

Multiple Changes Needed to Improve Milwaukee County's Call Center Performance

June 2009

Committee on Finance and Audit

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June 12, 2009

To the Honorable Chairman
of the Board of Supervisors
of the County of Milwaukee

We have completed an audit of the Milwaukee County Department of Health and Human Services (MCDHHS) Call Center, as directed by Milwaukee County Board Resolution (File No. 09-47).

The report details Call Center performance in recent years, identifies multiple reasons for an inordinately high volume of calls to the center, and notes that improving Call Center performance will require several corrective measures.

On May 26, 2009, the Governor signed legislation authorizing the State to take over administration of public assistance programs in Milwaukee County, including operation of the Call Center. The legislation creates the possibility of returning administrative responsibility for the programs to Milwaukee County at a future date. Regardless of which entity administers the program, we make several observations for improving Call Center performance.

A response from MCDHHS is included as Exhibit 2. We appreciate the cooperation extended by MCDHHS staff during the course of this audit.

Please refer this report to the Committee on Finance and Audit.

Jerome J. Heer
Director of Audits

JJH/DCJ/cah

Attachment

cc: Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors
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Summary

Due to growing complaints regarding the Milwaukee County Department of Health and Human Services (MCDHHS) Call Center, in February 2009, the Milwaukee County Board approved a resolution (File No. 09-47) directing the Department of Audit to conduct a performance and process audit on the Call Center.

This report details the following observations:

- **Ninety-five percent of the 27.6 million telephone calls placed to the Milwaukee County Call Center in 2007 and 2008 received a 'busy' signal.**
 - The telephone system has no way to determine how many of the total number of annual calls are comprised of individual clients making multiple failed attempts. However, callers that get through on the automated telephone system and elect to speak to an individual are placed in a holding queue. Those callers waited an average of 45 minutes before they were connected to a Call Center employee in 2007; in 2008, the average wait time was 54 minutes.

- **The Milwaukee County Call Center experiences an inordinately high call volume in relation to its caseload.**
 - Based on our analysis, the Call Center average of 13.8 million calls during the two-year period is nearly five times the expected call volume.

- **Several factors contribute to the Call Center's high call volume.**
 - Events noted in a timeline presented in the report paint a picture of reduced resources, sustained concerns with service delivery, attempts to improve performance with major operational changes, and increased demand for services.

 - A significant reduction in staff resources dedicated to administration of Wisconsin Shares program benefits in Milwaukee County occurred in January 2004 with the reduction of 62 County Economic Support Specialists (ESS's) and seven supervisory positions. This reduction in staff resources continued in later years despite concerns with Milwaukee County's FoodShare error rate.

 - A major change in approach, from individual case managers to a model of specialization called the Single Case Management system, was phased in during the summer of 2007 and directed all calls to a single destination, the Call Center.

 - Anything that leads to client confusion will generate additional call demand. Several issues related to State/County relations and systems have led to increased client confusion.

 - In addition, adverse economic factors have resulted in increased caseloads and call volume, particularly in 2008.

- **While caseloads and call volume increased, County staffing decreased.**
 - Even though caseloads gradually increased and call volumes increased substantially over the past two years, the number of ESS's steadily decreased within MCDHHS's Economic

Support Division. In 2007 and 2008, the total number of Economic Support Specialists working in the Economic Support Division averaged approximately 197 and 169, respectively. Based on the unduplicated case counts, the caseloads for each ESS would have been approximately 530 cases in 2007 and 640 cases in 2008.

- **Irrespective of staffing levels, less than half of Call Center staff time is spent answering telephone calls.**
 - In 2007 and 2008, Call Center employees logged 14,300 and 13,400 hours respectively processing Call Center calls. This equates to 40% and 45% respectively of their regular hours worked.
- **Milwaukee County has implemented measures to improve performance during 2009, but progress is limited.**
 - During the first four months (January through April) of 2009, 2,042,000 telephone calls to the Call Center were attempted. However, 1,813,000 (89%) resulted in a busy signal. The 89% represents an improvement over the 95% experienced in 2007 and 2008.
 - In 2009, once callers were connected to the telephone system, 80% were serviced. This also represented an improvement over the 74% serviced in 2007 and 2008. This improvement appears to be a direct result of calls taking less time to complete. In 2008, completed calls lasted approximately 6.5 minutes. During the first four months of 2009, completed calls have averaged 4.4 minutes, a 32% reduction. The result is more calls are answered.
 - The length of time individuals must wait in the holding queue decreased from 54 minutes in 2008 to 35 minutes in 2009, a 35% decrease.
- **Improving Call Center performance will require several corrective measures.**

On May 26, 2009, the Governor signed legislation authorizing the State to take over administration of public assistance programs in Milwaukee County, including operation of the Call Center. The legislation creates the possibility of returning administrative responsibility for the programs to Milwaukee County at a future date. Regardless of which entity administers the program, we make the following observations for improving Call Center performance.

 1. *Increase the resources dedicated to administration of the Income Maintenance and Wisconsin Shares programs in Milwaukee County.*
 2. *Take proactive steps to improve Call Center staff productivity.*
 3. *Focus efforts on reducing call volume to the Call Center.*

A management response from the Milwaukee County Department of Health and Human Services is included as **Exhibit 2**. We wish to acknowledge the cooperation of MCDHHS staff during the course of this audit.

Background: The State of Wisconsin is taking over operation of the Milwaukee County Call Center due to poor performance.

Under contract with the State of Wisconsin, the Milwaukee County Department of Health and Human Services (MCDHHS) is responsible for administering a wide variety of federal and state social service programs. The County Economic Support Division (ESD) assists eligible people to obtain FoodShare, Medical Assistance (Title 19), Child Day Care, BadgerCare and Wisconsin Home Energy Assistance benefits, among others.

