



Several Options Exist for Streamlining State Agency Contact Centers

at a glance

State agencies operate 49 customer contact centers to address citizen needs at an annual cost of over \$149 million. Although agencies have made efforts to streamline these centers in recent fiscal years, the Legislature could consider additional opportunities to achieve efficiencies and cost-savings. These options include co-locating the sites of contact centers that use multiple locations; consolidating all of an agency's contact centers; consolidating contact center locations with similar functions; combining all state agency contact centers into a single center; and consolidating all contact center information technology statewide. There are advantages and disadvantages associated with each of these options.

Scope

As directed by the Legislature, OPPAGA examined Florida's state agency customer contact centers and addressed four questions.

1. How many customer contact centers do state agencies operate?

2. What is the estimated cost to operate state agency contact centers?
3. What efforts have agencies made to streamline customer contact center processes and improve customer service?
4. What options could the Legislature consider to further streamline agency contact centers?

Background

Customer contact centers are facilities that manage all customer communication about services and issues. At a minimum, the centers have the ability to handle a considerable volume of telephone calls, screen and forward calls to people qualified to handle them, and log these contacts into a tracking system. In addition to handling calls, contact centers also often communicate with citizens through in-person consultations, email, websites, publications, letters, and faxes.¹

¹Contact centers monitor their performance and service effectiveness using indicators such as the percentage of calls answered, call volume, average length of calls, the number of unique callers and calls transferred, and customer satisfaction.

Government agencies use contact centers to effectively and efficiently deliver services to citizens. Government contact centers typically provide information about agency services, offer guidance on regulations, respond to consumer complaints, provide help in completing processes (e.g., obtaining a business license), and refer customers to other agencies.

Historically, contact centers have been located regionally; for example, in the same areas as agency field offices. However, as technology and consumer expertise has changed through increased Internet access and use, physical proximity to clients is less important to an entity's business operations. As a result, many private and public entities have sought to consolidate contact centers to increase efficiency and reduce costs. For example, USAA Insurance recently consolidated six contact centers into four locations, released employees that did not want to relocate, and transferred remaining personnel. Similarly, New York City recently consolidated its government's information and referral services; although this effort did not result in substantial cost savings, city staff cited increased customer satisfaction as a positive outcome.²

Questions and Answers—

Twenty-one state agencies operate at least 49 contact centers to address citizen needs, and several of these contact centers have multiple locations across the state. Agencies reported spending an estimated \$149 million to operate these centers in

Fiscal Year 2008-09. Although agencies have made streamlining efforts in recent years, the Legislature may wish to consider several options to further streamline state agency contact centers. There are advantages and disadvantages associated with each of these options.

How many customer contact centers do state agencies operate?

To determine the number, purpose, and operational model of Florida's state agency contact centers, OPPAGA surveyed all agencies and toured four contact centers and interviewed their staff members.³ Twenty-one agencies reported operating a total of 49 customer contact centers.⁴ Eleven of these agencies reported operating multiple centers (see Exhibit 1).

³ We examined the Department of Business and Professional Regulation's Customer Contact Center; the Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services' Division of Consumer Services Contact Center; the Department of Financial Services' Division of Consumer Services Contact Center; and Department of Revenue, General Tax Administration Contact Center. We chose these entities because they represent a wide range of contact center operations, with varying locations, client bases, and services.

⁴ One agency did not respond and eight agencies either reported that they did not have a contact center or we determined that their current operations did not meet our definition of a contact center. These were the Departments of Community Affairs, Citrus, Juvenile Justice, Law Enforcement, Military Affairs, and State; the Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission; and the Agency for Persons with Disabilities. These agencies report that they maintain contact with citizens via other mechanisms such as responding to inquiries and complaints from links on their websites, by email and correspondence, or via referrals from Governor's Office staff or legislative staff. The Office of the State Courts Administrator, which helps administer the state courts system, also reported that it did not have a contact center.

