

Digital Government: Government to Citizen (G to C)
Tennessee Department of Human Services Family Assistance Service Center

Executive Summary

The Tennessee Department of Human Services (DHS) Family Assistance Service Center provides enhanced, expanded client services and improves government operations in the state's primary eligibility programs such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Food Stamps, Medicaid and the federal Medicaid Waiver program (TennCare). The Family Assistance Service Center project provides toll-free telephone access for clients to request general and specific program eligibility information, verify case status, update case information, reschedule appointments with their case worker, explore complaints regarding case status, and process and file an eligibility appeal with the department's Division of Appeals and Hearings.



The Service Center project enabled the merger of multiple call centers and is staffed with trained eligibility counselors who can assist a client with needs that span multiple programs. The Service Center is operated out of three (3) distinct geographic locations across the state with approximately 70 agents in each location. All locations operate together as a single entity through the use of supporting technology at each location and a central call center system operating at the DHS central office in Nashville. Toll-free client access to the system is provided over sixteen (16) primary rate interface (PRI) circuits into the central system; and each of the three locations is connected to the system over the Tennessee Information Infrastructure (TNII), the State's statewide telecommunications network. This integrated solution fully supports call distribution to enable call routing to the next available counselor in any of the three Service Center locations and supports queue monitoring and reporting capabilities that provide management with complete data and derived statistics to assess call activity, response rate, abandoned calls, wait times and peak call times. The system provides on-demand recording of client calls at the central server, call monitoring for quality assurance, and management call intervention as needed to assist staff during calls.

With a project duration of six (6) months, the Service Center implementation project team included over 250 technical and business staff and involved partnerships with multiple state agencies, vendors, and private sector businesses that supported physical site build out; system configurations; communications infrastructure; and recruitment, hiring and training of over 200 new staff in the three locations. Today, the Service Center responds to an average of 25,000 calls per week and is available to a client population of approximately one million.

The Service Center is key to the creation of streamlined government access for clients concerning eligibility issues and is a major point of entry for clients when requesting eligibility appeals. The Service Center markedly improved the State's ability to provide quality services to its citizens and helped to streamline government operations through the consolidation of the two public assistance help lines provided by DHS and the Bureau of TennCare. The consolidation of call centers for eligibility issues and the merger of the appeals divisions between TennCare and DHS has removed significant redundancy prevalent in the previous environment.

The vision of the Department of Human Services is to provide client-focused excellence in service by enabling flexibility in workload distribution, enhancing and expanding customer service, supporting centralized support for case work activities, and deploying technologies that will facilitate future enhancements to customer service operations. The ability to monitor customer service is key to achieving the State's vision to provide a quality system of coordinated services to meet the changing needs of individuals, children and families in Tennessee.

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A: Description of project, including length of time in operation

The Tennessee Department of Human Services (DHS) administers more than twenty (20) areas of service for citizens of the State of Tennessee, including Families First, Food Stamps, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), TennCare [Tennessee's implementation of the Federal Medicaid waiver program], Child Support, Child Care, Adult Protective Services, and Rehabilitation Services. With over 5,000 employees in 130 offices statewide and a budget of \$1.4 billion, the mission of the Department of Human Services is:

“to provide a quality system of coordinated human services to meet the changing needs of individuals, children and families in Tennessee.”



Fulfilling this mission includes setting goals and implementing strategies to help protect the vulnerable and enable those in need to achieve self-sufficiency and improve their quality of life.

The Tennessee Department of Human Services Family Assistance Service Center is an innovative, practical, and **advanced technological approach** to fulfill the department's mission. The Service Center enables DHS to provide, enhance, and expand client services and improve government operations in the State's primary eligibility programs. For citizens accessing programs such as TANF, Food Stamps, Medicaid and TennCare, the Family Assistance Service Center project enables several key services including:

- Toll-free telephone access to request general and specific program eligibility information
- Ability to verify case status and update case information
- Reschedule appointments with their case worker
- Explore complaints regarding case status
- Process and file an eligibility appeal with the department's Division of Appeals and Hearings.

The Service Center project enabled the merger of multiple call centers from two different state agencies [DHS and the Bureau of TennCare]. Each call center location is staffed with eligibility counselors who are trained to assist a client with needs that span multiple programs. While the Service Center is located in three (3) distinct geographic locations across the state with approximately 70 agents in each location [Clarksville, McKenzie, and Morristown], the locations



operate together as a single entity. This is accomplished through the use of supporting technology at each location and a central call center system operating at the DHS central office in Nashville.

The technology employed to support the DHS Service Center is Perimeter Technology's Net-Vu Contact Management (NVCM) System, a comprehensive interactive management platform. The NVCM System includes Interactive Intelligence's Customer Interaction Center, which is a bundled communications software application suite that handles multi-channel telephone, fax and e-mail interactions. The call center system enables a wide range of capabilities, including:

- Multi-lingual support
- Skills-based routing
- Real time access to primary eligibility/benefits databases
- Traditional telephone call routing
- Automated call distribution (ACD)
- Interactive voice response (IVR)

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- Web-based interaction management
- Screen pop
- Call recording and monitoring
- Unified messaging
- Client/agent Web collaboration
- User-definable alarms
- Historical reporting.

Sixteen (16) primary rate interface (PRI) circuits provide in-coming telecommunication facilities to the central system for client calls via the public switched telephone network. Each of the three locations is connected to the central system over the Tennessee Information Infrastructure (TNII) using 3Mbps managed data circuits for call center data connectivity and four (4) point-to-point T1 circuits for voice call routing to counselors at each location. This integrated solution fully supports call distribution to enable call routing to the next available counselor in any of the three Service Center locations. The system supports queue monitoring and reporting capabilities that provide management with complete data and derived statistics to assess call activity, response rate, abandoned calls, wait times and peak call times. In addition, the system provides on-demand recording of client calls at the central server, call monitoring for quality assurance, and management call intervention as needed to assist staff during calls. The system is operated from the counselor's desktop. Because the system integrates with the State's enterprise email system, enhanced internal communications, including the ability to attach recorded calls to email messages, enable the appropriate personnel to respond to a problem.



The Service Center began operating in November 2004 as the culmination of an aggressive development project to create a single call center supporting all eligibility programs in DHS and the Bureau of TennCare. The planning and implementation of the Service Center occurred over a six-month period. It involved over 250 technical and business staff, and included a partnership of multiple state agencies, vendors, and private sector businesses. This partnership supported physical site build out, technology configuration, communications, and the recruitment, hiring and training of over 200 new staff in the three locations.

Today, the Service Center responds to an average of 25,000 calls per week and is available to a client population that is equal to approximately one million. The abandon rate of calls is slightly higher than the desired rate. Continuous process improvements are being made and the department's goal is to quickly meet the industry standard of less than 5%. The average wait time is less than two minutes.

B: Significance to the improvement of the operation of government

Strategically, the Department of Human Services Service Center, with its enabling technology infrastructure, is key to the creation of streamlined government access for clients concerning eligibility issues. It is the primary point of entry for clients when requesting eligibility appeals. DHS and the Bureau of TennCare previously operated separate call centers that essentially serviced the same client base for program eligibility issues. Additionally, the two agencies operated two different appeals divisions, which added complexity and confusion for the clients. The Service Center provided the vehicle to consolidate two different call centers. In addition, DHS and the Bureau of TennCare merged their eligibility appeals functions into a single entity

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within DHS; and the Service Center serves as the primary point of contact for all clients to file appeals.

Previously, DHS supported a very limited help line that responded to Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Food Stamps and Medicaid client calls. The Bureau of TennCare operated a call center that responded to Medicaid Waiver client calls. DHS has functioned as the contractor for the Bureau of TennCare to process waiver eligibility as part of the overall TennCare initiative in Tennessee. In many instances, the same client would have eligibility in some DHS programs, such as TANF or Food Stamps, or their eligibility would change between the Medicaid and Medicaid Waiver programs and a client would have to call two different help lines for questions about eligibility for similar services provided by the State. This situation created inefficiencies in state government and caused confusion for the clients who were seeking assistance.

The Department of Human Services Service Center markedly improved the State's ability to provide quality services to its citizens and helped streamline government operations through the consolidation of the help lines provided by DHS and TennCare. The Service Center was also vital to the merger of appeals functions being offered by both DHS and the Bureau of TennCare. In addition to performing eligibility appeals functions for TANF, Food Stamps and Medicaid, DHS now also manages the Appeals and Hearing Divisions for eligibility for TennCare and the Medicaid Waiver program. Through the Service Center, the client now has one major point of entry for requesting an appeal.