In January 2005, the MCDHHS Economic Support Division started the gradual implementation of the Milwaukee Modernization Initiative to deal with the challenges created by historically high caseloads and a model of service requiring direct face-to-face contact with clients. The Modernization Initiative eliminated the individual caseload duties performed by Economic Support Specialists (ESS) and created the following specialty units:

- The Call Center to handle calls from customers inquiring about their cases;
- The Verification Center to process all verification submitted by customers between review appointments;
- The Six-Month Review Form (SMRF) and Mail-in unit to process all SMRF's and mail-in applications;
- The Customer Service unit to follow up on inquiries from advocacy groups and elected officials on behalf of customers to ensure that problem cases are resolved timely;
- The Fair Hearings unit to coordinate all aspects of fair hearings for food stamps and medical assistance;
- The Alerts unit to act on alerts generated by individual cases; and
- The Intakes and Reviews unit to interview customers in face-to-face intake and review appointments and to process mail-in reviews.

Prior to the Modernization Initiative, ESD managed what was called a Change Center that received 4,000 to 5,000 calls per month in 2001. It was staffed with seven Quality Assurance Technicians (Techs) and one Supervisor. The Change Center only accepted calls related to changes that affected benefits.

By 2004, the Change Center was renamed the Call Center and was staffed by 13 Quality Assurance Techs. Clients were directed to call the Call Center in lieu of their individual caseworker. In 2006, the Call Center was budgeted with 26 ESS's to answer calls; however, at least five ESS's were assigned to primarily 'troubleshoot' issues with walk-in clients.

Budgeted ESS positions increased from 26 to 29 in 2007 but decreased to 27 in 2008 and decreased even further to 25 in 2009.

In July 2008, Legal Action of Wisconsin filed a federal lawsuit against the State of Wisconsin and Milwaukee County contending that both are moving too slowly to provide public assistance to the neediest residents, leading to long delays for food stamps and medical care.

On January 30, 2009, the County Executive wrote to the Secretary of the State Department of Health Services asking that the State of Wisconsin take over the Income Maintenance (IM) programs within Milwaukee County for the following reasons:

- "Since 2000, the Milwaukee County caseload for FoodShare has increased 60 percent; and Medical Assistance/Badger Care Plus has grown by 28 percent, while receiving flat IM funding each year with the exception of 2004 when funding decreased ... resulting in the County contributing almost \$3 million in property tax levy to help support this state-mandated program.
- Many of the calls made to the Call Center, the Milwaukee County Board, and other offices are a result of customer confusion regarding letters and notices from the state government.
- After encouraging customers to utilize telephone reviews as a part of the initiative, the lack of action by DHS has caused thousands of signature pages to be mailed out and returned each month by customers. While a telephonic signature was critical for operations, DHS did not consider it a priority, resulting in inconvenience for customers and additional workload and costs for Milwaukee County staff for several months."

On February 3, 2009, the Secretary of the Department of Health Services responded stating, "...the Wisconsin Department of Health Services (Department) will not contract with Milwaukee County's Department of Health and Human Services for Income Maintenance Administration beyond the current calendar year," and that the State will assume operation of the Call Center by July 15, 2009, citing the following performance issues:

- "Less than 5% of the phone calls placed to the Milwaukee County Call Center are answered.
- Because Milwaukee County's Call Center performance is so poor, the state Medicaid call center receives 250 – 300 calls per day from frustrated Milwaukee County residents.

- Only 70% of benefit applications are handled within the time periods required by state and federal law. This is compared to 85% throughout the balance of the State.
- Over 60% of case closures in the County are certified as eligible for benefits within two months of closure.
- The County has substantial backlogs in Walk-In and Mail-In Verification Centers, which cause many Milwaukee members not to receive the benefits to which they are entitled, resulting in a loss of access to health care and nutrition benefits.
- The FoodShare Negative Error Rate is currently 19.54%. This means nearly one out of every five FoodShare recipients is cut off from the program in error in a year.”

On May 26, 2009 the Governor signed into law legislation that requires the State Department of Health Services to take over administration of public assistance programs, including the Call Center, in Milwaukee County.

Due to growing complaints regarding the Call Center, in February 2009 the Milwaukee County Board approved a resolution (File No. 09-47) directing the Department of Audit to conduct a performance and process audit on the Call Center.

Section 1: Ninety-five percent of the 27.6 million telephone calls placed to the Milwaukee County Call Center in 2007 and 2008 resulted in a 'busy' signal.

In 2007 and 2008, a total of 27,529,000 telephone calls were placed to the Milwaukee County Call Center. Of that total, 26,130,000 (95%) resulted in a busy signal. The remaining 1,399,000 calls were connected to the Call Center telephone system for further processing. The telephone system has no way to determine how many of the total number of annual calls are comprised of individual clients making multiple failed attempts.

Of the 1,399,000 calls that were connected to the Call Center telephone system 656,000 calls were directed to Call Center employees while the remaining 743,000 callers selected the automated options offered through the telephone system. Ultimately, Call Center employees answered 298,000 of the 656,000 calls placed to them and the remaining 357,500 calls were either terminated or abandoned.

Once callers were connected to the Call Center telephone system, 1,041,000 callers (74%) were serviced.

As a result, once callers were connected to the Call Center telephone system, 1,041,000 callers (74%) were serviced.

The Call Center uses a telephone system (Symposium) that allows callers, once connected, to select one of five current options:

- Option 1 - Self Service (Status of FoodShare, HealthCare, CareTaker Supplement or Child Care benefits). The self-service option was first available in November 2007. Prior to that, a caller could select a childcare option.
- Option 2 - Directions to the office or hours of operation.
- Option 3 - How to apply for Foodshare, Medical Assistance or Childcare.

- Option 4 - Listing of various program phone numbers.
- Option 5 - Report a change, get an appointment or speak to a worker.

In 2008, callers waited an average of 54 minutes before they were connected to a Call Center employee.

The first option provides access to the status of an individual's benefits 24 hours a day. The next three options are pre-recorded announcements (available 24 hours) while the selection of option five (available 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.) directs clients into a holding queue to wait for a connection with a Call Center employee. The holding queue can accommodate up to 69 callers. It is at this point that, in 2008, callers waited an average of 54 minutes before they were connected to a Call Center employee. In 2007, the average wait was 45 minutes.

Because of the wait times, 284,000 callers in 2007 and 2008 voluntarily chose to terminate (abandon) their calls, which is 43% of the callers who chose to discuss their case with an employee. In the same two-year period, 73,500 calls were terminated by the Call Center as the phone system was placed in a not available mode to accommodate staff meetings and training sessions during regular work hours or due to system malfunctions.

Once a caller was connected to a Call Center employee, the average length of time employees spent addressing a caller's issue ranged from three minutes to 10 minutes. This wide range of call time may be explained by the fact that employees assigned to the Call Center did not receive formal training related to call processing techniques and best practices. We were informed that Call Center employees received this type of training in March of 2009.

Table 1 details the above data by year.

Table 1
Disposition of Call Attempted
To Milwaukee County Call Center
2007—2008

	<u>2007</u>	<u>2008</u>	<u>Total</u>
Attempted Calls	11,363,000	16,166,000	27,529,000
Busy Signal	10,740,000	15,390,000	26,130,000
Connected Calls	623,000	776,000	1,399,000
Automated Options 1-4	282,000	461,000	743,000
Call Center ESS Option 5	341,000	315,000	656,000
Answered	158,000	140,000	298,000
Abandoned	138,000	146,000	284,000
Terminated	45,300	28,200	73,500
Average Wait Time Minutes	45	54	

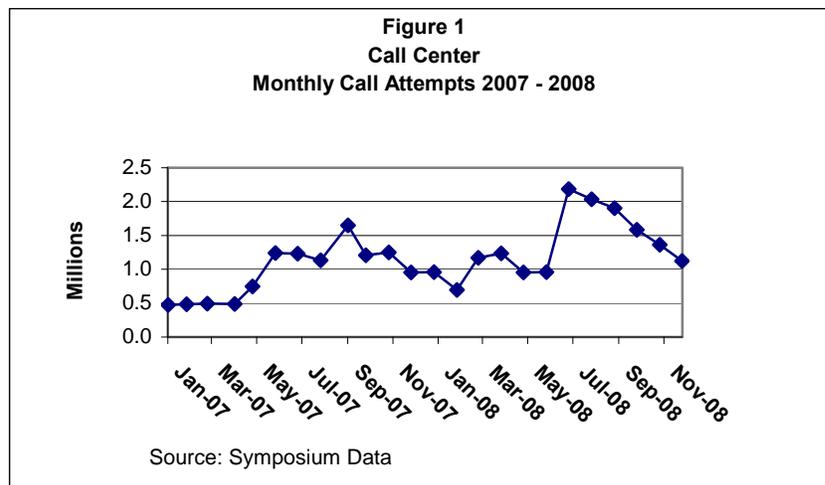
Source: Symposium system data reports.

Section 2: The Milwaukee County Call Center experiences an inordinately high call volume in relation to its caseload.

During the two-year period 2007—2008, telephone calls to the County DHHS Call Center averaged 1.15 million per month.

During the two-year period 2007—2008, the unduplicated caseload of Milwaukee County Income Maintenance Program clients ranged from 102,000 to 109,000. During that same time period, monthly telephone calls to the County DHHS Call Center averaged 1.15 million, or about 10.9 calls per case per month.

Figure 1 depicts the two-year trend in monthly calls received by the Call Center.



Call Volume Expectations

The 'normal' level of call volume that a combined caseload of approximately 110,000 would be expected to generate can be estimated based on several assumptions.

- Initial inquiry/annual review. Each client would need to contact the County, either by telephone, in person, or by mail, at least once annually. This could be an initial inquiry seeking assistance, or a mandatory annual review. All clients receiving Medical Assistance or BadgerCare benefits must contact the County for an annual review of their

eligibility, which can be accomplished by mail, but could involve a telephone call.

- Six-Month Review. Clients receiving FoodShare or Child Care Subsidy benefits must provide information to the County after six months for a mandatory review of eligibility. This information can be mailed in, but is likely to generate at least one telephone inquiry. (A subsequent review is conducted after 12 months. This can be accomplished by telephone or face-to face.)
- Changes in Status. Clients must promptly report any changes in contact information or in circumstances that could affect the status of their case. This includes changes in address or telephone number, family living arrangement, employer, wage rate, children's school schedules, etc.
- Turnover Factor. The extent to which a caseload of 110,000 contains turnover can affect the number of contacts generated. For example, an individual with a Medical Assistance case for 12 months may only require a single telephone contact during the year, while two individuals receiving Medical Assistance for a period of six months each would generate a total of at least two calls. A turnover factor of 1.5 would indicate the average case was active for eight months; a turnover factor of 2.0 would indicate an average case duration of six months, and so on.

We calculated the total number of calls that would be generated under a number of different assumptions.

Perhaps the best way to demonstrate the inordinate level of call volume experienced by the Milwaukee County Call Center is to calculate the total number of calls that would be generated under a number of different assumptions regarding the above variables.

As shown in **Table 2**, the number of calls that could reasonably be anticipated from a caseload of 110,000, is far less than the actual call volume experienced by the Milwaukee County Call Center.

Table 2
Annual Call Volume Generated by a 110,000
Caseload Under Various Assumptions

<u>Potential Reason for Call</u>	<u>No. of Calls Per Case</u>		<u>Total Annual Calls</u>	
Initial Inquiry/Annual Review	1	110,000	110,000	110,000
Six-Month Review	1	110,000	110,000	110,000
Change in Status	1	110,000		
	3		330,000	
	5			550,000
Miscellaneous Inquiry/Busy	2	220,000		
	4		440,000	
	6			660,000
Sub-Total (Assumes 12-month average case duration)		550,000	990,000	1,430,000
Turnover Factor				
1.3 (9-mo. average duration)		715,000	1,287,000	1,859,000
1.5 (8 mo. average duration)		825,000	1,485,000	2,145,000
2.0 (6-mo. average duration)		1,100,000	1,980,000	2,860,000

Milwaukee County Call Center Actual Experience

2007	11,363,000
2008	16,166,000

Source: Table created for illustrative purposes by the Department of Audit. Actual call volume for 2007 and 2008 obtained from Milwaukee County DHHS symposium system.

As illustrated in **Table 2**, call volume generated from a caseload of 110,000 would not be expected to exceed 2.9 million during the course of a year even under the following unlikely set of assumptions:

- Each client made an initial contact by telephone;
- Each client called in relation to one six-month case review;
- Each client called five times to report a change in circumstances;
- Each client made six additional telephone calls or attempted calls for miscellaneous reasons; and

- The average case was just six months in duration, creating a caseload turnover factor of 2.0.

