

# CONNECTIONS

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*Bringing Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services' employees closer together*

## ACCESSNebraska Changes Lead to Improved Service



The State of Nebraska created ACCESSNebraska, an online system to manage economic assistance and Medicaid programs, in 2008.

The new system had its drawbacks and when he came on board, Gov. Pete Ricketts decided to make improving the ACCESSNebraska system one of his administration's priorities.

"One of our state's most important duties is to help our most vulnerable citizens," Ricketts said during a recent press conference on ACCESSNebraska improvements. "Because of this, finding ways to make government customer-friendly is one of the key focuses of my administration.

To that end, Ricketts appointed Felix Davidson as his Chief Operations Officer earlier this year and asked him to work with DHHS to improve ACCESSNebraska's performance.

Since then, DHHS has made changes that are leading to increased ACCESSNebraska performance and better service for its customers.

Changes at mail and document imaging centers have reduced the amount of time needed to process documents – what used to take days, now takes hours. A reduction in after-call work has freed up

time for call center staff and led to increased productivity within existing staff levels. Daily meetings among ACCESSNebraska employees has led to improved communication, quicker problem-solving and better coordination among workers.

These changes have led to results.

For example, call wait times at ACCESSNebraska call centers processing Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) applications have fallen from a two-year high of 23 minutes and 51 seconds in August 2014 to a low of 4 minutes and 42 seconds in September 2015.

ACCESSNebraska customers have noticed an improvement too.

Here are a few customer comments highlighted at the ACCESSNebraska press conference:

- "100% and A+. My phone call was answered in less than a minute. That's good service! Worker was very helpful." - Beatrice customer
- A DHHS partner who helps clients apply for services thanked the Scottsbluff ACCESSNebraska team for handling her cases efficiently and accurately and added that the team has made a "vast difference for her and her clients."

- The Tiangwa family applied for SNAP benefits in the past couple months and they were approved and processed the following day. "This is really important for me and my family," said Ms. Tiangwa. "I'm so thankful and grateful for the help."

Doug Weinberg, director of DHHS' Division of Children and Family Services, said he is proud of ACCESSNebraska's improvements.

"While we know that we have a lot of work ahead to sustain this improved performance, I am confident we will be successful through the commitment and capability of the entire DHHS team and our partnership with the Governor's Office," he said.

Going forward, DHHS has set a goal to maintain call wait times under five minutes at the ACCESSNebraska customer service centers. It will also continue to work on other improvements to streamline the ACCESSNebraska process.

Davidson said the most recent progress is just the beginning.

"We will continue to work together to improve the performance of ACCESSNebraska to deliver

better results for Nebraskans... we are committed to a culture of process improvement, accountability, transparency, and most importantly better results," he said.

Nebraskans can keep track of ACCESSNebraska's progress with monthly performance metrics that are posted on [DHHS' website](#). The metrics highlight improvements in federal timeliness, accuracy standards and internal benchmarks.



Doug Weinberg, director of DHHS' Division of Children and Family Services, (at the podium) addresses reporters with (from left to right) Felix Davidson, Gov. Pete Ricketts' Chief Operations Officer and Gov. Ricketts at a press conference on ACCESSNebraska improvements on October 29 at the Capitol.

# Stay Connected on



## make the connection . . .

**DHHS Public Website:** [www.dhhs.ne.gov](http://www.dhhs.ne.gov)  
**DHHS Employee Website:** <http://dhhsemployees/>  
**DHHS Helpline:** 1-800-254-4202, (402) 471-6035 in Lincoln, or via email at [dhhs.helpline@nebraska.gov](mailto:dhhs.helpline@nebraska.gov)

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## DHHS' Employee Website....

