

Quality and Productivity Commission
28th Annual Productivity and Quality Awards Program
"Los Angeles County: Ahead of the Curve"

2014 APPLICATION

Title of Project (Limited to 50 characters, including spaces, using Arial 12 point font):

NAME OF PROJECT: CONSOLIDATED COUNSELING 4 BETTER CUSTOMER SERVICE

DATE OF IMPLEMENTATION/ADOPTION: MAY 1, 2012
 (Must have been implemented at least one year - on or before June 30, 2013)

PROJECT STATUS: X Ongoing One-time only

HAS YOUR DEPARTMENT PREVIOUSLY SUBMITTED THIS PROJECT? Yes X No

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Describe the project in 15 lines or less using Arial 12 point font. Summarize the problem, solution, and benefits of the project in a clear and direct manner.

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Approximately 200,000 people come to the Department of Consumer Affairs each year looking for assistance with consumer issues. These consumers are seeking help with issues such as avoiding foreclosure, identity theft, landlord/tenant disputes, consumer purchases, and real estate fraud. In the past, Consumer Affairs had a decentralized counseling structure with 5 different sets of counseling sections providing information to the public in different subject matter areas. Some of the counseling sections had sophisticated training with automated systems to help them serve the public more effectively. Other sections relied on a small team of individuals who were not always available throughout the day to answer incoming calls and walk-ins because of other responsibilities. In 2012, the Department brought together the counseling resources into a new Consolidated Counseling structure that centralized counseling operations into a single unit. Counselors received new training and worked together to support each other provide exceptional customer service. The consolidation allowed the department to help more people, more reliably, with an increased quality of the information being provided. It was definitely a change for the better.

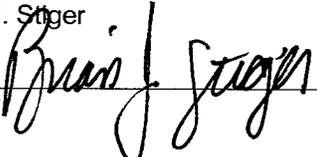
(1) ACTUAL/ESTIMATED ANNUAL COST AVOIDANCE	(2) ACTUAL/ESTIMATED ANNUAL COST SAVINGS	(3) ACTUAL/ESTIMATED ANNUAL REVENUE	(1) + (2) + (3) = TOTAL ANNUAL ACTUAL/ESTIMATED BENEFIT	SERVICE ENHANCEMENT PROJECT
\$	\$	\$	\$	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

ANNUAL = 12 MONTHS ONLY

SUBMITTING DEPARTMENT NAME AND COMPLETE ADDRESS Department of Consumer Affairs 500 W. Temple St. Room B-96 Los Angeles, CA 90012	TELEPHONE NUMBER (213) 974-9750
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PROGRAM MANAGER'S NAME Maritza Gutierrez	TELEPHONE NUMBER (213) 974-9415 EMAIL mgutierrez@dca.lacounty.gov
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PRODUCTIVITY MANAGER'S NAME AND SIGNATURE (PLEASE CALL (213) 893-0322 IF YOU DO NOT KNOW YOUR PRODUCTIVITY MANAGER'S NAME) Kirk Shelton 	DATE 7/15/14	TELEPHONE NUMBER (213) 974-4615 EMAIL kshelton@dca.lacounty.gov
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DEPARTMENT HEAD'S NAME AND SIGNATURE Brian J. Stiger 	DATE 7/15/14	TELEPHONE NUMBER (213) 974-9750
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1st FACT SHEET – LIMITED TO 3 PAGES ONLY: Describe the **Challenge, Solution, and Benefits** of the project.

Challenge

The Department of Consumer Affairs (DCA) provides consumer counseling in a wide range of areas. Each year, about 200,000 consumers contact the department for assistance with consumer issues. In the past, our counseling services were separated into 5 sections:

- ***Small Claims Court Advising***
- ***Consumer Issues*** including landlord/tenant, purchases, contracts, and autos
- ***Real Estate Fraud*** including foreclosure prevention
- ***Identity Theft***
- ***Mediation Services***

Consumers contacted DCA counselors on the phone, through email, or in-person at one of our offices located throughout the County for help with their questions. In the past, we would route consumers to the appropriate counseling section related to their specific type of question.

Unfortunately, some of these sections only had one or two staff available to help. These staff were not full time counselors and could get pulled away with other duties or be out of the office. If the staff members were not available, then a call or email would go unanswered until they returned. Consumers were understandably frustrated when nobody was available to answer their question. Each counseling section provided detailed information about their subject and it was difficult for people in other sections to step-in and assist because they lacked the expertise in that area. Each section also had different standards and priorities.

Investigations staff was also concerned about "call and counsel" cases. These were consumer complaints that did not qualify for investigation because the best service available from our department was consumer counseling or referral to another agency. Investigators often felt their time could be most productivity spent on casework and investigating consumer fraud rather than responding to these counseling situations.

The department needed a highly trained group of individuals who would be able to tackle a wide variety of counseling topics and ensure that skilled counselors were consistently available during all business hours to help consumers.

