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MEMORANDUM

TO: Government Oversight Committee
FROM: Department of Health and Human Services, Office for Family Independence
DATE: April 27, 2023
RE: Letter to DHHS Commissioner Regarding Customer Call Wait Times

Senator Hickman, Representative Fay, and honorable members of the Government Oversight Committee,

Thank you for your letter dated April 24 sharing concerns that you have received from constituents and requesting additional information and responses to specific questions about customer call wait times at the Department. Below please find responses to your questions. We look forward to continuing to engage with you on this topic should it be of interest.

What is your best available data or understandings about how long current customer wait times may be at present, when calling DHHS for assistance?

Currently (April 2023), the average wait time to speak with Wilton Call Center clerical staff is 16 minutes. The average wait time to reach an Eligibility Specialist (ES) is 106 minutes upon transfer by a Wilton Call Center clerical staff. The average wait time to reach an ES in March 2022 was 71 minutes. Please note that this response as well as the responses that follow are specific to the Office for Family Independence (OFI).

How are you measuring any such wait times?

OFI has a call Monitoring System (CMS), which is our call center system, maintained by the Office of Information Technology (OIT). The CMS tracks incoming calls, time waiting in queue, schedule adherence, hold time, and after call work. This tool is monitored constantly and in real time by OFI's dedicated Call Center Supervisor and by supervisors and Program Administrators in the regional offices. The CMS also furnishes reports that are used to monitor performance.

How have customer call wait times changed, if at all, since April 2019?

Average wait times have been significant prior to and since April 2019. In early 2019, the Department established the Wilton Call Center. Call Center clerical staff can answer basic questions, taking pressure off the ES staff. Additionally, the Call Center significantly shortened the time a constituent needed to wait to talk to a real person. In April 2019, the average wait time was 3.2 minutes to speak to a Wilton Call Center clerical staff. In February of 2023, the average wait time was 21 minutes, and in March of 2023, the average wait time was 20 minutes.

Please provide any available data on how many callers have encountered a “no one is available to take your call”-type message, or otherwise “given up” and ended the call.

Our telephony hierarchy has two tiers, the first being the Wilton Call Center, now including augmented staff from Public Consulting Group (PCG) to assist with the Public Health Unwinding in the MaineCare program. That tier is the initial human touch at OFI, and Wilton Call Center clerical staff can directly assist clients with several basic tasks, questions, and requests, such as changing addresses or other information, mailing out forms, etc. At this point we have “upskilled” most of our internal staff to take full advantage of available personnel, so they are trained to do more, but cannot determine programmatic eligibility. For eligibility determinations, a caller must speak with an ES, and have longer, more involved conversations.

We do not have data showing the number of clients who called but were unable to reach a clerical person at the Wilton Call Center. Prior to PCG, acceptance of incoming calls was suspended after the wait time to reach an ES exceeded an average of 2 hours and 35 minutes. Since PCG started, there has been no reason to suspend acceptance of incoming calls. Separate from this statistic is our “Abandonment Rate” which tracks how many clients hang up after they are waiting in our queues. Prior to PCG the average abandonment rate for the clerical queue was 34%. Since the addition of PCG, the abandonment rate has averaged 29%. For clients who have been transferred to wait for an ES, the abandonment rate prior to PCG was 71%. Since PCG the abandonment rate for the Eligibility queue has averaged 51%.

What, if any, DHHS performance metrics or standards govern the acceptable call waiting times for customers seeking any or all types of agency assistance, and are there any differing service levels offered for urgent or emergency matters?

For individual call handling, we do have detailed call monitoring standards, measures, and procedures. In the early years of operating a statewide call queue, OFI imposed productivity standards for individual workers to include calls handled. In that experience we learned that without an ability to surge state-line staffing levels to meet demand as is done in commercial call centers, those standards resulted in incomplete service, poor morale, and increased staff attrition.

In an effort to triage important needs, we established a separate queue line for Medical Providers, as well as methods for sorting callers to specific programs such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and Long Term Care eligibility. Additionally, the Wilton Call Center has the option of a priority transfer to jump ahead of the queue waiting for an Eligibility Specialist. This is only used for emergency situations like a medical issue, or emergency Food Supplement issuance necessary because of an error, and generally requires supervisor approval.

Please describe when, if at all, these concerns were first identified by DHHS itself, in 2023, or 2022, or earlier, and what if any actions are planned or underway to address them?

In 2015, in response to untenably large individual worker caseloads, OFI implemented a state-wide, task-based processing system and a statewide call center model. That change allowed OFI to take advantage of some efficiencies in managing its work and to remove a client’s dependency on having their individually assigned worker be available to address their case or call. It also

provided OFI and Department leadership meaningful data for the first time on the full picture of eligibility and enrollment work within OFI's purview. In 2015, call wait times to connect with any OFI employee were routinely 90 minutes and OFI routinely limited the number of calls in the queue due to high volume.

In the approximately eight years since that transition, OFI has seen fluctuations in call wait times for various reasons – such as staffing changes, the introduction of new programs and coverage groups, and COVID-related. OFI has pursued a series of initiatives and strategies to improve our responsiveness to clients in all areas. They include:

- Creating and staffing a triage call center based in Wilton in April 2019. This allows clients to reach a live person in a matter of minutes, rather than hours as had previously been the case, and get help with basic questions and routine tasks. This process allows eligibility staff assigned to the call queue to focus a larger percentage of their time on types of tasks and calls that require ES assistance.
- Applying for and operating under interview waivers for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), first for a particular population at recertification starting in 2019 and then for all qualifying applications and recertifications throughout the public health emergency (and for a limited period after if approved by FNS) to significantly reduce the number of SNAP applications and recertifications that require a live (phone or in-person) interview as a condition of eligibility. SNAP eligibility interviews take an average of 30 minutes to conduct, and waiving unnecessary interviews allows staff more time to answer calls and process tasks.
- Significantly improving clients' self-service options by replacing My Maine Connection in July 2022. Approximately 90,000 new household accounts have been created in the nine months since launch.
- Continuously developing and deploying technology enhancements designed to streamline worker activities. For example, in summer 2021, OFI improved the import process for online applications to minimize data entry, and in February 2023, OFI automated its processing of Unemployment Benefits data provided by DOL, eliminating the requirement that workers update that information in case files and consequently, freeing up more time for them to answer phone calls and process other essential tasks.
- Onboarding a large group of limited-period, MaineCare-focused Customer Representative Associate III's in state fiscal years 2020 and 2021 to help address the large backlog of expansion-related MaineCare work, which contributed to call volume challenges at the time.
- Launching automatic text and email reminders in February 2023, in preparation for MaineCare continuous coverage unwinding activities. Starting in April 2023 and ongoing, households nearing their recertification date will receive a text or email reminder in addition to regular noticing, with follow-up reminders every seven days until that renewal is received or the due date passes.
- Starting in November 2022, providing training to significantly increase the policy knowledge and responsibilities for Wilton Call Center clerical staff, allowing them to provide more significant assistance in MaineCare case processing and in addressing calls associated with that program.
- For the MaineCare continuous coverage unwinding period, onboarding approximately 100 contracted staff through staffing vendor PCG. A significant percentage of contracted staff will be dedicated to assisting with call triage.

- In mid-2022, implementing processes to facilitate the continuous hiring of eligibility specialists and increase the frequency of onboarding training sessions, as a change from previous training-class-based hiring. This has mitigated the impact that high attrition has had on levels of available trained staff capable of answering calls. Additionally, for the last several years OFI has continuously revisited and refined its training program and schedule to optimize workforce participation by newly hired staff.
- Periodically deploying overtime efforts during the last several years to reduce the backlog of work and mitigate the impact on phones and walk-in traffic.

