



2017 Customer Service Annual Report



Governor Hogan Presents Customer Service Award to Mack the Bee Dog and Handler Cybil Preston


Maryland Department of Agriculture Customer Service Overview

The Maryland Department of Agriculture's mission is to provide leadership and support to agriculture and the citizens of Maryland by conducting regulatory, service, and educational activities that assure consumer confidence, protect the environment, and promote agriculture.

The Maryland Department of Agriculture achieves excellence in MDA programs and in services that preserve and protect agricultural resources and the environment, promote profitable agriculture and consumer confidence, enhance the quality of life for all Marylanders, and secure a future for Maryland agriculture.

As executive departments go, the Maryland Department of Agriculture (MDA) is relatively young, having only been established since 1973, and small, with 383 permanent employees. As of August 2017 some 329 of the permanent employees successfully completed on-line customer service training. MDA's focus on one particular sector of the economy is unique among state executive departments, and reflects the recognition by lawmakers of agriculture's contribution to the state's economy, cultural diversity, and quality of life. The importance of promoting Maryland agriculture is made clear as its powers and duties are set forth in the Agriculture Articles of the Maryland Annotated Code: "The Secretary has general supervision, direction, and control of the provisions of this article and generally to all matters in any way affecting or relating to the fostering, protection, and development of the agricultural interests of the state."

The statutory directive to foster, protect, and develop the agricultural interests of the state has framed MDA's perspective on public policy matters over the years. The majority of program activities have regulatory functions or they are associated with implementation of laws in the Agricultural Article and related regulations pertaining to a



CUSTOMER SERVICE PROMISE
Larry Hogan, Governor · Boyd Rutherford, Lt. Governor

The State of Maryland pledges to provide constituents, businesses, customers, and stakeholders with services in the following manner:

- **Friendly and Courteous:** We will be helpful and supportive and have a positive attitude and passion for what we do.
- **Timely and Responsive:** We will be proactive, take initiative, and anticipate your needs.
- **Accurate and Consistent:** We will always aim for 100% accuracy, and be consistent in how we interpret and implement state policies and procedures.
- **Accessible and Convenient:** We will continue to simplify and improve access to information and resources.
- **Truthful and Transparent:** We will advance a culture of honesty, clarity and trust.

Tell us about your experience with the Dept of Information Technology. [Click here to complete a three question customer experience survey.](#)

variety of subjects, including agricultural land preservation; regulation of livestock, poultry, and eggs; pesticides and pest control; commercial feed, fertilizer, and liming materials; soil conservation and nutrient management; seeds, turfgrass, potatoes, and noxious weeds; promotion and marketing of agricultural products; and weights and measures. The department also provides a variety of services to the citizens and regulated industries of Maryland.

Historically, secretaries of Agriculture have balanced regulatory and service responsibilities with the goal of promoting policies that foster the development of agriculture by adopting a constructive and cooperative approach to fulfilling its goals.

The Department of Agriculture's Customer Service Promise describes our approach. Customer Service activities in 2017 included:

1. Improving the tracking, responsiveness, and time-to-resolution of all electronic, telephone, written, and in-person correspondence. For example, we acknowledge all email inquiries within 24 hours of receipt. Correspondence control and complaints is handled directly in the Secretary's office assuring impacted areas respond within 24 hours of receipt of any adverse information.
2. Ensure state employees and managers continue to improve customer service skills through formal training classes and informal coaching on best practices in customer service. Since there is no training budget for this action, MDA has utilized the very effective web-based training information. Customer service responsibility is an integral part of any new employee's on-boarding process.
3. Improved the processing times of agency services to help citizens and businesses accomplish their transactions with the state. This is an ongoing challenge and MDA employees often go the extra mile to make sure customers are happy and their request is acted upon almost immediately. And greater use of electronic media is helping to reduce any time lags. See point four below:
4. Increased the number of services the state provides online so that citizens and businesses can utilize self-service, as appropriate. MDA is still in the process of making all services available on line, such as license applications. Now, Kitchen Grease Haulers, Pesticides License, Permits and Certificates, State Board of Veterinary Medical Examiners, Weights and Measures Registering Service, are on line.
5. Updated online publications, forms, FAQs, and pertinent information on our website so that citizens and businesses can find relevant information quickly and accurately. MDA has dramatically decreased published information but instead relies heavily on electronic versions of documents that can either be read or printed, if desired, by members of the public seeking information.
6. Used social media to help get the word out about services, events, and news to provide citizens and businesses with information important to them. There are metrics on this in the social media section.

7. A three question Customer Experience Survey is available on our website for citizens and businesses to provide feedback. Results are used to make improvements to services.

