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## Assessing Customer Service Satisfaction with U. S. Pretrial Services, District of Nebraska

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**THE PURPOSE OF** this survey study was to examine customers' attitudes toward the services provided by the United States Pretrial Services Office for the District of Nebraska. This office was established as a separate agency from the U.S. Probation Office in July 1992. Its primary mission is to "preserve the presumption of innocence, while ensuring the protection of the community" (Connor, 2000). The services provided by U.S. Pretrial Services are diverse and its mission is to serve multiple customers, including judges, U.S. Marshals, United States and defense attorneys, U.S. Probation, alcohol and drug treatment staff, and defendants. Although the agency has existed for eight years, this was the first time clients' satisfaction and quality of services were formally assessed.

An extensive review of the literature indicated that assessment of client satisfaction with U.S. Pretrial Services agencies had either not been formally conducted, or not been published. This study contributes to the existing literature by addressing that deficiency. It is unique for several reasons. First, it provides a model for formal survey assessment of quality of services and client satisfaction that does not currently exist. Second, it assesses multiple clients' attitudes toward the services provided by U.S. Pretrial Services. Seven separate surveys were developed to assess the types of services provided to each client group. Third, an independent research consultant was used to administer the surveys and analyze the results. To ensure respondent anonymity, U.S. Pretrial Services staff did not have access to the raw data.

This study should benefit not only to the U.S. Pretrial Services Office in the District of Nebraska but other agencies interested in assessing quality of services and client satisfaction. In addition, the Federal Judicial Center may use the findings of this study to target training needs within the U.S. Courts.

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**Methods**

The research method used to conduct this study was a cross-sectional, descriptive survey. Survey methodology was particularly appropriate for this study because of its focus on assessing clients' attitudes about the services provided by the U.S. Pretrial Services office. It provided an opportunity for clients to assess the quality of U.S. Pretrial Services anonymously.

The sample for this study was seven customer groups served by the Lincoln and Omaha U.S. Pretrial Services offices, including judges, defense attorneys, U.S. attorneys, U.S. marshals, U.S. probation officers, drug and alcohol treatment center staff, and past and current defendants. Multiple sampling strategies were used to identify potential respondents. Census sampling was used to select judges, U.S. attorneys, U.S. marshals, and U.S. probation officers. All individuals in these groups were surveyed because of the small number in each of these four client groups. Since the population of defense attorneys was larger, they were selected using systematic random sampling so the number of participants equaled the number of prosecuting attorneys. Treatment staff were selected purposefully, by identifying staff members who regularly worked with U.S. Pretrial Services staff and could most accurately assess the services provided by the U.S. Pretrial Services office. The sampling frames used for these six client groups were current rosters maintained by the U.S. Pretrial Services office. Defendants were selected using systematic random sampling from a list of individuals who had worked with U.S. Pretrial Services staff in the last three years. The sampling frame used to identify defendants was the PACTS database system (Probation Pretrial Services Automated Case Tracking System). The original sample size for all seven client groups was 254; however, due to the difficulty in obtaining current addresses for defendants, 44 surveys were returned "undeliverable." This reduced the total sample size to 210. Of those 210, 125 usable surveys were returned for a 59.5 percent response rate. [Table 1](#) identifies the number of surveys mailed and responses by client group.

Seven separate surveys were designed to rate the services provided by the U.S. Pretrial Services office specific to each client group. The survey items were designed by U.S. Pretrial Services staff, with the assistance of an independent research consultant. The surveys had between 18 and 28 items. Surveys for all seven client groups had five common demographic questions. There were also nine common items on all seven client group surveys. Surveys for each of the seven client groups were specifically tailored to assess the types of services provided to each group. The surveys had between four and fourteen items specific to each client group.

The most common response set on the surveys was a five-point Likert scale (*strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, strongly disagree*). In some cases, respondents were asked to rate the quality of services using a different scale (*excellent, good, average, below average, poor*) or assess a "report card" grade for the services provided by the U.S. Pretrial Services office (A–F).

The surveys were mailed to respondents on August 13, 1999. A cover letter from the research consultant prefaced the survey, explaining the importance of the study, the need for respondents' assistance, confidentiality issues, and the logistics of filling out and returning the survey. The surveys were mailed by the research consultant and returned to the research consultant. The response rate for the first mailing was 34.8 percent. A second survey and revised cover letter was mailed to non-respondents on September 3, 1999. The total response rate after two mailings was 59.5 percent.

Data were analyzed using basic, descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, measures of central tendency (mean score) and measures of variability (standard deviation). Data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software. An independent consultant analyzed the data within client groups and across client groups.

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## Results

### *Common Items*

Nine common items were assessed by all seven customer groups. The items assessed basic services provided by U.S. Pretrial Services and customers' overall satisfaction with the agency. The item that was rated highest was staff professionalism (mean = 1.55) and the item that was rated lowest was objectivity with defendants (mean = 2.14). Seven of the items used a 5-point Likert scale (*SA=Strongly Agree, A=Agree, NAD=Neither Agree nor Disagree, D=Disagree, SD=Strongly Disagree*). [Table 2](#) reports the results for these seven items.

Respondents were asked to rate the overall quality of services provided by the U.S. Pretrial Services Office using the following scale: *Excellent, Good, Average, Below Average, Poor*. Forty-six of the respondents (37 percent) rated the services *excellent*, fifty-one (41 percent) rated the services *good*, eleven (9 percent) rated the services *average*, five (4 percent) rated the services *below average*, and eleven (9 percent) rated the services *poor*. Respondents were also asked to assess a letter grade for the services provided (*A=excellent, B=good, C=average, D=below average, F=poor*). Three quarters of the respondents awarded U.S. Pretrial Services a grade of either *A/excellent* (58/46 percent) or *B/good* (36/29 percent). Eleven respondents (9 percent) awarded a *C/average*, six (5 percent) awarded a *D/below average*, and nine (7 percent) awarded an *F/poor*.

#### *Common Items by Individual Client Groups*

The data for each specific client group were examined on the nine common items on every survey. The results indicated that overall, clients strongly agreed or agreed with the items and there was little variability across responses. However, of the seven client groups, defense attorneys' responses were slightly less positive than others with the exception of defendants. Defendants responses were consistently lower than the responses of those in the other six client groups, and there was greater variability across defendants' responses. [Table 3](#) identifies the mean score and the standard deviation for the seven common items based on client group.

The overall quality of Pretrial Services was rated the highest by the Judges (*excellent, 1.22/0.44*) and the lowest by the defendants (*average, 2.95/1.48*). The other groups rated the agency's overall quality as *good*. The report card grades assigned by the customer groups were consistent with their overall quality ratings. Judges assigned an *A* (1.11/0.33), defendants assigned a *C* (2.86/1.44) and the remaining groups assigned *B*'s.

#### *Items Tailored to Individual Groups*

*Judges.* Ten items were specifically tailored to assess judges' attitudes about their work with Pretrial Services. Judges' responses to the survey items specifically tailored to them were overall positive. One hundred percent of the judges *strongly agreed* that U.S. Pretrial Services staff were responsive to the courts (mean=1.00) and respectful (mean=1.00). Judges identified room for improvement in Pretrial Services officers' timeliness (mean=1.67) as well as thoroughness (mean=1.44) in reporting to the courts.

*U.S. Attorneys.* U.S. Attorneys responded to six items specifically tailored to their work with Pretrial Services. U.S. Attorneys *strongly agreed* that Pretrial Services staff were respectful (mean=1.16). The U.S. Attorneys *agreed* with the other five items tailored to them. The U.S. Attorneys indicated that pretrial services officers maintained a neutral position (mean=1.72),

*Defense Attorneys.* Defense attorneys were also asked to assess six items individually tailored to their work with U.S. Pretrial Services officers. Defense attorneys' responses to survey items that had to do with procedure, professionalism and quality of work were generally positive. The most highly rated item was that Pretrial Services Officers were respectful (mean=1.50). Defense Attorneys were neutral regarding whether Pretrial Services officers made appropriate referrals (mean=2.83) and whether the officers maintained a neutral position with clients (mean=2.83).