New information and photos are added daily to the employee website. Here are some recent posts and the dates they appeared. Like what you're seeing and reading? Then check out the employee homepage every day! Got an idea or a photo you'd like to share for the employee homepage or *Connections*? Send it to [melissa.lindell@nebraska.gov](mailto:melissa.lindell@nebraska.gov)

## Homepage Homeruns

### Eastern Nebraska Veterans' Home Hosts "Trick or Treat" Night, October 30

The Eastern Nebraska Veterans' Home (ENVH) hosted a "Trick or Treat" night on October 28 when families, volunteers and staff were able to bring their children to trick or treat with ENVH members.



Pictured: ENVH member Bill Nemeč with his great granddaughter at ENVH's "Trick or Treat" night on October 28. *Photo courtesy: Audrey Hester*

### Fremont CSC Honors Its Veterans, November 12

Nine veterans work at the Fremont Customer Service Center (CSC) and during the week of Veterans' Day, they were honored by their coworkers with reserved front row parking, gift bags and an Employee of the Week bulletin board dedicated to them and any family members who are current or former members of the United States Armed Forces.

Fremont CSC staff currently serving

- TSgt Stacey Huffman – Nebraska Air National Guard – 15 years – Meteorologist
  - Sgt. Carlos Romo – US Army/Nebraska Army National Guard – 10 years – Cavalry Scout (19D)
- Fremont CSC staff who have served
- SrA Dorothea Ann Howell – US Air Force – 4 years – Security Forces
  - Sgt. Keith Miskie – US Marines – 6 years – Diesel Mechanic
  - Sgt. Konner Tourek – US Marines – 6 years – Infantry
  - HM2 (E5) Eunite Treat – US Navy – 14 years – Medic

- A1C DeLinda Garza – US Air Force – 4 years – Telecommunications
- SSgt. Teresa Menking – US Marines – 8 years – Drill Instructor
- SPC Travis Carey – US Army – 4 years – 11B Infantry



Pictured: Nine veterans work at the Fremont CSC, including: back row (left to right) Travis Carey, Stacey Huffman, Keith Miskie, Konner Tourek, Carlos Romo, front row (left to right) DeLinda Garza, Eunite Treat, Teresa Menking, Dorothea Howell. *Photo courtesy: Stacy Huffman*

### Cass County "Holy Stitchers" Give Quilts to ENVH Members, November 17

The Cass County "Holy Stitchers" sewing group presented patriotic lap quilts to all the members at the Eastern Nebraska Veterans' Home (ENVH) last week. The quilts were presented on November 10th in recognition of Veterans' Day.

Chris Ahrens, Anna Mallett, Diane Mayfield and Helen Worthan got together and completed 120 of the lap quilts in eight months.

Two years ago, this group made privacy curtains, shower curtains and valances for every member's room. They are very dedicated to their craft and love to show their support for veterans.



Pictured: Helen Worthan from the Cass County Holy Stitchers presents ENVH member Kendall Bentzen with a patriotic lap quilt. *Photo courtesy: Audrey Hester*



Courtney Phillips, CEO

## Message from Courtney Phillips, CEO

food to the Food Bank of Lincoln and raised money for cancer research.

I love hearing these stories because they just prove what I already know – that we have a great group of people working here!

In December, more of these stories are bound to pop up as you find more opportunities for charitable holiday giving. I want to hear those stories. Who doesn't like hearing good news, right?

So, in the next couple weeks (or all year long, really) if you see your coworkers doing something great, please tell us. Send your acts of kindness stories into the employee homepage or Connections by sending them to Melissa Lindell. Or, just share the good news on the Bulletin Board.

Nothing makes the holiday season brighter than giving back and I'm thankful that I work with a group of people who obviously agree.

Speaking of being thankful, I wanted to take the opportunity

to express my thanks to each of you. Thank you for being a part of #TeamDHHS and stepping up each day to serve Nebraskans.

Like I mentioned in my email to you last week, the employees I've met in our facilities and offices across the state are dedicated and passionate and I'm thankful I get to serve alongside you. DHHS is filled with good people, who are committed to our agency's mission. I'll tell anyone who will listen that our employees rock!