In addition to these core customer service-related activities, we analyzed our business hours in order to better align them to customer needs; conduct focus group-type meetings with stakeholders, ensure literature is up-to-date, and conduct staff meetings to discuss progress on achieving customer service goals. We will also continue to recognize top performers in our agency for professionalism and courtesy, responsiveness in resolving a customer's needs, and for innovations that improve customer service. A year after the customer service improvement initiative was launched MDA still has the customer service challenge posted in in all entrances, exits, elevators, and bulletin boards. Staff is constantly reminded of their responsibility.

We monitored the execution of the aforementioned activities, measured performance, and analyzed the results in order to continuously improve customer service.

We are committed to providing Maryland citizens, businesses, stakeholders, and other customers with the best customer service. Customer service is also included in the MDA strategic plan.

Highlights of 2017

More than 85% of employees completed online customer service training by July 2017.

One of our outstanding MDA employees, Mack the Bee Dog, and chief state apiary inspector Cybil Preston, received the state's customer service award from the Governor.

Mack the “Bee Dog,” Cybil Preston Receive Governor’s Customer Service Heroes Award

ANNAPOLIS, MD – Mack, the bee-sniffing dog, and handler Cybil Preston were honored as the second recipients of Governor Hogan’s Customer Service Heroes Award. The award, presented monthly, recognizes and celebrates front line workers for customer service excellence. Preston is the chief apiary inspector for the Maryland Department of Agriculture. The department is the only one in the country with a bee-disease sniffing dog on staff – a position held by five canines since 1982.



Working for the department’s Apiary Inspection Program, the three -year-old yellow Labrador retriever helps Preston inspect commercial hives for American Foulbrood — one of the most widespread and the most destructive of the honey bee colony diseases. A trained dog can inspect 100 honeybee colonies in 45 minutes, versus human inspectors who average 45 colonies in one day. Early detection of the disease saves Maryland beekeepers substantial monetary loss from eradication of diseased bees and destruction of infected equipment.

“I am pleased to present the Customer Service Heroes award to Cybil Preston and her partner Mack ‘Bee Dog,’ who provide crucial protections for Maryland agriculture,” said Governor Hogan. “Cybil and Mack do a tremendous job protecting our bees and one of our state’s vital industries.”

Honey bees are critically important to the world’s agriculture industry, pollinating crops valued at more than \$40 million in Maryland alone. Research shows that every third bite we take is thanks to a pollinator, with managed honey bee colonies being the largest and most portable of the pollinators.

“Mack and Cybil provide an important service in inspecting Maryland’s honeybee colonies,” said Lt. Governor Boyd Rutherford. “Our administration, along with our state’s agricultural community, is grateful for the important work Mack and Cybil do in identifying diseased bee hives and helping to protect this important contributor to Maryland’s economy.”

Using bee dogs like Mack is cost-effective for Maryland since apiary inspections are a free service for commercial beekeepers and hobbyists. Mack’s job involves walking by beehives and sniffing the exteriors for traces of American Foulbrood infestation. When he detects the odor, he alerts Preston by sitting. Mack can only work in the colder weather from November to March – when bees are dormant – to avoid being stung.

“Mack is a tremendous asset to the department,” said Preston. “He is incredibly efficient – in a month span, Mack inspected over 1,600 bee colonies. And he is accurate – in field testing he correctly identified 100 percent of infected hives. He’s always well-received by the beekeepers. We all love Mack.”

The Maryland Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services K-9 trainers assisted in training and certifying Preston and Mack as an American Foulbrood detection team.

The Customer Service Initiative was announced by Governor Hogan in 2016 as a program designed to foster improvements in customer service across Maryland state agencies. The initiative focuses on three core deliverables: a renewed focus on a strong service culture in state agencies; improved customer service training for state employees; and the establishment of new service performance metrics, which will allow the administration and all Marylanders to track improvements in customer service.

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As a result of the event with the Governor the story was picked up widely by Maryland and other publications helping to multiply Maryland’s customer service message.

Customer Service Survey Results

From the initial launch of the effort to improved customer service, MDA has consistently ranked very high. Part of this is the hands-on nature of the work being done and employees know personally many of the customers with whom they interact. Much of the MDA staff is disbursed to the field where that personal touch is even more prevalent.

In any event, below are the cumulative results of the customer service survey since the initiative began. All are positive.

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| 1) Overall Customer Service: | 91% + |
| 2) Friendly and Courteous: | 95% + |
| 3) Timely and Responsive: | 91% + |
| 4) Accurate and Consistent: | 92% + |
| 5) Accessible and Convenient: | 95% + |
| 6) Truthful and Transparent: | 95% + |

Social Media/Communications

The Communications and Public Information Office serves as the department's liaison to the media, government agencies, elected officials, the agriculture industry, agency employees and the general public. Its goal is to ensure all stakeholders understand the state of Maryland's agriculture industry, department activities and the department's policy initiatives.

