

Abstract

Lean in the Public Sector: Driving Major Improvements in Idaho's Food Stamp Program

By

Russell Barron

Deputy Director, Idaho Department of Health and Welfare

Patrick Shannon

Professor, Operations and Supply Chain Management
Boise State University

"The Machine That Changed the World" by Womack, Jones and Roos (1991), the outcome of an MIT research project that compared the automobile industries in Japan, Europe and the United States, is often cited as the work that propelled the concept of lean manufacturing to the forefront in America. The lean movement is rooted in the Toyota Production System (TPS). Many articles and books such as *"The Toyota Way"*, by Jeffrey Liker (2003) describe the TPS which revolves around the desire to eliminate waste throughout the organization. The lean movement is solidly established in the American manufacturing sector. There are numerous lean success stories involving manufacturing companies who have substantially reduced rework, shortened process lead times, reduced inventory levels, increased product quality, and in general improved their ability to compete in the global marketplace.

However, the lean movement has also started to take place in the service industries, administrative departments, and even in the public sector. The article, *"Lean Information Technology Service Management: Bottom-up Process Improvement That Addresses The Bottom Line"* by Jack White and Scott Chaiken (Contract Management, May 2008) shows how lean methods can be applied to improve IT services in both private and public organizations. Eric Scorsone, in his article *"New Development: What are the Challenges in Transferring Lean Thinking to Government"* (Public Money & Management, February 2008), discusses how governmental organizations must balance such factors administrative laws and management-labor relations in order to effectively apply lean. Jan Hasenjager in the article, *"Lean Government (is not an Oxymoron)"* (Industrial Engineer, July 2006) describes how the Connecticut Department of Labor has used the lean philosophy, principles, and practices to improve departmental processes, eliminate wastes resulting in improved satisfaction of both internal and external customers of its services.

In this paper, we describe the successful implementation of lean concepts and practices by employees within the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare's Food Stamp program. Prior to the lean implementation, the Idaho program was failing in many ways and was ranked near the bottom of all states on key measures used by the Federal Government to evaluate food stamp program administration. Within three years following the launch of the lean initiative within the department,

Idaho's performance was at or near the top of all key Federal metrics and is considered a benchmark program for other states. The paper describes the steps that were taken, and the challenges that needed to be overcome, to improve the services to the citizens who rely on food stamps. Also, discussed are the ongoing lean efforts to drive further improvements in the food stamp program and in other programs within the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare.