

# 2009 NASCIO Recognition Award Nomination State of Georgia

*Nomination Category:*

Digital Government: Government to Citizen (G to C)

*Title of Nomination:*

1.800.georgia Contact Center

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## ***Executive Summary***

"1.800.georgia," a service of the Governor's Office of Customer Service, is a contact center especially for Georgians who need a state service but don't know who to call. Call center operations launched in January 2008. Callers may dial toll-free (1.800.georgia or 1-800-436-7442) or local in the Atlanta area (678.georgia or 678-436-7442). Trained agents use a robust KnowledgeBase of state services to connect callers to the right government service on their first call. 1.800.georgia also assists via email and, since April 2009, online "self-service" search and live chat support. In addition, 1.800.georgia supports other agencies by handling their tier-one "overflow" calls and "incubating" new agency call centers using a transferable business model and enterprise-wide technology solution.

1.800.georgia is a key component of Governor Sonny Perdue's Customer Service Initiative, which supports his vision for Georgia to be the best-managed state in the nation with the best customer service. The Customer Service Initiative is a unique effort to engage all Georgia state government employees in improving service to citizens through a three-pronged strategy to become *faster* (speeding up services), *friendlier* (developing a customer-focused culture) and *easier* (adopting an enterprise-wide approach to managing call centers).

1.800.georgia addresses problems discovered by the Governor's Customer Service Task Force in 2005. Forty-seven percent of Georgians prefer to deal with state government over the telephone, but many reported difficulty finding the correct agency to call for a service. Each year, more than 1.2 million calls to the state were misdirected, and less than two-thirds of surveyed citizens were satisfied with their experience. The state's old Directory Assistance model lacked the necessary customer relationship management practices and technology to deliver fast, quality service.

In the last year, 1.800.georgia has served more than half a million citizens calling the state for help. Calls are answered in fewer than 30 seconds, and callers consistently convey high customer satisfaction (95% on average). 1.800.georgia has helped other state agencies deliver quality service by handling overflow calls on issues ranging from voter information, corporation licensing, state vendor registration, inquiries for legislators, gas price gouging, disaster relief, federal stimulus funding and other services. In addition, 1.800.georgia leadership has helped two agencies with high public contact – the Georgia Department of Corrections and the Department of Human Resources' Vital Records Section – develop state-of-the-art call center operations to significantly improve their customers' experience.

## ***Description of the Business Problem and Solution***

Governor Perdue commissioned a special Customer Service Task Force in 2005 to interview Georgia citizens about opportunities to improve state government services. Among the findings, research showed that nearly half (47%) of Georgians prefer to contact government by phone – more than in person, mail or email – but many reported difficulty knowing the correct agency to call for a service. The Task Force found that each year, more than 1.2 million calls to the state went to the wrong place. In a citizen poll, only 64% who had contacted state government within the last 6 months said they were "somewhat" or "very" satisfied with their experience.

Georgia has operated a State Directory Assistance call center for many years; however, this service utilized outdated phone technology and lacked uniform processes and systems to maintain up-to-date state contact information and ensure consistent, high-quality service. Directory Assistance agents, who were knowledgeable of state government and provided very courteous service, nonetheless had limited resources available to help customers. They often had to rely on inconsistent listings and even personal knowledge to locate information. When citizens called, the agents provided phone numbers only; they did not transfer the calls, nor did they have a consistent process for monitoring the customer's experience afterward.

This was part of a larger problem facing state call handling. State-run call centers used a diverse array of systems and lacked consistent management practices, measurements, and service goals. Hold times were high (five minutes on average statewide – some as high as 56 minutes) and many calls were simply abandoned (17% on average). Some agencies did not have formal call centers, requiring regular office staff to manage high call volumes while juggling other duties.

The Governor's Office of Customer Service (OCS), established by Governor Perdue in 2006, took over the State Directory Assistance call center in 2007 with the goal of transforming it into a state-of-the-art, central point of access for state government services. On January 1, 2008, "1.800.georgia" officially opened for business.

1.800.georgia is a unique service among state governments. Citizens have one memorable, toll-free number for call to connect to any state service. It is backed by a robust KnowledgeBase of state services and an enterprise-wide solution for call center technology. 1.800.georgia agents also take overflow calls from other agencies to ensure prompt, seamless service to citizens.

OCS chose to adapt and improve an existing call center rather than create a new center or outsource operations. This option provided a number of benefits, including avoiding duplication of services and leveraging the knowledge and quality service of existing staff. OCS implemented new technology and management practices to bring the operation up to the standards for private call centers.