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Solution

The idea for Consolidated Counseling came from a department staff member who was helping out by covering the consumer counseling desk one day. The suggestion to create a dedicated team of counselors that could provide service in a variety of areas and standardize counseling services across the department was well received.

Utilizing existing staffing resources, the department reorganized its operations to consolidate all five counseling sections into a single counseling unit. Since over one half of the inquiries related to Small Claims Court, the unit was divided into two teams. One team responded to Small Claims questions and the other team answered all other consumer inquiries. Due to changes at the court, Small Claims courtrooms were being moved to new central hubs, so it made sense to leave the Small Claims Counseling team together so they could focus on providing services in the changing court environment and open new branch locations to better assist litigants.

The “4” in “Consolidated Counseling 4 Better Customer Service” stands for the 4 sections that were consolidated together to provide integrated counseling service to consumers.

Staff members from different programs were brought together into the new Consolidated Counseling unit and received in-depth training in the variety of subject matter areas they would be covering. Program supervisors arranged special morning and lunchtime training sessions specifically for the counselors to train them in areas where they did not have previous experience. The new supervisor over counseling reviewed call records and identified the most common types of questions and issues from consumers. The supervisor then worked with a skilled volunteer to provide counselor training sessions that developed expertise in these crucial subjects.

The training process extended for over two years. The training sessions grew in popularity to include investigators and mediators who wanted to learn more about the various counseling subjects. The widely attended trainings improved inter-unit collaboration and helped resolve procedural issues that slowed the flow of work through the department.

Counselors began answering all of the “call and counsel” cases and online “Ask a Question” emails. These duties provided productive activity when there was call volume was low. It also helped investigators focus their time on their casework.

In 2014, the Counseling unit began cross training between counseling teams to include the fifth area. By the end of the year, counselors will be able to provide information and assistance in all five of the areas covered by the department.

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LINKAGE TO THE COUNTY STRATEGIC PLAN (DETAIL IS REQUIRED FOR COUNTY DEPARTMENTS):

GOAL 1: OPERATIONAL EFFECTIVENESS/FISCAL SUSTAINABILITY: - Maximize the effectiveness of processes, structure, operations, and strong fiscal management to support timely delivery of customer-oriented and efficient public services.

Consolidated Counseling brought together a group of skilled counselors who were trained across a variety of subject matter areas to provide accurate and timely information to consumers who need our help.

Benefits

Consolidated Counseling has greatly increased the number of calls that our counselors are able to answer. Answering more calls allows the department to help more people.

The number of people that counselors were able to assist on the phone went up by 8.1% between FY 2012-13 and FY 2013-14. During the same period, the number of walk-in consumers that received one-on-one counseling services at one of our offices also increased dramatically by 75%. These increases are especially remarkable to see occurring together because these two counseling activities usually draw time away from each other.

In August 2013, the percent of callers hanging up before they could speak with a counselor was still too high at 11%. The Consolidated Counseling team was able to tackle this problem and almost cut that abandoned call rate in half to just 6% by June 2014. Having a unified team allowed them to work together to conquer this problem.

The benefits also extended beyond the department's counseling services. With the counselors taking on some of the work previously done by investigators, investigators were able to focus more attention on their cases and succeeded in resolving a higher percentage of their cases in a shorter period of time.

Consolidated Counseling also allowed our mediators to focus on their casework by handling all of the incoming mediation counseling calls which helped fuel an explosion of productivity in the mediation program. In FY 2013-14, mediators successfully resolved over 4 times as many disputes as the previous year. The implementation of Consolidated Counseling created positive ripples throughout the organization that benefited consumers who utilized any of our services.

Consolidated Counseling has been judged a huge success in our department. Consumer Affairs has been able to provide timely and accurate information and assistance to more people and with less time waiting for help. This was definitely a change for the better at the Department of Consumer Affairs.

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COST AVOIDANCE, COST SAVINGS, AND REVENUE GENERATED (ESTIMATED BENEFIT): If you are claiming cost benefits, include a calculation on this page. You must include an explanation of the County cost savings, cost avoidance or new revenue that matches the numbers in the box. Remember to keep your supporting documentation.

Cost Avoidance: Costs that are eliminated or not incurred as a result of program outcomes.

Cost Savings: A reduction or lessening of expenditures as a result of program outcomes.

Revenue: Increases in existing revenue streams or new revenue sources to the County as a result of program outcomes.

(1) ACTUAL/ESTIMATED ANNUAL COST AVOIDANCE	(2) ACTUAL/ESTIMATED ANNUAL COST SAVINGS	(3) ACTUAL/ESTIMATED ANNUAL REVENUE	(1)+(2)+(3) TOTAL ANNUAL ACTUAL/ESTIMATED BENEFIT	SERVICE ENHANCEMENT PROJECT
\$	\$	\$	\$	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

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There was no cost savings associated with this project. The realignment of staff allowed the DCA to function more productively, help more consumers, and provide better customer service.