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Cross-Boundary Collaboration Award Category

County Call Center Intervention Program: Modernizing Ohio's County-Administered Human Services Call Centers

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Operational Excellence: Stabilizing and Modernizing Ohio's County-Administered Human Services Call Centers

Executive Summary

Ohio's county-administered benefits and human services call centers are, for many Ohioans, the "front door" to public assistance, where trust in government is either reinforced or eroded in a single interaction. When customers contact these call centers and experience extended waits, high abandon rates, and receive inconsistent answers, the impact is immediate: families cannot get timely help to meet application and renewal timelines, frontline staff absorb avoidable rework, and counties face rising reputational risk as frustration escalates beyond the phone lines.

The Call Center initiative shifted counties from "managing by anecdote" to managing by measures: real-time and historical dashboards enable supervisors to see outliers as they happen, intervene earlier, and coach with facts rather than assumptions. A structured cadence of operational reviews and root-cause analysis helps teams' separate volume-driven constraints from fixable internal friction.

Operationally, the program produced measurable service improvement across multiple county agencies, especially in Ohio's largest counties affected by demand volatility. In Franklin and Cuyahoga counties, Average Speed of Answer (ASA) dropped from 65.6 minutes and 62.8 minutes at the start of the interventions to a steady-state range of roughly 20–25 minutes (Cuyahoga) and approximately 20–30 minutes (Franklin) during the period of most sustained improvement. Over the same timeframe, answer rates improved from 45.3% (Franklin) and 53.1% (Cuyahoga) to above 80% at their peak in August 2025, meaning tens of thousands more calls were resolved rather than abandoned or repeated.

To move quickly without imposing a one-size-fits-all model, Ohio used a tiered support approach that aligns support intensity with county need and readiness. In the highest-impact counties, the state conducts **Deep Dives**: time-bound operational turnarounds that combine performance analysis with onsite discovery (shadowing and staff workshops). Next, the team translates findings into a jointly owned action plan with sustained follow-up to hold gains. For counties that needed a faster on-ramp, **Deep Dive Light** provides a shorter-duration engagement focused on core call center leading practices, including supervisor routines, performance coaching, queue management fundamentals, and workforce planning education. This includes teaching counties how to use historical call data and standard planning methods (e.g., Erlang-C concepts) to estimate staffing needs for predictable surge periods.

