

1. Abstract of the Program

With a limited budget and a burgeoning population requiring more services, more information and a more accessible government, Stafford County faced a dilemma – how to provide a central location to answer citizen’s questions in a quick and efficient way without having the funds to build a state-of-the-art call center. Using creativity, teamwork, and a strong belief in customer service, the Public Information and Citizens Assistance staff found a way to establish a 311 Center using available resources. By persuading departments to lend personnel to answer calls re-routed to the 311 Center, and by using the expertise of a well-trained corps of volunteers, Stafford was able to offer a new service to benefit citizens at a time when most governments were cutting back on services.

2. The Problem/Need for the Program

Stafford has been a crossroads for many important events and travelers in history. From Pocahontas and Captain John Smith, to George Washington and his famous fabled “chopping of the cherry tree,” to the countless Civil War soldiers’ encampments and hospitals, Stafford has centuries of tales to tell. The civilians of Stafford were among the first in the new world to suffer the devastating effects of a modern war, having to host most of the Union's Army of the Potomac from 1862-1863. Over 200,000 soldiers camped, ate, and lived off the land, straining the county's resources to the point of collapse. Stafford's population did not recover until the 1940s, well into the twentieth century.

In the meantime, Quantico Marine Corps Base was established in 1917 with 35,000 acres in Stafford, and the new Stafford courthouse was built in 1922. With the completion of Interstate 95 in the 1960s, growth continued in the county.

Between 1990 and 2010, Stafford’s population increased from 61,236 to 128,961, growing by more than 50 percent in 20 years. The population has continued to grow, with more than 134,000 residents in 2012, and shows no signs of stopping. Stafford’s proximity to Quantico and other military bases – Fort A.P. Hill, the Naval Surface Warfare Center at Dahlgren, Fort Belvoir and the Pentagon - drew people from all over the world who made

the County their home, either temporarily while on a military assignment, or permanently, retiring in Stafford after their military duty was up. These residents came with varying experiences and expectations for services. Traditionally, citizens called Stafford's general information number or individual departments with inquiries. Volunteers and staff in the Citizens Assistance office handled the general information calls. They would put the citizen on hold and call around to see which department might be able to handle the issue. Despite the institutional knowledge of the volunteers and Citizens Assistance staff, this sometimes resulted in citizens being on hold long periods of time. On occasion, callers would hang up before getting an answer. When citizens called departments, they were sometimes transferred from employee to employee. None of this was acceptable to Stafford's Board of Supervisors, which made Service Excellence a priority for the community. To the Board, Service Excellence is a reflection of their commitment to providing the highest quality customer service to Stafford' citizens, businesses, visitors and other customers. To support this priority, staff wanted to streamline how incoming calls were handled and to ensure that callers were getting their questions answered in an efficient and timely manner.

3. Description of the Program

The creation of a 311 Center had been under discussion for several years before it was proposed to the Board of Supervisors in late 2011. While the Board supported the concept, they did not provide any additional funds to establish a 311 Center. This was because all of their priorities for the community – Public Safety, Education, Economic Development, Infrastructure and Service Excellence – were encompassed by an overall theme of Fiscal Responsibility and Reducing the Tax Burden. Their strict financial policies led to Stafford's bond rating being upgraded twice to AA in the last two years – from Standard and Poor's and Fitch Rating Services. They were determined to stay the course with their fiscal stewardship. With the Board's support, but without additional funds for a center, county staff took on what they initially thought was an impossible task. In reality, all they had to do was look at what was in front of them to find just what they needed.

Location, location, location is every realtor's mantra. The same could be said for Stafford's call center. Rather than build a new space in the buildings of Stafford's already-crowded Government Center campus, the Citizens Assistance staff looked at their own office, which is located conveniently near the entrance and help desk of the government center. This makes it easy to look up information for visitors as well as callers. Using existing resources, staff outfitted several cubicles with computers, phones and headsets for operators to answer phone calls.

The Citizens Assistance Office then looked at its existing staff, which consisted of two employees and a rotating schedule of volunteers. Two employees and one or two volunteers could not handle the volume of calls and reach the center's goal of answering someone's questions in one call, without transferring them. Knowing that existing county staff would be the best resource to launch the 311 Center quickly and efficiently - they had the institutional knowledge and didn't need to be trained on how to use equipment - the director of Citizens Assistance and his supervisor teamed up with different departments to use their staff members to field calls in the center. Not only would this help with manpower, it would broaden everyone's knowledge in the 311 Center and would ease the amount of phone calls being fielded by individual departments. They studied the departments that received the highest volume of calls and asked those department directors to "lend" their staff to the center. While this idea seemed like a win for everyone, it was surprisingly a hard sell in some cases. The Citizens Assistance manager and his supervisor had multiple meetings with various departments and had to reassure some that they were not taking staff away from them. They convinced departments that what they were doing would result in better service to citizens and allow departments to do their work without as many interruptions.

Utilities and Public Works were the first to send staff to the 311 Center. The Utilities employee exclusively answers Utilities calls, of which Stafford receives the highest volume. Her computer was set up with NaviLine, the computer system used to track Utilities bills

and operations. The Public Works employee has access to Hansen, the system used to track permits and building in Stafford County.

To further ensure that callers receive a positive experience, 311 Call Center employees attended a six-month series of customer service classes that focused on attitude, commitment to the customer, grammar and enunciation, oral communication, telephone service, active listening skills, problem-solving techniques and exceeding customer expectations. These classes were already planned for county staff as a whole and again, were an existing resource used to improve service.

In addition to the internal coordination, staff had to negotiate with local landline providers to offer the 311 service to their customers. In the future, plans call for negotiating with mobile phone providers for the use of 311 and providing support to more departments throughout the county.

4. Responding to the Economic Downturn

No city or county in the United States was left untouched by the economic downturn. Stafford County is no exception. The downturn forced local governments to do more with less, and in Stafford's case, to do more with no additional funds. Staff examined their budgets and figured out where money could be redirected to pay for phone lines. Departments lent employees to staff the center and the Information Technology Department re-purposed existing equipment. Stafford responded to the economic downturn by refusing to be limited by it.

5. Use of Technology

The center uses NaviLine for answers to Utilities questions and Hansen for Public Works information. The only other technology needed was computers, headsets and phones.

6. The Cost of the Program

There are four components to a call center that could cost money: an office, staff, equipment, and phone lines.

Office

Stafford used an existing office in which to set up the call center. Existing furniture was re-purposed to make cubicles for operators and computers. There was no additional cost for this.

Staff

The operators in the call center are existing employees who were already answering calls in individual departments. Employees and volunteers in the Citizens Assistance Office also take 311 calls. As the operators were already employees, none of them came with an added cost.

Equipment

The center utilized surplus computers and phones already owned by the county. The Citizens Assistance Manager purchased three special headsets for answering the phones. These cost approximately \$800. Again, existing funds were used to cover this cost.

Phone Lines

Staff had to negotiate with local landline carriers to use their assigned 311 numbers. The initial cost was \$1,848. The added cost to monthly phone bills was \$60 total. Existing funds were used to absorb the cost.

7. The Results/Success of the Program

As departments were gradually phased in, the call center volume increased from 403 calls in February 2012 to 3,190 in July to 1,046 in December, for a total of 24,825 calls over an 11-month time period (2012). Of those calls, 24,102 were answered by call center personnel at the time of the call, for a total of 97 percent. Three percent were answered by the automated system. This means 97 percent of callers interacted with a professionally trained call center operator and received assistance. Now, citizens have their questions answered by operators who know how to get answers in a quick and efficient way designed to limit or eliminate frustration felt by citizens. By funneling the calls through the call center, staff can now keep statistics like these where before, calls went to different departments and were not tracked in a comprehensive way. By keeping this data, the county has a tangible way to measure customer service and gauge its effectiveness.

8. Worthiness of an Award

Stafford County's new 311 Center is worth of a VACO Award because it enhanced customer service to the community using innovative thinking and existing resources. In particular, it meets the required criteria:

1. It offers a new and much-needed central call center service to citizens. It improved the effectiveness of the existing Citizens Assistance Office in answering phone calls at no added cost. It also promoted interdepartmental cooperation and coordination by "borrowing" staff from other departments.
2. The center improved services for citizens because they can call one number now and get the answer to any question. It enhanced employee productivity by freeing up department employees from answering the phones so they can perform other tasks for their jobs. The results can be measured by the number of calls handled by the call center that did not have to be transferred – a mere three percent of total incoming calls.

3. The center was an innovation for Stafford and was not based on anyone else's existing 311 centers. Stafford devised its own definition of a 311 Center and how it works based on the county's particular needs.
4. The center was created with no costs as it was absorbed by existing funds. Stafford abides by certain principles of responsible, accountable government. Among the tenets of those principles is using innovative practices to run government efficiently and having a balanced budget. The center was created within the context of staying within the parameters of Stafford's principles of responsible, accountable government. The Board of Supervisors established certain priorities they adhere to in governing Stafford County. One of the overall themes is "Fiscal Responsibility/Reducing the Tax Burden." Creating a new center and service without creating more burden to taxpayers means Stafford is using its resources in a wise and fiscally responsible way.