I also want to thank each of you for warmly embracing my family. I am especially grateful for the warmth shown to my little man. I hope you each have the chance to spend quality time with your loved ones this holiday season. Never miss the chance to express your thanks for the simple gifts that we are given each day.

Courtney  
#TeamDHHS

### Stories of Giving:

[Norfolk Employees Raise Breast Cancer Awareness, Funds with "Think Pink" Event, November 4](#)

Employees in Norfolk raised money and breast cancer awareness during their third annual "Think Pink" event last week.

The event featured a bake sale and breast cancer awareness puzzles which could be entered in a drawing for a chance to win a gift certificate to a local eatery.

The bake sale and drawing raised about \$200, which will go to the Johnny Carson Cancer Center.

[Lincoln Customer Service Center Staff Donate More than 100 Pounds of Food to the Food Bank of Lincoln, November 4](#)

Staff at the Lincoln Customer Service Center (CSC) recently donated more than 100 pounds of food to the Food Bank of Lincoln.

They received a thank you note from the Food Bank of Lincoln which serves about 57,000 people in a 16-county service area.

[Lincoln Regional Center's Wellness Committee Hosts Charity Chili Cook-off, November 18](#)

The Lincoln Regional Center (LRC) Wellness Committee sponsored its annual Chili Cook-off on November 5.

With the admission price and the donations (votes) towards everyone's favorite chili, a total of \$266.11 was raised.

Pictured: LRC staff members sample chili at their annual chili cook-off.

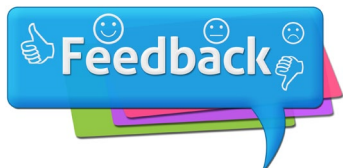


## Surveys, Surveys, Surveys, Everywhere There Are Surveys Check out the Results of our Annual Employee Survey

*By Jennifer Monroe  
DHHS Human Resources Regional  
Manager*

Surveys are everywhere! Following a customer service phone call, accompanying a receipt, within stores where we can simply press a button to report on our overall experience – and even here at the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services!

Electronic surveys provide a safe forum for all DHHS employees to confidentially-voice their opinions about work experiences. Currently, we distribute “New Hire” surveys to our newest employees to learn about their experiences during the recruitment process, “Annual Employee Surveys” to all active employees to discover more about ongoing experiences as a DHHS employee, and “Exit Surveys” to employees as they exit our workforce. The opinions employees share inform leadership about overall satisfaction and/or critical concerns; in turn, leadership can impact changes that improve our overall work experiences. These surveys make us better, they bring us together: they makes us better... together!



Do you receive the necessary information you need to do your job? Do you feel like communication is clear? Are you comfortable sharing ideas with your supervisor? Do these questions sound familiar? They might – if you completed the most recent Annual Employee Survey. You might also recall that in previous years, Human Resources compiled these results, sharing them with Division Directors exclusively... but this year we are also sharing the results with you!

You can find these summaries on our Human Resources and Development page on the Employee Intranet or by clicking [HERE](#). We encourage you to examine all of the results: compare the Division you represent with others. If you have suggestions, questions, or ideas, feel free to share them - talk to your supervisor, talk to your Division Director... or come see your friendly Human Resources Representative!

Thank you all for finding time to complete the surveys we create! We value your input and strive to be the very best we can be for those we serve and for our employees. We are better together: we are #TeamDHHS!

## November was National Adoption Month DHHS Encourages Adoption Year-Round

Every child deserves to grow up in a good home. That’s the message of November’s National Adoption Month.

The goal of adoption is to provide children with a family for the rest of their life – a “forever family.”

This year, the focus of National Adoption Month was on the adoption of older youth currently in the foster care system—because “We Never Outgrow the Need for Family.”

According to information from the United States Department of Health and Human Services, youth ages 15 to 18 make up 5 percent of the foster care population.

It’s very important for these young people to form lifelong connections because compared to their peers, many youth in foster care are more prone to drop out of high school, be unemployed or face homelessness.

