



Oregon

John A. Kitzhaber, M.D., Governor

Department of Human Services

Office of the Director

500 Summer Street NE, E15

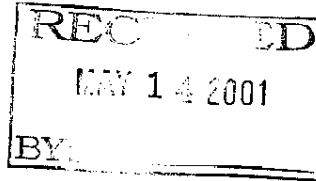
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May 10, 2001



Honorable Members of the Senate:

Last week, you asked that I review a training item for AFS clients that suggested they could search Dumpsters as a means of stretching their budgets.

Enclosed is a copy of the report written by the policy analyst from my office who conducted the independent review. I am disappointed to report to you that this was not an isolated incident involving a contractor only. This also involved AFS staff, and the inappropriate training occurred, for the most part, between October 2000 and March 2001.

AFS staff statewide have reviewed all similar training materials, and we believe this problem was isolated to the Eugene-Springfield area.

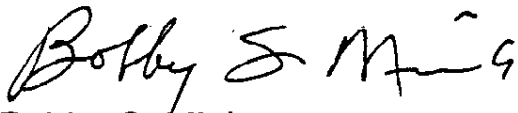
In addition to the recommendations contained in the report, I have asked our Human Resources Manager to tell me what corrective action is appropriate for any of the employees who were involved in this error of judgment. I have also asked Cindy Becker, our Chief Administrative Officer, to identify possible contractual violations and recommend penalties, if appropriate.

Further, we are using this incident as a learning opportunity throughout our department. I will discuss it in this week's Director's message to all employees. In addition, this will be a topic at our next Cabinet meeting, and I am asking each part of the department to assess the appropriateness of all our interactions with the people we serve. Our respect for the dignity of our clients must be paramount.

Honorable Members of the Senate
May 10, 2001
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Finally, I want to join Jim Neely, our AFS Administrator, in expressing our regret for the inappropriate judgment exercised by our staff and contractor in this incident. I am sorry that this happened, and we will work to improve our sensitivity.

Sincerely,



Bobby S. Mink
Director

Enclosure

c: Honorable Members of the House of Representatives
Mark Gibson, Office of the Governor
Mike Greenfield, Director, Department of Administrative
Services
DHS Cabinet Members



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May 9, 2001

To: Bob Mink, Director
Donnie Griffin, Deputy Director
Jim Neely, AFS Administrator

From: Ramona Rodamaker, Executive Policy Analyst

Re: Findings from "Dumpster tip" Investigation

At your request, I have investigated the incident in which Department of Human Services' (DHS) Adult and Family Service (AFS) clients were given a tip sheet that recommended that they "check the dump and residential/business dumpsters" to make ends meet.

Attached please find a brief description of the history leading up to this incident, my findings, and recommendations on future steps DHS can take to prevent this from happening in the future. AFS has already begun implementing many of the proposed recommendations. Please let me know if you would like me to begin working with other units to make needed changes.

If you have any questions or would like additional information, please let me know.

"Assisting People to Become Independent, Healthy and Safe"
An Equal Opportunity Employer

DO 2254 (4/01)

**Findings from
“Dumpster tip” Investigation**

May 9, 2001

**Ramona Rodamaker,
Executive Policy Analyst**

Oregon Department of Human Services

History:

A handout entitled "Shopping Tips to Save \$" was created by two Lane Workforce Partnership (LWP) staff four years ago. The tip sheet includes seventeen ideas for saving money, including: "Check the dump and residential/business dumpsters." The handout was used on four occasions prior to October 2000, and was used in a weekly budgeting class from October 2000 to March 2001.

The tips were taken from a book entitled *1001 Ways to Stretch a Dollar*. The handout was distributed in budgeting and life skills classes in three AFS branches—Springfield, Eugene, and West Eugene. Usually, AFS and Lane Workforce Partnership acted as co-presenters in the weekly budgeting classes. A total of four instructors have used this handout—one from AFS and three from LWP.

The budgeting class lasts for two hours, and attendance is mandatory for AFS clients. The bulk of the curriculum focuses on what to expect from your paycheck, determining the number of deductions to take on your taxes, earned income credits, and developing a monthly household budget.

The "Shopping Tips" handout was included in a packet of supplemental materials, and generally was not discussed in class unless a client had a question or wanted to discuss it. The tips were presented as additional ideas to consider. Other materials in the supplemental packet included a listing of resale clothing shops and a second tip sheet entitled, "62 Shopping Tips to Save a \$\$Bundle\$\$," which suggests using coupons, carpooling, sale shopping, etc.