*U.S. Probation.* U.S. Probation staff responded to four items specifically tailored to their group. The most positive rating was on cooperation in sharing information (mean=1.00) and the lowest rating was on Pretrial Services' promptness in responding to their requests (mean=1.75).

*U.S. Marshals.* Four survey items were specifically tailored to U.S. Marshals. U.S. Marshals *strongly agreed* (mean=1.42) that U.S. Pretrial Services staff were respectful. They *agreed* that U.S. Pretrial Services maintained current demographic information (mean=1.67), that they were timely in sharing information (mean=2.00) and that U.S. Pretrial Services staff were considerate of defendants (mean=2.00).

*Drug and Alcohol Treatment Staff.* Eight survey items were individually tailored to Drug and Alcohol Treatment Staff. At least two thirds of the drug/alcohol treatment staff *strongly agreed* or *agreed* with all of the survey items tailored to their work with Pretrial Services' work with treatment agencies. All respondents *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that Pretrial Services staff was respectful. On all other individually tailored survey items, drug and alcohol treatment staff *neither agreed nor disagreed*.

*Defendants.* Defendants responded to eight survey items tailored to their group. Defendants *agreed* that they were treated with dignity (mean=2.38). This was the item they rated the most positively. The mean scores indicated that the defendants were neutral (*neither agreed nor disagreed*) with the other seven items, including being treated fairly (mean=2.71), Pretrial Services providing accurate information (mean=2.62), and being treated as an individual (mean=2.88).

Defendant responses to survey items were more varied than the responses from the other participant groups. The standard deviation on these eight items ranged from 1.08 to 1.47. In general, more than half of the respondents were positive about the services provided by U.S. Pretrial Services, 14 percent to 17 percent were neutral, and approximately 30 percent were negative.

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## **Discussion**

Overwhelmingly, respondents perceived that U.S. Pretrial Services staff conducted themselves in a professional manner. This item had the highest mean score of the seven items assessed by all seven client groups (mean score=1.55). This item also had the smallest standard deviation (0.81), which means there was less variability across responses than on the other six items. The data suggest that professionalism is demonstrated by Pretrial Services staff in their attire, conduct under pressure, and interactions with other professionals as well as defendants. The agency chief's emphasis on professionalism may contribute to this result. The chief's emphasis includes discussions on professionalism and a written policy pertaining to appropriate office attire with an emphasis on projecting a professional image.

Defendants, though their scores were lower overall than those of the other client groups, were positive on items that seem to generally reflect the professional attitudes and decorum of the agency. More than half *strongly agreed* or *agreed* they were "treated fairly," were "treated with dignity," received "accurate information," received a "clear explanation of the function of Pretrial Services," and were "treated like an individual."

Defendants were much less positive about items that could have been related to the entire federal case experience and its outcome. Those items include the defendants' attitudes about being treated as "innocent until proven guilty," and feeling that Pretrial Services "helped (them) find a balance between case-related demands and life demands." Fewer than half of the responses to each of those items were rated positively (*strongly agree* or *agree*). Several defendants' comments reflected confusion about U.S. Pretrial Services, as they indicated they thought the U.S. Pretrial Services officer had written the pre-sentence investigation and made a sentencing recommendation, which is a role of a U.S. probation officer. Negative defendant responses could be based on several factors, including highly structured and restrictive release conditions and/or violation proceedings, lack of understanding of Pretrial Services' role in the case versus U.S. Probation's, and/or the Pretrial Services' officer's failure to provide the assistance the defendant needed.