Despite this, research has confirmed that children can overcome traumatic experiences and succeed in adulthood if they are connected to a positive, permanent support system.

Adoption can provide these youth with a sense of belonging and connect them to a family who provides stability and helps them into adulthood.

During National Adoption Month and all year long, prospective adoptive families can learn more about adoption by calling 1-800-7PARENT(1-800-772-7368).

Fostering and adoption is a great way to grow a family.



Pictured: Gov. Pete Ricketts and First Lady Susanne Shore recently recognized foster and adoptive parents and thanked a Lincoln family for adopting 13-year-old Joy. Pictured here are Department of Health and Human Services, Division of Children and Family Services Director Doug Weinberg; Shore; Ricketts and Joy, Doug, Tracy and Austin Christensen.

# It's Flu Season: Protect Yourself and Your Family by Getting Vaccinated

*From a news release by Leah Bucco-White*

The holidays are just around the corner and snow has already hit some parts of the state. You know what that means – it's flu season.

The Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) has already reported that flu activity is slowly increasing statewide.

With that in mind, DHHS is encouraging Nebraskans to get the flu vaccine as soon as possible.

Vaccination plays a critical role in the fight against the flu, said Dr. Tom Safranek, DHHS State Epidemiologist.

"It can reduce flu-related illnesses, visits to the doctor, missed work and school and flu-related hospitalizations," he said. "We've still got a little lead time before cases really ramp up. Take advantage of it and make sure getting a flu shot is at the top of your to-do list."

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends that everyone six months and older get vaccinated for flu.

Flu can make anyone sick, but certain people are at greater risk to develop serious complications from flu. For that reason it is especially important for these groups of people to receive the flu vaccine:

- Young children
- Adults 65 years of age or older
- Pregnant women
- People with health conditions like asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, diabetes (type 1 and 2), heart disease, neurologic

conditions and other long-term health conditions

- Residents of nursing homes and other long-term care facilities

The severity and the length of flu seasons vary, but flu season in the U.S. typically peaks between December and February.

DHHS officially started its flu surveillance October 4. Surveillance shows where the flu is and how fast it's spreading across the state.

DHHS uses multiple surveillance systems to track flu viruses, including physicians who report the number of people with flu-like illness weekly, lab tests, school surveillance, hospital data, emergency department data and death reporting.

Severe cases of flu can lead to hospitalization and even death. There were 84 flu-related deaths in Nebraska last season. Nebraskans can better protect themselves from flu by getting vaccinated.

Flu vaccine is safe, effective and rigorously tested. The most common reaction is soreness and redness at the injection site. If you don't like needles, FluMist is a nasal spray that may be available for healthy people 2-49 years old. After you're vaccinated, it takes about two weeks for your body to build immunity.

"Flu vaccine not only protects you, but your family, friends and coworkers as well," said Courtney Phillips, DHHS CEO. "That's why I get a flu shot every season and encourage others to do so too."

For more information on flu and how to protect yourself and your family, visit [www.dhhs.ne.gov/flu](http://www.dhhs.ne.gov/flu) or [www.cdc.gov/flu](http://www.cdc.gov/flu).

Follow us on Twitter - [@NEDHHS](https://twitter.com/NEDHHS)

or like us on Facebook - [www.facebook.com/NeDHHS.#GotMyFluVax](https://www.facebook.com/NeDHHS.#GotMyFluVax)



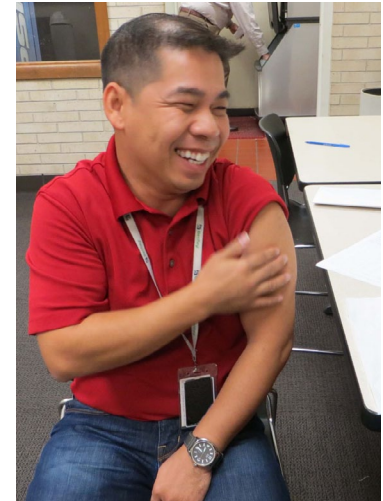
DHHS CEO Courtney Phillips gets her flu shot



