

The Phones Rang 30,000 Times, and the New Call Center Answered

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It's been four months since the new [Human Services Call Center](#) began to absorb some of DOH's toll-free hotlines.

To put it another way – it's been more than 30,000 telephone calls.

Thirty thousand times that the phones did not ring in the Organ Donation Program, nor in the Bureau of Narcotics Enforcement, nor in the Bureau of Vital Records, nor in the Office for

Professional Medical Conduct, nor in the offices that receive complaints about hospital and nursing home care.

And yet, 30,000 times that people got answers to their questions.

So far, so *very* good.

Answering Calls Is Their Business

All government agencies receive public inquiries. In most agencies, phone calls are juggled with other duties by employees with many responsibilities.

But at the Human Services Call Center, answering callers' question is all they do.

"The Call Center sees answering questions as a business," said Diane Christensen, DOH's Director of Audit Services and liaison to the Call Center Project. "And they are striving to be the best in that business. They have systems in place to handle the volume and train their staff to answer questions. They anticipate bottlenecks and work to clear them."

Governor's Initiative

The Statewide Call Center Consolidation Project, one of Governor Cuomo's initiatives, seeks to streamline basic calls from more than 30 agencies into four anchor groups to drive efficiencies, improve business processes and customer service, and save taxpayers money.

'It's a Big Success for Both Organizations'

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professionally. It's a big success for both organizations." --Lenny Kluz, Assistant Director

Bureau of Vital Records

One of those anchor groups is the Human Services Call Center, managed by the Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS), which has more than 40 years of experience operating the State Central Register of Child Abuse and Maltreatment. That hotline receives more than 300,000 calls annually.

From the OCFS perspective, DOH was an ideal agency to start with, given its many toll-free numbers and wide range of callers' questions. OCFS and DOH had shared a good experience already concerning toll-free hotlines. OCFS staffed the DOH "bath salts" hotline, which was established during summer 2012 after Commissioner Shah issued an order to ban the sale and distribution of the synthetic drugs, and the Public Health and Health Planning Council adopted new regulations.

Since May, the Call Center has grown from five representatives taking 300 DOH calls daily to 14 representatives taking 1,000 calls daily and growing.

Before any phone rang in the Call Center, there was planning. Call Center staff met with DOH program staff to develop scripts to answer "Level 1" complexity calls for general information. The scope of Level 1 calls varies for each program.

Organ Donation: It's Freed Us Up

"We are a small unit," said Health Associate Kimberly Valente, R.N., who directs day-to-day operations of the Organ Donation Registry. "We're responsible for data entry into the Registry as well as other issues. At any point in time we can receive up to 1,000 new enrollees in a week."

Helping to Improve How Business Is Done

"To have the Call Center script answers to routine questions ... helped us improve the way we were doing business, even before they took over our toll-free lines." -- Kimberly Valente, Health Associate, Organ Donation Registry

On May 15, the Call Center took over Organ Donation's toll-free line, and has answered more than 1,000 calls since.

"Not having to constantly stop work to answer the phone has freed us up," Valente said. Before the Call Center, the Organ Donation Program occasionally missed its data entry targets. These backlogs delayed enrollments, frustrating New Yorkers who volunteered to become organ donors. "Since the Call Center has taken our calls, we are consistently meeting those turnaround times," Valente said.

Working with the Call Center had another benefit. Valente said the Call Center staff wanted to understand her program's needs, burdens and worries. "To help the Call Center script answers to routine questions and route more sensitive issues to us – that made us look at our programs as a whole," Valente said. "It helped us improve the way we were doing business, even before they took over our toll-free lines."

Vital Records: Fewer Disruptions

For the Bureau of Vital Records, the telephone had become an impediment to getting work done. "We were spending far too much time on the phone answering general questions," Assistant Director Lenny Kluz said, "and we couldn't perform our core vital records duties without disruption."

In May, the Bureau and Call Center teams began developing scripts and templates to allow the Call Center to handle calls for general information (called Level 1). The Call Center took over the phone lines on July 25, and has handled about 2,600 Vital Records calls since then. The most frequent request is for copies of birth certificates.

"The Call Center staff did an outstanding job in all areas," Kluz said, "including requirements gathering, planning, implementation and monitoring after the 'go live' date. The calls are being handled efficiently and professionally. It's been a big success for both organizations."

Narcotics Enforcement: Help When Staff Needed It Most

The Bureau of Narcotics Enforcement is always busy. But nearly 23,500 calls in four months? Yes – as BNE was rolling out the new Prescription Monitoring Program, known publicly as I-STOP (Internet System for Tracking Over-Prescribing), calls to the hotline began to skyrocket.

'Invaluable' as I-STOP Prepped

"Call Center staff 'quickly ramped up to meet the Bureau's needs by answering at least two to three times the normal volume of calls... The Call Center freed BNE staff up to handle the more complex calls and facilitate the implementation of the I-STOP program. The Call Center and its staff were invaluable." -- Terence O'Leary, Director, Bureau of Narcotics Enforcement

The first of its kind in the nation, the program aims to prevent "doctor shopping" – patients visiting multiple physicians to obtain prescriptions for narcotic painkillers – by recording these transactions in real time. I-STOP is a tool to help the medical and law enforcement communities stem street sales of powerful prescription drugs, and prevent addiction and overdoses.

BNE started enrolling prescribers in mid-June. At the end of August, doctors, hospitals, clinics and pharmacists were required to check I-STOP before giving a patient a prescription for controlled substances. Enrollment was automated – but the phones still rang.

"The Call Center staff helped to provide accurate and consistent information to a variety of callers that had questions related to all Bureau functions, including implementation of the I-STOP law," BNE Director Terence O'Leary said. "Call Center staff have worked side-by-side with Bureau staff to ensure that information provided to callers was concise, accurate, and consistent.

"Call Center staff quickly mastered a wide range of topics resulting in a majority of the calls to be handled without further transfers," O'Leary added. "For example, during implementation of I-STOP, the consolidated Call Center staff quickly ramped up to meet the Bureau's needs by answering at least two to three times the normal volume of calls. The Call Center freed Bureau staff up to handle the more complex calls and facilitate

the implementation of the I-STOP program. The Call Center and its staff were invaluable."

Office of Health Systems Management: Sensitive Issues

People reporting suspected unprofessional conduct by physicians or physicians' assistants are often angry or heartbroken, their trust in their medical providers shattered. Similar emotions come out from callers filing complaints about the quality of nursing home or hospital care. Each case is individual, and privacy is paramount during investigations.

'Can't Say Enough Positive Things' About Call Center's Impact

"I really can't say enough positive things about the Call Center and the impact it has had... it has cut our phone work down by at least 80 percent.... The level of stress and aggravation due to the constant interruption of the phone has dropped significantly.... [Call Center staff are] very polite, patient and informative with each caller, no matter how difficult the caller was." -- Marie D'Entrone, Director, OPMC Central Intake Unit

The Call Center took over the toll-free lines for the Office of Professional Medical Conduct in May, for hospital complaints in August, and nursing home complaints in September. The Center has answered more than 2,500 calls for these programs so far.

"I really can't say enough positive things about the call center and the impact it has had," said Marie D'Entrone, Director of OPMC's Central Intake Unit. "I was very apprehensive about this project." That changed once D'Entrone met Call Center Customer Relations Manager Pamela Knowles and Business Analyst Lorraine Stevens.

"The OPMC script that Lorraine and Pam put together is well organized and easily accessed by each call center representative," D'Entrone said. "I was at the call center on (May 20) the day they started taking calls for OPMC. It was a wonderful experience to be in the presence of such professional, focused people. They were very polite, patient and informative with each caller, no matter how difficult the caller was."

"I left that day feeling confident that all the time spent putting the OPMC script together was well worth the effort."

Looking at the experience three months later, D'Entrone said, "As far as the impact on my unit, the call center has cut our phone work down by at least 80 percent. This frees up my staff and allows them to work relatively interruption free. The level of stress and aggravation due to the constant interruption of the phone has dropped significantly, and I think our efficiency level has improved. My staff and I really are very happy that the call center was created."

For OCFS, Plans Become Reality

Call Center supervisors find their work with DOH enjoyable.

"It was an extremely rewarding experience for the project team to bring the Human Services Call Center from a plan on paper to a working operation," said Kathryn Shelton, OCFS Project Director. "We were thrilled to watch our first calls come in and we look forward to adding new customer agencies and new lines from our existing customers. It is our goal to provide best-in-class service as we grow our organization

and provide as much assistance as possible to callers on behalf of our agencies.”

In the coming months, this Call Center expects to incorporate the rest of its customers: the Office for People with Developmental Disabilities, the Division of Criminal Justice Services, the Office of Victim Services, the Office of Mental Health, the Division of Human Rights, the Office of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Services, the Department of Civil Service, and the Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance.