

Colorado Model Office Project

PRELIMINARY ASSESSMENT OF THE PRIVATIZED CUSTOMER SERVICE UNIT FOR THE DENVER COUNTY DIVISION OF CHILD SUPPORT ENFORCEMENT

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INTRODUCTION

This is a preliminary assessment of one aspect of the Model Office Project. It involves the creation and implementation of a privatized and specialized customer service unit (“Unit”) to handle all phone calls to the Denver County Child Support Division (“Division”). The purpose of the intervention is to improve services to clients and to relieve child support technicians of time consuming telephone duties and the routine information requests and simple case actions associated with many of these calls.

Surveys and focus groups conducted with clients reveal a number of complaints about child support technicians. Clients complain that technicians do not answer their telephone and fail to respond to voice mail messages. As a result, they are unable to get timely information about their case. They accuse technicians of failing to make note of important information they supply about the absent parent such as his address or employer. They criticize technicians for neglecting to take follow-up actions on their cases such as obtaining wage assignments and pursuing other enforcement remedies.

Technicians, on the other hand, report that they are overwhelmed by the number of telephone calls and messages they receive each day. Due to frequent telephone interruptions, they maintain they have little time to actually work child support cases or even adequately update the automated child support system (ACSES).

The Division hoped to address these problems through the implementation of a specialized and privatized customer service unit. The intervention calls for a staff of customer service representatives to be trained to respond to a wide range of questions posed by clients who call the Division. The goal of the intervention is to have telephone representatives provide information to clients, explain the child support process, inform clients about the status of

their case based on information available on ACSES, accept and note new relevant information like addresses and employers, verify location information and resolve simple case problems. These objectives may be summarized as follows

- Eliminate clients' complaints that Division staff fail to answer their phones or return their messages;
- Free technicians of telephone duties so that they can concentrate on case work functions that lead to increased collections;
- Provide a single point of contact for all calls to the Division;
- Perform routine case duties, respond to simple requests for information on case status, and resolve minor case problems.

In February 1996, Lockheed Martin Information Management Services Company (IMS), a private, for-profit firm, submitted a proposal to the Denver County Child Support Division to operate the customer service unit for a period of 18 months (April 1, 1996-September 30, 1997). Lockheed Martin operates the Family Support Registry (FSR) for the State of Colorado which is responsible for collecting child support payments and distributing them to custodial parents. In April 1996, Lockheed Martin was selected by the Denver County Child Support Division to perform the customer service function. The Division felt that Lockheed Martin had the staff, equipment, and experience required to provide the agreed-upon services for customers. In addition, the selection of Lockheed Martin also enabled callers to be readily transferred between the customer service unit and the FSR, depending upon their questions and other concerns.

This report deals with the organization and implementation of the Customer Service Unit. Using interviews and focus group techniques, we explored the reactions of key groups affiliated with the Unit: program architects and administrators at the Division and Lockheed

Martin, the customer service representatives who staff the Unit, and child support technicians and supervisors at the Division. All interviewed respondents were asked to describe their expectations about the Unit, their apprehensions and concerns, their exposure to the Unit and the representatives who staff it, their early impressions of the Unit's utility, areas of strength and weakness, and suggestions for change and improvement.

DEFINING THE SCOPE OF THE INTERVENTION

In its proposal to establish a customer service unit, Lockheed Martin outlined an extensive array of tasks to be performed by customer service representatives. They included the following:

- Receive and process telephone and mail requests for changes of address for both R/As (obligees) and APs (obligors). Staff will be required to obtain two verifiers before making an address change on ACSES from a telephone request.
- Verify home and employment addresses for R/As and APs as new information is obtained from return mail or R/As who call in.
- Release any type of disbursement hold authorized by Denver County. The most common holds concern returned checks.
- Communicate directly with Denver County child support staff via chron/mail on the ACSES E-Mail system to resolve client problems.
- Provide appropriate information on case status to obligees and obligors.
- Provide information to clients regarding the IRS offset process. Customer Service Staff is expected to understand and be conversant in the IRS processes that relate to IRS intercepts for absent parents whose child support payments are in arrears.