The 2.9 million calls expected to be generated by a caseload of 110,000 under those unlikely assumptions pales in comparison to the Milwaukee County Call Center's actual call volume of 11.4 million and 16.2 million in 2007 and 2008, respectively. Based on this analysis, Call Center average of 13.8 million calls during the two-year period is nearly five times the expected call volume.

Section 3: Several factors contribute to the Call Center's high call volume.

Several factors contribute to the inordinately high volume of calls to the Milwaukee County Call Center. Following is a timeline of key events leading to the current state of Milwaukee County's Call Center operation.

- **January 2004:** State budget cuts of approximately \$3.1 million resulted in the abolishment of a total of 87 positions including 62 Economic Support Specialists (ESS's) and seven Economic Support Supervisors.

State Department of Health Services provided financial and staff resources (as many as 25-30 staff) to review all new applications to assist Milwaukee in improving the accuracy of its FoodShare eligibility.

State DHS provided Milwaukee one-time funding to implement a strategic planning initiative to improve their process/business systems.

- **January 2005:** Path to full specialization and the Single Case Management model (i.e., clients no longer assigned to specific case managers) in Milwaukee County began with establishment of the current Call Center.
- **June 2005:** Call Center added face-to-face troubleshooting (four ESS workers). Staffed with a total of 24 ESS's and two clerical positions to schedule appointments.

State notified Milwaukee County that its performance on Food Stamp administration needed improvement due to high error rates and poor customer service.

- **2006:** State DHS provided funding for a staff person assigned to Milwaukee to do one-on-one technical assistance for problem cases.
- **March 2006:** Implemented new Call Center technology at the Coggs Center to include greater system capacity, significantly enhanced reporting features and the ability to provide better information for callers waiting on hold.
- **August 2006:** Preceded by continued phase-in of specialty units, Milwaukee County instituted the Single Case Management System.

- **2007:** Implemented initiative to work internally and with community organizations to make efficient use of the State's new Internet-based Food Share application process.
- **March 2007:** Robles Office switched to the single caseload method, increasing call volume to the Call Center.
- **April 2007:** Approximate start date of the implementation of Modernization Initiative, a broad-based effort to improve service delivery within several programs, focusing on encouraging customers to apply and recertify for benefits on-line and by phone, again increasing Call Center call volume.
- **March 2008:** State's implementation of BadgerCare Plus Program, which expanded health care benefits to additional Wisconsin residents, created additional cases and inquiries as to eligibility, generating additional call volume.
- **May 2008:** State advised Milwaukee County that its failure to process orders from fair hearing decisions in a timely fashion had resulted in more than \$74,000 in penalties, Milwaukee County agreed to pay.
- **June 2008:** Milwaukee County was placed under a federal disaster declaration including a plan to issue emergency food assistance to victims of flooding. Food Share Disaster Relief started and Milwaukee County accepted 19,319 applications.
- **Summer/Fall 2008:** Major recession hits U.S. and Wisconsin.
- **January 2009:** Milwaukee County Executive urged the State to consider taking over the Income Maintenance (IM) programs.
- **February 2009:** Milwaukee County Board passed a resolution to create a workgroup to recommend corrective and continuous improvement measures, as necessary, to enhance and improve Milwaukee County's Call Center.

State Health Secretary announced a phased takeover of Call Center with complete State control no later than July 15, 2009.

- **May 2009:** The Governor signed bill that requires the State of Wisconsin DHS to take over administration and eligibility determination of income maintenance and supplemental payment programs.

Key Factors Affecting Call Volume

Review of call volume statistics and interviews with County DHHS managers identified the following key factors that affect call volume to the Milwaukee County Call Center.

CARES System and Other State Relations Issues

The delivery model of counties administering a state/federal program has some inherent accountability and responsiveness issues that must be recognized and addressed by both parties to successfully operate the Wisconsin Shares program. County managers expressed a level of frustration with the following issues.

CARES Letters and Administration

Anything that causes confusion on the part of clients is likely to generate telephone calls requesting clarification.

Anything that causes confusion on the part of clients is likely to generate telephone calls requesting clarification. County management indicated there have been numerous problems associated with letters automatically generated by the State Client Assistance for Re-Employment and Economic Support (CARES) system. Every time a case is placed in 'pending' mode (there are more than 300 codes for this purpose, such as awaiting income verification information), a CARES letter is generated. The following example provides an excellent illustration of this point.

- 60 days prior to a mandatory six-month case review for either FoodShare or Child Care Subsidy benefits, a notification letter is automatically generated by the State CARES system. The letter informs clients that forms will be mailed to them to update their case eligibility information within the next 30 days.
- Within the next 30 days, a Six-Month Review Form (SMRF) is mailed to each client. Clients have until the 5th of the next month to submit the forms to Milwaukee County for processing.
- Milwaukee County has until the end of the month to process the updated information, entering the data into CARES. However, 13 days prior to the end of the month, if the updated SMRF information has not yet been entered into

CARES, the system automatically generates a follow-up letter to clients reminding them of their obligation to submit a SMRF. The letter warns clients that their benefits are at risk if a SMRF is not submitted.

- This ‘disconnect’ between the entry deadline for Milwaukee County and the client reminder notice automatically generated by CARES resulted in a significant number of calls to the Call Center from clients protesting that they had, indeed, submitted an updated SMRF. County managers addressed the problem by initiating a ‘SMRF day’—one day per month in which virtually all available staff are dedicated to the entry of SMRFs into the CARES system.

There has been a significant reduction in the number of calls made to the Call Center each month in 2009 compared to 2008.

Results from this adjustment in procedure have been dramatic.

Table 3 shows a significant reduction in the number of calls made to the Call Center each month in 2009 compared to 2008.

<u>Month</u>	<u>2008</u>	<u>2009</u>	<u>Percent Change</u>
January	957,000	683,000	-28.6%
February	695,000	350,000	-49.6%
March	1,171,000	454,000	-61.2%
April	1,236,000	556,000	-55.0%

Source: Symposium system data records.

A review of CARES generated client letters provided additional examples of items that appear confusing. For example, most letters contain a return address at the upper left corner of the letterhead. These return addresses identify several former W-2 sites that are no longer in service. A separate return address, identifying the proper Milwaukee County agency location, is provided at the upper right corner of the letter.

