



SUBMISSION FORM

All submission forms must include the following information. Separate submission forms must be turned in for each eligible program. **Deadline: July 1, 2021.** Please include this submission form with the electronic entry. If you do not receive an email confirming receipt of your entry within 3 days of submission, please contact [Gage Harter](#).

PROGRAM INFORMATION

County: _____

Program Title: _____

Program Category: _____

CONTACT INFORMATION

Name: _____

Title: _____

Department: _____

Telephone: _____ Website: _____

Email: _____

SIGNATURE OF COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR OR DEPUTY/ASSISTANT COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR

Name: _____

Title: _____

Signature:  _____

Utilities Call Center Making a Difference in the Time of COVID-19

1. The Overview

For Chesterfield County's Department of Utilities' Billing/Customer Service Section's call center, the year of 2020 has been an adjustment period where, without choice, changes occurred in our working environment. The workplace changed most significantly for the call center group. They went from being in the office and greeting customers five days a week to working from home or teleworking. Although each of the customer service representatives is teleworking, we allow one person to come into the office once a week on a rotating basis. The staff delivers consistent, excellent customer service by applying the best practices and learning habits that have been emphasized in our workplace culture. As challenging as it might be for everyone, this new work environment has become part of our current culture, and it has given us the confidence to know we can meet future challenges.

The goal of every call center customer service representative is to give each customer a pleasant customer service experience by creating an innovative service package that results in higher levels of customer satisfaction. To deliver service excellence in our call center, we have focused on helping customers understand that our strategic long-term goal is that we are here to help them, especially during a pandemic. We are fully trained to answer their inquiries and concerns.

2. The Challenge

When the pandemic began, the call center staff immediately gathered for a meeting to strategize the steps needed to continue to deliver excellent customer service to our customers. The call center staff began teleworking and continues to work remotely with "working from home" becoming the new culture for future generations. This new virtual working environment is very

different from what we are used to. Our training strategy for our new normal relies on Microsoft TEAMS where everyone can join in the discussion via a desk computer, laptop, or mobile application. The department encourages employees to meet their work and personal objectives as well as the department's needs. We have initiated more one-on-one communication with staff as well as for the group. The TEAMS environment is useful to target areas that need clarification and help focus on continuous improvement that is needed to understand our customers' needs and wants. With the culture that we are developing in the call center, we are encouraging the team-culture environment and the ability to adapt to an ever-changing environment that we are currently experiencing. Teamwork becomes the key to survive this new way of doing business.

The call center utilizes the AVAYA Automated Call Distribution System, or ACD, for reporting capabilities where supervisors and managers can see the number of customer service representatives available to answer customer calls. The ACD system provides live, end-of-the-day, and historical reporting. The reporting becomes the guidance for the supervisors and managers to ensure that the call center is adequately staffed to respond to all customer concerns and inquiries. Additional reporting capabilities through the ACD System include real time, historical, and customer reports. These reports are used to identify performance-based measures and standards, to monitor calls, and to ensure standards are being met. The reports are very helpful in indicating that we need to have more staff logged into the ACD system to ensure that abandoned calls are minimized, and all customer calls are being answered. The reporting within AVAYA helps monitor the performance of each customer service representative, or CSR, and guides us in having a productive daily output while teleworking. When the CSRs were in the office, it was easy for the supervisor and manager to approach them to make sure that they were

logged into the ACD system. With teleworking, the AVAYA reporting is the most reliable source of being able to monitor each individual CSR. The supervisor and the manager know who is in aux mode (temporarily logged out of the system), who is at lunch, and who may be completing other duties. This helps in the productivity of the entire group.