² New York City's information and referral center answers 50,000 calls a day or over 1 million calls a month. The state of Georgia and Kansas City, Missouri; Greensboro, North Carolina; and Corpus Christi, Texas also have consolidated contact centers.

**Exhibit 1
State Agencies Operate 49 Contact Centers
Across the State**

Agency	Number of Contact Centers
Department of Health	7
Department of Financial Services	5
Department of Financial Services, Office of Financial Regulation ¹	2
Agency for Workforce Innovation	4
Department of Education	4
Department of Highway Safety	4
Department of Management Services	4
Agency for Health Care Administration	3
Department of Revenue	3
Department of the Lottery	2
State Board of Administration	2
Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services	1
Department of Business & Professional Regulation	1
Department of Children and Families	1
Department of Environmental Protection	1
Department of Legal Affairs	1
Department of Transportation	1
Department of Veterans' Affairs	1
Executive Office of the Governor	1
Public Service Commission	1
Total	49

¹ The Office of Financial Regulation is a unit of the Financial Services Commission. The commission includes the Governor and Cabinet, which appoints the officials who oversee the Office of Financial Regulation and the Office of Insurance Regulation. These offices are administratively housed in the Department of Financial Services, but report directly to the commission.

Source: OPPAGA survey.

The number of agency contact centers has remained relatively stable in recent years, with only one new contact center established over the past three fiscal years - the Department of Education's Florida Teacher Certification Examinations/Florida Educational Leadership Examination contact center.⁵

⁵ This contact center was created in 2007.

Nine agencies reported operating multiple locations for one or more of their customer contact centers in Fiscal Year 2008-09 (see Exhibit 2).

**Exhibit 2
Nine Agency Contact Centers Use Multiple
Facilities to Provide Services**

Agency	Contact Center	Number of locations
Agency for Workforce Innovation	Unemployment Compensation	4
Department of Children and Families	ACCESS	3
Department of the Lottery	Retailer hotline	2
Department of Transportation	SunPass	2
State Board of Administration	MyFRS Financial Guidance	2
Agency for Health Care Administration	Medicaid Contract Management	2
Department of Financial Services	Workers' Compensation, Customer Service	2
Department of Revenue	Child Support	2
Department of Management Services	People First	2

Source: OPPAGA survey.

State agency contact centers provide similar types of services to a range of customers. The state agencies reported using contact centers to manage a range of citizen services, including providing information and collecting fees. The agencies also reported that their centers provide services to a range of consumers, including businesses, families seeking financial assistance, and concerned citizens. Most (48) of the centers reported providing information, and 43 reported providing referral services. Centers also frequently reported providing case management services, coaching citizens through processes such as filing taxes and applying for licenses, and collecting fees.

Telephone calls are a major mode of customer contact, but electronic access is also important. The state agency contact centers reported widely varying call volumes. In Fiscal Year 2008-09, the number of calls answered by the centers ranged from 2,500 calls to the Department of Health’s Brain and Spinal Cord Injury hotline to 13.3 million calls answered by Department of Revenue’s Child Support Enforcement customer contact centers.

In addition, 48 contact centers provide callers with the opportunity to access requested information via the web, while 42 centers provide information by email.⁶ During Fiscal Year 2008-09, the number of hits to contact center websites ranged from 2,681 on the Governor’s Office of Citizen Services website to 600 million on the Department of Transportation’s SunPass website.⁷ The number of emails received by the centers similarly varied widely, from 19 at the Department Health’s contracted center for pregnancy support services to over 523,000 emails handled by the Governor’s Office of Citizen Services.

What is the estimated cost to operate state agency contact centers?

Agencies reported spending \$149 million to operate contact centers in Fiscal Year 2008-09. In the same fiscal year, individual contact centers reported operational costs ranging from \$24,879 for the Department of Health’s pregnancy support services contact center to over \$29 million for the Agency for Workforce Innovation’s Unemployment Compensation contact

center.⁸ These operational costs excluded expenditures for some contracted contact centers (e.g., the Department of Management Services’ People First service centers) because these centers are operated as part of an overall service contract and cost data for these centers is considered proprietary.⁹

Costs of some contact centers have increased in recent years due to workload. While the costs of most state agency contact centers have remained relatively unchanged over the past three fiscal years, total statewide costs rose by approximately 8%, or \$11.1 million, in Fiscal Year 2008-09. This increase was attributable mostly to higher staffing levels at a few centers to address greater consumer demand for services. For example, the Agency for Workforce Innovation reported adding 158 call center staff and associated technology resources to handle increased unemployment claims, raising its contact center costs by \$4.2 million. Similarly, the Department of Education reported \$2.1 million in increased costs for its Just Read Florida’s Progress Monitoring and Reporting Network due to higher staff, software, and equipment expenses.

Contact center costs are driven largely by consumer demand, contact method, and staffing. The communication methods provided by contact centers affect their operating costs, with those centers offering more personnel-intensive services generally having higher expenses. Industry data indicates that it can cost an

⁶ Agencies reported that callers are usually referred to websites by the contact centers’ interactive voice recording or by call agents.

⁷ The number of completed calls and website hits demonstrates contact center utilization rather than the number of unique users.

⁸ Low-end costs reported here often represent the salaries and benefits of a single full-time equivalent position (FTE) managing a contract for a contact center’s operations. Other costs are likely being absorbed by the agency or the contractor hired to operate the center.

⁹ The total appropriation for the People First initiative was \$44 million in Fiscal Year 2008-09.

estimated \$5.50 to handle a telephone service call versus \$5 for an email service request and \$0.10 for a web transaction.

Florida's state agency contact centers receive large numbers of calls, and this volume drives the number of staff needed to answer the calls and thus contact center costs. Agency contact center managers indicated that their centers' costs were largely driven by staff salaries and benefits. For example, most (\$4.1 million, or 89%) of the Department of Business and Professional Regulation's \$4.6 million in contact center expenses are related to staffing.

The 49 contact centers we identified reported having 2,882 full-time equivalent positions (FTE), ranging from one contract manager for the privatized Department of Health call centers to 760 staff for the Agency for Workforce Innovation's Unemployment Compensation contact center. This total does not include contracted or reserve staff. Nine agencies reported having 16 contracts for contact center services but did not provide staffing totals for these contracted services.¹⁰ In addition, 23 contact centers reported that they use temporary staff to assist during high demand periods or natural disasters. The average size of these reserve-staffing pools was 27 FTEs, ranging from 2 additional staff at the Agency for Health Care Administration's Health Quality Assurance contact center to 87 temporary employees at the Department of Children and Families' ACCESS contact centers.

What efforts have agencies made to streamline customer contact center processes and improve customer service?

Most centers (39) reported streamlining their operations in the last three years. Managers reported that these efforts were conducted to enhance performance, increase customer service, or achieve cost savings.

Agencies typically streamline contact centers by updating information technology. Many contact center managers reported that they streamlined their operations by updating contact center technology, including website improvements (29), equipment updates (21), and software acquisitions (20). Often, these efforts required additional expenditures. For example, 22 contact center managers reported incurring streamlining costs, and 14 of these managers reported making technology purchases. In some cases, these expenditures may be offset by staff reductions if the technology improves a center's efficiency.

Software investments by agency contact centers have produced service improvements for citizens. For example, the Department of Revenue's Tax Administration contact center developed software that enables staff to view a caller's case files and call history based on their telephone number or account number. This innovation was reported to reduce call times by an average of 15-20 seconds and improve customer service.

Agency contact center managers also reported that they improved electronic services to encourage citizens to use websites.¹¹ Although agencies did not

¹⁰ Agencies report that most contracted employees providing contract center functions live in Florida or will within the current fiscal year.

¹¹ Despite the advantages to moving customers to websites, state agency contact centers that provide services other than

provide specific information on related cost reductions, research indicates greater website use can lower costs by decreasing both the number of calls and staffing needs. Moreover, website improvements can lead to greater efficiency as well as help manage call volumes. For example, Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services Division of Consumer Services' contact center staff reported that updating the division's website helped to manage changes in call volumes caused by consumer alerts (e.g., recalls of children's products) and other significant events such as hurricanes.

Streamlining efforts can result in performance improvements. Most (34) contact center managers reported that streamlining efforts achieved performance improvements such as decreased caller wait times and fewer abandoned calls. For example, the Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services' Division of Consumer Services contact center developed scripts to enable their staff to respond more quickly to caller questions. The division reported that landlord/tenant calls are complex and took an average of 3 minutes and 26 seconds to answer. After introducing a landlord/tenant script in August 2009, the division reported that staff reduced the average length of these calls by 16 seconds.

Similarly, the Department of Business and Professional Regulation's contact center recently made changes to improve performance. Specifically, the center performed a call volume analysis, which enabled it to forecast peak customer

contact times and develop staff schedules based on operational needs. The call center also changed its interactive voice response system to better direct calls in a queue to particular specialists. These initiatives enabled the center to increase the percentage of calls it answered from 78% to 91%.

Streamlining efforts can increase customer satisfaction. Most (32) contact center managers reported greater customer satisfaction after implementing streamlining efforts. For example, the Department of Business and Professional Regulation's contact center reported that its modifications increased customer satisfaction. This increase was attributed to the contact center implementing a quality assurance system in Fiscal Year 2007-08. As part of this effort, the agency began to conduct call monitoring, recording, and quality scoring, and used this information to identify staff training needs. Customer satisfaction improved from 89% before this effort to 98% the following fiscal year.

Contact center managers noted that some efforts to improve customer satisfaction and efficiency may be accomplished at no additional expense. For example, 17 managers reported that they were able to modify center operations without incurring additional costs. These no-cost streamlining efforts included modifying telephone call routing, rotating staff to support extended hours, changing workflow, and changing contact center service hours.

What options could the Legislature consider to further streamline agency contact centers?

The Legislature could consider opportunities to consolidate agency contact

information and referrals may not be able to entirely move to Internet-based services. Industry research suggests that some citizens served by state agencies remain disproportionately offline, such as people with chronic diseases or disabilities.

centers to achieve benefits including performance improvements and cost savings. These options include directing agencies to consolidate centers that currently have multiple locations; directing agencies to consolidate all of their call centers into a single facility per agency; consolidating contact centers across agencies that have similar functions; consolidating all agency contact centers into a single statewide entity; and directing agencies to use standardized technology to operate their contact centers. The Legislature should consider several factors when reviewing these options.

Consolidation can achieve benefits when entities are combined that provide similar services. The experience of both business and governmental entities has demonstrated that consolidating contact centers can provide benefits including standardized processes, more efficient technologies, better collaboration and information sharing among agencies, and one-stop-shopping for customers. These changes can improve an entity's efficiency in providing services and enhance customer satisfaction. For example, New York City consolidated 40 contact centers that provided information and referral services into a single point of access for all city services. City officials report that this effort resulted in reduced call transfers and increased customer satisfaction. In addition, states that consolidated contact center information technology systems reported increased efficiencies. For example, Georgia, Michigan, and Minnesota currently provide a single technology platform for all contact centers, and Illinois plans to do so as well. These states expect this step to result in fewer transferred calls and greater flexibility to meet the demand for services.

Consolidation does not always produce cost savings. However, it should be noted that consolidating contact centers typically requires initial investments that may not be offset through efficiency savings. State agencies reported that these investments to improve efficiency generally included technology costs such as software upgrades, new phone systems, and other hardware.

Three state agency contact centers – the Department of Veterans Affairs' Benefits and Assistance Services, the Agency for Health Care Administration's Medicaid Enrollment Broker Recipient Call Center, and the Department of Financial Services' Division of Consumer Services – reported consolidating facilities in the last three years. Of these, only the Department of Financial Services reported achieving cost savings.¹² Specifically, the department consolidated 10 Division of Consumer Services contact centers into two locations and incurred \$308,000 in related expenses for construction, furnishings, rent, and new telephone lines. However, as a result of reducing the number of sites and other factors, such as staff attrition and transferring remaining staff to other positions in the agency, the division reports that it saved \$701,000 in rent, salaries, and other costs, producing a net savings of \$393,000 in Fiscal Year 2008-09.

Although reducing the number of staff and facilities can reduce operational expenses, these savings do not always offset substantial costs, particularly if new

¹² The Department of Veterans Affairs consolidated contact center staff at one field office but did not eliminate staff positions or facilities. The Agency for Health Care Administration consolidated one contracted and one agency contact center location of the Medicaid Enrollment Broker Recipient Call Center into a single center staffed by the agency, but did not achieve net savings.

software or hardware is required. For example, the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services' contact center managers noted that if required to consolidate with other customer contact centers, the department would likely be unable to leverage all of its current technology investments and would incur expenses (e.g., new software and staff costs) to build a consolidated system.

Other states have reported similar experiences. For example, officials involved with the New York City consolidation initiative noted that consolidation typically required substantial investments, especially for consultants, new software systems, and facilities. City officials reported spending \$25 million on such investments in consolidating the city's information and referral contact centers.

Combining entities with similar services and clearly establishing governance responsibilities contributes to the success of consolidation. Studies of contact center consolidation indicate that maximum benefits are achieved when centers that have similar functions are consolidated. For example, New York City and Georgia consolidated contact centers that provided only information and referral services and also created websites that provide citizens the same information as that provided by call center staff. Combining centers providing information services enabled the city to minimize the time required to train staff and avoided having to certify that staff could manage confidential information.

Georgia and New York City representatives also noted the importance of governance in managing the consolidation process. In particular, these officials noted the importance of having the project championed by chief executives, such as the governor or mayor. They also noted that it may be beneficial to have the consolidation process managed by an information technology entity due to the complexity and extent of software required to run a large contact center.

However, consolidation may not be desirable for all contact centers, even those that provide similar services. The location of centers and the types of citizens they serve may be important to delivering services. For example, the Agency for Workforce Innovation noted that they would not be able to recruit staff with foreign language proficiency needed to serve citizens if they closed their South Florida contact centers. In addition, a few center managers noted that consolidating centers into a single location would not allow for needed redundancy in the event of a hurricane or other natural disaster.

The Legislature may wish to consider options for streamlining agency contact centers. Given the state's current budget situation and concerns about duplication across state agencies, the Legislature may wish to consider directing agencies to further consolidate their customer contact centers. Exhibit 3 presents five options for contact center consolidation and the advantages and disadvantages associated with each option.

**Exhibit 3
The Legislature Could Consider Five Options to Modify the State’s Contact Center Structure**

Option	Advantages	Disadvantages
Option 1 – Co-locate the sites of contact centers that use multiple locations		
<p>Direct agencies to consolidate the sites of contact centers with multiple locations. Under this option, a contact center with more than one location would merge operations and staff into fewer facilities. This option could also be exercised in conjunction with Option 5.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Improved knowledge transfer between agency units ▪ Easier to scale to meet peak demands ▪ Possible savings opportunities via reduced staffing levels, facilities, and training ▪ Reduces costs by limiting time-consuming walk-ins by citizens 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Increased training time, as staff will require additional knowledge ▪ No redundancy in the event of a disaster ▪ Staff expertise only available in particular areas in Florida (e.g., multilingual staff) ▪ Technology costs for retrofitting one of the locations ▪ Some reduction in consumer access as in-person consultations would no longer be available at closed sites
Option 2– Consolidate all of an agency’s contact centers		
<p>Direct state agencies to consolidate all the contact centers in their agencies and build an associated website to support or duplicate content provided on the telephone. Under this option, each agency would have a single point of contact with the public. The agency contact center could house staff in single or multiple locations as required. This option could also be exercised in conjunction with Option 5.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ A single intake point/source for all questions could result in more efficient responses to citizens, fewer transfers, and more capacity to address follow-up or tangential questions ▪ Increased efficiency could increase customer satisfaction ▪ Possible savings opportunities via reduced staffing levels and facility costs ▪ Easier to scale to meet peak demands 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Staff would lose their subject matter expertise ▪ Requiring staff to increase their knowledge base to this extent could cause performance issues and could affect service quality ▪ Training staff in using new or different systems could be lengthy ▪ No redundancy in the event of a disaster ▪ Each agency program may have different state or federal requirements for personnel handling confidential information ▪ Potential cost increases related to transitioning to a central technology platform ▪ Loss of the state’s investment in unique hardware and software systems for each center
Option 3 – Consolidate contact center locations with similar functions		
<p>Direct state agencies to consolidate all state government contact center locations with similar functions. In addition, direct the agencies to develop an associated website to support or duplicate content provided on the telephone. For example, agencies could consolidate all contact centers that provide information and referral services. Under this option, the contact center could house staff in single or multiple locations as required. This option could also be exercised in conjunction with Option 5.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Centralized management and oversight ▪ Possible savings opportunities via staff reductions or facility costs, if existing facilities can house the operation ▪ Possible economies of scale for purchasing, servicing, and updating technology ▪ Could increase customer satisfaction by answering calls faster 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Complication of contact center management through high call volume, unique agency processes, and diverse caller issues ▪ Training staff in using new or different systems could be lengthy ▪ Requiring staff to increase their knowledge base to this extent could cause performance issues and could impact service quality ▪ Potential cost increases related to transitioning to a central technology platform and possibly a new facility ▪ Loss of the state’s investment in unique hardware and software for each center ▪ Each agency program may have different state or federal requirements for personnel handling confidential information

Option	Advantages	Disadvantages
Option 4 – Combine all state agency contact centers into a single center		
<p>Direct state agencies to consolidate all state government contact centers into a single state contact center. Information technology associated with the contact center would be centralized as well. The Legislature could designate an entity with enterprise-wide authority to coordinate this effort. Under this option, the MyFlorida.com website would have to link to contact center websites or would require content upgrades. Depending on the size of the staff required, this contact center could operate in single or multiple locations.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Centralized management and oversight ▪ Possible economies of scale for purchasing, servicing, and updating technology ▪ Agencies dealing with confidential information could still have private networks ▪ Possible savings via facility costs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Complication of contact center management through high call volume, unique agency processes, and diverse caller issues ▪ Training would be complex and lengthy ▪ Requiring staff to increase their knowledge base to this extent could cause performance issues and could impact service quality ▪ Each agency program may have different state or federal requirements for personnel handling confidential information ▪ Loss of the state's investment in unique hardware and software for each center ▪ Potential cost increases related to transitioning to a central technology platform ▪ Loss of redundancy in the event of a natural disaster
Option 5 – Consolidate all contact center information technology statewide		
<p>Direct an entity with enterprise wide authority, to coordinate the procurement or development of a hosted contact center service (a portal) and require state agency participation. Under this option, all technology for the contact centers would be centralized. This could be a stand-alone option so that existing state agency contact center locations and personnel levels remain the same or could be used in conjunction with any of the other options presented above.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Centralized management and oversight of information technology system ▪ Possible economies of scale for purchasing, servicing, and updating technology ▪ Agencies dealing with confidential information could still have private networks ▪ Potential reduction in the cost per call, as state agencies may not be fully utilizing their existing systems ▪ More flexibility for agencies, as they could call and subscribe for additional agents and then drop them if they are no longer needed without having to incur the costs of purchasing additional hardware and software to meet the demand for services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Substantial up-front expense to purchase the service and the associated technology ▪ Complication of contact center management if a contractor provides the service ▪ Potential transition costs to agencies, particularly if agencies don't have a technology infrastructure that is compatible with the centralized hardware and software platform

Source: OPPAGA analysis.

The Florida Legislature

Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability



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