

## SECTION 3.

### CUSTOMER SERVICE AND COMMUNICATION WITH THE PUBLIC

#### 3.1 CUSTOMER SERVICE PRINCIPLES AND VALUES

The following principles and values are the basic foundation of our approach to customer service.

- Customers are our business. Especially since we are a regulatory agency, it is essential that we provide good customer service. Our customers include all the stakeholders in the development and compliance processes: property owners, developers, contractors, architects, neighbors, neighborhood organizations, business organizations, business owners, code violators, the general public, staff from other bureaus and agencies, and any other interested parties.
- We all have responsibility for customer service.
- The underlying philosophy is to treat customers with respect, dignity, and understanding. We provide services to customers regardless of past experiences, considering each interaction as a new opportunity to create a good relationship.
- We respond to customers promptly and quickly, but also efficiently. We give each customer the time they need, within operational restraints, but remember there are always other customers waiting.
- We work with customers to help solve their particular project-related problems in constructive and creative ways.

#### 3.2 CUSTOMER SERVICE GOALS

In light of our principles and values, we have adopted the following customer service goals:

- Customers feel that we work to understand their expectations and handle their projects and inquiries in a timely and effective manner.

- We team with our customers as creative problem-solvers, suggesting alternative solutions and approaches that satisfy customers and meet city codes and regulations.
- Customers are provided accurate and complete information to meet their project goals, city codes and regulations.
- Customers feel that their needs have been recognized and that they have been treated with fairness, respect and integrity.
- Customers view us as responsive to their concerns, continually reassessing internal work processes to improve quality, lower costs and/or improve timeliness.
- We each demonstrate an understanding of how our individual job impacts the workflow of other employees and their ability to deliver customer service.
- We work as a team to deliver seamless, consistent customer service by utilizing flexibility, ingenuity, creativity and innovative problem-solving.
- We speak highly of and promote other agencies and their representatives to external and internal groups.
- We are supportive and approachable.
- We respect and value one another's time, knowledge and efforts.
- Employees from all interacting agencies feel supported in their ability to meet customer service goals and that they have been treated with fairness, respect and integrity.

### **3.3 HOW TO WORK WITH CUSTOMERS**

By communicating well and being a collaborative problem solver, you will provide the level of service that most of our customers want and expect. Keep in mind that the customer has nowhere else to go to get a permit, a review, or an inspection, as an organization we need to get the customer through the process.

Here are some hints to help us work well with our customers:

- Recognize that we have a diverse customer group. Differences in culture, language and permitting experience mean that you will need to tailor your response to meet the customer's individual needs.
- Understand the stakes for the customer and find out the consequences of not delivering.

- Work with customers to help them understand what the rules and regulations are and how they apply to their project/proposal. Be a problem-solver. Work with the customer to develop alternative solutions to their problems.
- Maintain a positive attitude and keep your sense of humor.
- Acknowledge the complexity of all the regulations that we are required to enforce and do your best to communicate the regulations in understandable terms for the customer.
- Communicate clearly, especially where there is room for misinterpretation; clarify costs, timing, code details, policies and processes. Make sure that the person knows what to expect from you and understands bureau decisions.
- You can say NO when "no" is the right answer. Be sure to explain why and, where possible, suggest acceptable alternative solutions.
- Provide an estimate for completion of your work and notify customers of changes within 24 hours.
- Don't make remarks that could be construed as discriminatory as to race, color, age, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, source of income, marital status, national origin, disability, or union affiliation.
- Do not make reference to the qualifications or quality of work of contractors, design professionals, consultants, homeowners, installers, equipment, etc.
- Don't be intimidating, threatening, insulting or use profane language under any circumstances, even if provoked.

### **3.4 DEALING WITH DIFFICULT, BUT NON-THREATENING PUBLIC**

(See Section 6.11 of this Handbook for information on dealing with a threatening situation.)

Most customers interact with us in a professional manner. However, from time to time we encounter a customer who behaves inappropriately. You are not expected to tolerate verbally abusive behavior, including insulting or demeaning remarks, profanity, remarks of a sexual nature, shouting or a voice raised in anger. In most cases verbal abuse arises from the customer's frustration and/or feeling of helplessness.

When confronted with an emotionally-charged situation, remember the 4 A's:

- Assess - let the customer tell their story; listen actively.

- Acknowledge - offer feedback that indicates you understand the customer's point of view.
- Agree - to the extent that you can.
- Apologize - empathize with the customer's position.

The following procedures apply to situations where a member of the public is verbally abusive, **but physically non-threatening**:

- Respond to the customer in a professional manner. Responding with abusive speech sends the message that verbal abuse is acceptable and also makes it more difficult for a supervisor or manager to deal with the customer - it can put them in the middle of a "he said, she said" situation.
- If you are unable to de-escalate the situation, ask your supervisor to intervene. If your supervisor is not available, contact your manager or another supervisor.
- Often customers get frustrated when they feel that government is taking away their choices and telling them what they have to do. It can be helpful to identify areas where options do exist and the customer does have choices.
- Any time a customer asks to speak to a supervisor, he or she should be directed to a supervisor immediately. If this occurs during a phone conversation, you should give the caller your direct supervisor's name and phone number. If you are waiting on the customer in the DSC, you should first contact a supervisor from your section. However, if no supervisor from your section is available you should contact the DSC manager or a supervisor from another DSC work group. When possible, brief the supervisor regarding the customer's concerns prior to their meeting with the customer.

#### ▪ On The Phone

You are not required to tolerate abusive behavior. If a caller becomes abusive, courteously inform the party that they are being abusive in their speech and that you will transfer the call to your supervisor. If your supervisor is not available, get the caller's number and tell him or her that the supervisor will return the call. If the caller refuses to disclose his or her number, convey your supervisor's name and number and advise the caller that you are hanging up.

#### ▪ In The Field

When leaving a correction, citation, notice of violation or stop work order notice on a job site, whenever possible, attempt to verbally inform the owner or contractor of the reason for the posting. Point out code problems in an objective, informative and

respectful manner. Suggest acceptable alternatives. Leave the site immediately if ordered off the site or threatened in some manner (see Section 6.11 for more information on how to handle a threatening situation).

### **3.5 CONTACT WITH NEWS MEDIA**

The Bureau Director, division managers, and section supervisors are responsible for all contact with the media. They accommodate reasonable requests for access to public records, make themselves available for interviews, and respond to reporters' questions. All media contacts shall be reported to the Customer Service and Public Information Manager (x3-4017).

If you receive inquiries from the news media, refer them to a supervisor or manager unless you are specifically designated by your supervisor to respond to such inquiries. In that case you can provide information and answer questions about bureau policies and activities, and other matters within your field of professional expertise. Questions that go beyond your field of expertise should be referred to a supervisor or manager, or to the Customer Service and Public Information Manager.

If you are contacted by the media while in the field responding to an emergency, you can answer questions related to the situation at hand but notify your supervisor of the contact as soon as possible.

### **3.6 REPRESENTING BDS AT LEGISLATIVE SUB-COMMITTEES, STATE BOARD MEETINGS, OR PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS**

The Director assigns a small number of employees, usually those in supervisory or "senior" positions, to represent BDS in associations and on committees that are relevant to BDS' work. If you are designated as a BDS representative, the bureau will pay for any association dues or other related costs. If you have questions about your status as a BDS representative, talk to your supervisor.

- If you have been assigned to attend such a meeting, your division manager or supervisor will meet with you to review the board or committee agenda prior to the meeting. If appropriate, you and the manager or supervisor will develop a position statement that incorporates City and bureau concerns and makes recommendations. The Director has to approve any position statement prior to its presentation at a meeting.
- When representing BDS in any setting, you can present only the position or recommendation the Director has approved. You cannot express personal opinions that are in conflict with the bureau's position if you are at the meeting as a representative of BDS.

- After the meeting, meet with your supervisor to discuss further actions.
- Only staff designated by the Director can attend committee or board meetings as a representative of BDS and can present the bureau's position. If you are not assigned to represent BDS, the bureau does not prohibit your attendance. However, when you attend such meetings during working hours, you must apply for vacation leave prior to attending the meeting. Any communication you provide must not be associated with the bureau and must clearly state that it does not represent the position of the bureau.

### **3.7 CITIZEN INQUIRIES & CONCERNS**

The Customer Service and Public Information Division has developed a process that allows for a citizen to voice concerns about bureau processes, customer service issues and issues around employee behavior. This process handles inquiries that have been through the appropriate supervisor and other avenues of resolution have been exhausted. Inquiries from the Mayor's Office, Commissioners and Ombudsman are handled through this process as well.

If there is a complaint about you or a complaint about an area in which you have responsibility, your supervisor will discuss the complaint with you and decide on an appropriate resolution.

A Customer Assistance Team (CAT) exists to handle inquiries or concerns that cross section or division boundaries. The selected staff works with Customer Service and Public Information staff to gain resolution and develop a clear path assisting the customer to gain compliance.

Names and other identifying information related to these complaints from the public are kept confidential in order to protect citizens from possible retaliation. Never give out any complainant information. If the public continues to request confidential information, refer them to your supervisor.

### **3.8 APPEALS**

A permit applicant who has been denied an appeal by the administrative appeal board may appeal to either the full appeals board or the state chief inspector.

For minor labels, a permittee who disputes an inspector's call has the right to appeal to the Tri-County Service Center dispute resolution procedure.