

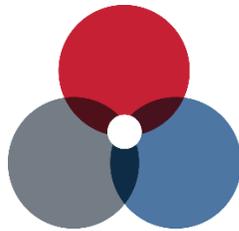
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# Cuyahoga County JFS: On the Road to Providing a Superior Customer Experience

By Rachel Cahill,  
Consultant

November, 2017



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**On the Road to Providing a Superior Customer Experience:**  
*A summary of Cuyahoga JFS call center roll out and plans for the future*

**November, 2017**

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**Introduction**

The Cuyahoga County Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) recently completed a year-long strategic planning process in order to assess how the agency is making a positive difference in the lives of county residents and to develop a plan for the future. Throughout community listening sessions and stakeholder interviews, DHHS consistently heard a desire from customers and their advocates for “clear pathways to services and consistent and timely communication from county staff.” In particular, stakeholders raised concerns about the “length of time to return a phone call and the inability to leave messages for county employees.” In the [strategic plan](#), DHHS acknowledges that “effective and timely communication between employees and customers is essential,” and sets a topline goal to “provide a superior customer experience.” Included in this goal is a commitment to making communication with Cuyahoga Job and Family Services (JFS) available “in person, over the phone, and online, depending on the client’s preferred method of service.”

Although much work remains to be done, Cuyahoga JFS has spent much of 2017 laying the foundation for a new model of phone-based application and enrollment assistance that has the potential to improve the speed, quality, and efficiency of JFS. This update provides a brief overview of JFS’ progress to date and plans for the future, all of which are designed to significantly improve the customer experience in Cuyahoga County.

**Cuyahoga County Goal 14:**  
Provide a superior customer experience.



**Cuyahoga County's Strategic Priorities:**

- 14.1 Consistently provide an excellent customer experience.
- 14.2 Expand omni-channel access to services through the smart and effective use of technology.
- 14.3 Provide easier access to services through targeted neighborhood partnerships and outreach.
- 14.4 Establish "any door is the right door" policies and practices for better access to government services.
- 14.5 Provide services in spaces that are welcoming, comfortable and well-designed for both customers and employees.
- 14.6 Build trust in government.

*Source: Cuyahoga County Department of Human Services Strategic Plan*

### **Why a Call Center?**

County residents struggling to make ends meet cannot easily forgo work, training, or child care responsibilities to apply for, renew, or report changes related to their receipt of public benefits. At the same time, JFS caseworkers struggle to manage very large caseloads while playing endless phone tag with customers who have limited time during the work day to connect with JFS. As in other aspects of life, more effective and efficient customer service could be provided for many JFS customers through a model that includes call-in services.

The model that Cuyahoga JFS is adopting will eventually lead to a fully operational call center where cross-trained caseworkers answer in-bound calls related to Medicaid, Food Assistance (also called SNAP), and Cash Assistance (OWF), with a focus on "first-call resolution." This means the primary metric for success is whether the caseworker was able to respond to the customer's request right away, such as processing their application or conducting their recertification interview, without passing the request on to someone else. This model has several advantages, including:

- 1) Customers are able to reach a fully trained caseworker as their schedules allow. This will result in less phone tag between caseworkers and customers and much quicker case processing.
- 2) As more customers recognize the convenience of phone-based assistance, Neighborhood Family Service Centers will likely see less lobby traffic, making it easier for those who need in-person assistance (e.g. homeless individuals and others without reliable phone access) to get the help they need.
- 3) New tools, like call forecasting and “virtual hold” technology, will allow JFS to increase staffing during peak volume, and allow customers to receive an automatic call back when they reach the front of the line instead of waiting on hold.
- 4) As caseworkers become empowered to resolve case issues while clients are on the phone, caseworkers are likely to experience increased job satisfaction as well as higher productivity.

## **Timeline**

*January 25, 2017* – The Medicaid Call Center pilot began at Virgil E. Brown (VEB) Neighborhood Family Service Center, based on a call center platform (known as “Shared Services”) provided by the state. The pilot launched with a “silent” go-live, meaning that no external marketing was done, but the phone number was included in renewal packets sent to customers. Pilot staff received training and began participating in weekly focus groups to provide feedback and share best practices.

*February and March 2017* – During the first two months of the pilot, the Call Center handled over 1,200 Medicaid calls, 91 percent of which had no wait time. In March, 55 percent of Medicaid applications and 62 percent of renewals enjoyed “first time resolution,” an important metric of meeting all of the customer’s needs without postponing or passing work to other staff.

*April 2017* – The Call Center pilot expanded to Southgate and Quincy Place Neighborhood Family Service Centers, resulting in a total of 118 total staff (caseworkers and supervisors) receiving training on the new system. A separate call center on a county-driven platform that handles Long-Term Care Medicaid cases began its pilot by accepting applications from 13 nursing facilities.

*May 2017* – During the first four months of the pilot, the Call Center handled over 4,000 Medicaid calls, with a 92 percent answer rate. Additional call forecasting and associated scheduling changes were completed, in response to staff feedback.

*June 2017* – The Call Center pilot expanded to include Old Brooklyn Neighborhood Family Service Center, resulting in 100 percent of zip codes in Cuyahoga County having the ability to apply, renew, and report changes for Medicaid over the phone. In addition, a partnership began with Cuyahoga County Public Library (CCPL) branches to allow customers to fax verifications to JFS through the library at no charge.

**July 2017** – The county-driven call platform which focuses on long-term care cases implemented a second phase of its pilot by accepting applications, renewals, and case changes over the phone for all 100+ nursing homes located in Cuyahoga County.

**August 2017** – During the first seven months of the pilot, the Call Center handled 18,500 Medicaid calls, including over 5,200 during the month of July, with a 95 percent answer rate. As its capacity increased, the Call Center began accepting “soft transfers” from other departments, including the Benefits Information Line (216-987-7000), to provide customers with quicker case resolution without the need for additional follow up calls.

**September 2017** – Additional staff received Call Center training to increase schedule flexibility, and eventually, expand Call Center services to additional benefits (e.g. Food Assistance).

**October 2017** – Cuyahoga JFS began publicizing the Call Center number, including adding it to phone trees to route calls directly to the Call Center. Updated voicemail scripts went into effect, which include the phone number for the Medicaid Call Center. In addition, marketing materials for the Medicaid Call Center were placed in waiting rooms across the agency and in library branches.

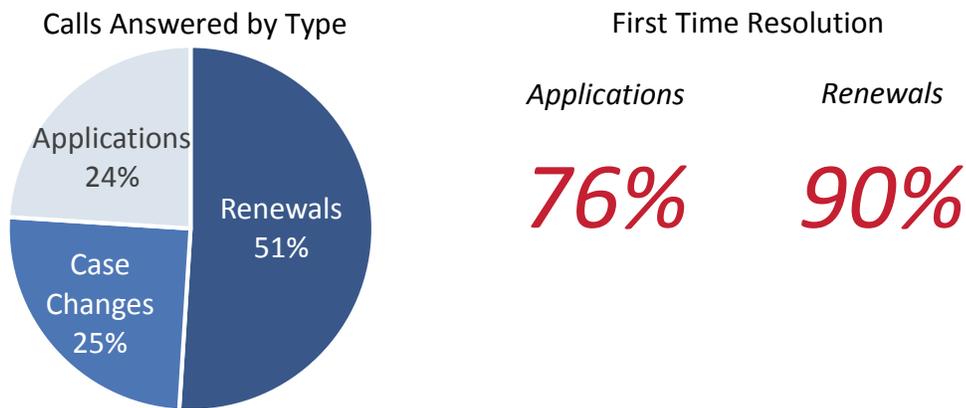
## **Results to Date**

The Call Center pilot in 2017 has been a customer service success for Cuyahoga County. Because the model lends itself to robust measurement, below are some of the key performance indicators included in the DHHS Strategic Plan that will be used to monitor success over time.

- **Average Wait Time** – Throughout the pilot period, average wait time never rose above 3.3 minutes, and was typically *less than 1 minute*. While this wait time will likely increase as the Call Center gets publicized more widely, Cuyahoga JFS plans to continue adjusting staffing levels as necessary to respond to times of peak demand.
- **Answer Rate** – The answer rate is defined as the number of calls answered divided by the number of calls placed by customers. Since May, the Call Center has achieved an answer rate between 94-99 percent, meaning 1-6 percent of customers abandoned the call before reaching a caseworker.
- **First-time Resolution** – As mentioned above, first-time resolution describes the percentage of calls where a benefit determination was made by the caseworker, without the need to request additional information or send follow up work to another worker (which is common practice on the general benefits information line.) JFS leadership has communicated to caseworkers staffing the Call Center that first-time resolution is among the most important metrics being tracked. Since May, the Call Center has achieved an impressive 85 percent first-time resolution rate for individuals calling to apply for or renew their Medicaid benefits.

- **Average Handle Time** – Average “handle” time is the length of a call with a customer plus the time caseworkers need to complete all associated tasks, like adding case notes or processing a renewal. While many commercial call centers strive to keep handle time to a minimum, Cuyahoga JFS emphasizes first-time resolution over a low handle time. Throughout the pilot period, the average handle time for Medicaid calls fluctuated between 19 and 23 minutes, while call times themselves ranged from 9 to 12 minutes.

**Cuyahoga County Call Data: May, 2017**



In the future, Cuyahoga JFS stakeholders may benefit from additional metrics on county performance, such as:

- **Application Timeliness** – This is a metric of the percentage of applications submitted each month that are processed (i.e., approved or denied) in the required timeframe (e.g., 30 days for Medicaid, 30 days for SNAP, 7 days for Expedited SNAP).
- **Application Channels** – The Cuyahoga HHS Strategic Plan seeks to offer JFS services in person, over the phone, and online, depending on clients’ preferences. To that end, one key performance indicator is the number and percentage of county services offered online or via call center.

## What's Next?

Although the Call Center pilot had impressive outcomes during its first months of service, it is currently limited to Medicaid cases. Cuyahoga JFS is actively working with the state (ODJFS) to secure the permission and technology necessary to add Food Assistance (SNAP) to the Call Center, so that the vast majority of Cuyahoga JFS customers could apply, renew, and make changes to their cases over the phone. This enhancement to the Call Center is expected sometime in 2018.

Cuyahoga JFS is also preparing to transition its SNAP and TANF caseloads from CRIS-E, the agency's legacy eligibility system, to Ohio Benefits, the new eligibility system that currently supports Medicaid. This significant system change will be piloted in five smaller counties in the coming months and will likely reach Cuyahoga County by mid-2018. In the meantime, Cuyahoga JFS will continue to implement and expand measures to improve customer service for all.



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