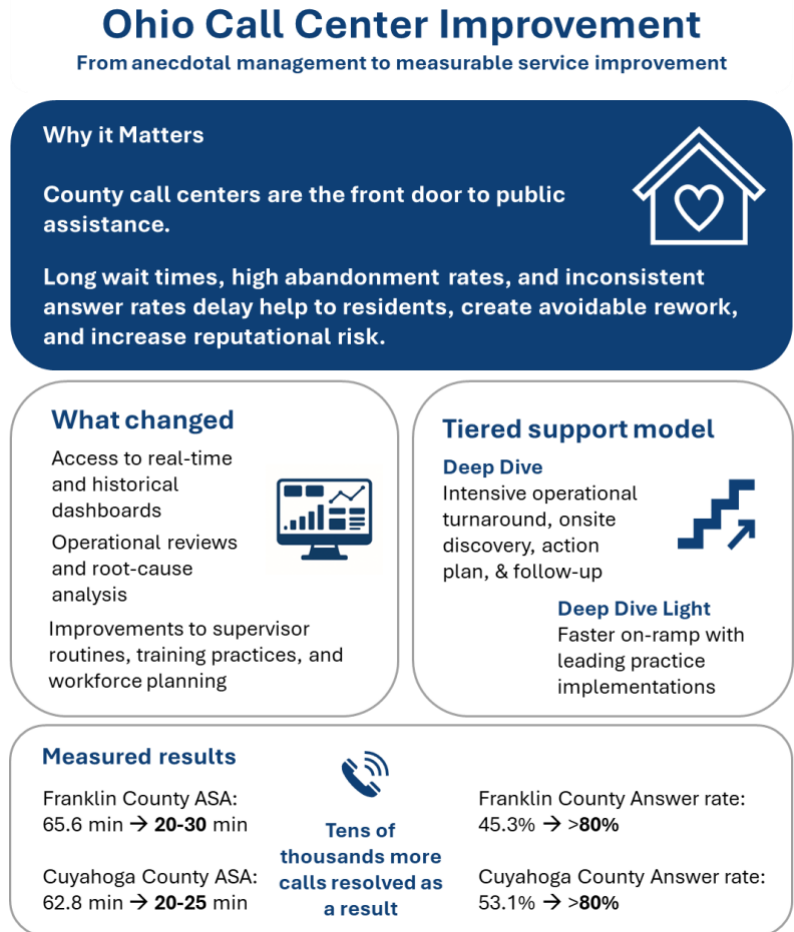


Figure 1: Ohio Call Center Improvement

IDEA

Problem/Opportunity

In the most acute cases, Call Center performance had deteriorated to levels that were untenable for both Ohioans and staff. Franklin and Cuyahoga, two counties that heavily influence statewide trends, entered the initiative with ASAs of 65.6 and 62.8 minutes respectively. In other words, an Ohioan could spend more than an hour waiting to talk to someone about a time-sensitive eligibility question. At the same time, lower answer rates (45.3% and 53.1%) meant many calls never reached an agent at all.

Counties also lacked a consistent, shared operating model for managing queues and staff performance. Supervisors had limited real-time visibility into what was happening “in the moment” (e.g., unusually long time in wrap-up or not-ready states), and limited historical views of time breakdowns and trends that could support coaching. Counties were often forced into reactive firefighting, discovering issues only after wait times and complaints had already spiked.

Why It Matters

For families relying on Medicaid, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (cash assistance), calling a county call center is rarely optional. It is often triggered by a deadline notice, a missing document, an interview requirement, or a change that must be reported. When wait times extend from minutes to hours and calls go unanswered, Ohioans may miss time-sensitive milestones, lose benefits temporarily, or feel forced into in-person visits they cannot easily make. This is not just an operational inconvenience; it is a direct friction point in program accessibility and a driver of public frustration that can quickly escalate into complaints and reputational risk for both counties and the state.

Operational excellence is the mechanism that protects program access when demand spikes and staffing is constrained. Each minute of avoidable wait time increases the probability that a caller abandons, calls back, or seeks help through higher-cost channels. Each unanswered call creates churn in applications and case actions. This increases workload for case workers and supervisors and amplifies delays for other Ohioans. The state's opportunity was to reduce that friction quickly, stabilize performance during volatility, and equip counties with an operating model that does not depend on unsustainable workarounds or overtime. As shown in Figure 2, Ohio's County Call Center Intervention Program aligns to many of NASCIO's 2026 Top 10 Priorities through call center improvement efforts focused on improving access, stabilizing operations, and reducing avoidable workload.

What Makes It Different

What made the work different was the “incubator-to-scale” model. Intensive **Deep Dives** in the highest-impact counties surfaced root causes, tested interventions under live conditions, and produced practical tools that could then be rolled out more broadly.

2026 State CIO Top 10 Priorities Achieved in the Call Center Intervention Program

BUDGET / COST CONTROL / FISCAL MANAGEMENT

- Avoided unnecessary staffing costs by equipping counties with tools to identify work avoidance practices within their existing staff, paired with coaching resources to improve staff performance.

MODERNIZATION

- Empowered counties to adopt statewide tools including performance management dashboards and Business Intelligence reports that replaced manual processes.
- Moved counties away from manual program checklists towards using the State's central mailing system.

DIGITAL GOVERNMENT / DIGITAL SERVICES

- Encouraged counties to promote the Ohio Benefits Self-Service Portal to residents.
- Motivated counties to adopt a document upload feature which allows callers to upload a document from their mobile device while speaking to a call center agent.

ACCESSIBILITY

- Reduced call center wait times, which directly increased program accessibility for callers who have limited time to wait on the line or visit an office in-person.

DATA MANAGEMENT & ANALYTICS

- Unlocked staff performance insights for supervisors through performance management dashboards.
- Equipped counties with predictive analytics tools to adjust their staffing based on historic call volumes.

CONSOLIDATION / OPTIMIZATION

- Optimized processes for counties by implementing automated tools, creating uniform practices across counties, and streamlining document submission methods.

Figure 2: NASCIO Top 10 Priorities

Universal Applicability

The core innovation is a replicable “operations playbook” for government call centers that operate in federated environments where service delivery is local, but the state has a responsibility to ensure equitable access and consistent performance. Ohio’s model combines: (1) clear statewide service targets, (2) lightweight, high-utility performance tools for operational management, (3) a tiered assessment and support approach (Deep Dive, Deep Dive Light, and statewide enablers), and (4) a cadence of operational governance that turns data into decisions. Because this approach is rooted in operating disciplines, rather than a single technology platform or one-time staffing surge, it can be adopted incrementally by counties of different sizes, maturity levels, and local constraints.

Universal applicability is also reinforced by how Ohio prioritized and sequenced the work. Rather than relying on subjective “who is loudest” escalation, Ohio developed a county comparison and prioritization methodology that weighed operational need (e.g., ASA, answer rate, volume, transfer rate, time in wrap-up), readiness and receptivity (e.g., interest in scorecard adoption, existing dashboard usage), and feasibility (e.g., queue structure, supervisor-to-staff ratio). The prioritization approach creates a scalable way to allocate limited improvement capacity in a federated model by concentrating effort where it will improve statewide outcomes while still offering lighter-touch entry points for counties that are smaller or earlier in their maturity journey.



Figure 3: Call Center Operations Playbook

IMPLEMENTATION

Roadmap

Ohio’s roadmap deliberately paired quick, statewide friction-reduction steps with deeper operational turnarounds in the counties driving statewide performance. In June 2024, the state launched coordinated interventions to address long wait times and dropped calls, starting with changes that could be implemented immediately across all counties, such as updated self-service portal login links and standardized queue messages, while deploying two performance-management capabilities: the performance management dashboard for real-time supervision and the Agent Scorecard to trend agent behavior and productivity over time.

Deep Dives in Franklin and Cuyahoga counties served as the operational “test kitchen” for what would become statewide practice: a repeatable method to diagnose constraints, implement targeted fixes, and then stay engaged long enough to prevent regression. As those practices proved effective, Ohio scaled adoption through the same recurring statewide forums counties already relied on, including quarterly all-county meetings and conference trainings, by adding focused call

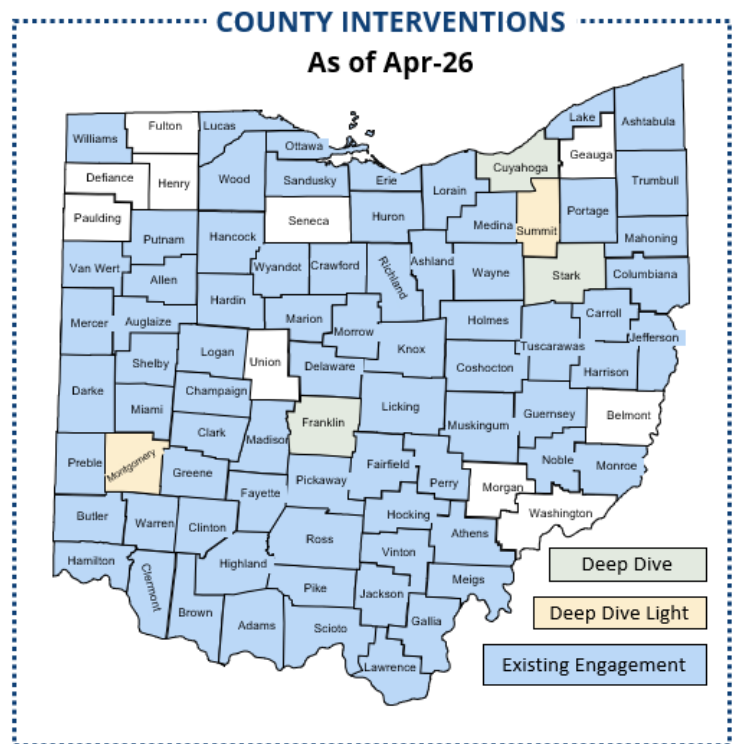


Figure 4: Map of County Interventions

center updates, tools, and practical management guidance so counties could adopt improvements at a pace aligned to their readiness and staffing realities.

Who was Involved?

Stakeholders

The program is a state-county partnership. State partners set clear service expectations (e.g., targets for ASA and answer rate), provide shared tools and analytics, and convene recurring operational reviews to keep attention on performance trends. Counties, who own day-to-day service delivery, translate those expectations into supervisory practice, staffing decisions, and queue management, and help validate what data is showing on the ground through discovery sessions, focus groups, and shadowing.

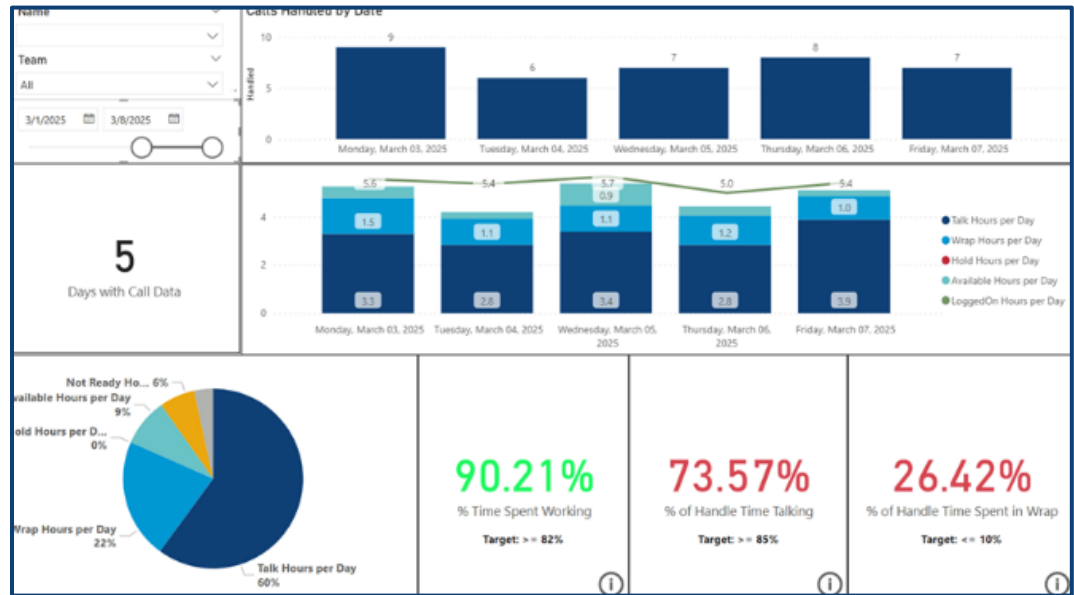


Figure 5: Agent Scorecard

How We Did It - Operationalization Approach

Ohio operationalized the work through a command-center discipline: set explicit service targets, establish a shared performance baseline and consistent metrics across counties, and create a routine for translating signals into action. At a practical level, this means moving beyond monthly hindsight and giving supervisors the ability to manage live operations and coach consistently. Performance management dashboards enable real-time supervision, surfacing unusually long durations, flagging threshold breaches, and helping leaders differentiate between volume-driven impacts and fixable internal bottlenecks. The Agent Scorecard complements that live view with historical trending, allowing supervisors to review time breakdowns, identify sustained patterns, and reinforce expectations through structured coaching.

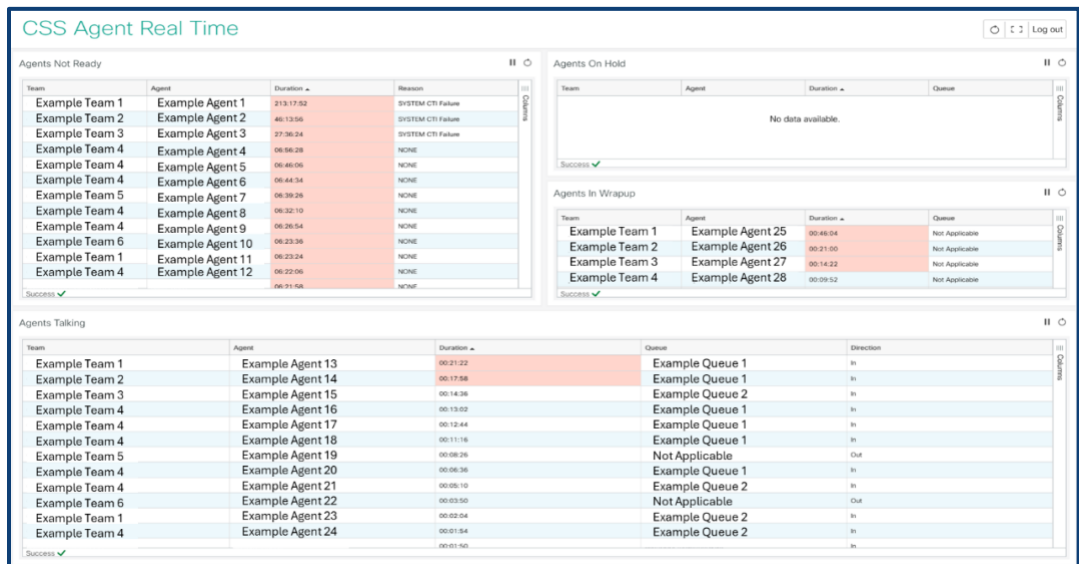


Figure 6: Performance Management Dashboard

Operational excellence is reinforced by pairing visibility with action. Deep Dives translate “work as done” into targeted interventions, such as establishing a QA call review scorecard to standardize client service behaviors, adjusting SNAP intake scheduling processes and adding interim tracking (e.g., application linking logs and business intelligence reporting) to support

outbound interviews, and reviewing organizational structure and supervisor-to-staff ratios to ensure adequate coaching coverage. In counties beginning the journey, Deep Dive Light provides a short-duration engagement centered on call center leading practices and practical supervisor enablement, including foundational education on how staffing requirements are calculated using historical data and standard planning methods.

Sustainability

Sustainability is designed into the model by embedding operational excellence into existing supervisory routines, rather than relying on temporary staffing surges or one-time “project” attention. Monthly statewide reporting and recurring county touchpoints create a durable governance cadence, while manager-ready tools (performance management dashboards and the Agent Scorecard) make performance visible enough to be coached and managed locally. Importantly, the model recognizes government realities: turnover cannot be eliminated overnight, and demand will spike. Ohio therefore considers two systemic sustainability levers—improving staffing methodology (forecasting for peak periods, shrinkage, and attrition) and stabilizing functional support coverage (quality assurance, workforce management, and performance management)—so improvements do not disappear when volume rises or experienced staff leave.

IMPACT

What We Made Better - Operational Outcomes

The most visible impact was the speed and reliability with which Ohioans could reach a county representative, especially in the highest-volume counties that drive statewide performance. When the initiative began, Franklin and Cuyahoga counties entered the **Deep Dive** phase with ASAs of 65.6 minutes and 62.8 minutes and answer rates of 45.3% and 53.1% respectively. Through a combination of operational governance, queue and staffing interventions, and data-driven supervision, both counties achieved substantial service recovery. By the strongest period of sustained improvement, Cuyahoga County maintained an ASA around 20–25 minutes despite increased volume, while Franklin County improved into roughly the 20–30-minute range.

At the statewide level, Ohio set explicit, measurable targets (20-minute ASA and 75% answer rate) and used monthly reporting to sustain attention and accountability. Statewide ASA improved from nearly 26 minutes (May 2024 baseline) to 19 minutes (September 2025), and statewide answer rate improved from 71% to 76%. Like any high-volume service operation, performance is vulnerable to demand spikes and staffing churn. Ohio treated any volatility as an operational planning requirement, not a surprise: the same governance cadence and dashboards that drove improvement were used to sustain discipline over time and reinforce more consistent education on staffing calculations for predictable surge periods, alongside targeted removal of operational bottlenecks that drive repeat calls and rework.

Beyond speed, the initiative improved consistency, reducing the variation in “how things work” from county to county and from supervisor to supervisor. Queue messages and updated links helped steer some demand for self-service when appropriate, while deep-dive findings drove tighter client guidance (e.g., clearer directions on document upload and verification expectations) and reduced misroutes, missed interviews, and avoidable transfers. The result is a more dependable experience: Ohioans receive clearer, more reliable help regardless of where they call, and frontline staff spend less time recovering from preventable confusion.

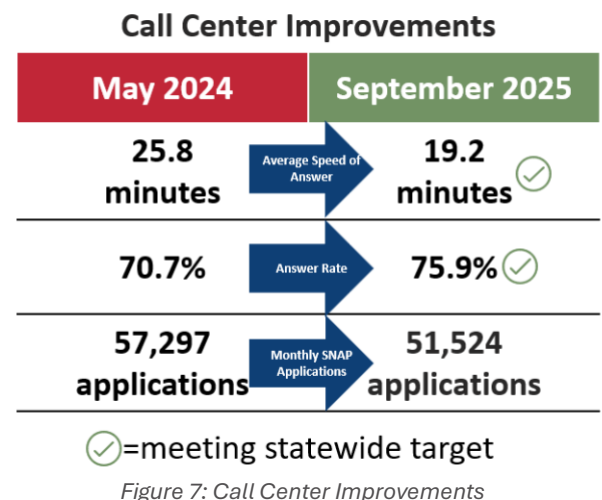


Figure 7: Call Center Improvements

For many Ohioans, the call center is the program. First impressions are formed here and long waits, inconsistent answers, and unnecessary transfers quickly turn into repeat calls, escalations, and in-person visits. By improving operational responsiveness and strengthening consistency across counties, Ohio reduced near-term friction in how Ohioans access benefits and created a more stable “front door” experience, even as volume volatility and staffing challenges persisted.

How We Know - Quantitative and Qualitative Results

- **County Deep Dive recovery (measured where most impact was concentrated):** Franklin and Cuyahoga counties reduced ASA from 65.6 and 62.8 minutes at intervention start to materially lower levels within months. Across the strongest period of sustained improvement, Cuyahoga County maintained ASA around 20–25 minutes despite increased volume, and both counties lifted answer rate from 45.3% and 53.1% to above 80% as of August 2025.
- **Statewide performance improvement:** Statewide ASA improved from nearly 26 minutes (May 2024) to 19 minutes (Sept. 2025), and statewide answer rate improved from 71% to 76%, providing a measurable indicator that operational governance, visibility, and supervisory routines translated into more reliable access for Ohioans. The operating model is designed to sustain performance through volatility by strengthening staffing planning discipline and surfacing drift early through ongoing reporting.
- **Demand and churn indicators tracked alongside service delivery:** Monthly SNAP applications declined from 57,297 (May 2024) to 51,524 (Sept. 2025). The initiative tracked this trend as a potential indicator of reduced re-application churn and improved first-contact resolution, while acknowledging multiple external drivers.
- **Root-cause visibility improved at the frontline:** Through an auto-refresh supervision view of performance management dashboards and the Agent Scorecard’s historical time breakdowns, supervisors could identify outliers (e.g., prolonged wrap-up, Not Ready, or Hold) and coach with consistent standards, reducing the lag between problem emergence and intervention.

What Now?

Long-Term Value

Long-term value comes from building operational resilience in a service environment that will always face volatility due to policy changes, seasonal spikes, and staffing churn. Ohio’s approach strengthened the “operating system” behind county call centers: clearer performance expectations, earlier detection of emerging issues, and a repeatable method to diagnose and resolve root causes. That maturity matters because it reduces reliance on crisis-mode management and protects access to benefits during the months when Ohioans need timely answers most.

Because the model is built on transferable operational behaviors, including transparent reporting, disciplined review cadences, and supervisor enablement, it scales beyond any single county or tool deployment. Deep Dives function as an “incubator” to test and refine interventions, then move proven methods into statewide rollout (for example, supervisor coaching resources and expanded visibility tools). Ohio’s next phase builds on this foundation by expanding Deep Dive and Deep Dive Light assessments and strengthening workforce planning capability across counties through leading-practices education, including how to estimate staffing needs from historical call patterns and plan for predictable peak periods without over-hiring year-round.

Ohio’s county call center initiative demonstrates what operational excellence looks like in government: pragmatic, outcomes-driven, and built to endure. By focusing on operational governance, performance visibility, and supervisor enablement, and by using Deep Dives as an incubator to rapidly identify root causes and deploy practical interventions, Ohio improved timely access to assistance for Ohioans while reducing downstream strain on county staff. The work also made an important leadership choice: measure success honestly, including where staffing constraints and seasonal demand pressure performance, and use that transparency to drive the next cycle of improvement. That is how public service delivery becomes more reliable, one operational discipline at a time.