In four years, three clients have voiced concerns about the Dumpster tip. Eighteen months ago, a client admitted that she had been going through a Dumpster and was arrested. The client was not offended by the idea of searching through Dumpsters, but did state that she believed it was illegal. At that time, one LWP instructor in the West Eugene branch retyped the list, eliminating the Dumpster tip from the handouts that she used. The instructor did not pass this information on to the other instructors. After a second objection to the tip, an AFS instructor drew a line through the item, but again did not pass the change on to other instructors.

On October 3, 2000, before the budgeting class in question began, a committee, consisting of AFS and LWP staff, reviewed all of the proposed class handouts. The group decided to use a version of the handout that did not include the Dumpster tip. Unfortunately, not all of the curricula files were updated at that time, so instructors continued to use two versions of the handout—one with and one without the Dumpster reference.

On March 30, 2001, an LWP instructor handed out the old version of the supplemental packet, and a client strongly objected to the Dumpster tip, in addition to most other parts of the class. Because the LWP instructor believed the woman was generally unhappy and dissatisfied with being required to take the class, she took no specific action on the Dumpster tip at that time.

In April 2001, a client contacted a reporter for the *Eugene Register-Guard* to make a complaint about the tip sheet.

Findings:

While the tip sheet reference is obviously inappropriate given the power differential between AFS staff and clients, nothing in my investigation leads me to believe that AFS or LWP staff ever intended to convey any malice or disrespect toward clients. However, staff members were insensitive to their clients' situations and this left some clients feeling disrespected.

Client evaluation sheets indicate that the vast majority of clients found the budgeting class very helpful and indicated that they would recommend it to others. And, while a large number of people protested at the thought of shopping at thrift stores ("at least one person per session"), fewer people made negative comments on the Dumpster tip. Instead, most clients who discussed it would describe the things they had found (e.g., VCR's) in Dumpsters. Nevertheless, by facilitating such discussions, staff may have led clients to believe that searching through Dumpsters was a safe, healthy, and legal activity.

AFS managers and staff believe that Lane Workforce Partnership is an excellent contractor, and that this has been an unfortunate, but isolated incident. Chuck Forster, director of LWP, offers his apologies to clients in addition to those of DHS and AFS.

AFS and LWP staff are taking this incident very seriously. The staff removed the tip sheet from the packet, and has begun a thorough review of all prime and subcontractor materials (written and video), as well as all purchased curricula. They are reviewing all materials with two questions in mind:

- (1) Could a client feel humiliated if this material were used in class?
- (2) How would the general public perceive this material?

The review committee will consist of AFS, LWP, client and former client representatives, and will be meeting monthly to review all materials. The committee will also be developing a client comment form, discussing client input at management meetings, and dating all future materials.

AFS has directed all of its district managers to work with principal contractors to develop a similar review process in every district. Reviews will include all materials developed by contractors and AFS staff.

Staff of LWP and AFS recently asked Donna Beagle, an advocate for people in poverty, to visit Lane County and provide training on the "culture of poverty" and how to treat clients with respect. Partners were invited, but most of the partners who attended were managers—not line staff. The four instructors indicated that their managers had attended, but they had not felt welcome or "invited."

This incident could have been prevented on several different occasions if a better system of communication or a more effective review process had been in place in Lane County.

Overall Recommendations:

Adult and Family Services, particularly the Lane County branches, seems to be taking adequate steps to ensure that this mistake is not repeated. However, many of DHS's other divisions may still be vulnerable to complaints that their own or contractors' materials are offensive. Therefore, I would suggest that the following actions be taken to prevent this situation from occurring again in DHS:

- Add language to our contracts that requires DHS staff to review and approve all materials used by contractors before the materials are introduced to clients.

- Revise the New Employee Orientation curriculum to include a segment on treating clients with dignity and respect. This segment should include information on working with clients with disabilities, clients from diverse racial, ethnic, or cultural backgrounds, and understanding the culture of poverty, as well as the power differential that sometimes exists between staff and clients. Line staff from principal contracting agencies should be strongly encouraged or required to attend this session as well.
- Offer more continuing education and training opportunities for long-term employees on providing excellent customer service, which starts with honoring and respecting clients. Client focus groups should be used to review the curricula for these classes.
- Provide an internal mechanism for clients to make suggestions or voice their concerns, so they don't feel a need to go to the press or the Legislature without first trying to resolve their issues with the division or program office directly. This could include everything from making comment cards available to advising clients of their rights and informing them of available grievance procedures during the initial client orientation.
- Offer principal contractors the opportunity to have their line staff attend DHS training—especially the training that would enhance their staff's skills in working with clients.
- Mark all forms, curricula, and supporting materials with a review date. Review materials at least once a biennium.
- Offer evaluation forms at the end of each class or training, so clients and consumers have a means to offer timely comments, suggestions, praise, and concerns.
- Discuss this error in our communications with staff and partners to raise awareness and sensitivity to the importance of treating clients with dignity and respect.