Media Monitoring. As part of ongoing consumer service, the Communications Office regularly distributes news releases to traditional media outlets about agency programs, activities and announcements. The office uses a media monitoring system to track and research media contacts, distribute news releases, maintain media lists for targeted stories, and distribute news clippings of interest to the agency and its constituencies. During FY 2016, staff distributed 265 news releases to nearly 400 news outlets and interested parties, which generated 800 logged inquiries from the media, which doubled from the previous year. Each business day, news stories are identified, linked to the agency's website and distributed to all staff and other interested parties.

Digital Engagement. During FY 2016, the Communication Office continued to strategically integrate its online presence (i.e., website and social media platforms) under the overarching practice of "digital engagement." Rather than each platform having its own goals and metrics, the department now uses them together to create more comprehensive, coordinated and far-reaching messaging. The goal of the agency's digital engagement is to ensure that the public sees this agency as the authoritative, honest, credible source for information about the agricultural activities, services, regulations and issues under the agency's purview. The website is home base, the place where all other digital platforms lead.

Website. Again, to better serve consumers, the Communications Office has continued to build out the agency's website which received a re-design during FY 2015. This new design makes it easier to share content across platforms and is more accessible to mobile users, which make up an increasing share of the site's traffic.

There were 381,800 visits to the site during FY 2016 – up from 37,678 (11 percent) over the year before. Of this year's visitors, 144,053 (38 percent) came to the site more than once. About

33 percent came to the site through mobile devices – up 5 percent over last year.

Last year, 12,200 website visitors came by way of Facebook. This year, 18,642 came via Facebook – an increase of 53 percent. Last year, 1,896 website visitors came by way of Twitter. This year, 2,253 came that way – an increase of 19 percent. These figures do not include referrals from tiny URL, which are likely Facebook and Twitter related. Those links increased from 595 last year to 4,561 this year – or 667 percent!

Note: The Maryland's Best website is a marketing website, designed to connect consumers with producers rather than to promote agency information. It is hosted by a private vendor and populated by the marketing office.

Social Media. More and more organizations, agencies, nonprofits and regular people are communicating via social media. Traditional media as well are moving to online, digital

Platforms. By its nature, social media is fast moving and immediate. Rumors and misunderstandings can “go viral” very quickly. By being online and engaged with a following, the department can not only become part of relevant discussions, it can also stop bad information from taking off.

The department’s social media activities allow the agency:

- To maintain a constant and consistent presence in online communities and discussions;
 - To provide credible information directly to the public, without relying solely on the media;
 - To monitor trends and issues in public discourse, to correct rumors and provide alternative viewpoints on emerging controversies;
 - To improve the image and increase citizen understanding of agriculture;
 - To regularly and routinely – both seriously and informally – engage citizens in a variety of issues;
 - To continually promote the agency’s website as the authoritative source of information.
- The department continued to expand its social media presence during FY 2016 with growing followings on Twitter and Facebook and a less prominent presence on Instagram, Flickr, YouTube, and Soundcloud. These social media platforms provide the agency direct access to a new, younger, more tech savvy audience. MDA’s official Facebook page ended FY 2016 with 9,295 followers (55 percent increase). MDA’s official Twitter feed ended the year with 10,652 followers.

Agency Social Media Accounts. The department continues to maintain several program-specific accounts in addition to its official Facebook and Twitter. In FY 2016, the department created a new Twitter account used for updates and information on the mosquito control program and the state’s Zika virus response.

Twitter

- @MdAgDept – Main Maryland Department of Agriculture account
- @MdsBest – The department’s marketing office account
- @MdEquines – The Maryland Horse Industry Board account
- @MdFarm2School – The Farm to School Program account
- @MdAgMosquito – The Mosquito Control program account.
- @MdGypsyMoth – A small feed that live tweets when planes are spraying trees and forests for gypsy moth.

Facebook

- Maryland Department of Agriculture
- Maryland Horse Industry Board
- Maryland Farm to School
- Maryland’s Best

*The department also maintains Flickr, Instagram, YouTube.

Improving the Customer Service Experience

Although the indicators of MDA's customer service delivery are overwhelming positive, we will not be satisfied until we can touch 100% in all the categories. This is a lofty goal as human nature and the nature of MDA's work, spraying for mosquitoes for instance, can create both positive and negative reactions. Sometimes local agencies actually implemented the pest control measures but MDA is singled out. Customer transactions are already almost immediate. However, we will be mindful in the future to address any service delays should they arrive. Generally, any service delays are a direct result of too many requests and too few people to service those requests. We do not see that dynamic changing and have moved to use the Web to address many concerns, to provide timely information, and to allow for more on-line transactions. The move to make services more accessible via the Web will continue as we move forward.



Customer Service Liaison Ron Buckhalt shares a light moment with Lt. Governor Boyd Rutherford as Cybil Preston and Mack the Bee Dog look on.

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