

**Health and Human Services Committee**  
**LR 551 Testimony**  
**October 16, 2012**

**Thomas Pristow, MCSW, ACSW**  
**Director, Division of Children and Family Services**

Good morning Sen. Campbell and members of the Health and Human Services Committee. I am Thomas Pristow (T-H-O-M-A-S P-R-I-S-T-O-W), and I am director of the Division of Children and Family Services in the Department of Health and Human Services. I appreciate the opportunity to provide testimony about ACCESSNebraska, the delivery system for Economic Assistance programs for Nebraskans.

ACCESSNebraska has received a lot of attention in recent years. I began my job here in late March in the latter throes of your consideration of legislation. I want to assure you from the get-go that we have made progress in addressing the issues brought before this committee, and that we continue to evaluate and make adjustments to further improve the system.

That doesn't mean there aren't individuals unhappy about their experience with ACCESSNebraska, or that we are entirely satisfied with our progress. We will always strive to improve. I assure you, however, that we have made progress in improving the system with dedicated employees who are doing their best to meet the needs of our clients.

The key to developing our systems and increasing success is employee training and experience. Before employees work full-time answering client phone calls, it is necessary that they receive 16 weeks of training. Not only are they instructed in customer service and operating the N-FOCUS software, but they must also be prepared to respond to clients about the details of 16 complicated economic assistance programs. Of our employees in the four Customer Service Centers, 70 percent have held their jobs less than 18 months, and 26 percent have worked less than a year. Currently, 56 people are in training and will start their work between now and the end of December. Everyone reaches proficiency at a different pace, and we expect our employees to accomplish that no later than 24 months after completing training. Two of our four Customer Service Centers have been opened in the past 12 months, another in the last 18 months and the first site opened almost two years ago. We have been fully operational for less than one year.

Today, we have 26 vacancies, which is the lowest vacancy count we have had in the last year. Vacancies are due to a variety of reasons such as retirements, advancements, voluntary resignations and terminations.

I've been director of Children and Family Services for about seven months, and in my travels about the state, I have been meeting with employees and advocacy groups, working with

ACCESSNebraska management, reviewing reports and listening to concerns and opinions. I feel confident in saying our technology and business structure system is the gold standard for delivery of public assistance across the country. I back my statement with supporting comments made in a recent visit by the USDA, which is pushing states to move in this direction, the emails we receive from clients, their responses to an online poll, my observations and the history of other states engaged in implementing this approach to client service. Some states have failed in their attempt to do what we have accomplished so far (Indiana and Texas). Some states have partially implemented and other states haven't even started down this road yet.

Despite the fact we did not receive a Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) bonus this past year, USDA officials told us they support our work on ACCESSNebraska 100 percent. I want to point out that Nebraska's SNAP negative error rate was 3.15 percent, which is significantly below the national average of 8.3 percent even with our transition from assigned caseload to universal caseload. In fact, only 13 of 53 states and territories received a bonus. Our error rate did not fall significantly compared to other states modernizing their service delivery.

We have received many positive comments and emails from clients. Some are attached to my testimony. I'd like to tell you about one. A mother in Minnesota contacted us needing assistance for her Medicaid-eligible son who earned a scholarship to a Nebraska college. He needed immediate assistance before trying out for a team or he would have lost his scholarship. Our employees responded to his need and his mother told us that dealing with ACCESSNebraska was a breeze compared to the Minnesota system. She said in her county, they would have needed to travel to an office, take a number and wait an hour or two with a hundred other people just to talk to someone. She appreciated everyone she spoke with at ACCESSNebraska, saying they were kind and helpful. I encourage you to read the other comments we've gathered. Not included is praise from sons and daughters watching over their elderly parents from overseas and other distant locations in our nation.

We all know there are stories at the other end of the spectrum and we address those as we become aware of them. For instance, a woman was quoted in the October 5<sup>th</sup> edition of the Lincoln Journal Star. Her case is complicated and we are working directly with her and her family to resolve the situation. In addition, there are some cases we have assigned to workers for spousal impoverishment and refugees in order to provide continuity and expert experience until applications and benefits are processed and the cases are moved into universal caseload. We are going to add nursing home cases to those assigned to specific workers. Nursing home cases can be complex and we believe there is a benefit to having the continuity and experience of assigned workers.

All conversations with clients are recorded. When complaints are received about workers, our system allows us to listen to those conversations. Reviews by management of the complaints we have received about employees have rarely been out of line with their training and our expectations. Employees are instilled with an attitude to provide positive customer service, and we won't tolerate anything less.

In our efforts to provide positive service, we also note your passage of LB 825, which requires us to work with community-based organizations and place staff in local offices to help serve walk-in clients. There was an article in the Grand Island Independent newspaper claiming that the Department is ignoring parts of LB 825. This is not accurate. The Department provided an estimate of the cost to implement LB 825 to the Legislature but we received less than half of the funding necessary to fully implement the bill. The Governor informed the Legislature that the bill was inadequately funded and as a result, the Department could not implement all of the provisions of LB 825. The article in the Grand Island Independent was misleading at best and any perceived failure to implement LB 825 is the result of inadequate funding.

We have more than 600 community partners that voluntarily help serve our clients in a variety of ways. We host a monthly phone call for our partners to discuss concerns or answer their questions. Eight and soon to be nine Community Support Specialists work closely with our community partners providing feedback to the administrative team on ideas to improve service. To date, we have 22.5 experienced staff who were previously scheduled to be laid off, hired 11 additional staff and we are hiring another 12 employees. There are 41 local offices with Economic Assistance staff. Thirty-one of our offices have at least one kiosk for client use. A list of these offices is attached for your reference.

I'm certain a question you expect me to answer is, "What could have been done better?" In my review of ACCESSNebraska, I believe we could have done a better job communicating the impact of moving the many thousands of cases from individual workers to a universal caseload. It was a significant change for our clients and staff. To that end, I changed the reporting structure in Economic Assistance which now is a clearer line of communication and accountability for all levels in the field and Customer Service Centers to central office.

Communication is a focus of our efforts. I send a weekly message to all employees in my division, and regular meetings are held with management staff. I have been a frequent visitor to the field offices to meet with staff. In fact, last week I traveled to Grand Island and Kearney, and the week before to Scottsbluff and Gering. Staff provided input on positive changes. I have also met with many advocacy groups and many of you in this room today, and I encourage my top management to do the same and they have been hitting the road as well.

One change we've made after receiving feedback is eliminating an expectation of employees answering a target number of phone calls. We average between 6,000-7,000 calls a day. In talking with staff and ACCESSNebraska management, we feel target goals push employees to rush through phone calls which can affect accuracy. Instead, employee performance will focus on quality work, good customer service, and handling calls efficiently and effectively, among other measures. In addition, we are placing a stronger emphasis on one-call resolution and answering questions correctly the first time. This will require more assistance of supervisors, but I am confident this change will result in better service to clients.

Call wait times have increased in recent months. There are spikes in calls on Mondays, the days after holidays, and when the seasons change and applications are due for programs. We continue to work toward lower wait times.

We would like for you to see our staff in action and provide additional details about ACCESSNebraska. We invite you to tour the Lincoln Customer Service Center on November 28. We will provide additional information as we approach this date.

I would be happy to answer any questions. Thank you.



## Attachment B: Nebraska Economic Assistance Offices Open to the Public

Office Location	Kiosks available	Staff available	Staff Available FT or PT
1. Ainsworth – 644 E. 4 <sup>th</sup> St., (402)387-2523	Yes – 1 kiosk	Yes	FT
2. Alliance – 411 Black Hills, (308)763-2900 (staff expected to be available in January 2013)	No (space is not available)	Yes	FT (in January 2013)
3. Auburn – 1908 O St., (402)274-4021	Yes – 1 kiosk	Yes	FT
4. Beatrice – 3000 Lincoln Blvd, 204 Sheridan, (402) 223-6000	Yes – 1 kiosk	Yes	FT
5. Blair – 597 Grant St., Suite 100 (402)426-2329 (staff expected to be available in October 2012)	No	Yes	PT
6. Broken Bow – 2475 South E. St., (308)872-6700	Yes – 1 kiosk	Yes	FT
7. Center – 309 Bazille St., (402)288-4226	Yes – 1 kiosk	Yes	FT
8. Chadron – 1033 E. 3 <sup>rd</sup> St., (308)432-0537	Yes – 1 kiosk	Yes	FT
9. Columbus – 2365 39 <sup>th</sup> Ave., (402)564-1113	Yes – 2 kiosks	Yes	FT
10. Dakota City – 1401 Pine St., (402)241-0032	Yes – 1 kiosk	Yes	FT
11. Fairbury – 411 Fourth St., (402)729-6168	No (space is not available)	Yes	FT
12. Falls City – 1700 Stone St., (402)245-4431	Yes – 1 kiosk	Yes	FT
13. Fremont – 839 S. Broad St., (402)753-1610	Yes – 1 kiosk	Yes	FT
14. Fremont – 124 E. 5 <sup>th</sup> Street, (402)727-3200	Yes – 1 kiosk	No	PT
15. Gering – 1600 10 <sup>th</sup> Street, (308)436-6500	Yes – 1 kiosk	Yes	FT
16. Grand Island - 116 South Pine St., (308)385-6100	Yes – 2 kiosks	Yes	FT
17. Grand Island – 208 N. Pine St., (308)385-6123	Yes – 1 kiosk	No	PT
18. Hastings – 300 N. St. Joseph Ave., Room 204, (402)462-1800	Yes – 1 kiosk	Yes	FT
19. Hebron – 225 N. 4 <sup>th</sup> St., (402)768-0400	No (space is not available)	Yes	FT
20. Imperial – 135 W. 5 <sup>th</sup> St., (308) 882-4791	No	Yes	PT
21. Kearney – 24 West 16 <sup>th</sup> St., (308)865-5592	Yes – 1 kiosk	Yes	FT
22. Lexington – 800 N. Washington, (308)324-6633	Yes – 1 kiosk	Yes	FT
23. Lexington – 1501 Plum Creek Pkwy, Suite 4, (308) 324-1416	Yes – 1 kiosk	Yes	FT
24. Lincoln – 1050 N Street, Suite 250, (402)471-7000	Yes – 4 kiosks	Yes	FT
25. McCook – 108 West D St, (308)345-8420	No (space is not available)	Yes	FT
26. Nebraska City – 917 Wildwood Lane, Suite A, (402)873-6671	Yes – 1 kiosk	Yes	FT
27. Neligh – 501 Main St., (402) 887-4196	No	Yes	FT
28. Norfolk – 209 N. 5 <sup>th</sup> St., (402)370-3120	Yes – 4 kiosks	Yes	FT

## Attachment B: Nebraska Economic Assistance Offices Open to the Public

Office Location	Kiosks available	Staff available	Staff Available FT or PT
29. North Platte – 200 South Silber St., (308)535-8200	Yes – 1 kiosk	Yes	FT
30. Ogallala – 210 E. 5 <sup>th</sup> St., (308) 284-8080	No (space is not available)	Yes	FT
31. Omaha – 1215 S. 42 <sup>nd</sup> St., (402)595-2665	Yes – 5 kiosks	Yes	FT
32. Omaha – 3737 Lake St., (402)595-3700	Yes – 2 kiosks	Yes	FT
33. Omaha – 1313 Farnam St., (402)595-2880	Yes – 1 kiosk	Yes	FT
34. Omaha – 5211 S. 31 <sup>st</sup> St., (402)595-1787	Yes – 2 kiosks	Yes	FT
35. O’Neill – 128 North 6 <sup>th</sup> St., (402)336-2750	Yes – 1 kiosk	Yes	FT
36. Ord – 213 S. 15 <sup>th</sup> St., (308)728-3685	No	Yes	FT
37. Papillion – 1251 Golden Gate Dr. (402)595-1394	Yes – 1 kiosk	Yes	FT
38. Pender – 415 Main St., (402)385-2571	Yes – 1 kiosk	Yes	FT
39. Seward – 1313 285 <sup>th</sup> Road., (402)646-2132	No	Yes	FT
40. Sidney – 1820 Illinois, (308)254-6900	Yes – 1 kiosk	Yes	FT
41. Valentine – 365 N. Main St, Suite 4 Courthouse (402)376-1790	No	Yes	FT
42. Wahoo – 433 N. Chestnut, (402)443-4252	No	Yes	PT
43. York – 824 Lincoln Ave., (402)362-4471	Yes – 1 kiosk	Yes	FT

## Some Comments from Clients & Shared by Employees

**Sent:** Friday, August 03, 2012 10:23 AM

xxx called to find out why her SNAP benefits were closed for 8-2012. She stated that she just missed a call from DHHS and wanted to know what the status of her case was. I told her the SSW she talked to earlier today fixed the error on her case and reinstated her benefits for 08-2012. xxx asked me to thank xxxxxxxx for taking the time to look into her case considering how busy case workers are. She stated a huge burden has been lifted off her shoulders. She was also very sorry for missing her call.

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**Sent:** Tuesday, July 03, 2012 11:56 AM

Client wanted to make sure I informed a supervisor that she enjoys our new system. She states that although she has to wait 10 mins it is so much better than the 2 or 3 days she had to wait for a case worker to call her back before. Client wanted me to tell you that every time she calls she gets a nice person on the phone and she appreciates that. She made me promise to tell my supervisor so here you have it.

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**Sent:** Friday, June 08, 2012 8:10 AM

I just wanted to take the time to tell you what a great job xxxxxxxxx did in assisting me with a escalated issue last night.

We had a mom call whose child is in the NICU and was told she had to get a prescription for the baby. When she went to inquire at the pharmacy she was told her child had no coverage for prescriptions and she would need to pay \$150.00.

The call came into me around 4:55. I seen xxxxxxxxx was still available on the office communicator at 5:02 so I pinged her and she was able to assist. She reviewed the case and quickly identified the problem. She worked on the case while I was updating the mom. xxxxxxxxx advised she had processed/updated the childs information and coverage was going to be good after the overnight run. She also offered to call the pharmacy for the client.

I updated mom after xxxxxxxxx completed her work and she was so thankful and said she wanted to make sure we knew how much it meant to her to receive that kind of assistance for her baby from us.

This is just one of the many times I have asked xxxxxxxxx for help and every time she does a great job. I wanted to make sure you were aware of it.

Please extend my thanks along with the clients to xxxxxxxxx for a job well done.

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**Sent:** Tuesday, May 22, 2012 12:31 PM

I heard two positive comments this week regarding AccessNebraska. One was from a previous client of Nevada. She said she loved the 10 minute wait time as opposed to two hours in Nevada only to be treated poorly by the person answering the phone. She said the workers were rude and she has received excellent service in Nebraska.

The second client said that she loves the new system—it saves gas and time and is quite easy. All you have to do is punch in a few numbers and someone assists you. She said that some people just don't like change but this was a good change.

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**Sent:** Tuesday, October 02, 2012 3:37 PM

I just had a great call from xxxxxxxx. He wanted to make sure that xxxxxxxx's supervisor knew that he was very impressed with her customer service with his case. He said that he had surgery last week and hadn't had time to call back to let us know. He really appreciated that she listened to him.

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**Sent:** Tuesday, August 14, 2012 1:48 PM

Mr. xxxxxx,

I just wanted to send you a note to thank you for Access Nebraska's outreach efforts here at the xxxxxxxxx House. The response has been overwhelming and xxxxx and xxxxxxx have provided excellent services, in a small amount of time. The homeless clients seem to really appreciate the one on one contact, and it also allows our case-managers to attend to other clients/needs. We look forward to a continuing partnership with Access Nebraska. If there is anything we can do for your mission, please let us know.

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**Sent:** Wednesday, July 25, 2012 11:42 AM

xxxxxxxxxxx called in with questions but stated she moved here from IL and HHS here is wonderful. She said it is great to call in and speak with a live person and just automated system or leaving a vml. She said in IL if you go to local office, you sit for 5 hrs before they give you the runaround. She said it is wonderful here to go to a window and get someone to help you and everyone she has spoken with on the phone has been really nice. 😊

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**Sent:** Friday, June 15, 2012 3:04 PM

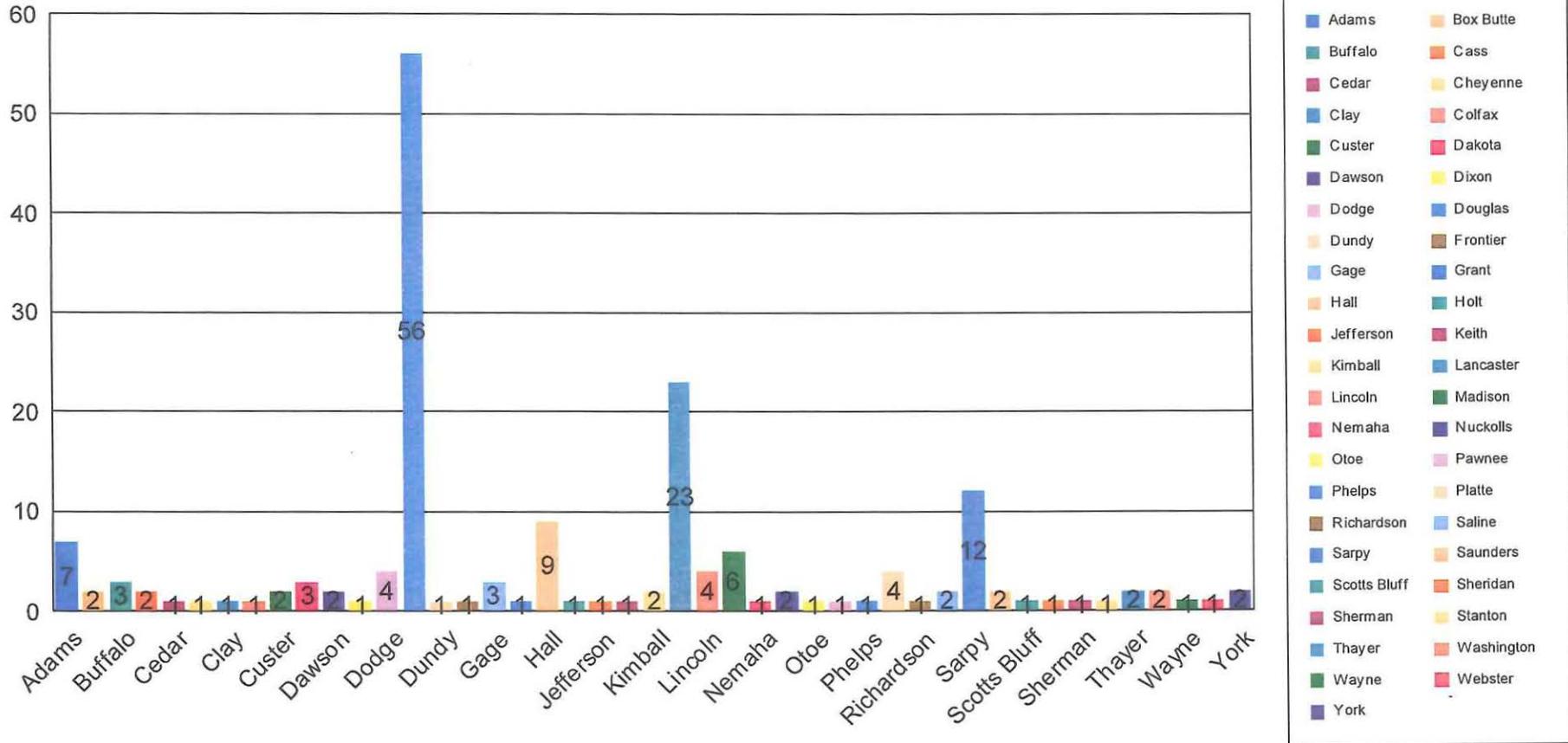
I received a call from xxxxxxxxxx who stated that xxxxx did an excellent job of straightening out her case. She felt he was helpful, and went out of his way to get her the help that she needed. She felt that he was Awesome to work with and she wanted him to know how much she appreciated his help and that she appreciates all that DHHS does for all their customers. Good Job, you are a valued member of our Team.

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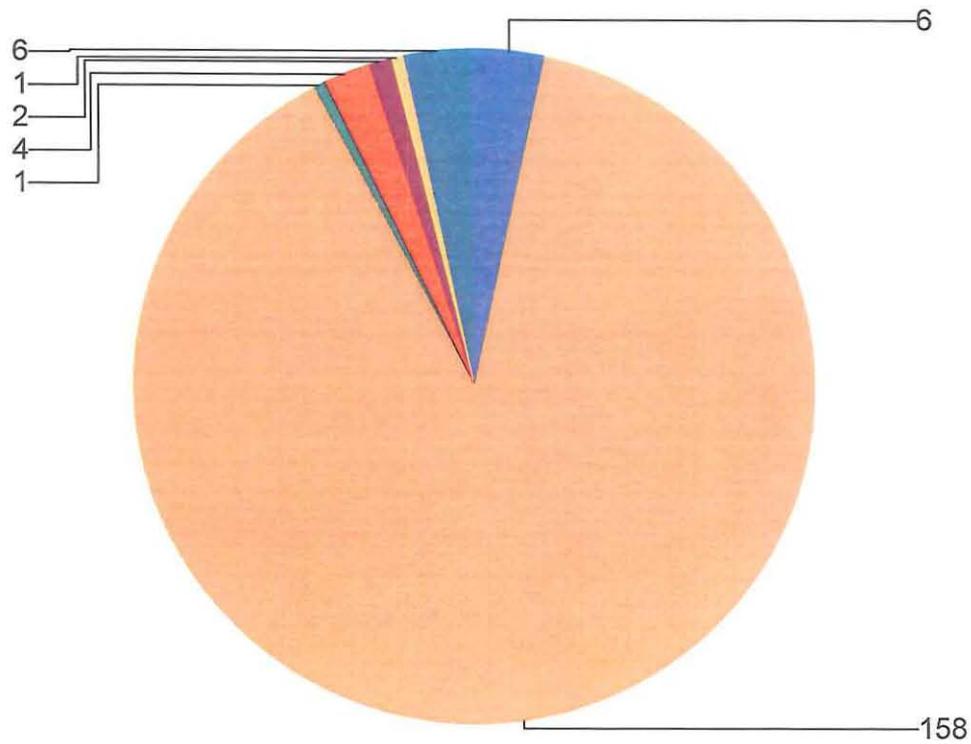
**Sent:** Wednesday, March 07, 2012 8:22 AM

I just talked to xxxxxxxxxx. She interviewed with xxxxxxx yesterday and wanted me to pass along that he was, in her words, "amazing and so helpful". She didn't understand anything about the benefits and said that this was all very new to her and xxxxx took a lot of time and explained everything to her and answered her questions. She said that so far, her experience with NE DHHS has been far better than her experiences with benefits in Ohio where she used to live.

