



Welfare Peer Technical Assistance Site Visit

Call Centers

Essex County, NJ

December 4-5, 2007

Prepared for:
The Administration for Children and Families
Office of Family Assistance



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I. SITE VISIT BACKGROUND

A. Overview

The Welfare Peer Technical Assistance Network, as part of its ongoing mission to support the sharing of promising practices in welfare reform, joined with the New Jersey Department of Human Services to visit an automated call center at the Hennepin County Human Services & Public Health Department (HSPHD) in Minneapolis, Minnesota. The goal of this Site Visit was to present New Jersey with information on call center development and implementation.

The Site Visit took place on December 4th and 5th, 2007. The Welfare Peer Technical Assistance Network facilitated the provision of qualitative and quantitative information on call center implementation, specifically for the Essex County Division of Welfare within the New Jersey Department of Human Services. Approximately fifteen participants participated in the Site Visit throughout the two days. The Site Visit featured presentations by program managers, supervisors and information technologists on developing a call center site; a tour of the call center site including information on the functionality of the call center from the perspective of line staff; and dialogue among participants to facilitate action planning for New Jersey on next steps for necessary programmatic and policy changes.

B. Background

“Integrated Eligibility Determination and Call Centers”

Health and Human Service (HHS) agencies administer a wide range of programs, including state health insurance programs such as Medicaid and the Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP), cash assistance through Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), food stamps, and institutional and community-care services for the elderly and disabled. A principal duty for each HHS agency is determining whether applicants meet the criteria to receive services. Some programs have mail-in, phone, or online applications, but the majority of eligibility determination is performed by a specialist in a face-to-face interview setting.

New Jersey sought to determine the cost effectiveness of one or more eligibility-determination call centers. After researching several call centers across the country, they determined the call center in Hennepin County most closely mirrored their needs based upon TANF program size, number of employees, volume of calls and call specificity. Essex County’s caseload, which includes TANF, Medicaid, General Assistance and Food Stamps, has increased significantly. Case Managers are overwhelmed by the volume of customers that request assistance in each office. Department officials believed a call center

approach, along with the inherent automation, would greatly reduce the burden on case managers and customers. Officials also believed data accumulated through the call center's use would be useful in stabilizing the sanctioning process.

New Jersey was most interested in receiving information on: **Technology** – equipment, staff, and infrastructure requirements; **Functionality** – parameters for call center services, and; **Cost** – initial funding, ongoing funding, and maintenance requirements.

II. SITE VISIT SESSION

A. Hennepin County Call Center Tour: History and Purpose

Hennepin County representatives presented historical, evolutionary and political data that was encountered in developing and funding their system.

The Hennepin County Human Services & Public Health Department (HSPHD) piloted their first call center in three service units in October 1999. Phase Two began in February 2000 and incorporated an additional fifteen service units. By 2001, the Families Area had been added and 52 people were taking calls in a large call center. Calls were received on one specific number then dispersed throughout the call center.

Hennepin quickly determined a team approach would be the most beneficial method of responding to both the volume and specificity of calls coming into the call center. Each team operates as subject matter experts for specific departmental functions.

The call center focused on supporting existing clients and maintaining a “front door” policy for everyone that is being served. They have established a business partner relationship with other agencies that provide resources to clients. The strategic goal for these partnerships is to:

- Provide a broader level of service;
- Enable clients to have 24/7 access; and
- Generate better needs assessments.

B. Call Center Technology

In determining the vendor to use to implement the call center, Hennepin County elected to use Cisco Systems, Inc. because the majority of their network already used Cisco Systems products and it was the easiest and most cost effective to work with. Capital Project provided the funding for Voice Over Internet Protocol (VoIP) while the funding for the call center software/hardware was provided by

HSPHD. The HSPHD Team Phone System increased the County's functionality value on the investment by providing:

- Internet protocol contact center;
- IP-ACD Live agents; and
- IP-IV integrated voice response.

With the decision to use the HSPHD Team Phone System, Hennepin County established a response goal of 6000 calls per day, which required thirty-five teams comprised of 450 human service representatives to operate the call center. Representatives were given three hours of staff training, collectively spoke five languages, and responded to a range of questions and requests from customers that included:

- Failed to file an application;
- Benefits insurance information;
- Team messaging;
- Request for forms;
- Change reporting; and
- Issuance application.

EZ Info results from August 2007 indicated that

- 185,695 calls were received;
- Average speed of answer was 5.1 minute
- Thirty-five percent of those calls involved self-service on the part of customers;
- Twenty percent of calls were abandoned; and
- An average of 1,200 calls were made by customers to report a change.

C. Staffing Requirements

Hennepin County hired staff with call center experience. Three supervisors divided responsibilities to include training, officer of the day (handled the operation of the call center for that day) and monitoring. There were also lead workers (as many as four) who conducted the on-the-job training and transferred calls to the assist line if they didn't know how to answer.

The ratio of supervisors to staff is typically one supervisor to every twelve staff. The call center supports a variety of spoken languages to adequately respond to client inquiries. Calls are routed to the team or a particular individual with the specific language in question. The languages supported include:

- English;
- Somalian;
- Russian;
- Spanish;
- Vietnamese; and
- Monk.

Call center staff also use the language line if they are unable to support the language needed at a given time. In addition, Minnesota follows all ADA requirements for responding to clients with disabilities.

As stated earlier, one of the purposes of the call center is to reduce the number of clients that physically go into the office. Call center staff can quickly and efficiently process information such as adding a new child to a TANF case, client change of address, employment information and mailing pertinent information to clients.

Management implemented thresholds set by the county that included quality assurance, wavelengthing (managers reviewed calls together to ensure calls were reviewed in a consistent manner by all supervisors), real time reports, web view availability, queue checks to determine the number of people waiting for a response, customer service training, and changes to their promotion process to alleviate staff turnover.

D. Hennepin County – Call Center Implementation Strategy

Minnesota's decision to implement strategic call center sites grew from a need to respond quickly to client inquiries and to decrease the number of clients who travelled to their offices for questions/concerns/issues that did not require a face-to-face meeting. The positive impact of the call center approach included:

- Matching employees to the tasks that match their strengths;
- Client information goes directly into the State eligibility system (EZ Info) so that clients are able to obtain information and report changes using the automated system;
- The team is able to leave messages for clients, usually reducing the type and number of caller complaints;
- Six employees to a pod;
- Employees collaboratively determine how questions will be responded to;
- Utilize email as an ongoing communication tool;
- Managers schedule meetings during quiet periods;
- Employee private workstation numbers are never shared with clients;
- Minnesota is in the process of creating an on-line manual; and
- Weekly reports track the average answer speed as well as the number of calls received per hour.

E. Future Plans – Hennepin County

Hennepin County has a myriad of issues that affect future plans for call center growth and progress. They include:

- Reduced staffing;
- Cultural/Immigrant populations that distrust the government;

- Inability to address all language barriers;
- Original culture was created from a “for profit” agency. They are seeking to shift the culture to one of increased trust;
- Team concept is less efficient than the large call center but control over work is at a premium; and
- Call center worker training on schedule with State training. State training takes about 3-4 months for food stamps and other services.

The county is working through the issues and is moving forward with lessons learned during the process. Lessons learned include the need to hire staff with knowledge of economic assistance, reinforce ties to the state MAXIS welfare system, review the document imaging system currently in place, change the VoIP along with the IRP, and pay overtime to workers who increase their processing time with the phones and paperwork.

F. Cost

Implementing the call center in Hennepin County cost approximately \$500,000. New Jersey can expect to pay higher costs for their implementation due to the increased costs of new technology.

G. New Jersey’s Needs

Essex County, New Jersey has approximately 26,000 people access their services each month. They have a high staff turnover rate, 1/3 – 2/3 of their staff are there for three years or less. There is a prevailing thought in New Jersey that call center jobs are highly stressful, prompting younger workers to seek employment elsewhere.

Unlike Minnesota, New Jersey does not have a separation of services. Their staff process 600 sanctions per month for 9,000 clients. Staff are overwhelmed by the volume and struggle to provide the full range of services to customers. An additional difference between Minnesota and New Jersey is that New Jersey requires their direct line staff to have a 4 year college degree.

New Jersey believes that an integrated approach, along with call center technology, will assist them in being responsive to the customers they serve and significantly reduce staff turnover.

III. NEXT STEPS

New Jersey received a wealth of useful information from Hennepin County representatives. This information will be shared with state representatives and a determination will be made on whether a call center in Essex County will be cost effective and if it will reduce staff turnover. The representatives from Essex

County are unsure of the funding sources for call center implementation but are confident the information received from Hennepin County, Minnesota will provide a positive argument for a call center in Essex County.

The Welfare Peer TA Network was excited to have hosted this successful event and looks forward to continued collaboration opportunities with TANF professionals in the Essex County, NJ. Further materials related to this event and to the Hennepin County call center are located on the Peer TA Website, located at <http://peerta.acf.hhs.gov/>.

APPENDIX A:
AGENDA



WELFARE PEER TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE NETWORK

Site Visit – Call Centers - Essex County, NJ



Minneapolis, MN

AGENDA

DAY ONE

8:00 – 8:30 AM **Welcome and Introductions**

8:30 – 11:30 AM **Program Manager and Supervisors Presentations**

This session will provide:

Break at 9:45

- An overview of the system
- How Program Managers use the system
- History of the system – Past/Present
- System functionality
- Staff Assignments

Judy Peterson - Planning Analyst

Ann Zager – Human Service Supervisor

Jeanne Tazzioli – Human Services Program Manager

Joe Gaspard - Human Services Program Manager

Judy Sledge - Human Services Program Manager

Tom Pingatore - Human Services Program Manager

Lisa Groves - Human Services Program Manager

Peg Douglass - Human Services Program Manager

Human Services Supervisors (2)

11:45 – 1:00 PM **Lunch (on own)**

1:00 – 3:15 PM **Technology Presentation**

This session will focus on the technology used to facilitate the systems' use. A review of the costs of the system technology will be shared.

Geoff Gruba – IT Supervisor, Network Communications

Gregg White – Network Manager, Network Communications

3:15 – 3:30 PM **Break**

3:30 – 4:30 PM **Question and Answer Line Staff**

This time will allow Participants to ask questions of the line staff. Areas of interest are: How do staff like the system? Any dislikes? Functionality from a line staff perspective. Any additional questions are encouraged from the New Jersey contingent.

This session will conclude Day 1 and introduce the activities for Day 2.

DAY TWO

8:30 – 12:30 PM **Call Center Tour – Government Center – 300 South 6th Street, Minneapolis Room 1222 – 12th Floor of Administrative Tower – Weapons Screening required**

The tour will allow site visit participants to view call center operations to include the system, live monitoring, functionality of interface with the State Welfare System (EZ Info), Reporting on Calls (wait time, length, etc...).

PA Supervisors will demonstrate monitoring techniques to include team numbers, historical reports, call queues, etc....

Line staff and supervisors will answer questions regarding day to day operations.

Managers will discuss training and evaluation tools, costs and other issues.

Andrew Ervin – Human Services Program Manager
Moxamuud Abdallah – Human Services Supervisor
Paul Gisselquist – Human Services Program Manager

12:30 – 1:30 **Lunch (on own)**

1:30 – 4:00 PM **Discussion**

Minnesota will provide additional history of the call center's evolution and political issues that were encountered in developing and funding the system. This session will also provide an opportunity for additional questions and answers.

Bill Brumfield – Human Services Area Director
Pat Mack – Human Services Area Manager
Lee Berger – Human Services Area Manager
Melanie Betts – Information Technology Supervisor

4:00 – 4:15 PM **Closing Remarks**

*Minnesota Department of Human Services Staff
Welfare Peer TA Network Staff*

**APPENDIX B:
PARTICIPANT LIST**



WELFARE PEER TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE NETWORK
Site Visit – Call Centers - Essex County, NJ



Minneapolis, MN
December 4 -5, 2007

Participant List

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**APPENDIX C:
EVALUATION SUMMARY**



Evaluation Summary
Site Visit – Call Centers – Essex County, NJ
 Minneapolis, Minnesota
 December 4 - 5, 2007

1. Peer TA Staff handled the logistics, arrangements, and scheduling of the event in a timely and competent manner.

Strongly Disagree 1	2	3	4	Strongly Agree 5	Average Score
0	0	0	1	2	4.66

2. Peer TA staff prepared me for the meeting by providing clear communication regarding the meeting's agenda and purpose.

Strongly Disagree 1	2	3	4	Strongly Agree 5	Average Score
0	0	0	2	1	4.33

3. The presenters had valuable information to share, and were thorough in the subject areas presented.

Strongly Disagree 1	2	3	4	Strongly Agree 5	Average Score
0	0	0	2	1	4.33

4. The presenters engaged the audience effectively and facilitated interactive discussions.

Strongly Disagree 1	2	3	4	Strongly Agree 5	Average Score
0	0	0	0	3	5.00

5. The information presented and shared will be useful in determining the validity of building and utilizing a call center in Essex County, NJ.

Strongly Disagree 1	2	3	4	Strongly Agree 5	Average Score
0	0	0	2	1	4.33

6. **What did you find most useful about attending this site visit (i.e. any immediate or long-term benefits to you/your staff that you anticipate as a result of attending this site visit)?**

- Viewing the system first hand meeting with front line staff and supervisors.
- As we proceed have a great understanding of the pitfalls.
- Document imaging utilization; different way of interpreting federal rules and confidentiality/data sharing ideas.

7. **About what issues would you like to have had more discussion at the site visit?**

- System did not necessarily address my concerns re: sanctioned clients.
- Overall initial costs and ongoing costs.
- Outcome measures.

8. **On which aspects of call center implementation would you like to receive additional technical assistance?**

- Individual messages to specific clients.
- Establishing an IVR.

9. **Please share any overall comments regarding the program or the presenters, which you feel might be helpful in planning future programs.**

- Extremely helpful and knowledgeable; addressed all issues questioned.
- Would have like to tour more of the offices and talk with staff other than handpicked people.