Defense attorneys were consistent in their assessment of both the overall quality of the U.S. Pretrial Services office (*good*) and a report card grade (*B*). Both items had mean scores of 1.83. The three items the defense attorneys rated the lowest were the appropriateness of U.S. Pretrial Services' recommendations (mean=2.67), their objectivity with defendants (mean=2.67), and the appropriateness of referrals (mean=2.17). Interestingly, these were the same three items rated lowest by U.S. attorneys. Although defense attorneys rated those items lower than U.S. attorneys did, this is a general indication that defense attorneys view Pretrial Services' orientation as too restrictive and U.S. attorneys view the agency as not restrictive enough. The mean scores indicated that defense attorneys had a slightly more positive overall perception of the U.S. Pretrial Services office than did U.S. attorneys. Although the mid-point "neutral" was a legitimate response, U.S. attorneys may have also chosen neutral responses because they did not have direct observation of, or exposure to, referrals or interactions between U.S. Pretrial Services and defendants. A "not observed" or "not applicable" option on the survey might have provided a more accurate rating. Selecting the neutral responses lowered the mean score on those items.

Ratings by judges and U.S. attorneys indicated a need for improvement in the timeliness of reporting violations. Timeliness in reporting violations can be affected by the officer's delay in reporting to the judge until he or she receives verification that a violation has occurred (e.g., obtaining citation copies, accessing drug testing forms to be cross referenced with laboratory reports). The agency may want to consider using email to report "apparent violations" and the status of the officer's verification efforts.

Communication was another issue that was assessed. On three of the four survey items for the U.S. Marshal Service, there were a few responses that were *neither agree or disagree*. Those three survey items assessed whether U.S. Pretrial Services maintained current demographic information, were timely in sharing information, and were considerate of the demands on the U.S. Marshal Service. One respondent *disagreed* that U.S. Pretrial Services shared timely information and one *disagreed* that U.S. Pretrial Services was considerate of the demands on the U.S. Marshal Service. Both items address communication between the two agencies. While treatment staff responses were positive overall, it appears that the issue they also most strongly believed needed to be addressed was Pretrial Services' inter-agency communication.

Overall, respondents of all groups *agreed* (mean score 2.14) that U.S. Pretrial Services staff treated defendants objectively. Interestingly, this item had the second smallest standard deviation of all the common items (0.98), indicating less variability on this item than on most items. One might have assumed there would be greater variability, especially between respondents who fit into professional groups versus defendants, but that was not the case.

Neutral to negative responses from all client groups regarding timely assistance may reflect the low number of staff employed relative to the caseload size in this district. At the time this survey was conducted, U.S. Pretrial Services staff was composed of five officers, two support staff and two interns/contractors for a caseload of 563. The numbers of cases require all Pretrial Services staff to have more obligations (e. g., attending court hearings, conducting investigations) outside the office. At times, the office may not have been staffed because all staff members were involved with obligations outside the office.

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### **Limitations of this Study**

Several potential limitations may have influenced this study. It was difficult to locate the current addresses of the defendants. The highest rate of "undeliverable" surveys were returned because defendants were no longer incarcerated or no longer at their last known address. The researchers compensated for this by over-sampling defendants.

The survey was directed only to English-speaking defendants. The names of non-English speaking defendants were removed from the sampling frame, because of their inability to respond to a survey in English.

Those respondents who were selected randomly (i.e., defense attorneys and defendants) most likely had varying degrees of interaction with U.S. Pretrial Services. Though the researchers tried to compensate for this by developing seven different surveys, tailoring each survey to the specific client group, some respondents may have had less exposure to the U.S. Pretrial office's services than others in the same client group.

The survey used Likert-scale items but did not have a response option for "not applicable" or "not observed." In some cases the responses may have been skewed because respondents may have used the midpoint on the scale (neither agree nor disagree) when an item was not applicable or observed. This would have lowered the overall rating on the items where this occurred.

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## **Recommendations**

Based on the results of this study, several recommendations are offered for the target audiences of the study.

### *For U.S. Pretrial Services–District of Nebraska*

1. Develop a mechanism to better educate client groups (especially defendants and treatment providers) about the role of the U.S. Pretrial Services Office, relative to the status of the case and the judicial process. Pamphlets, written in English and Spanish, would be the most economical educational tool; however, a video would also be effective.
2. Address the issue of communication with Spanish-speaking individuals. A limitation of the study was that only English-speaking people were surveyed.
3. Pretrial Services staff need to make in-person community contacts with treatment centers regularly.
4. Pretrial Services staff should participate in ongoing training on current developments of addiction/treatment issues to aid in supervision.

### *For Pretrial Services Officers*

1. Officers should regularly consult with other officers about client cases to ensure objectivity and exploration of all available options for supervision and recommendations.
2. Pretrial Services officers should also communicate, with regularity, with drug and alcohol treatment staff about clients' participation and progress as well as court developments and drug testing results.

### *For the Federal Judicial Center*

1. Continue to emphasize a key training issue, specifically the language barriers that some U.S. Pretrial Services officers face in interacting with Spanish-speaking defendants. The Center could assist officers by offering programs such as interactive computer training program(s) or providing lists of recommended programs or training to officers.
2. Support the creation of an educational mechanism for defendants to assist with their understanding the role of Pretrial Services' within the judicial process.

### *Recommendations for Future Research*

This was an exploratory study designed to assess customer satisfaction with the U.S. Pretrial Services, District of Nebraska. This study could be expanded in several ways, based on the following recommendations:



1. Extend this survey to additional client groups who work with U.S. Pretrial Services, including courtroom deputies and U.S. Marshals' support staff.
2. This type of customer satisfaction survey required a significant time commitment, particularly for analysis and formal composition of the entire assessment tool with results. Agencies considering conducting a similar customer satisfaction assessment should designate staff assigned to the project and designate blocks of time, such as a week at a time, during which those staff members are considered "unavailable" for routine office work to focus on the assessment. Alternatively, agencies should consider hiring an independent research consultant to not only conduct the survey and analyze the data, but also to compile the written report. This alternative will require a significant monetary investment.
3. The U.S. Pretrial Services Office should design customer satisfaction tools that would enable the officers to collect data from non-English speaking and uneducated clients.
4. A broader geographical study of U.S. Pretrial Services across the country would provide a good comparative data base to see how U.S. Pretrial Services offices are perceived throughout the country, and whether there are differences by region. This could have implications for national training and policy.

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**TABLE 1***Survey Return by Client Group*

Client Group	Total "n"	Number Returned	Response Rate (%)
Judges	9*	9	100
Defense Attorneys	23	12	52
U.S. Attorneys	21*	19	90
U.S. Marshals	14*	12	86
U.S. Probation	17*	16	94
Treatment Staff	21	15	71
Defendants	105	42	40

\*Represents total number in population



**TABLE 2***Seven Common Items Across all Client Groups**Mean/Standard Deviation*

Survey Item	N	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Mean	SD
Written Investigations Thorough	125	44/35	53/42	18/14	6/5	4/3	1.98	0.99
Make Appropriate Recommendations	123	33/26	55/44	16/13	13/10	6/5	2.22	1.11
Professionalism	125	75/60	36/29	10 /8	3/2	1/0.8	1.55	0.81
Make Appropriate Referrals	123	41/33	45/36	23/18	8/6	6/5	2.13	1.10
Give Timely Assistance	125	43/34	54/43	15/12	6/5	7/6	2.04	1.08
Objective with Defendants	124	34/27	55/44	21/17	12/10	2/2	2.14	0.98
Overall Satisfaction with PTS	124	57/46	44/35	8/6	6/5	9/7	1.92	1.17

Scale: 1 = Strongly Agree    5 = Strongly Disagree

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