Further, letters are written generically (e.g., “Your FoodShare, Health Care, Caretaker Supplement and/or Child Care case is

due to be reviewed.”) and attempt to cover every contingency. This results in lengthy, cumbersome correspondence that could intimidate average readers. An example of a CARES-generated letter that could generate client confusion is attached as **Appendix A**.

The inability of Milwaukee County to obtain ad hoc management information from the State CARES system was also noted as a concern. While several management reports are automatically generated by the State for County managers, customized reports must be requested centrally. According to Milwaukee County management, Racine County has been granted the access necessary to generate ad hoc CARES reports. It is unclear why Milwaukee County has not been granted such access.

Lack of Interface

When the State initiated on-line applications for Income Maintenance programs in 2007, it did so with no interface to the CARES case management system.

When the State initiated on-line applications for Income Maintenance programs in 2007, it did so with no interface to the CARES case management system. As a result, County staff must input all on-line applications. Delays in entering the data into CARES will generate calls from anxious clients, increasing Call Center call volume.

Coordination Efforts

The State’s expansion of the BadgerCare health benefit in March 2008, created additional calls related to questions about eligibility and program requirements. According to County management, there was no advanced coordination with Milwaukee County on this program rollout.

Telephonic Signature

One idea for reducing call volume through technology is the use of voice recordings as a ‘telephonic signature’ to replace signed attestations by clients on case reviews. To the extent that calls are generated by clients whose benefits are delayed somewhere in the process of mailing signature forms to the County to

release benefits, adoption of this technique could reduce call volume. Use of telephonic signatures requires a federal waiver of regulations, which the State of Wisconsin has procured, but the State has not approved the technique for implementation in Milwaukee County.

Impact of the Economy and Natural Disaster

Two other issues related to the state of the economy and a natural disaster has undoubtedly influenced requests for assistance and Call Center volume.

In June 2008, Milwaukee County was designated as a federal disaster area due to flooding. Emergency FoodShare Disaster Relief resulted in more than 19,000 applications and generated a huge volume of calls to the Call Center during the following months, as shown in **Table 4**.

**Table 4
Milwaukee County Call Center
2008 Monthly Call Volume**

<u>Month</u>	<u>Call Attempts</u>	<u>Call Connected</u>	<u>Call Busy</u>
January	957,088	60,150	896,938
February	694,675	57,189	637,486
March	1,170,580	56,809	1,113,771
April	1,235,610	70,549	1,165,061
May	955,513	63,209	892,304
June	959,190	63,224	895,966
July *	2,185,692	74,251	2,111,441
August *	2,033,930	70,385	1,963,545
September *	1,904,691	72,207	1,832,484
October	1,582,229	66,138	1,516,091
November	1,362,003	56,818	1,305,185
December	1,124,314	64,593	1,059,721
Total	16,165,515	775,522	15,389,993

* Note: Milwaukee County was designated a federal disaster area due to flooding in June, resulting in Emergency FoodShare and other federal benefits.

Source: Symposium system data reports.

No discussion of caseload and call volume in 2008 can neglect the impact of the worst economic recession since at least 1982. Since it is doubtful that the full impact of the national downturn has been fully realized, the pressure on Income Maintenance programs in Milwaukee County is likely to continue the increasing trend noted during 2008.

Summary

The events noted in the timeline presented in this section paint a picture of reduced resources, sustained concerns with service delivery, attempts to improve performance with major operational changes, and increased demand for services.

A significant reduction in staff resources dedicated to administration of Wisconsin Shares program benefits in Milwaukee County occurred in January 2004 with the reduction of 62 County ESS and seven supervisory positions. This reduction in staff resources continued in later years (see **Section 4**), despite concerns with Milwaukee County's FoodShare error rate. A major change in approach, from individual case managers to a model of specialization called the Single Case Management system, was phased in during the summer of 2007 and directed all calls to a single destination, the Call Center. Anything that leads to client confusion will generate additional call demand. Several issues related to State/County relations and systems have led to increased client confusion. In addition, adverse economic factors have resulted in increased caseloads and call volume, particularly in 2008.

Section 4: While caseloads and call volume increased, County staffing decreased.

As previously discussed, in 2007 and 2008 the unduplicated case counts ranged from 102,000 to 109,000. In 2007, 11.4 million calls were attempted, 623,000 were connected and 10.7 million received a busy signal. In 2008, 16.2 million calls were attempted, 776,000 were connected and 15.4 million received a busy signal.

In 2007 and 2008, the total number of ESS's working in the Economic Support Division declined from an average of approximately 197 to 169.

Even though the caseloads gradually increased and call volumes increased substantially over the past two years, the number of Economic Support Specialists (ESS's) steadily decreased within MCDHHS's Economic Support Division (ESD). In 2007 and 2008, the total number of Economic Support Specialists working in the Economic Support Division averaged approximately 197 and 169, respectively. Based on the unduplicated case counts, the caseloads for each ESS would have averaged approximately 530 cases in 2007 and 640 cases in 2008.

The number of Full Time Equivalents working in the Call Center decreased from 24 in 2007 to 19.4 in 2008.

In addition, the number of Full Time Equivalents (FTEs) actually working in the Call Center decreased from 24 in 2007 to 19.4 in 2008. One contributing factor to the decrease was the ESS turnover experienced during the two-year period. In 2007, 11 ESS's transferred out of the Call Center or left County employment as compared to four transferring in. Again in 2008, nine additional ESS's transferred out or left while two transferred in. The net result was that 14 positions were vacant at some point. This turnover rate undoubtedly had a negative impact on the stability and the performance of the Call Center. In addition, most of the remaining vacant positions were ultimately filled by newly trained ESS's. As a result, we believe that the performance of the Call Center again suffered from the lack of experience of the newly trained ESS's.

Table 5. illustrates the turnover of ESS's assigned to the Call Center.

	<u>FTEs</u>	<u>ESS's New</u>	<u>ESS's Transferred Into</u>	<u>ESS's Transferred Out/Left</u>
2007	24.0	2.0	4.0	11.0
2008	19.4	9.0	2.0	9.0

Source: Form 159 – Employee Tracking Forms

The reduction of ESS's has resulted in increased workloads.