- Explain all ledger transactions. In order to prevent duplication of services, callers who are interested in financial information only will be directed to call FSR.
- Explain the child support process to callers. Customer service staff are expected to not only provide information, but to take actions that will lead to a case result or significant labor savings in case action service.
- Explain the process for making application for child support enforcement service with Denver County.
- Explain parent location services--describing the difference between locate only and full-service locate.
- Explain the general requirements of paternity establishment including the legal rights lost/gained by not establishing/establishing paternity.
- Explain both the legal and administrative process of establishing support orders.
- Explain the remedies available for the enforcement of child support including, but not limited to, contempt, IRS and state tax offset, wage assignment, property liens, lottery intercept, unemployment benefits, drivers' license suspension, credit bureau reporting and administrative collection.
- Explain the collections process including the FSR role in payment processing and disbursement. Staff will advise callers of the availability of direct deposit for child support disbursement and recurring automatic withdrawal for payment of support.

- Explain the interstate processes, UIFSA and RURESA and registrations of foreign judgments, available to enforce child support responsibilities for absent parents who reside in a different state than the custodial parent.
- Mail routine letters of verification, status and inquiry as needed.

A key start-up task was to refine the above-noted list of proposed tasks and address various operational matters. To accomplish this, a steering committee was formed in early February. The purpose of the committee was to clarify the scope of the Unit and the specific tasks to be performed by representatives. The committee was comprised of representatives of every child support function in the Denver Division, administrators at Lockheed and top administrators of the Denver Division.

The first activity of the steering committee was to develop a desk reference for customer service representatives containing frequently asked questions and appropriate responses. To accomplish this, the committee conducted extensive brainstorming sessions during which they examined each component of the child support process. The intake, establishment, enforcement and accounting functions were all scrutinized by the group. Key questions by clients were anticipated. Steering committee members and other child support staff provided the answers to each question. The exercise revealed differences in practice and opinion which were reviewed until a consensus was reached. As the Division's Project Manager recalls, "We tried to break down everything we do in child support and anticipate the questions that come up." The result of the exercise was a comprehensive document covering all issues related to child support. It was hoped that customer service representatives would be able to use the document as a "cheat sheet" guide to enable them to quickly respond to customer inquiries in a standard manner.

Another issue the committee grappled with dealt with communications between client, customer service representative and technician. The objective was to have the customer service representative screen the calls but refer to the technician those requiring more

specialized attention. Representatives needed to understand the types of calls they should refer to technicians. They also needed to be able to apprise customers of the time period in which the technician would respond.

After much discussion, it was decided to use the time frames established by the federal child support program for the completion of various child support functions. In most cases, this meant a turn around time of two days. Accordingly, customer service representatives were instructed to tell clients that they would be contacted by a technician within two working days. Customer service representatives were given authority to contact supervisors for technicians who failed to respond within the two day time frame. If no action was still forthcoming, Division administrators were to be notified of the infraction.

Communication between customer representatives and technicians took the form of electronic mail messages. Customer service representatives were instructed to leave electronic messages for technicians whenever they encountered questions they could not answer. The committee determined that the technician's direct telephone number would be released only under particular circumstances. They included following:

- An absent parent who wants to pay child support arrearages;
- A custodial parent who wants to cure a sanction for non-cooperation;
- A client who wants to reschedule a face-to-face appointment (e.g., a negotiation conference to establish an order or a genetic test appointment);
- An attorney who is interested in speaking with an attorney in the child support division;
- A custodial or noncustodial parent who receives a negative result on a paternity test.

A summary of every conversation between customer service representatives and clients was added to the chronology component of the client's automated child support record. Technicians also had the option of responding to client queries by leaving a message on

the ACSES chronology and/or E-mail system for the customer representative. In this manner, a technician could meet the two-day time frame and respond to a client inquiry without accomplishing a telephone contact with the client.

In addition to responding to information requests and unraveling simple case problems, customer service representatives were given responsibility for receiving all postal and employer verifications and documenting their receipt in client records on the ACSES.

RECRUITMENT, HIRING AND TRAINING

Lockheed Martin recruited all its customer service representatives internally among the staff at the FSR. In April 1996, six FSR employees were selected to be customer service representatives and one individual was selected to be a floor supervisor. In May, a seventh individual was hired to serve as a customer service representative. The customer service representative position is a promotion for FSR employees. Customer service representatives earn more, handle a wider range of case duties and experience more job variety than do their counterparts at the FSR.

Lockheed Martin administrators cite many advantages to using experienced FSR employees to staff the new Unit. One is their exposure to child support and the automated child support system (ACSES). Although customer service representatives had many training needs, their FSR background was regarded as a "definite benefit" by Lockheed Martin administrators and Denver Division personnel.