### What is your county of residence?

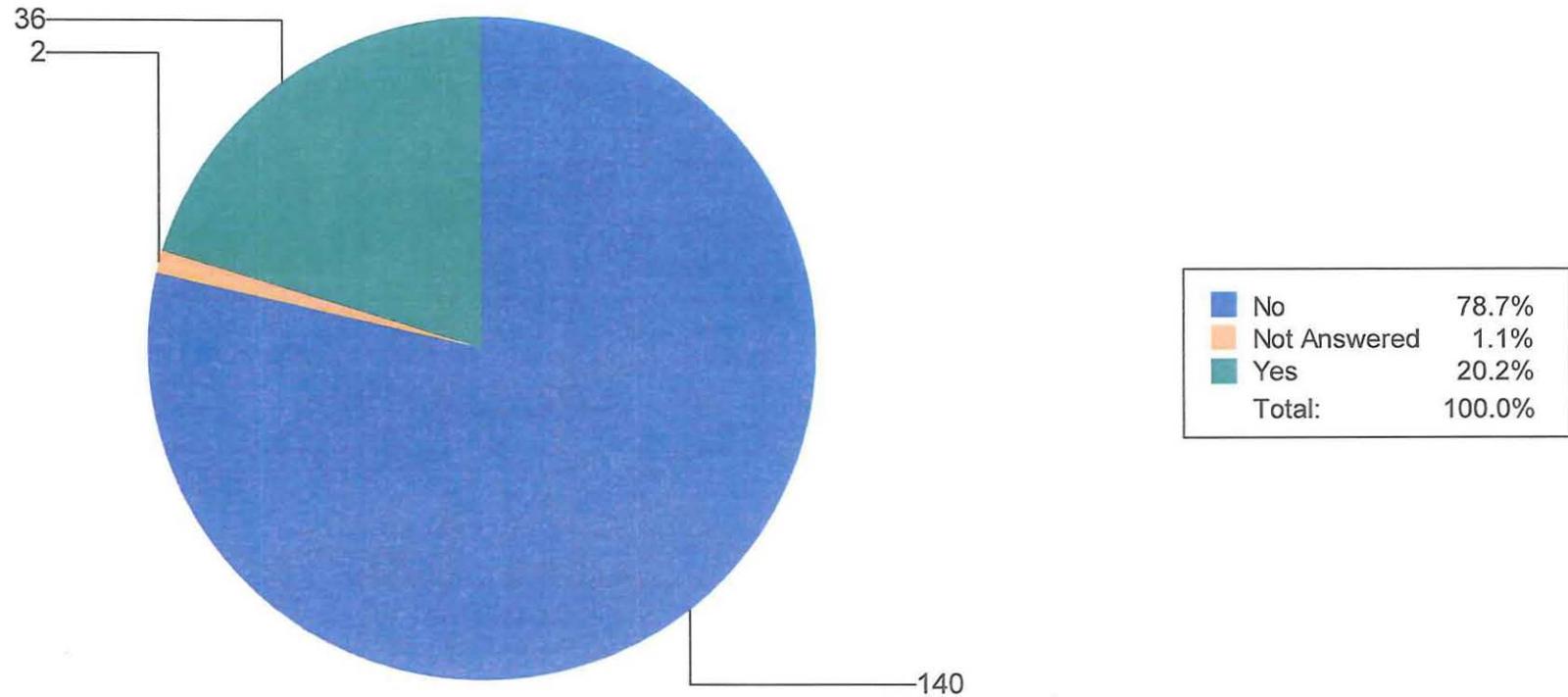


### Where did you complete this survey?

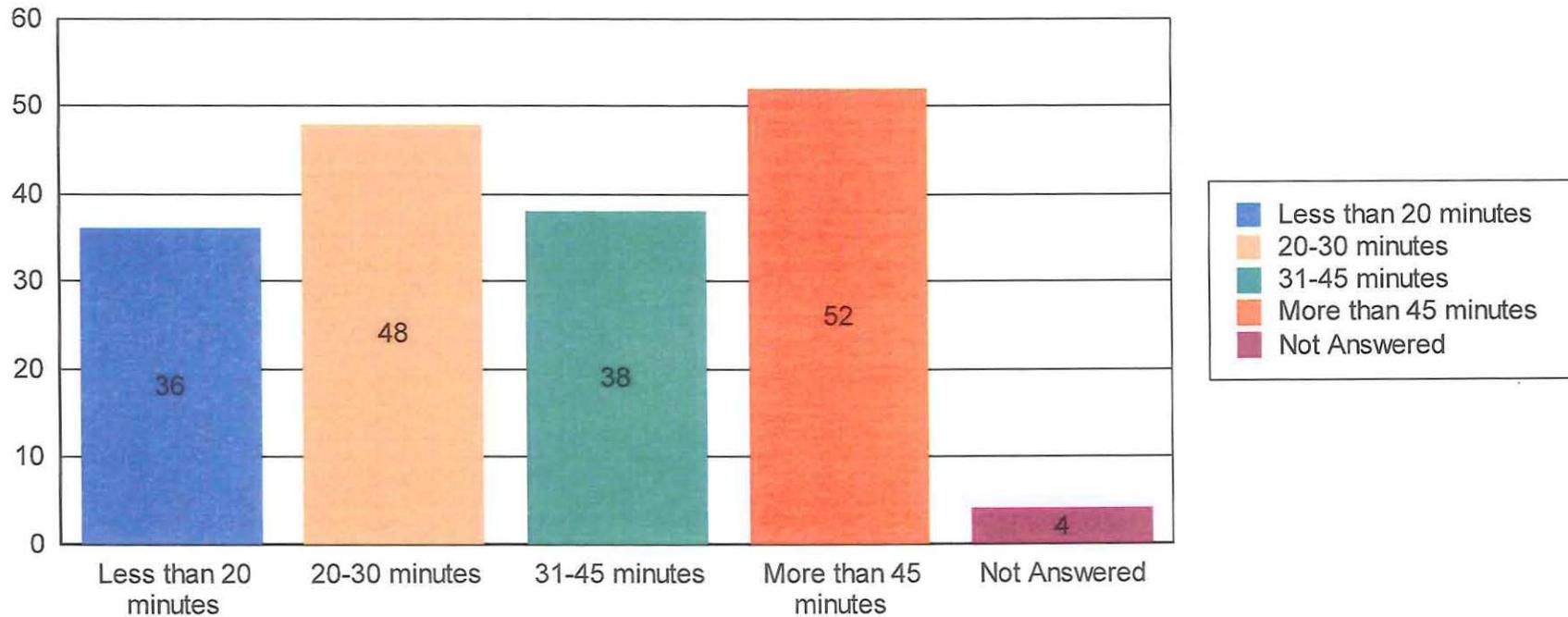


Community Agency	3.4%
Computer at home, at a family member or friend's house or at work	88.8%
Health Care Center	0.6%
Hospital	2.2%
Library	1.1%
Public Health Agency	0.6%
The computer at your local DHHS Office.	3.4%
Total:	100.0%

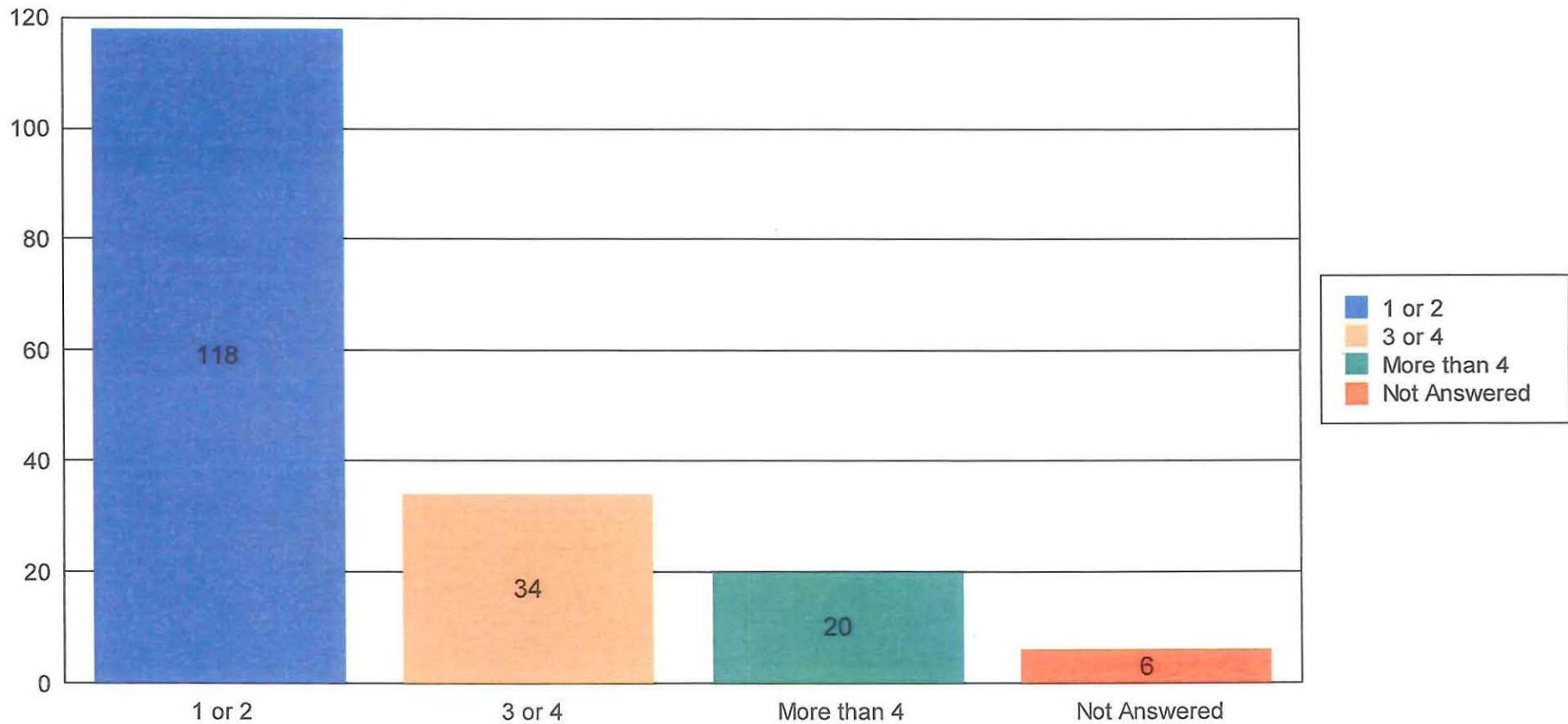
### Did you have another person assist you in completing the application?



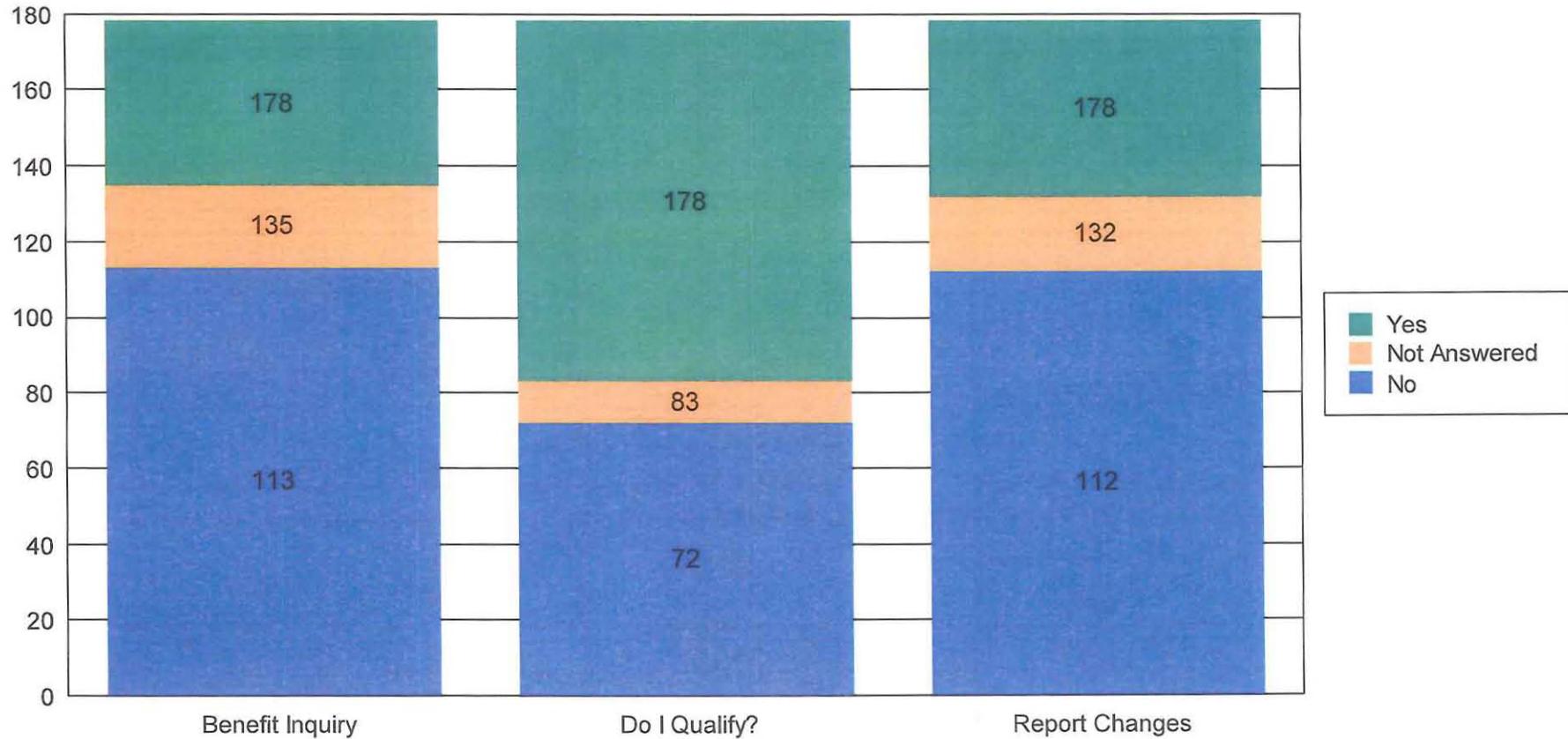
## How long did it take you to complete the application?



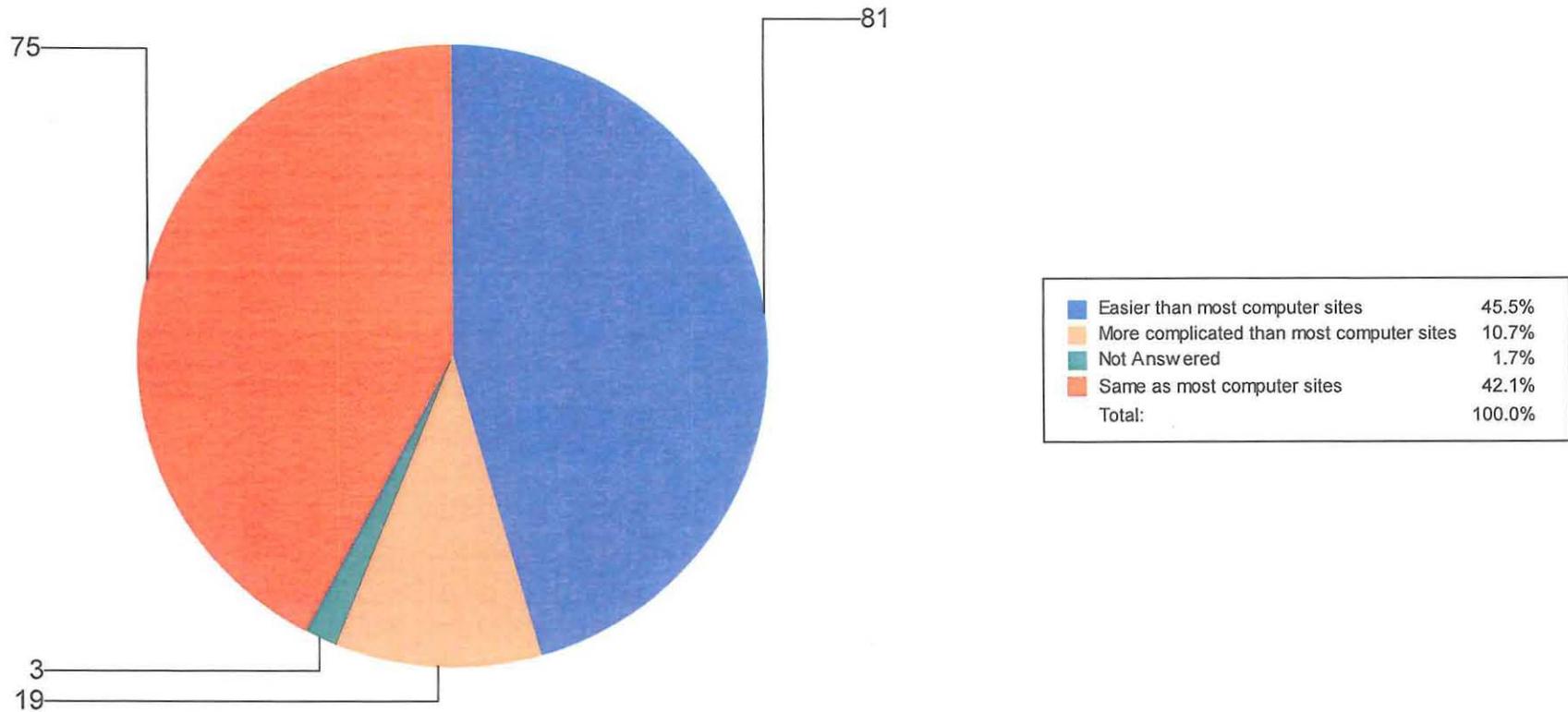
### How many times have you used this web site to complete an application?