*KnowledgeBase of State Services:* OCS designed and built an online KnowledgeBase of nearly 2,000 state services linked to telephone numbers and answers to frequently asked questions. The KnowledgeBase is designed to be updated regularly by 200 administrators representing all state agencies, universities and services. Agencies are responsible for updating and maintaining their own data; an OCS quality assurance team helps manage this ongoing process.

*Vendor-hosted Technology:* OCS secured an enterprise-wide contract for call center technology, which permits management to industry standards around service and cost. Global partners Nortel and Oracle offer a vendor-hosted solution, which ensures continuous updates of technology at no extra charge. State agencies benefit from minimal up-front investments and no increase in annual operating costs. The cost model enables fees to go down as the number of seats goes up.

This technology enables "work away" programs, adjustment to seasonal call fluctuation, and disaster preparedness. Call tracking capabilities help agencies understand customer needs and assist them more effectively. A citizen relationship management (CRM) tool reports on what citizens call about and from where they call.

1.800.georgia was the first to implement this solution in 2007. To date, all of the state's major citizen-facing call centers use the solution, including Driver Services, Family and Children Services, Child Support Services, Revenue Taxpayer Services and Motor Vehicle Services, to name just a few. The solution is also available to all county and local governments as well as nonprofits in Georgia.

*Retraining an Excellent Team:* OCS retrained existing Directory Assistance staff on call center industry best practices, customer service skills, and new technology, and developed a formal call-center career track for promotion opportunities.

Today, the customer's experience is fast, friendly and easy: When a citizen calls 1.800.georgia, a trained agent connects the caller to the person or place responsible for the service needed. When possible, the agent provides a "warm transfer," which means she or he stays on the line with the caller until the person who can help answers.

### *Communications and Marketing*

OCS planned and executed a comprehensive marketing campaign to generate awareness about 1.800.georgia among state employees, particularly those working in other state call centers, receptionists and other frontline staff who field many calls. The objective was to introduce the service and let employees know that if they receive calls that don't belong to them, they can transfer them to 1.800.georgia for immediate assistance.

*Employee sticker campaign:* OCS designed and printed colorful, two-inch round stickers promoting 1.800.georgia, plus a corresponding desk tent telling employees what to expect and how to work with 1.800.georgia. OCS staff made in-person visits to state

facilities with high public phone contact to introduce the service and help affix stickers to employees' telephones. From May to July 2008, OCS staff visited 430+ employees at 17 state call centers, as well as 1,500+ reception/frontline staff in 21 administrative offices. Call reports show a 73% increase in incoming calls from May through July, especially to the Atlanta-local line (678.georgia) where most of the targeted staff work.

*General employee communications:* The sticker campaign was part of a broader internal communications effort including regular features in statewide print and web publications; presentations at state leadership meetings; and cultivated partnerships with state call-center managers, agency KnowledgeBase administrators and agency customer-service "champions."

OCS also markets 1.800.georgia to the public:

*Blue pages:* 1.800.georgia is being published in local phonebooks across Georgia. OCS is also working with the phonebook publishers to "clean up" the "blue pages" sections by identifying and removing old, outdated state government listings.

*On the web:* 1.800.georgia is advertised prominently on the home page of Georgia.gov, the state's official web portal. Many state agencies feature the number on their public web sites. Visitors to the Governor's web site on Stimulus Accountability are directed to 1.800.georgia for further assistance.

#### *Recent enhancements*

In March 2009, 1.800.georgia launched a web site, [www.connect.georgia.gov](http://www.connect.georgia.gov), which allows members of the public to search the same KnowledgeBase of state services that 1.800.georgia agents use. From this site, they may also "chat" live with a 1.800.georgia agent.

#### **Significance of the Project**

1.800.georgia is a key component of Governor Sonny Perdue's Customer Service Initiative, which supports his vision for Georgia to be the best-managed state in the nation with the best customer service. The Customer Service Initiative is a unique effort to engage all Georgia state government employees in improving service to citizens through a three-pronged strategy to become *faster* (speeding up services); *friendlier* (developing a customer-focused culture); and *easier* (adopting an enterprise approach to managing call centers).

1.800.georgia benefits multiple stakeholder groups. First and foremost are the people of Georgia – including individual citizens, visitors, businesses, and groups – who need state services and don't know who to call for help. They can now call one number to be connected to the right place. State agencies benefit because 1.800.georgia helps their customers reach them in a fast, friendly manner. Call reporting shows what customers are calling about and from which parts of the state, which helps state leaders plan and

adjust services, staffing models and other operations to continuously improve service. These reports also help state legislators know what their constituents' needs are. The technology and best practices adopted by 1.800.georgia are also a model for other state call centers, which now measure performance against the same industry standards and performance goals.

### ***Benefit of the Project***

*More than half a million served – faster, friendlier, easier:*

So far this fiscal year (July 1, 2008 – May 31, 2009), 1.800.georgia agents have handled more than 517,000 calls, emails and chats. This number is on track to exceed 600,000 next year. On average, each call is answered within 29 seconds – the equivalent of five rings. The team maintains a consistently high customer satisfaction rating (95% on average) based on follow-up surveys conducted with 700 customers each month. 100% of the staff are eligible to work remotely.

In addition, 1.800.georgia leads cooperation and partnership among state agencies to best meet the needs of Georgians.

*Helping the state deliver seamless service*

*Helping voters get to the polls:* OCS and 1.800.georgia staff helped the Secretary of State's Elections Division handle an increased number of calls during the 2008 election. Agents fielded 13,000 overflow calls in a week and a half, including 3,100+ calls on Election Day alone, answering questions about polling locations and hours, registration verification and acceptable forms of proof of identification. The average wait time was less than one minute. Even an unannounced fire drill did not interrupt service – since most agents work remotely, calls were still handled and questions were answered. This extra support from 1.800.georgia allowed Secretary of State employees to handle more complex calls in a timely manner, and citizens experienced a consistent, positive experience with state government.

"I want to thank Governor Perdue for assisting Georgia's voters by dedicating the Governor's Office of Customer Service and '1.800.georgia' to answering voters' questions," Secretary of State Karen Handel said. "I commend these teams for providing outstanding customer service to their fellow Georgians."

*Helping businesses do business:* In February 2009, 1.800.georgia took more than 1,000 calls a day for the Secretary of State's Corporations Division for annual business registrations. Agents were able to answer 40% of the callers' questions immediately without having to transfer them to the Secretary of State's office, freeing their staff to focus on more complex requests.

*Improving the state procurement process:* 1.800.georgia agents helped the Department of Administrative Services (DOAS) achieve timely implementation of a new e-

procurement system, which required contacting and re-registering thousands of state suppliers on the new system. In just over two months, 1.800.georgia agents placed more than 19,400 outbound calls to supplier contacts to gain their compliance with the state's directives and fielded nearly 3,500 inbound calls from suppliers affected by the transition. This helped DOAS update its supplier list and remove duplicates so that, now, more than 8,200 businesses are actively registered and receiving timely notices about contract opportunities. This means more opportunities for Georgia companies and more competitive bids for the state. Vendors were pleased to receive such helpful service from the state. One vendor said, "this is a pleasant surprise – no one from the state has ever called us before!"

*Preparing to help at a moment's notice:* 1.800.georgia is currently working with the Georgia Emergency Management Agency to put a backup support system in place should a hurricane or other emergency strike the state. Once in place, the support system can be activated in minutes to handle overflow calls to GEMA.

1.800.georgia has helped other agencies field overflow calls regarding price gouging during declared states of emergency, inquiries about federal stimulus funds, questions for the Speaker of the House, and other services.

#### *Helping agencies launch industry-standard contact centers*

Other state agencies are working with OCS and 1.800.georgia management to implement their own contact center operations using the 1.800.georgia business model and technology. The new operations are "incubated" in 1.800.georgia's facility, utilizing the space vacated by 1.800.georgia agents now working remotely. There, agency employees and supervisors (formerly in "office" environments) are retrained to use the state's call center technology and management best practices. Once up and running, employees begin remote work.

*New connection to Corrections:* Until 2009, the Department of Corrections did not have a formal call center to assist callers inquiring about inmates or services. Office or prison staff handled these calls in addition to their regular duties. Callers first face a complex automated system with 25 options; then, they were often transferred several times before getting help. OCS and 1.800.georgia management helped Corrections rationalize their call handling by retraining existing office staff as call-handling specialists equipped with the state's new call center technology.

*Revitalizing Vital Records:* 1.800.georgia also "incubated" a call center for the Department of Human Resources' Vital Records Section. Previously, 70% of callers got a busy signal, and many simply hung up. Now, the Vital Records call center team answers all calls, most in 30 seconds or less.