Another advantage to using known personnel was the company's ability to select motivated applicants. Project administrators recall looking for people who "wanted to make a difference and do more for clients." Everyone knew that the job would be challenging. The best applicants were deemed to be individuals who were "frustrated by the limitations of their work at the FSR...and had a drive and a desire for self-growth." Interviews with customer service representatives suggest that Lockheed Martin achieved its hiring

objective. All representatives cited their primary reason for seeking the job to be a desire to “learn more and make a difference.”

Following their selection, customer service representatives pursued an intensive period of training. They completed the state ACSES training program and the training for new workers. New worker training gives the participant a complete overview of all child support functions. It is attended by all new child support technicians. Each training program lasted approximately five days. In addition, customer service representatives completed three days of customized training on the ACSES system with Denver Division training personnel. By following cases through the computerized system, customer representatives were taught how to access various ACSES screens in a rapid manner.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, customer service representatives found this training regimen to be of limited help. Representatives recall feeling “crammed” with information, and because all of the training was delivered before they began answering the phones, it was hard to follow and fairly abstract. They also felt that the training was heavily “technical” and not “grounded in reality.” As a result, when the first call came, technicians recall that they “didn’t know what to say.”

According to customer service representatives, the most useful form of assistance was having Division personnel at the Unit during the first month of operation to help answer questions. The on-site presence of a Division supervisor meant that representatives could get immediate feedback and help while a client was on the line. Following the call, the Division representative could amplify on her response and provide valuable background information.

Lockheed Martin utilizes a sophisticated phone system that distributes calls automatically and allows for silent monitoring and third party participation. Calls to the Unit's eight phone lines are automatically relayed to the seven customer service representatives in the order in which they are received as a technician becomes available. In addition, the system

allows the Unit's supervisor and Lockheed administrators to monitor the representative's phone calls for quality purposes and to detect additional training needs. Finally, the phone technology permits the supervisor and administrators to participate in calls with representatives and clients where their assistance is required. If a representative is engaged in a very lengthy call, the supervisor may initiate silent monitoring. If the representative requests assistance and/or the supervisor believes she can be helpful, she has the capacity to enter the call as a participant.

EXPECTATIONS ABOUT THE CUSTOMER SERVICE UNIT

All actors in the child support system had serious reservations about the specialized customer service intervention before its inception. Clients, for example, were extremely skeptical. In a focus group conducted with twelve custodial parents trying to get child support for children ages 15 months to 22 years, parents expressed unambiguous opposition to specialization of the customer service function. Without exception, clients said they wanted to deal directly with their technicians. They saw technicians as the only people able to make things happen on their case. Although they were frustrated by the problems they experienced communicating with technicians and wished that technicians were more responsive, they did not want to be shielded from their technicians. Those who had experienced case progress attributed their success to putting constant pressure on their technicians. They opposed any type of arrangement that served to distance them from their technicians or introduced another level of bureaucracy in the child support process.

Clients also had reservations about the ability of customer service representatives and technicians to communicate through the ACSES. In their experience, a lot of case information never gets entered on the ACSES. As a result, clients doubted that customer service representatives would know enough case detail to be very helpful. Everyone was convinced that they would be bounced back and forth between technician, customer service representative and FSR personnel.

Denver Child Support Division administrators readily admit that although they were eager to transfer the customer service function to a specialized staff of workers, they favored using existing child support workers and housing it within the Division. Administrators cite several reasons for their preference. For several years, a single individual had successfully performed the customer service function for the child support team handling non-public assistance cases. Similarly, during the transition to the FSR, the Division had designated five workers to handle all calls related to financial issues. These experiences had convinced administrators of the benefits of centralizing the customer service function and freeing staff to do other work.

At the same time, administrators doubted whether non-child support personnel could reliably engage in problem-solving. They felt as though the customer service function was best performed by individuals who handle cases or someone in close proximity to actual case handlers. They questioned whether customer service representatives and technicians could act as a team from a distance. Lingering memories about the transition to the FSR made some skeptical about Lockheed Martin's ability to perform to a high standard. Finally, Division administrators believed that they could provide the service less expensively with an in-house staffing arrangement. As one administrator observed:

Yes, we were originally supportive of an in-house effort. We felt that customer service was best done by a person handling the case or someone close by with access to case information. We thought it would be tough to have a team relationship from a distance. Also, our relationship with the FSR had some problems. Customer service is so intertwined with everything we do. We didn't feel it could be done with a private contractor. Also, we thought we could do it less expensively.

Child support technicians understandably had their own set of concerns. The chief one was a perceived loss of control. Child support staff favored having a representative for each team perform the customer service function, thereby retaining maximum control over their cases and customer service personnel. Some technicians reported feeling "protective about their cases" and resentful at the prospect of non-child support personnel changing computerized case records and taking certain actions. The introduction of the external Unit

also introduced a level of scrutiny and oversight that most technicians had not experienced before. As a Division administrator explained:

There was a fear factor. They were afraid others couldn't work up to their standards. They wanted to keep the deciding role on case action. Time standards were also a factor. They were apprehensive about time frames coming in to play. You can't manipulate time standards. You give away some authority. Someone else is monitoring your work. It is tough. They had to handle a loss of control.

Others worried whether adding another actor in the child support process would cause confusion for the technician and the clients. In the absence of direct contact with clients, they wondered whether "things such as necessary paperwork might get lost in the shuffle," or absent parents would end up with actions taken without input.

Still other technicians were convinced that clients would "play games" with customer service representatives and that representatives wouldn't recognize the games or know how to respond. They worried about clients manipulating both customer service representatives and technicians by misrepresenting the answers given by representatives or making promises that the technician could not deliver. Everyone agrees that "opposing answers between technicians and representatives can create a problem for technicians." This arrangement created opportunities for miscommunication and confusion.

Another problem that some technicians anticipated was that customer service representatives would be "too empathetic to the caller's problems." They wondered whether representatives would give clients the answer they "wanted to hear," which is not necessarily the correct answer. In this scenario, the technician would be the one to deliver the "hard news" and "always look bad" in the eyes of the client.

Finally, technicians worried about job security and the whole child support program becoming privatized. One supervisor termed the Unit a "crack in the wall," and predicted that it would set off a wave of privatization developments.

I don't want to see child support privatized. If they start with one thing, why not other parts? All employees, public and private are worried about job security and benefits. People are worried about their jobs going to private business and industry. News reports of downsizing, the minimum wage issue, and converting full-time positions into part-time to avoid giving employees benefits are causing a great deal of employee stress and worry across the country...With the same training and telephones, customer service could have been done in-house just as well.

The Unit was explained to technicians in a series of staff meetings at the Division. Administrators recall that they stressed the benefits: "that their phones would ring less and there would be less grunt work." Very soon after the project came on line, "almost all were won over." Administrators have made a concerted effort to send technicians and staff members with residual concerns to the Unit in order to spend time with the customer service representatives, handle calls themselves and better understand what the job entails. The approach seems to be an effective one. As one supervisor observed after her stint at the Unit:

There is a lot of frustration with phone answering. Clients are hostile. I feel sorry for the customer service representatives because of the hostility. It is an unrewarding job.

Similarly, a technician who spent a day with the Unit reports having a much better understanding of what the representatives do and sympathy for them.

That experience really gave me a different picture of what customer service representatives do. I felt sorry for them. They were overwhelmed by the calls. It was like, 'Oh, my God.' They handled themselves well.

To publicize the new customer service unit to clients, a notice was included with the monthly status report mailed to AFDC recipients in Denver County in February 1996. On March 15, 1996, callers to the Denver Child Support Division encountered a voice mail message about the Unit. And on April 1, 1996, the date the Unit began operating, all Division technicians recorded a message about the Unit on their personal voice mail. They instructed callers to either contact the customer service unit or the Family Support Registry,

depending upon the nature of their questions. In order to insure that all callers heard the message, technicians did not answer their phones at all that day.

PRELIMINARY OPERATIONAL PATTERNS: CALL VOLUME, TALK TIME AND ABANDONMENT RATES

Based upon a log of incoming calls to the Denver Division taken in February 1995, project architects estimated a total call volume that ranged from 200-400 calls per day with an average of 288. During the Unit's first two months of operation, however, call volume exceeded these estimates. For example, in May, the Unit received an average of 425 calls and an average of 452 calls in June. During the single busiest day in May, 490 calls were logged on the Unit's automatic call distributor. On June's busiest day, there were 565 calls.

On a daily basis, customer service representatives responded to 72 percent of calls. This represented an 18 percent increase over response rates recorded for April, the first month of operation. The average conversation with each caller in May took 3:54 minutes. This was lower than the average of 4:32 recorded in April. Following each conversation, the customer service representative spent an average of 3:00 minutes to complete a case chronology on the ACSES. This translates into approximately seven minutes for each call.

On average, each May and June caller waited about 3.30 minutes to speak to a customer service representative, down from 4:19 in April. Staff absences, lunch breaks and other reductions in force translate into considerably longer wait times for callers. For example, one day when three representatives were out at one time, callers reportedly waited for up to 18 minutes.

A little more than a quarter (26.5%) of all calls received are abandoned before a representative gets on the line. It is unknown how many of these callers redial and are subsequently served. The number of abandoned calls in May decreased 22.6 percent when compared to April.

At the request of Division administrators, Lockheed Martin added an eighth line to the unit to reduce the incidence of busy signals. Since there are only seven customer service representatives, one likely consequence of this change will be an increase in the call abandon rate. To reduce abandoned calls and customer wait time, Lockheed Martin recommends that the Unit change its hours of operation to 8:00 a.m. - 4:30 p.m. and shorten the lunch break to 30 minutes. Call volume is relatively constant during each hour of the work day except from 4:00 to 5:00, and drops precipitously from 4:30 to 5:00 p.m.

In addition to their telephone duties, customer service representatives mailed 114 non-AFDC applications, 58 letters to post offices to verify addresses and 46 letters to employers to verify employment. All of these indicators of non-phone activity in May were substantially higher than levels reported for April 1996.

A log maintained by representatives during the week of June 17-21, 1996, reveals that 70 percent of calls to the Customer Service Unit are resolved by representatives without further involvement of legal technicians. The remaining 30 percent are referred for action by technicians via the chronology and electronic mail systems. Technicians appear to be handling most of the matters referred to them within specified time frames. Only about 40 clients call back each week to complain that the technician has not resolved their problem or responded within specified time frames. These matters are referred for supervisory attention. Taken together, this analysis suggests that 70 percent of caller questions are handled by representatives, 27.2 percent are resolved by technicians and 2.7 percent require supervisory intervention.

REACTIONS TO THE CUSTOMER SERVICE INTERVENTION

By all accounts, the customer service unit intervention has been far more successful than anticipated. Administrators at the Division and Lockheed Martin are pleased with the project and characterize it as a "very exciting concept." Most technicians and supervisors think that the Unit is "a really good thing." Although there has been some difficult moments in the transition process, and the customer service representatives have had to go through a

"steep learning curve," most believe that the Unit is a positive development. As one technician explained, "They went through a trial and error learning period, but have alleviated a great deal of pressure for me."

According to child support personnel, the Unit has had an immediate and palpable effect at the Division. When the phones stopped ringing, the stress level dropped and office morale rose. Administrators maintain that "the stress level changed over night." This helped to make some skeptics on the staff more supportive.

Some Division personnel believe that the Unit has also had a positive impact on staff productivity. The reduced number of calls is believed to free up time for workers to engage in revenue-generating child support activities. As one supervisor explained:

A technician used to get as many as 20 telephone calls per day. With the decrease in telephone calls, technicians are working reports not previously worked, making fewer mistakes, cleaning up cases and really doing research and enforcement in the way we should do it. We are digging deeper and getting more money.

Technicians also report feeling more effective. Many indicated that they had been constantly interrupted with telephone calls, usually requests for information on case status. This type of information can be readily supplied by customer service representatives using ACSES files. Now that they don't have to "respond to calls cold," technicians feel that they spend "less time paging through computer screens." As a result, technicians feel that they can respond to clients' questions or problems more rapidly and perform the duties needed to increase collections. A technician explains the impact of the Unit on her work day this way:

It frees me up to prioritize my desk better. Before the Unit started, if I answered the phone calls as they came in, I was constantly interrupted. If I didn't pick up the phone, I had a lot of phone messages to call back at the end of the day. I had no control over phone messages. Now, I may average ten mail messages from customer service representatives that need a

response. Fifty percent of these I can handle in about 10 minutes. Real simple. The calls now are a lot easier to handle.

Not all technicians report experiencing a substantial reduction in telephone activity due to the Unit. Establishment technicians who do legal paperwork, for example, report that they still must deal directly with clients on many matters and that the Unit has affected them less than their counterparts. Technicians who handle interstate matters are also less apt to report workload relief. Many interstate cases are complex and require "hands-on" attention; there are few services that customer service representatives can deliver. Moreover, due to their vast experience working with attorneys and the court system in other jurisdictions, interstate technicians are believed to be better equipped to solve problems than customer service representatives. There is also some question about the appropriateness of the two day time line for technicians to respond to client requests in interstate matters since an answer frequently involves contacting an out-of-state agency.

It will clearly take some time to get a more definitive reading on changes in staff productivity due to the customer service unit. Administrators feel that the real impact of the customer service unit may not be statistically visible until July. Even then, it may be difficult to distinguish the impact of the Unit on productivity from other organizational changes at the agency including internal reorganization and intensified management and accountability systems.

Administrators at the Division are pleased that the Unit enhances the ability of supervisors to monitor the performance of their staff. In recent months, the Division has pursued performance monitoring and auditing more aggressively than it had in the past. Because technicians share their cases with customer service representatives, they are pushed to do "better quality work." Feedback from customer representatives is also seen as a useful monitoring tool. As one administrator put it:

It helps supervisors do a better job eliciting performance and monitoring performance. We always had response time as a priority. The supervisors

follow up on response time. This intervention has helped reinforce our monitoring of performance.

Clients also appear to be pleased with the new Unit. Administrators at the Division report that there has been a drop in the number of complaint letters and calls. They feel as though more matters are being successfully handled by customer representatives and technicians and "do not escalate to a higher level of intervention."

Customer service representatives and project administrators report hearing "incredibly good feedback" from clients. After years of reaching voice mail, clients are reportedly pleasantly surprised to reach a human being when they phone the Division. As one client reportedly commented:

I've left six voice mail messages for a technician. No one has called me back. And you have just answered my question.

Although many clients initially insisted on talking with their technicians, customer service representatives feel as though most clients are willing to "give us a chance," and that many are repeat callers who are becoming more comfortable with the Unit and confident about their interactions with customer service representatives. Project architects hope that clients will become less angry and frustrated as they experience better treatment with customer service representatives. As they explain:

Many clients call expecting failure. They are angry to begin with as a result of past experiences with unresponsive technicians. A small number of clients will never be pleased. The information they receive is often inherently displeasing. But at least they don't feel devalued. They feel important, respected and valued.

Division employees attribute the success of the Unit to a few factors. One is the effort expended by the customer service representatives and the Lockheed Martin personnel supervising the Unit .

All personnel involved with the intervention get high marks for dedication and hard work. Customer service representatives work beyond their hourly requirement, often ignoring breaks. Their supervisor observes that she must insist that they stop for lunch. This level of zeal is rare in the child support world. As the project manager from the Division who worked most closely with the Unit observed:

I'm used to an 8-4:30 schedule at Denver County. Sometimes I'm down here (at the Unit) until 6 p.m. It's a different environment. Employees are dedicated to administering quality service to clients.

Customer service representatives are propelled by personal factors too. Most are single, working parents who are sympathetic to the problems clients face and their desire for action on their case. They describe themselves as people who "want to make a difference" and like going home every day "feeling as though they have helped someone." In the words of one representative:

All these people want is an effort to try. People recognize and appreciate the effort. If you don't care, you are in the wrong business.

Another reason why the project is successful is the level of communication between Lockheed Martin and technicians and supervisors at the Division. Child support personnel have appreciated being consulted about the Unit. Those who served on the Steering Committee played a key role in defining the intervention, identifying likely questions by callers and outlining preferred responses. They worked together to develop time frames, procedures for referring callers directly to technicians and situations that require technician attention. This has helped to foster a sense of team work and ownership among Division employees. Many regard this interaction to be crucial to project success. As one supervisor observed:

It was nice that they asked for input...Even though child support procedures have federal and state regulations and guidelines, each county has its own method of administration. Communication is key and it is established in Denver County.

AREAS OF CONCERN

No project of this scale can avoid some bumps. Although administrators, technicians and customer service representatives are excited about the customer service intervention and pleased with its progress, all have some concerns that they would like to see addressed in coming months.

1. Reducing the abandonment rate and excessive wait times. Everyone concedes that the level of demand has exceeded pre-project projections and that additional customer service representatives and telephone lines are needed to accommodate the volume of calls. Division administrators maintain that they get complaint calls from clients who are angry about busy signals and long waits when they telephone the Unit. It remains to be seen whether calls taper off as clients acquire more experience with the Unit and get their problems addressed. It is unknown whether calls are generated by a relatively small number of clients who phone the Unit frequently or many clients who call only occasionally. It is also unclear whether the volume of calls will increase as the Division pursues mass enforcement techniques like credit bureau reporting and notifications of driver's license suspension.