The reduction of ESS's in the entire division, as well as in the Call Center, while unduplicated cases gradually increased, has resulted in increased workloads. The by-products of this combination appears to be increased backlogs and errors. This in turn had a negative impact on the call volume.

During the course of our interviews, we repeatedly heard that the primary reasons for most of the calls received by the Call Center were either:

- Something that was suppose to be done was not completed on a timely basis or
- If it was completed, it was done incorrectly.

Another factor that may have affected the increase in errors and backlogs is the lack of accountability associated with the Single Case Management model.

Another factor that may have affected the increase in errors and backlogs is the lack of accountability associated with the Single Case Management model. Under this model, no single ESS is responsible for a case. Therefore, whether a client's benefits are processed in a timely fashion or correctly is not the responsibility of one case manager, but rather the collective responsibility of all those who may have been involved in processing the case. The reduction in the number of ESS's in ESD in recent years may

have combined with this lack of accountability to exacerbate the error rate and backlog problems.

Section 5: Irrespective of staffing levels, less than half of Call Center staff time is spent answering telephone calls.

Various Call Center employees were assigned to functions other than answering calls.

Irrespective of staffing levels, less than half of Call Center staff time is spent answering telephone calls. In 2007 and 2008, Call Center employees logged 14,300 and 13,400 hours, respectively, processing Call Center calls. This equates to 40% and 45% respectively of their regular hours worked.

During this time period, we calculated that ESS employees assigned to the Call Center worked approximately 71% and 74% of the hours available when all paid and unpaid time off and break time is considered. Based on the 24 and 19.4 FTEs that actually worked in the Call Center during 2007 and 2008 respectively there were approximately 38,000 and 32,000 hours available to answer calls. However, various Call Center employees were assigned to functions other than answering calls. A review of payroll data showed that Call Center staffing was reduced by approximately one additional FTE per year due to absenteeism associated with unpaid Family Medical Leave and other unpaid leave.

Depending on the volume, four to five Call Center employees were assigned to meet with individuals who had walked into the Coggs Center to resolve issues related to their benefits. Many of the issues discussed were the same issues that were handled over the telephone. In addition, one other employee was assigned to scheduling appointments for the walk-ins who require additional assistance.

Further, another Call Center employee was assigned to resolving issues referred from County Board staff. Because of the difficulty in getting through to the Call Center, constituents have contacted their Supervisors pleading for their intervention to

resolve their particular case issues. In turn, the County Board staff referred these issues to Call Center staff.

As a result, on any given day six to seven Call Center employees are not available to answer phone calls. In addition, Call Center employees performed other duties that took them away from answering calls such as:

- Processing mail returns;
- Processing supplemental care taker authorizations; and
- Inputting on-line (ACCESS) applications.

According to the current Call Center Manager, Call Center staff no longer performed these duties since December 2008.

Another factor that appeared to affect the amount of time that Call Center employees were diverted from accepting phone calls is the lack of ESS experience. In 2007, 19 of the 34 employees who were assigned at some point to the Call Center had less than two years of experience as an ESS. In 2008, the ratio improved to 13 of 31 employees with less than two years experience. According to prior Call Center supervisors and managers, the lack of experience often resulted in Call Center employees consulting with supervisors to obtain instructions on how to resolve various issues.

In 2007, 19 of the 34 employees who were assigned at some point to the Call Center had less than two years of experience as an ESS.

Because of these various factors, the ESS's assigned to the Call Center collectively spent the majority of their working hours not answering calls from clients.

Section 6: Milwaukee County has implemented measures to improve performance during 2009, but progress is limited.

Milwaukee County has implemented measures to improve performance during 2009, but progress is limited. During the first four months (January through April) of 2009, 2,042,000 telephone calls to the Call Center were attempted. However, 1,813,000 (89%) resulted in a busy signal. The 89% represents an improvement over the 95% experienced in 2007 and 2008.

The 2,042,000 attempted calls through April 2009 also represents a significant reduction in the amount of calls attempted (4,058,000) during the same period in 2008. In 2007, the number of call attempts was 1,945,000. The reduction appears to be the direct result of a processing change that MCDHHS implemented by initiating a 'SMRF day' in which all available staff are dedicated to entering Six-Month Review Forms into the Cares System (see **Section 3**).

The remaining 229,000 calls through April 2009 that did not receive a busy signal were connected to the Call Center telephone system for further processing. Of the 229,000 connected calls, 115,000 calls were directed to Call Center employees while the remaining 114,000 callers selected the automated options offered through the Call Center telephone system. Ultimately, Call Center employees answered 69,000 of the 115,000 calls placed to them and the remaining 46,000 calls were either terminated or abandoned.

Through April 2009, once callers were connected to the Call Center telephone system, 80% were serviced.

As a result, through April 2009, once callers were connected to the Call Center telephone system, 183,000 (80%) callers were serviced. This also represented an improvement over the 74% serviced in 2007 and 2008. This improvement appears to be a direct result of calls taking less time to complete. In 2008,

completed calls lasted approximately 6.5 minutes. During the first four months of 2009, completed calls have averaged 4.4 minutes, a 32% reduction. The result is more calls are answered.

In addition, the length of time individuals must wait in the holding queue decreased from 54 minutes in 2008 to 35 minutes in 2009, a 35% decrease.

Section 7: Improving Call Center performance will require several corrective measures.

State legislation creates the possibility of returning administrative responsibility for the Call Center to Milwaukee County at a future date.

On May 26, 2009, the Governor signed legislation authorizing the State to take over administration of public assistance programs in Milwaukee County, including operation of the Call Center. The legislation creates the possibility of returning administrative responsibility for the programs to Milwaukee County at a future date. Regardless of which entity administers the program, we make the following observations for improving Call Center performance, and recommend that Milwaukee County DHHS management work cooperatively with the State to achieve the following objectives.

- 1. Increase the resources dedicated to administration of the Income Maintenance and Wisconsin Shares programs in Milwaukee County.*

As of the writing of this report, indications have been made that the State will add additional staff dedicated to the Call Center. In addition, the State plans to abandon the Single Case Management model and return to a model of assigning clients to specific, dedicated case managers. History indicates that a return to this model of individual case management will require additional ESS workers to avoid the complaints of poor responsiveness that will likely accompany caseloads exceeding 500 per case manager.

- 2. Take proactive steps to improve Call Center staff productivity.*

Our analysis showed that less than one-half of available Call Center staff time was spent actually responding to telephone calls in 2007 and 2008. That performance must be diligently monitored and improved. Specific training targeted towards standardized telephone protocols and efficient customer relations should help reduce average call times. Enhanced

supervisory monitoring of staff performance could facilitate improved productivity.

3. Focus efforts on reducing call volume to the Call Center.

Efforts to improve the performance of the Call Center must focus on reducing the inordinate call volume associated with Milwaukee County's public assistance caseload. While the State's plan to abandon the Single Case Management system will require additional staff resources, it may improve accountability for case management errors that can lead to increased call volume. Reducing confusion among clients stemming from CARES system-generated letters appears to offer the greatest opportunity for reducing call volume.

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Appendix A

**Example of letter generated by State CARES system
that may add to Call Center Call volume
due to client confusion.**

MILWAUKEE
MILWAUKEE COUNTY DSS

State of Wisconsin

1220 W VLIET ST
MILWAUKEE WI 53205

Date: 09/03/08
Case Name: [REDACTED]
Case Number: [REDACTED]
Worker Name: [REDACTED]
Worker No: XMI323
Telephone: (414)-289-6000

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
MILWAUKEE WI 53233 1044

REPAYMENT AGREEMENT FOR FOODSHARE OVERPAYMENT

BVLE

PIN: [REDACTED] NAME: [REDACTED]

You were previously notified that you were issued FOODSHARE benefits that you were not eligible to receive. This caused an overpayment of benefits which you are responsible to repay. The overpayment claims are listed at the end of this agreement.

Payment in full must be received at the agency listed below by 09/25/08.

If you are unable to pay the amount in full by 09/25/08, you may make installment payments by completing and returning this agreement to either address listed below. The repayment agreement must be properly signed using your full name and returned by 09/25/08. YOUR FIRST MONTHLY PAYMENT MUST BE RETURNED WITH THIS REPAYMENT AGREEMENT TO:

MILWAUKEE COUNTY DSS
1220 W VLIET ST
MILWAUKEE WI 53205

OR

PUBLIC ASSISTANCE COLLECTION UNIT
PO BOX 8938
MADISON, WI 53708-8938

OR

<http://dwd.wisconsin.gov/epayment/>
IMPORTANT: If you use the electronic payment method, you must still return your signed agreement to an address above or it may cause default and further collection action.

Repayments may be made electronically online at the web address above if you have a checking account. Please have your PIN available as you will need it to enter into the electronic payment system.

You may make payments by check or money order made payable to an agency listed above. Please be sure to include your PIN or Social Security Number on your check.

If you are currently receiving benefits, we will automatically collect the overissuance by reducing your benefits each month. You do not need to return this agreement if you are currently

Case Number: [REDACTED]

Date: 09/03/08

PAGE: 02

receiving benefits. However, if you choose to have your benefits reduced by more than the mandatory amount, please indicate the amount on this agreement in the Terms section below. You will receive a new repayment agreement when your case closes, and you will be expected to make monthly payments at that time.

If your overpayment(s) is under \$500, you must pay monthly installments of at least \$50 per month.

If your overpayment(s) is over \$500, you must pay equal monthly installments to have your balance paid in full within three years. To determine payment amount, divide the total amount owed by 36.

If you are unable to make these arrangements, you must contact the local agency or the Public Assistance Collection Unit at 1-800-943-9499 to negotiate an acceptable arrangement. The minimum payment accepted is \$20 per month. Failure to make the required minimum payment may result in delinquency. If there is a change in your financial situation, the terms of this agreement may be renegotiated.

If you have a previous agreement with the District Attorneys office or court ordered amount, you must continue to repay according to that agreement. YOU MUST STILL SIGN THIS AGREEMENT AND RETURN IT TO THE AGENCY OR YOU MAY BE SUBJECT TO FURTHER COLLECTION ACTION.

All liable individuals must make payments on an overissuance. If you and your spouse are jointly liable for an overpayment, you may both sign this agreement. The total payment amount indicated will be split between you and your spouse for compliance and default purposes. The total payment for both individuals must not be less than \$40 per month. All liable parties are jointly and severally liable which means that each person is responsible for the total amount due.

If you or your spouse files for bankruptcy, you must send notice of the bankruptcy to the Public Assistance Collection Unit or your local agency. If you do not properly notify the agency, the overpayment you received may not be discharged by the bankruptcy.

PLEASE CHECK THE PAYMENT OPTION BELOW AND SIGN THE LAST PAGE.

TERMS:

I am returning this agreement with my payment for the full amount of the overpayment.

I agree to repay \$ _____ on the overpayment in monthly installments and I am returning this signed agreement with my first payment. I understand monthly installments are due by the 25th of each month. I understand by signing this agreement I may be subject to further collection actions if my payments are in default.

FOR ADDITIONAL BENEFIT REDUCTION:

Case Number: [REDACTED]
Date: 09/03/08

PAGE: 03

I agree to have \$ [REDACTED] subtracted automatically each month from my benefits and I am returning the signed agreement by the above date. This amount must be greater than the required allotment reduction. When you stop receiving assistance, this agreement must be renegotiated. IMPORTANT: ONLY MARK THIS OPTION IF YOU ARE CURRENTLY RECEIVING BENEFITS IN THIS PROGRAM OF ASSISTANCE.

SIGNING THIS REPAYMENT AGREEMENT MAY NOT EXCLUDE YOU FROM FURTHER COLLECTION ACTION IF YOUR DEBT IS CONSIDERED IN DEFAULT.

DEFAULT:

The consequences for defaulting on your repayment agreement may be severe. A debt shall be considered delinquent if the debtor fails to make the monthly payment by the due date three times over the life of the debt. The agency may collect a delinquent debt by more than one means of collection at the same time. A delinquent debt retains delinquent status regardless of future payment on the debt or future payment agreements. If payments are missed and the debt becomes delinquent, this repayment agreement shall be null and void and the balance remaining on the overpayment shall be immediately due and owing and the agency will have the right to take collection actions to recover the entire overpayment.