To the extent these concerns have been known to DHHS, what if any factors has DHHS identified to date as to potential causation?

The primary cause of long wait times is a workforce size compared to the workload OFI staff are collectively responsible for addressing. That imbalance impacts call wait-times as well as wait-times in offices to see staff in person.

Are there service areas or topics that are experiencing higher call volumes than others, and if so, please identify them?

SNAP benefit issuance is and has long been the main driver of call volume, and it accounts for a significant majority of all calls that ES field. In accordance with federal regulations, a SNAP case closes automatically at the end of the client's recertification period unless both the client has returned the recertification form and OFI has completed all steps to process the case and reestablish eligibility. Clients typically notice that closure during 'issuance week,' the period each month when benefits are loaded onto a SNAP client's EBT card, and they call or come into an office. Call volume during issuance week is typically 20-25% higher than on other weeks of the month.

As we look ahead to the 12 months of the unwinding period when MaineCare cases will close for the first time since the start of the pandemic, OFI anticipates a significant increase in calls related to that issue. PCG staff and Wilton Call Center staff, who have received dedicated MaineCare policy training, are expected to field that additional traffic.

To what extent are calls fielded by remote workers, including agency employees or contractors working from home?

OFI staff have the option to telework up to three days a week in accordance with DHHS policy, and both Wilton Call Center clerical staff and Eligibility Specialists assigned to the call queue frequently perform those duties from home. Contracted PCG staff are fully remote.

To what extent, if at all, has remote work been identified as a factor in call response time efficacy?

OFI has successfully operated under a telework and in-office model (hybrid) since the start of the pandemic, and at no point have changes to that model had a noticeable impact on call response time or work in general. Since the Department adopted a permanent hybrid option in the fall of 2022, OFI has tracked productivity for in-office and remote work and data indicate that productivity is consistent regardless of location.

Has the staffing or work location(s) of call response workers changed at all since April 2019, and if so, please describe any such changes.

The most significant change to call staffing occurred in April 2019, when the Wilton Call Center came online. Aside from that, there have been no major staffing changes beyond pandemic related telework adjustments. Statewide staffing assignments for fully trained eligibility workers are made on a weekly basis, taking into account the number of available staff, the nature and age of backlogged tasks, and several other factors.

To the extent not already addressed in response to 2., has the call volume changed since April 2019, and if so, how?

While we have seen some fluctuations in our average incoming calls, they normally remain consistently high over the years. In April 2019, we received 18,605 calls and in February 2023, we received 21,382. Several metrics are reported in the annual report on Measures of Child and Family Economic Security for Families Participating in Maine's Public Assistance Programs, pursuant to 22 MRS §3109. The 2022 report is available online¹ and call metrics (average speed to answer, calls received, calls terminated, and percent of calls terminated) begin on page 21.

What measures (e.g., training, staffing, monitoring, statistical summaries of metrics, other quality assurance) are in place to ensure that agency employees or contractors are performing their call response obligations timely, and consistent with best practices for customer service?

All Eligibility Specialists and Wilton Call Center clerical staff go through an extensive training period, delivered by OFI's internal Training Group, that is specific to ES call responsibilities. This is followed by a Learning at Work period led by their regional supervisors and peer mentors. Supervisors who have staff who are on phones are tasked with performing a minimum of one weekly Call Monitoring, including completing a standard form rating the staff member on many specific call performance standards that we expect and consider best practice. Supervisors also track the number of calls taken per day for all employees to ensure acceptable productivity. We also have a Call Center Supervisor whose responsibility is monitoring our daily call queue performance, both overall and by individuals, staying connected with regional supervisors to ensure staff are conforming with our standards for availability, schedule adherence, hold time, and after-call work. This Call Center Supervisor also keeps Senior Management apprised of performance, issues, and anomalies. Additionally, we have a Quality Control group that does random sampling of staff work to provide a further check that our work is complete and correct and identify any training issues.

¹ <https://legislature.maine.gov/doc/8182>