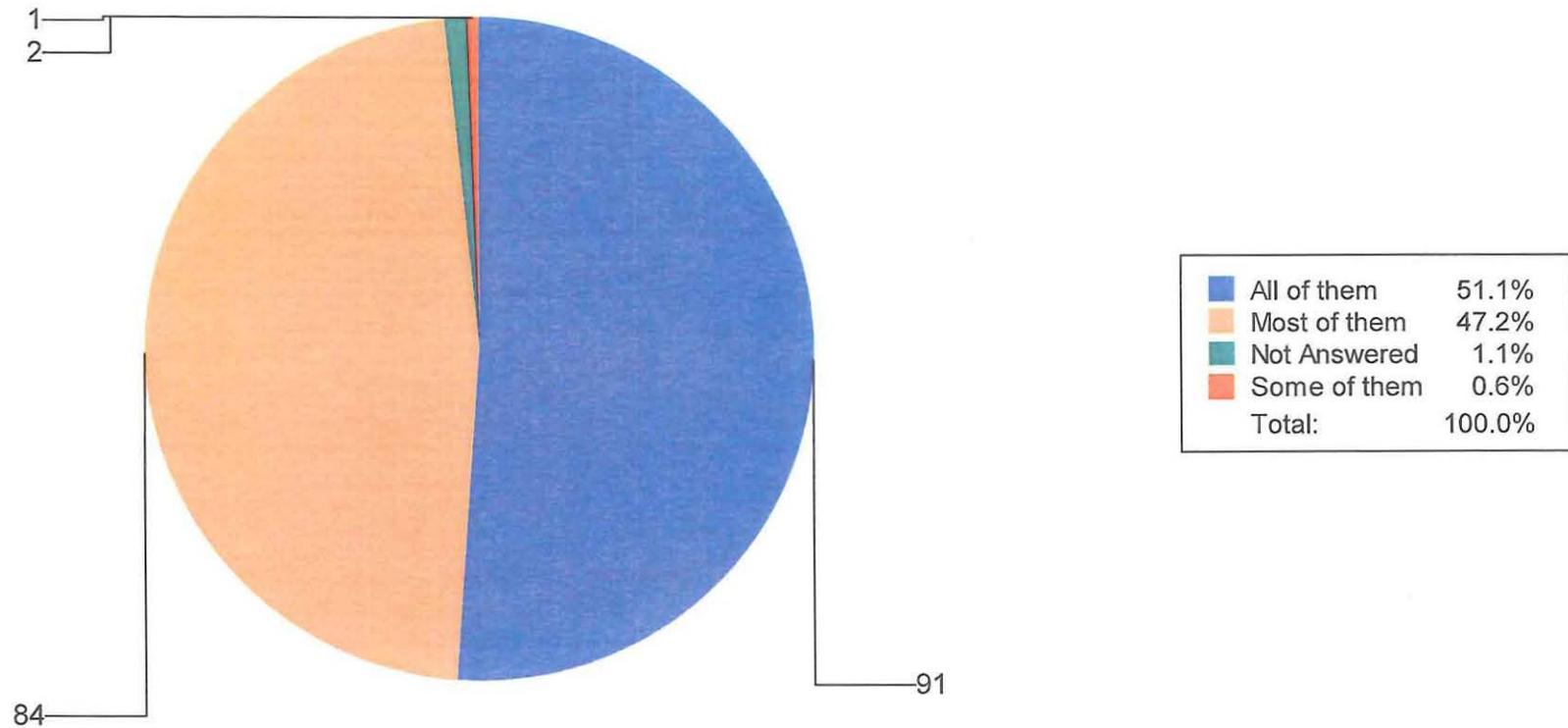
## Have you used any of the following ACCESSNebraska web site options?



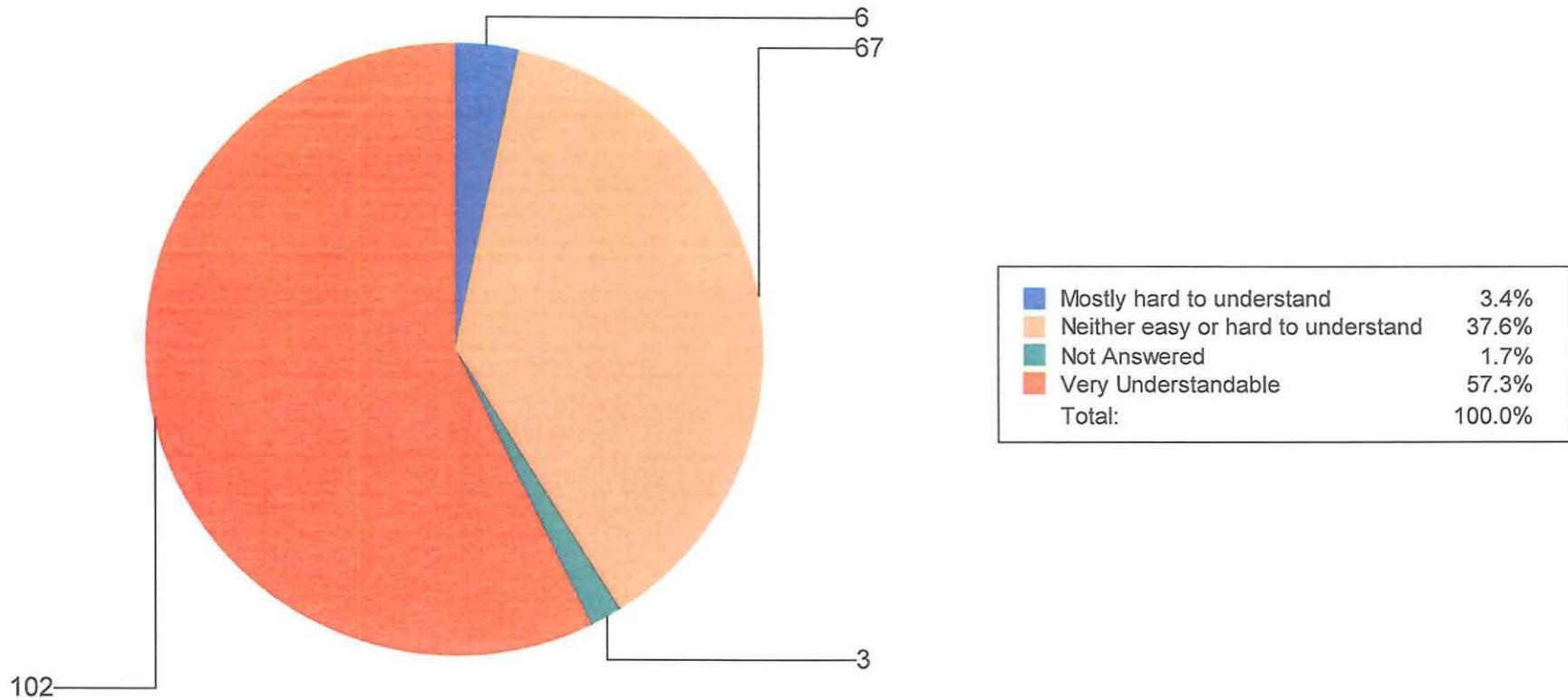
### Did you find the directions and navigation through the application easy to follow?



