San Mateo County

Call Center Case Study



**Intent of Project/Program/Service**

In 1996 the Call Center of the Department of Child Support Services had the following service levels: 35% to 50% abandonment rate, 7 to 10 minute average wait time (20 minute wait times were not unusual), 25% call resolution rate, and high staff absenteeism and turnover. In 1997 the Department embarked on a performance improvement plan to address these issues. The Department was subsequently able to improve service levels by providing call center specific customer service training, developing competitive staff incentives to decrease average wait times and abandonment rates, and improved team building activities. This effort yielded positive results. The service level improved to a relatively low wait time of about 3 minutes and a call abandonment rate of about 25%. In following years the unit supervision changed and the unit’s recurring issues continued to plague their performance.

In 2000, the service level in the Call Center had again reached dramatic lows. The call wait time was averaging 10 minutes per call and the abandonment rate was over 50%. This meant more than half of the calls that were waiting for a representative in the queue abandoned or hung up. This was undoubtedly due to the long caller wait time. Additionally, the Department performed a frequency analysis and determined that the median wait time was closer to 15 minutes. This meant that half of all calls were waiting longer than 15 minutes in the queue. In an effort to combat this, the decision was made to rotate caseworkers through the call center to help improve the service level. The Call Center had been staffed by Public Service Specialists and caseworkers found themselves each rotating into the unit on a four hour a day shift to help cover the volume of calls. The toll of this mandatory rotation began to take a negative effect on the quality and quantity of casework produced by these case managers. Caseworkers lost about a half-day a week due to the rotating coverage in the Call Center. The caseworkers were able to resolve a higher percentage of calls without additional follow up when they staffed the call center, however, caller wait time, talk time, wrap up time, and overall abandonment rates increased with caseworkers in the call center. Additionally, a lot of animosity built up between caseworkers and the staff in the Call Center. The Department’s Call Center was in crisis. The Director realized something had to be done. The Call Center was, after all, the customer service arm of the Department and a high priority for all staff, including the County Manager’s Office, and the County Board of Supervisors.

**Innovation Characteristics**

The Department’s Director tasked management with investigating and researching the organizational structure and success of other high performing child support call centers throughout the nation. After researching best practices in some of the nation’s top performing child support call centers and making contact with State Child Support Programs in Iowa, New Mexico, Tennessee, and Texas, the Department authored a detailed and comprehensive request for proposals for the contracting out of the full service child support customer service call center. The Department conducted a Bidder’s Conference, screened all proposals and managed the entire process of securing a contract for call center services working collaboratively with the County Manager’s Office, County Counsel, Service Employees International Union 715, Human Resources, child support staff, and the California Department of Child Support Services. There were three major options to consider: 1) a full service contract operation, 2) private management of a county operated call center, or 3) a county operated call center with varied vendor support. Each option had its advantages and disadvantages. After careful consideration and successful discussion with the County Manager’s Office and the local labor union, the Department decided to go with Option #3. After reviewing the submitted proposals and assessing the political, legal, and administrative feasibility of various solutions, management staff developed a multi-pronged solution. The solution was to develop entirely new child support call center classifications, new performance standards, new compensation plans including a performance bonus program, contract out the management and training of the new call center to a professional child support call center management firm, contract the testing, screening, staffing, and recruiting portion to a private professional call center staffing firm and provide for technological enhancements to improve the service level. The technological enhancements included the purchase of proprietary call center software to screen scrape and track all incoming calls to the unit. This gave the Department the unique ability to monitor the type of incoming calls, most frequent type of inquiries, generate ad hoc reports to analyze trends, and most importantly implement a mechanism to “close the loop” and track case action notices (CANS) sent to caseworkers and ensure proper follow up was performed in a timely fashion. It allowed the Call Center to proactively follow up on CANS sent to caseworkers that had not yet been resolved before another follow up call was made to the call center from the same client on the same outstanding issue. Furthermore, the Department contracted out the overflow of calls, depending on specific service thresholds to a child support call center in the State of New Mexico, who offered an abundance of Spanish speaking call center representatives, and who would serve as backup at the flip of a switch and continue to maintain a high level of service during potential negative staffing and turnover periods for the unit.

The Department finalized two contracts with Policy Studies Inc., and InTelegy for various call center services. Policy Studies received a contract to provide call center management, comprehensive training, automation enhancements, and call overflow coverage in their New Mexico child support call center. InTelegy was given a contract to source, recruit, screen, test, and recommend for hire, call center professionals to staff the Department’s new customer service unit. The Department worked with the County’s Human Resources Department to develop new county positions, competitive compensation scales, new job descriptions, job standards, performance evaluation criteria, a bonus/incentive program, and overall new business processes which led to the creation of the most effective and efficient child support call centers in California. The underlying basis for this type of solution was the identification by the Department that an entire industry was devoted to call center management and professional child support call center consultants and staff existed and were already prepared to help the Department improve the call center through their programmatic and technical expertise. The Department’s core competency was case management and enforcement of court orders for child support and not necessarily the management of a full functioning customer service call center

**Obstacles**

In early 2001, the Department was faced with the colossal task of increasing the service level and addressing the various issues plaguing the Call Center. Department management staff met to discuss what needed to be done to improve the unit.

**Applicable Results and Real World Practicality**

The results were nothing short of dramatic. To date the call wait time has been reduced to about 60 seconds. The abandonment rate is averaging 8% while maintaining a high call resolution rate, around 90%. The service level has been remarkably increased and maintained. The unit is now staffed by call center professionals and the management of the unit was smoothly transitioned in 2002 from a child support call center consulting firm to Department management staff. A Call Center Supervisor position was created to provide first line supervision and management of day to day operations. Caseworkers are no longer needed to rotate through the unit for coverage and the quality and quantity of the work they produce has also steadily increased. A formalized training program and performance incentive program have been established and the overall image of the call center has been improved. The Public Service Specialists who previously staffed the Call Center were reassigned but guaranteed to maintain their current classification and pay, and given the opportunity to compete for one of the new call center positions. Staff in the Call Center are much more respected by all units within the Department and the unit has worked together in harmony to provide only the best quality of service to our clients. By managing the transition and ensuring that all quality thresholds were maintained and customer service efforts continued to be improved, the Call Center continues to be a source of pride for the Department and the County as a whole.

After more than a decade the Call Center continues to be recognized for demonstrating outstanding customer service and providing a mechanism for elevating and communicating successful customer service strategies, county and state wide. Since 2008 the San Mateo County Call Center through shared services handles all child support calls for Marin County, San Benito County and Santa Cruz County. Staff have trained other California Counties on our call center business process which has resulted in the creation of 9 shared service calls centers representing 60% of California’s counties. The Call Center distinguished itself for having clear and measurable goals for outstanding and improved customer service, developing and implementing specific customer service improvement strategies, demonstrating innovation and resourcefulness in providing outstanding customer service, and demonstrating a significant correlation between customer service improvements and child support program outcomes.

Awards:

2007 – County of San Mateo Stars Award

2009 – California Department of Child Support Services – Outstanding and Positive Collaboration of Shared Services