The Department of Human Services Service Center is fundamental to the streamlining of government operations. It reduces the complexity and confusion for the clients that it serves. The consolidation of call centers for eligibility issues and the merger of the appeals divisions between TennCare and DHS has removed significant redundancy prevalent prior to the implementation of this project.

C: Benefits realized by service recipients, taxpayers, agency or state

The primary benefits realized by the implementation of the Service Center include improved service to clients, enhanced reporting and statistical information, greater ability to monitor customer service issues, flexibility in designing service delivery and is an initial step in the Client Focused Excellence in Service vision of the agency and the State. The Service Center offers clients a single point of contact and toll-free access to eligibility workers (for all Human Services eligibility programs). Clients can receive general and case specific information, file eligibility appeals on case actions, and report changes resulting in case updates.

The Service Center is staffed with highly trained eligibility counselors who can perform these functions, thereby providing workload relief to case management staff in county offices. DHS employees in county offices have historically been burdened with high caseloads and insufficient capacity to respond to client calls. The Service Center provides county office staff relief by providing manpower to receive client calls and respond to a majority of the client's needs during the initial call to the center. This frees the county staff to process applications and perform other case maintenance functions that typically require an in-person visit to the county office by the client. Allowing a segregation of eligibility responsibilities whereby the Service Center addresses routine client-reported case changes also enhances the department's ability to make timely case changes. Perhaps most important is the department's improvement in customer service with immediate client access to an eligibility counselor. The project enabled DHS to respond to the need to provide more timely assistance to clients.

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The statistical and reporting benefits that are provided by the Service Center are immeasurable. For the first time in the history of the supported programs, DHS is now able to provide real-time data regarding client contacts. The ability to monitor customer service is key to achieving the vision to provide a quality system of coordinated human services to meet the changing needs of individuals, children and families in Tennessee. DHS now has the ability to assemble that data into information that can be used when formulating agreements with advocates, modifying existing legal agreements, litigation, and reporting to the legislature. Very simply put, the Service Center, and the technology supporting it, allows the Department of Human Services to make more timely and informed decisions regarding client service programs than it ever has in the past.

The overall vision of DHS is to provide client-focused excellence in service. The Service Center is the initial step towards the greater vision. Benefits of the Service Center include:

- Enabling flexibility in workload distribution
- Enhanced and expanded customer service
- Support for case work activities from a centralized point and via phone rather than in each county office
- Enabling deployment of a new eligibility system that will add more flexibility to workload management and better client services with features such as a fully functional interactive voice response system.

D: Return on investment, short-term/long-term payback

Initially this project has increased operating costs; however, the increase is a result of a greatly expanded level of service and responsiveness to clients than was previously provided through the simple help lines provided by DHS and TennCare. In the short term, the State is now positioned to have a dedicated resource on which to rely for dependable and professional customer support. In addition to providing direct, first-level support to the client base, these dedicated resources also facilitate the State's ability to respond to inquiries from advocates, legislators, and the media.

The return on investment is realized not only in the quality of service but also in the improved accountability to the citizens in the state of Tennessee. Improved data enhances the ability to meet the reporting requirements to the department's federal partners. The investment in the Service Center has also improved state government operations by the efficiencies realized as a result of combining two state agency functions into a single process to support customer contacts on eligibility programs. Just as important is the ability to monitor and develop statistics regarding customer contact. This is true on two levels. The recording of calls helps with the monitoring of customer support; and the statistics provided by the system help the agency to determine responsiveness, ease of contact and manage workload volume.

The final ROI payback relates to economic development. The Service Center was established in three (3) rural areas of the State that were economically depressed but possessed potential for supporting this technologically enabled project. Each was located in close proximity to colleges; and this facilitated recruitment of graduates. The presence of the State's telecommunications network (TNII) ensured the connectivity needed to establish one virtual Service Center from these disparate locations. Locating these centers in economically depressed areas supported the Governor's desire to provide quality jobs in depressed areas whenever possible. The economic impact of establishing the centers in McKenzie, Morristown,

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and Clarksville is extensive, with an estimated \$1.75 million annual payroll contribution to each locale. Key criteria for selection of these areas were the regions' need for good-paying jobs, as well as suitable, easy-to-move-in locations and an available pool of college graduates. The state's technical infrastructure, including the consolidated statewide network, made it possible to establish these high tech centers in remote areas of the State.