Failure to complete the repayment agreement and/or make scheduled payments may result in further collection actions including, but not limited to any of the following:

- 1) Referral to a credit bureau or collection agency
- 2) Referral to State and/or Federal tax offset programs
- 3) Wage garnishment

PLEASE SEE YOUR ORIGINAL OVERPAYMENT NOTIFICATION FOR SPECIFIC INFORMATION REGARDING THE CAUSE OF THE OVERPAYMENT AND AUTOMATIC REDUCTION OF BENEFITS. THE NOTICE ALSO GIVES INFORMATION ON YOUR RIGHTS TO A FACT FINDING FOR WISCONSIN WORKS (W-2) AND FAIR HEARING INFORMATION FOR FOODSHARE, MEDICAL ASSISTANCE AND CHILD CARE OVERPAYMENTS.

SIGN: _____ Date: _____

SIGN: (Spouse) _____ DATE: _____

Claim Number	Prgm Code	Overpayment Period	Outstanding Balance (In Dollars)
7900265977		09/01/07 09/30/07	30.00

Audit Scope

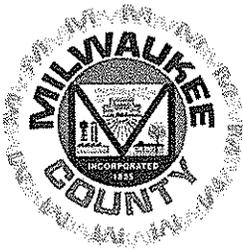
The Department of Audit conducted an audit of the Milwaukee County Call Center to determine whether the Call Center is adequately staffed and the personnel were adequately trained, including an analysis of filled positions, hours worked and hours not worked and to analyze the volume of calls received by the Call Center and determine the potential causes that impact increased call volume.

The audit was conducted under standards set forth in the United States Government Accountability Office *Government Auditing Standards (2007 Revision)*.

We limited our review to the areas specified in this Scope Section. During the course of the audit, we:

- Reviewed County Board and Board committee minutes to identify issues, concerns, recommendations, and County Board Resolutions relating to the Call Center.
- Reviewed Adopted Budget information relating to the Call Center.
- Reviewed surveys, research reports, briefings, communication, and data and policy analyses undertaken by Milwaukee County pertaining to the Call Center.
- Interviewed departmental staff to obtain a clear understanding of how Call Center operations are performed.
- Developed a timeline that demonstrates how the Call Center positions evolved from 2005 through 2009.
- Obtained the number of budgeted and filled positions from 2006 through 2009.
- Developed statistics related to hours worked and time off from 2007 through 2009.
- Reviewed and analyzed the volume of calls received by the Call Center and determine the potential causes that impact increased call volume and developed statistics regarding number of calls attempted, answered and busy by month by hour of day for January 2007 through April 2009.
- Obtained statistics related to the increase in cases from 2007 through 2009.
- Determined number of positions assigned to answering phones and number of positions assigned to other activities.
- Reviewed information on the application process of the call system.

- From the call application system data determined the number of employees that are answering phones for the time periods that the data was available.



DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

Milwaukee County

Lisa Marks, Interim Director

June 11, 2009

Mr. Jerome Heer, Director
Department of Audit
2711 W. Wells
Milwaukee WI 53208

Dear Mr. Heer:

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Milwaukee County Department of Audit report entitled *Multiple Changes Needed to Improve Milwaukee County's Call Center Performance*.

The audit correctly states on May 26, 2009 the Governor signed 2009 Wisconsin Act 15 authorizing the State to takeover the administration of Income Maintenance in Milwaukee County. I concur with the Audit Department's recommendation that Milwaukee County Department of Health and Human Services management work cooperatively with the State to improve the performance of the Call Center. One of my goals since becoming Interim Director of the Milwaukee County Department of Health and Human Services has been to ensure a smooth and successful transition plan to serve those most in need.

Specifically, with regard to the audit report, I respectfully submit the following comments:

Call Center

The audit report concludes the Call Center should expect to receive no more than 2.9 million calls per year based on the current caseload. The audit data also indicates the Call Center currently answers approximately 600,000 calls per year (140,000 through an agent and 460,000 through IVR). This leaves 2.3 million "legitimate" calls that cannot be answered, substantiating the report's claim that the call center lacks adequate funding.

Child Care Authorizations

Call volume that is generated by childcare authorization changes requires added attention. The spike in call volume in the summer of 2008 definitely ties to the emergency flood relief. However, it also parallels a spike in the summer of 2007 that correlates with the need for childcare during the months that school is not in session. ESD has implemented procedures to attempt to spread out these summer authorizations and complete them in a timelier manner. This effort must continue.

Single Case Load

The assumption that the single caseload leads to a lack of accountability for case management errors may be incorrect. The audit report does not have the data to substantiate that "another factor that may have affected the increase in errors and backlogs is the lack of accountability

associated with the Single Case Management model". Commonly, the blame is placed on the assumption, "if a case does not belong to a worker, no one can be held accountable." However, ESD process requires that whoever touched the case last owns the case. If a worker works on a case they are to complete all aspects of the case.

ESD more likely lacked adequate supervision with the single caseload approach because it did not effectively enforce the mandate that a worker take care of all aspects of the case when they "touch" a case, even though the data is available to do this through the HMAC report. Milwaukee County abandoned the individual case load model for the single caseload model because workers were not returning calls, errors were high, paperwork was getting lost, etc. - the same complaints currently heard. Milwaukee County was on the right track with the single caseload and technology innovations, however, the County did not have sufficient time, or necessary State cooperation to fully implement the program. As varying levels of government examine different approaches to eligibility determination, this report should not contribute to the idea that single caseload is an unsuccessful method to managing caseload.

CARES System and Other State Relations Issues

Automated correspondence from the CARES system is confusing. Changes in the verification letter is part of the settlement agreement in the West v Timberlake case. Other documents should be examined to improve client communication. Inefficiencies between ACCESS and CARES may be soon corrected. The State is testing a limited interface, which will allow ACCESS data to automatically populate the CARES system in new BadgerCare Childless Adult applications. If the interface is expanded to all ACCESS activities, this will increase worker effectiveness and assist in better service to clients. The electronic signature, if implemented, will assist both the State and Milwaukee County clients in expedited needed services.

Thank you for the opportunity to express the Department's comments on the Milwaukee County Audit Department's audit regarding the Call Center's performance.

Sincerely,



Lisa Marks
Interim Director
Milwaukee County Department of Human Services