Due to the pandemic and the continuous changing guidelines issued by the county, state, and federal government, important information regarding the pandemic (COVID-19) is scripted to establish standard responses to our customers' inquiries, questions, concerns, and complaints. We script conversations as guides that will enable us to establish standard responses to customer' inquiries, questions, concerns, objections, complaints, etc. that will ensure that our CSRs are knowledgeable on what is going on. As a whole and as a utility provider for water and wastewater, many of our daily processes have changed. We are not disconnecting customers for non-payment; we are in a situation where we understand that customers need to have access to water for health and safety reasons.

3. The Program Description

The work-from-home strategy, or teleworking, for the call center is a key factor in the success of the department. The call center employees were given a teleworking kit (teleworking kits including monitors, keyboard, headset, mouse, and laptop) to make this transition into a win-win situation. The call center was given opportunities to succeed. This gives them the opportunity to learn and use their skills to a higher level. They can apply their learned knowledge by implementing new ways to do things in their everyday activities. The continued growth and success of our department depends upon our employees having continuous opportunities to learn, to use new skills, and to apply their knowledge and skills in their daily activities. By

teleworking, the employees are building a balance between work time and personal time. The continuous development plan for each employee still hasn't changed. Through U-learn, the county's online training system, employees are still provided training to maximize their potential.

We want the work-from-home process (teleworking) to be successful for the call center and all call center customer service representatives. To ensure the teleworking program is successful, we adopted the following processes:

- New equipment. Employees were given a teleworking kit to install for home use. The teleworking kit consists of the new laptop, two monitors, keyboard, mouse, headset, and a docking station.
- Goals and Measurements. We reviewed the goals and measurements set in the call center to ensure the standards of answering the ACD customer calls during the pandemic are maintained.
- Guidance. We provided guidance on how to set up the workstation at home and our help-desk team made themselves available to quickly assist anyone that needed help in setting up or getting their computers up and running.
- Microsoft Teams. We began to depend on and use Microsoft Teams to quickly communicate with staff. Teams has allowed us to provide answers to CSRs' questions in real time, while they are still on the line with a customer instead of them having to put a customer on hold or offer a call back. We also have held our staff meetings over Teams, ensuring that all staff is made aware of any changes that have been made to processes, staff is aware of any upcoming programs, and staff can have the opportunity to express any issues they have experienced

while working from home. They can discuss issues with their peers at that time as well and come up with a best-practice solution.

- **Update Procedures.** Another big change was made in setting up accounts for tenants requesting to move into a property. Since our offices were closed to the public from mid-March to mid-June, we could no longer require a tenant to come into the office to provide their lease, ID, and pay their deposit. We now have the tenant email us a copy of their lease and ID, we set up their account, and then provide them with their customer and account number to pay their required deposit by phone or online. This requires a significant amount of follow-up from the CSRs — they need to ensure that we received the lease, ID and deposit. If the deposit was not received, the CSR must generate a reminder letter to the tenant asking for the deposit.
- **Monitor Calls.** To ensure that staff remains engaged and attentive to their responsibilities, we monitor their Average Handle Time, Talk Time, Abandoned Calls and Aux time as well the number of calls taken throughout the day. Also, by monitoring their calls, we can address and provide assistance with any issues immediately.
- **Follow up.** Conduct follow up discussions between the employee and manager during the pandemic daily to ensure that the managers didn't miss anything, and all the necessary steps are implemented in the work-at-home environment.

The intent of allowing staff to telework is to develop and implement a new environment necessary to continue providing excellent customer service, and it shouldn't stop because we are teleworking. Our strategy for working from home is to match the potential of our call center staff and the needs of the department.

Establishing conversational scripts for any new announcements and expectations for every customer contact is to ensure that great customer service is provided to each customer by the call center. We adopted customer service guidelines for our customer service staff to be committed to giving their all. The customer service call center staff are expected to perform their duties by going the extra mile whenever possible. Within legal, ethical, and organizational policies and procedures, staff need to perform and satisfy the needs of the customer, answer the phone within the allotted “three rings” rule, and return customer calls within 48 hours. They must always use the customer’s name when transferring calls, stay on the line until the other line has been answered, and thank the customer politely after the conversation is completed.

The customer service standard of answering all incoming calls should be *“Chesterfield County Department of Utilities, (employee name) speaking, how may I help you?”* Our standard closing is, *“Is there anything else I can help you with? Thank you for calling and have a nice day.”* In addition, when possible, always follow-up on any voicemail that needs to be responded to within 48 hours and provide guidance to customers that need help.

In setting up our staff for success, we have completed one of the county’s objectives of investing in employee engagement. Through proper training and guidance, we can promote and encourage staff’s individual growth. We also strongly emphasize our commitment to providing our customers the best and number one goal of providing excellent service.

4. Execution of the Program

The department invested and promoted the work-from-home program (teleworking) by providing each customer service representative the tools to perform successfully. The customer service

representatives also are trained on properly answering the phone to ensure that the excellence of customer service is indeed intact and practiced. Also, the customer operations group, especially the call center, has an intense training program for new employees to learn the process of how to respond to all customer inquiries and concerns. We are heavily invested in training new employees because we want them to perform well. New employee training begins with one full day and one-half day of orientation for full-time employees through Ulearn using the virtual option via TEAMS due to the pandemic.

In a normal setting, the supervisor would have a checklist for ensuring that new employees receive organizational information and training prior to beginning their call center duties. Once the employee completes new orientation training, they are assigned to a mentor who will introduce and train the employee on using our telephone system, understanding our billing system, and answering customer calls. Training will last anywhere from three to eight weeks depending upon the progress of the employee. The new employee will shadow their mentor, listening to customer calls and observing the various billing screens necessary to identify and resolve customer concerns. As the new employee becomes familiar and comfortable with how to converse with a customer, look-up information, and record notes of customer conversations on their account, they will assume responsibility for completing these tasks under the watchful eye of the trainer. Gradually, the new employee will begin to handle customer calls with the mentor observing their actions.

Because of COVID-19, social distancing is enforced, and the one-on-one training/shadowing is not permitted. Instead, the trainer trains the new employees in a designated area where four or

five people can be in an oversized room and use the projection monitor on the wall for training.

The training days are still the same, however the new employees will utilize their laptop while the trainer guides them on how to complete functions like they would at home. The new employees are provided a daily timetable for their training and a list of the subjects they will be covering. The beginning of the training focuses on the overview of the billing system, how to navigate our system, and how the system works. Upon mutual agreement between the new employee, the trainer, and the supervisor, the employee will begin to handle customers without direct supervision. Once this occurs, close monitoring by the supervisor begins to ensure that the new employee is comfortable with their responsibilities and successfully handling customer calls. Monthly meetings will be held between the supervisor and employee to chart their progress to ensure success.

The cost for training each customer service representative for eight weeks is \$4,640 with an average salary of \$14.50 per hour. The cost of the teleworking kit with a laptop is \$1,200 each. However, we need to realize that to make our training program a success, we need a proper and excellent training program. This is an investment that the department must utilize to ensure that customer service excellence is provided to each of our customers from our newly trained employees in the call center.

5. Results

Since March 2020, our ways of working in the call center have changed to where all the call center personnel have developed a work-from-home strategy. Currently there are nine customer service representatives in the call center. All are trained to complete the tasks in any situation or

environment. With COVID-19, the way of doing business and the process of how the business should be run had to be rolled out properly and effectively for the safety and health of our employees and customers. There are fewer customers coming in, and the volume of the calls has increased with minimum staffing. The career development plan was reinstated so employees can still pursue advancement, which upon completion, would provide an increase of their salary by five percent. Working from home is a transition and environmental change on how to do things.

Training on the new concept of teleworking is a new trend of the virtualized government. The pandemic has changed the future of work from a virtual concept to a reality. In the call center, despite some adjustments to how we do things, the concept itself and the performance is better than what we had expected. With teleworking, technology is giving us an advantage. We are promoting the work-at-home environment and want all our employees to do well in their job while they are working from home. We give them guidance on how to be successful. So far, our guidance is working, and we have had no complaints from staff about being overwhelmed or overworked. We have been successful in obtaining a work-life balance, even during a pandemic, and we are prioritizing the significance of creating a better work environment that will continue as we look to the future. This is just the beginning.

This guidance we provide to staff is as follows:

- Set up a separate designated space in your home as your new designated work area away from distractions such as television.
- Plug the electronics that you are using directly into outlets or use a surge protector to avoid heat and potential fire hazard. Do not use extension cords.

- Do not sit at your desk all day. Stretch your body every half hour. Go get a drink or just move around.
- Make sure there is a comfortable chair to avoid back aches.
- Position your equipment for the most effective set-up, such as having a monitor in front of you.

Our measurement for the calls answered while being in this environment of teleworking is not different from the normal measurement of answering calls. However, we have noticed that because we were not able to bring back the part-time personnel that were furloughed, there are days that our abandoned calls are higher. The two most significant standards we measure within our call center are our percentage of telephone calls answered and calls abandoned. During this pandemic, we stopped calling customers to ask them to rate their customer service experience since we are down three call center staff that should have been answering the phone lines. Our current target for answering the phones in the call center through the ACD system is at 95 percent. We are meeting the target of answering 97.64 percent of calls even with being short-handed. We received 76,347 calls of which 66,889 were answered within 20 seconds. This is exceptional customer service. Also, there are fewer complaints from customers regarding our service.

In summary, during the pandemic, our customer service representatives are doing an excellent job in completing their tasks of answering the phone in a timely manner. Although the work is done through a teleworking environment, our call center staff has managed to improve the targeted statistics. They are providing exceptional customer service during this extraordinary time.

It is also noted that during the pandemic, we are improving our communication efforts through the TEAMS environment. Anytime, there is a need for clarification on how to handle and solve an issue, the environment of TEAMS is used. TEAMS allow us to provide and promote a positive atmosphere and gain a better understanding of a situation. The TEAMS environment is used by the call center staff daily without hesitation.

6. Our Commitment

Our commitment to our customers is to provide world-class customer service. The objectives of our customer service commitment are to provide innovative and creative strategies for achieving customer excellence for every customer contact, create an innovative service package for our customers, adopt service strategies that result in a higher levels of customer satisfaction, and adopt process improvements that have measurable results. The pandemic challenged the department's way of doing business, about how we deliver the services that we provide to our customers of Chesterfield County. But through creative and quick thinking of supervisors and managers, new processes have been implemented to make the new work environment a pleasant experience for the staff. Employees are adapting to new processes and the continuity of the services didn't falter. Everything moved efficiently. We understood that no matter what is happening around us, our customers still need our services. It is our responsibility to provide these services while at the same time ensuring a healthy work environment.

As we moved forward to the year 2021, even though the uncertainty of the future is still upon us, we will always be looking for ways to continually improve our call center. Our key objectives will be to continue to achieve an improved level of service and then hold those gains by striving

to always do a better job. In the coming years, we will strive to meet increasingly demanding customer needs and expectations. Through better communications, training programs, and mentoring, we will meet the department's expectations. We will remain open-minded with the new trends of how we are going to do business in the future.

We firmly believe that virtual governing is the trend of the future. We will be focusing on the teleworking environment and trying to continuously improve to do better in the future. We will always adhere to the standards of improving communication with our customers by doing the best in the industry. Ultimately, our goal is about improving performance, focusing on training and continuous improvement of our processes, and improving service for our customers. We reflect on ways that we can improve our processes and create new ways of delivering these new and innovative ideas. We want to recognize our employees for their contributions, efforts, and successes. Working remotely has become our new normal by bringing the future into reality.

Chesterfield Utilities' customer service representatives teleworking.