Maximus just got vaccinated and is ready for flu season



Danny, a DHHS Veterans' Home member, receives his flu vaccine



Ben flashes a smile before receiving his flu shot

# Way to Go!

## Statewide and National Recognitions, Honors and Awards

### Jennifer Severe-Oforah Recognized by the Association of Maternal and Child Health Programs

**Jennifer Severe-Oforah**, epidemiology surveillance coordinator, with Public Health, was recently recognized by the Association of Maternal and Child Health Programs (AMCHP).

She was selected as the Young Maternal and Child Health (MCH) Professional Award Recipient for Region VII.

AMCHP was established to recognize outstanding MCH professionals under age 45 who have made substantial contributions to their state's MCH program, maternal and child health outcomes or made other contributions to promoting the health of women, children and families in their state.

Severe-Oforah's recognition letter from the AMCHP board says that she is being recognized because of her "individual capacity to perform above and beyond expectations, using creativity and innovation to address pressing MCH

challenges, as well as her emerging and future leadership potential."

Severe-Oforah will be presented with her award during the AMCHP Annual Conference, January 23-26, in Washington, DC.

### Health Promotion Section Honored

The Society of Health and Physical Educators of Nebraska (SHAPE) recognizes outstanding professionals who significantly impact children and adults in the areas of health, physical education, recreation and dance.

The Nebraska chapter of SHAPE recently recognized Public Health's Health Promotion section as the "Health Education Professional of the Year: Business/Industry/Workplace" for 2015-2016.

The department was recognized for its dedication to serving communities across the state.

**Kay Wenzl**, administrator of the Health Promotion section, said **Brian Coyle**, community health educator, has led the work for DHHS in this area.

### Josie Rodriguez Nominated as Chair of RHEC Region VII

Congratulations to **Josie Rodriguez**, Office of Health Disparities and Health Equity administrator with Public Health, who was recently nominated to serve as chair of the Regional Health Equity Council (RHEC) Region VII which includes Nebraska, Iowa, Kansas and Missouri.

Josie recently represented Nebraska at the RHEC Region VII meeting in Iowa and Leslie Marsh, CEO of the Lexington Regional Health Center, said Josie did an exemplary job.

"A cross-section of federal and regional representatives remarked on Josie's dedication, passion and commitment to excellence," Marsh said. "Josie consistently provides high quality work and is widely recognized as an exemplary leader in both regional and federal circles."

Marsh said she has had the pleasure of working with Josie on several different committees and is always impressed by the quality of her work.

"Her attitude, her presentation style and her effectiveness are noteworthy," Marsh said. "I was so proud of Nebraska and Josie as she presented data and trends about minorities and heart disease."

At the meeting, Josie also shared a resource, created under her direction, which can be used to more effectively manage care of vulnerable and minority populations. Marsh said other meeting attendees were very impressed.

"When someone represents our great state so effectively it should be shared at home, so I took the liberty of telling you about her work and the powerful impression she left on so many," Marsh said. "We can all be proud of Josie and of the work that she does on behalf of the Nebraska State Office of Minority Health."



## Beating Holiday Stress

*“A crust of bread eaten in peace is better than a banquet partaken in anxiety” Aesop*

By Richard Mettler,  
Human Resources



The holiday season often brings unwelcomed guests—stress, which leads to depression. It’s no wonder. The holidays present a dizzying array of activities—shopping, gift wrapping, cooking, cleaning, entertaining and on and on.

There are many practical steps you can take to help minimize stress as you claim control of your holiday season. Following are some tried and true suggestions to consider from recognized authorities, including the Mayo Clinic.

