specifically what parents don't like. And, because we separately tracked custodial and noncustodial parent responses, we were able to compare their levels of satisfaction in all areas of the services we provide. Overall, significantly more custodial than noncustodial parents were satisfied with us and, more specifically, more custodial parents reported that:

- they are inclined to use the website, find the information they are looking for and find the information easy to understand; and
- they are treated courteously during phone calls and fairly at court hearings, were given an opportunity to ask questions during a hearing and were also given information about what to expect after the hearing.

The survey also asked about personal characteristics such as, level of education, age, and number of years with DOR to see if there are any outside factors that might influence satisfaction. Custodial and noncustodial parents were similar with respect to all characteristics, except level of education - with significantly more custodial parents reporting educations beyond high school. The survey also contained questions about computer use for online activities such as online bill paying and shopping – with significantly more custodial parents using computers.

These distinctions may explain why custodial parents – in far greater numbers - reported that it was easy to find the information they needed on our web site (90% vs. 67%) and that written information on the web and in letters was easy to understand (92% vs. 68% and 93% vs. 70%, respectively). These differences do not explain, though, the differences between custodial and noncustodial parents’ experiences of courteous treatment over the phone (96% vs. 82%) or ‘fair’ treatment during a court hearing (89% vs. 52%).

Using Customer Information for Change

We have begun to make some changes in response to the information from our customers (e.g., our web site) and are in the process of identifying how to work with noncustodial parents to improve their overall experiences with us.

Modifications to DOR’s Website

In response to information about noncustodial parents’ use of and experience with our website, we are in the process of making specific changes so that information is easier to find and easier to understand. We are also adding more information that might be helpful to noncustodial parents who have fallen behind in making payments.

Improving Noncustodial Parents’ Overall Experience

While we know that parents’ satisfaction with us is influenced – at least in part -- by the role we play in their lives (e.g., collecting or disbursing child support), this factor alone does not explain why noncustodial parents perceive us as less courteous, fair and informative than their custodial parent counterparts. Better serving the fathers in our program (since the vast majority of noncustodial parents are men) means better understanding the importance and value of engaging fathers across all of the human services agencies. To this end, we are working with leadership in the Fatherhood Engagement community to put together workshops and training for all staff that focus not only on the benefits of engaging fathers but also on overcoming obstacles, such as old attitudes and assumptions, to working better with fathers.

And finally, we plan on using the survey results as a benchmark from which to measure whether changes in processes and/or systems result in greater levels of customer satisfaction. If you would like to read the survey in its entirety, please click on the link below. Contact Karen Melkonian at Melkonian@dor.state.ma.us with any questions or comments.