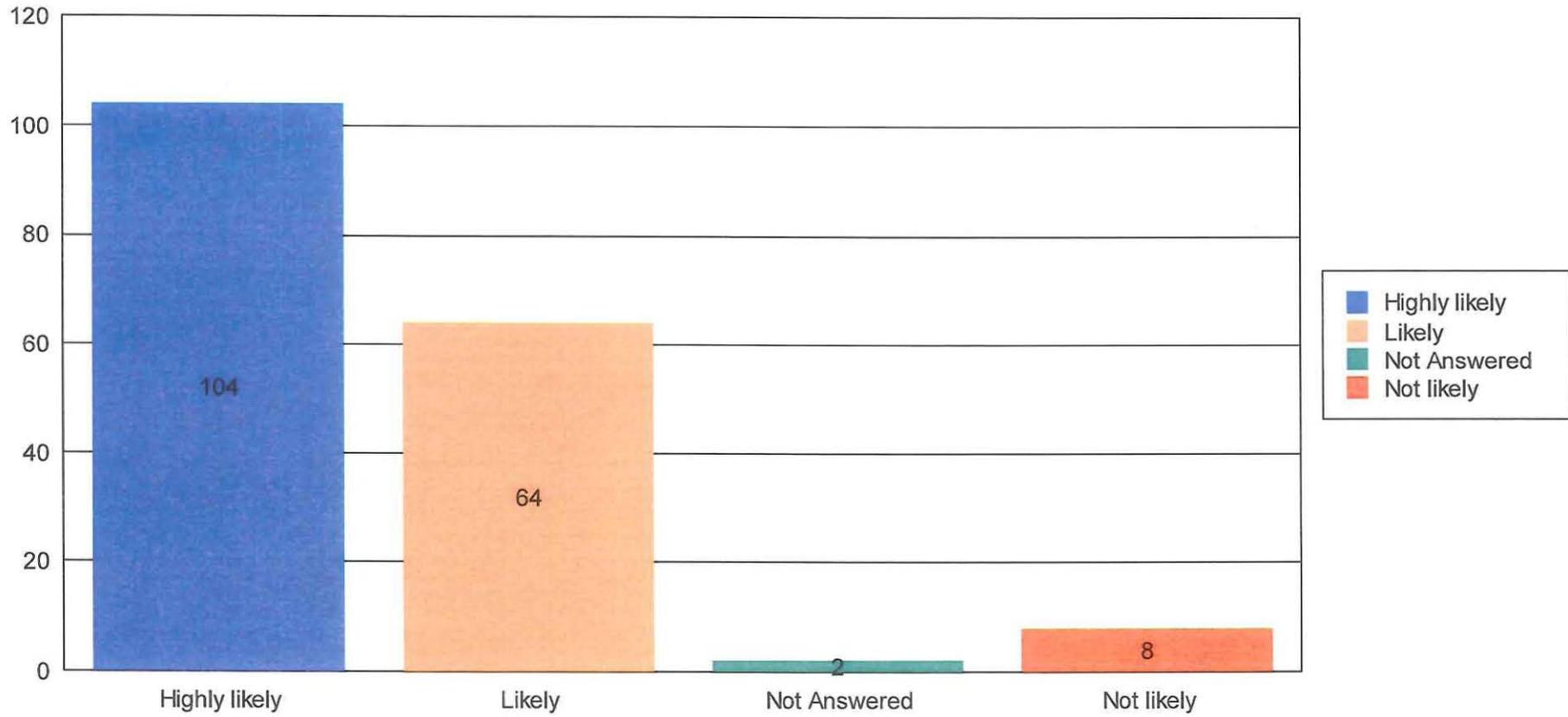
### About how many of the questions on the application did you answer?



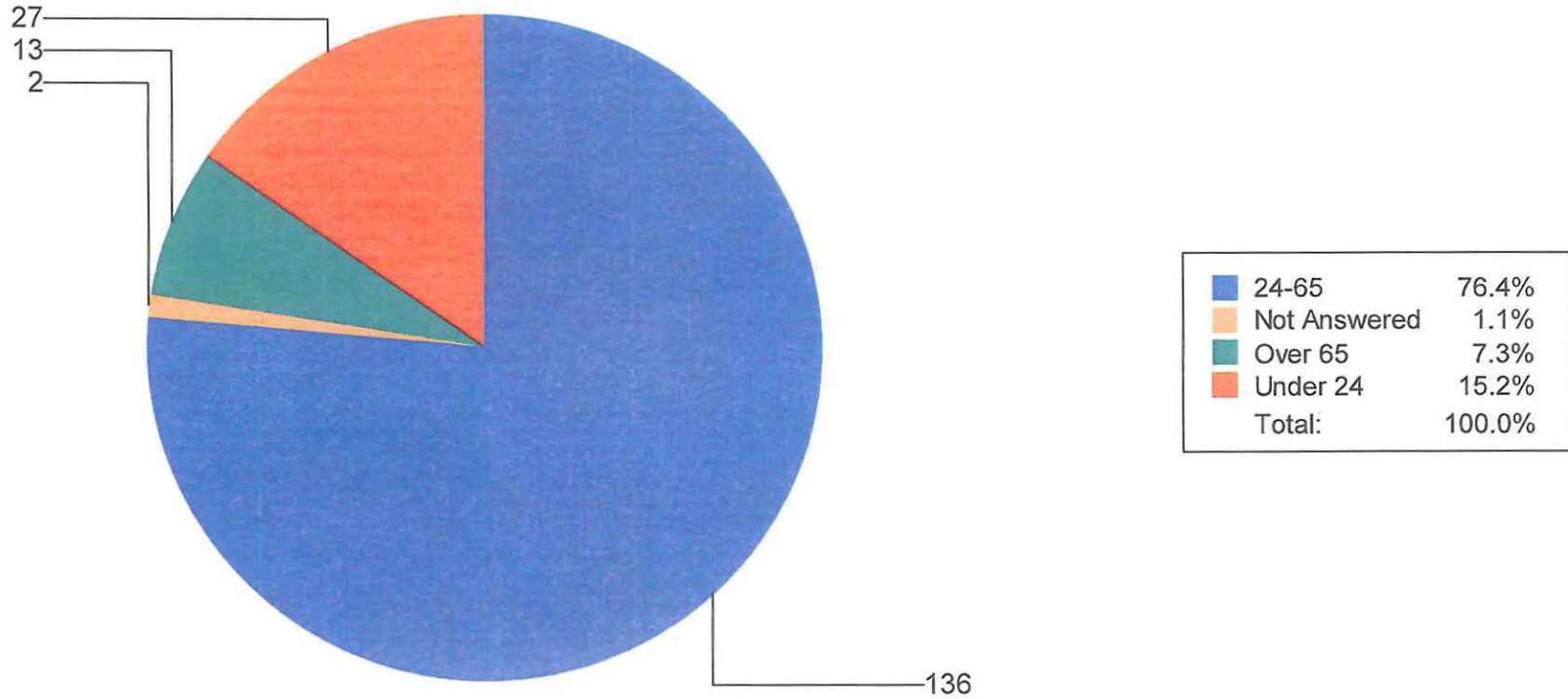
### Did you understand what information was being asked for on the application questions?



### Will you use the ACCESSNebraska web site again for services?



### Which age group do you belong to?



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- 3. It has been validated to the extent allowed by processing time available, and*
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