### Tips to Rein in Holiday Stress

- ❖ Set realistic goals for the holidays. Prioritize, simplify, and resist feeling over-obligated. Respect your limitations. Encourage others in your life to do the same.
- ❖ The holidays don’t have to be perfect, or just like last year. As families change and grow, traditions often change as well. Choose some

- traditions to maintain, and be open to creating new, less demanding ones.
- ❖ Delegate or suspend household chores that can wait.
- ❖ Agree on spending limits with family and friends and stick to these agreements.
- ❖ Be creative with gifts. For example, a nicely framed photograph with special meaning can delight another person well beyond something more expensive.
- ❖ Set aside specific days for shopping, cooking, visiting friends, and other activities.
- ❖ Plan menus and then make a shopping list. Line up help for food preparation and cleanup.
- ❖ Prepare food ahead of time and freeze it, or buy prepared foods instead of cooking everything from scratch. Ask others to bring their favorite dish to a holiday meal.
- ❖ Consider pot lucks or holiday open houses where many people chip in as easy entertainment options.

- ❖ Eat wholesome, well-balanced meals, drink lots of water, and get plenty of rest. Continue your ongoing personal self-improvement goals, including daily physical activity.
- ❖ Make plans to visit some friends and family soon after the holidays.
- ❖ Pace yourself. Do not take on more responsibility than you can handle. Rest when your body and mind tell you.
- ❖ Set aside grievances with others. Try to accept family, friends, and coworkers as they are. Agree to a holiday season truce. Who knows, this may become permanent.
- ❖ It’s OK to say ‘no’. Saying ‘yes’ when you are entitled to say ‘no’ can leave you

feeling overwhelmed and resentful. People close to you will understand if you choose not to participate in every activity.

- ❖ Take a breather. Allow yourself private time to recharge. Just 30 minutes alone, without distractions, may refresh you enough to feel calm. Find something to reduce stress and clear your mind. Some options include: taking a walk at night; soothing music; reading; visiting over the phone with a friend.

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Please email your thoughts, concerns, or suggestions about workplace courtesy and workplace relationships to [Richard Mettler](#).



*“For fast-acting relief try slowing down.” Lily Tomlin*

# In Gratitude

The Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services' mission:

**Helping people live better lives.**



Here are some letters & notes DHHS employees have received thanking us for the work we do every day to help people live better lives.

**Sherri Lamb** (Social Services Trainee, Omaha),

I just wanted to say thank you for being so prompt on my application and being so friendly. I am struggling with supplying my children with food and today was a blessing.

Thank you! I am grateful for kind people like you. Have a wonderful day.

Sincerely,

**A Grateful Client**

**Laurie Zitterkopf** (Social Services Worker, Scottsbluff),

I called in this morning and was able to get assistance right away. I have never called and received such fast and friendly assistance. I want to congratulate all of DHHS for your service and for getting hold times down. It was amazing.

**A Thankful Client**

**Edilma Him-Osorio** (Vital Statistics Supervisor, Lincoln)

I just want to thank you again for all of your help. This morning (because of your help) my passport came in the mail! Thanks for being you! I hope the State of Nebraska realizes what a valuable employee they have!!!

Best Regards,

**A Grateful Client**

**Jane Harms** (Child and Family Services Specialist, Beatrice),

My daughter needed help in more ways than one. I didn't know where to begin. Jane came to our rescue.

Jane was always there for my daughter and me even though she had many others to look after. She never failed to help. If she was out of the office, she contacted me as soon as possible by telephone or in person – whatever the case called for. This included several months of hard work. She was always be at the top of our list in helping, caring and loyalty.

Respectfully,

**A Grateful Mother of a Client**

**Sue Pluta** (Economic Assistance Case Aide, Omaha)

Sue is an excellent person. She is one that, every time I'm there, has "service with a smile."

She went above and beyond one day last week when I brought in my neighbor and her daughter to your building. Sue went the extra mile to help my neighbor quickly so that she and her baby could get a ride back home with me instead of waiting for a bus.

She also has a pleasant attitude and demeanor.

If your department has rewards/awards for employee of the month, then I believe Sue is deserving of it and/or other recognition or praise.

Sincerely,

**A Thankful Client**