2. Reducing the number of calls referred to technicians. A monitoring effort conducted during one week in June revealed that 30 percent of calls to the Unit are referred back to technicians for further attention. It is uncertain whether this referral rate can be reduced. To date, the Unit has not collected information on the types of calls referred to technicians because of the extra time it adds to each interaction the customer service representative has with a client. Nevertheless, this type of data collection effort may be needed to achieve reductions in the number of calls referred to technicians. By tracking and coding calls, it may be possible to identify future training needs for customer service representatives. It is believed that many calls are referred to technicians if they involve interstate matters, arrearages due from the absent parent and interest calculations; however, without a record-keeping system, this cannot be confirmed. Tracking and coding

calls may also enable project personnel to determine whether calls are being appropriately referred to technicians. For example, some Division personnel wonder whether representatives are referring some calls to technicians when they ought to be telling clients that “there is nothing more to do in your case right now.”

3. Improving relationships between customer service representatives and child support technicians. Although most technicians appear to welcome the customer service intervention, certain tensions exist between representatives and Division employees. As messengers, representatives convey news that is frequently upsetting to both clients and technicians. Although representatives maintain that they try to write messages in neutral, factual language, technicians sometimes perceive their E-mail messages to be critical and bossy. If the client is angry and critical, the message can sometimes be angry and critical. The problem is compounded by the fact that representatives can play a supervisory role in the life of a technician, although cases only appear to be escalated to a supervisory level about eight times per day. Representatives who hear from clients that a technician has failed to respond within the proscribed time frames are instructed to refer these cases to a Lockheed supervisor who contacts the technician's supervisor. Subsequent failure to respond to a client leads to referral to a Division administrator.

Customer service representatives also have problems with some technicians. They accuse some technicians of having negative, judgmental and blaming attitudes that are visible in the messages they send when cases are referred by customer service representatives. Representatives are also offended by what they perceive to be sloppy work habits among some Division technicians. They cite instances in which technicians have failed to take obvious child support actions such as initiating wage assignments after representatives have verified employment information. Indeed, the tension that some representatives experience with a few technicians is regarded as the most frustrating aspect of the job. As several representatives observed, “I'm not the enemy. We are there to help them and most do but there are some who are so negative.”

It will clearly take more time and mutual exposure to dispel some of these misconceptions and difficulties. Division administrators acknowledge that the relationship is difficult for technicians since "you give away some authority when someone else is monitoring your work." At the same time, both Lockheed Martin and Division administrators believe that these problems arise with only a small fraction of child support technicians and that most have been "won over."

4. Improving the quality of ACSES chronology messages. One key to the success of the intervention is clear communication between customer service representatives and technicians on the chronology system. Customer service representatives are required to document all client contacts on ACSES. In order for them to respond to client queries, they need an informative log of case action initiated by the technician. If documentation is inadequate, they are unable to respond to clients, the technician must be contacted and the client winds up calling the Unit again and again.

Division personnel concede that technicians have not always been attentive to their record-keeping on the chronology system. When they are the only ones working a case, technicians feel that it is less important for them to document every action. It has been painful to get some technicians to provide the detail in chronology messages that representatives require in order to do their job. As a Lockheed Martin administrator notes:

We find the chronology content is sometimes inadequate. It can be too general to work with. We are forcing some technicians to generate a case record that is more thorough.

Some child support technicians also find the quality of chronology messages left by representatives to be lacking. Due to inexperience, representatives may sometimes fail to use child support terminology in their chronology messages. Over time, technicians expect that representatives will leave messages that are more standardized.

5. Expanding the range of duties that customer service representatives perform. Customer service representatives would like to assume more casework responsibilities. They feel that clients expect and want them to be able to do more; they are frustrated that they are unable to initiate wage assignments and do other child support functions that logically follow from the verification activities that they routinely perform. The situation becomes particularly acute when technicians fail to follow through on needed case actions. Representatives are convinced that when cases get "too many handing, too much gets dropped." As one customer representatives put it:

Clients expect us to know an answer. They expect us to do more than the state lets us do and they are mad...We need the authority to do things that are obvious, like take a flag off a check or do a wage assignment or send a wage assignment for service of process.

Division administrators, on the other hand, would like to reduce the wait time that clients experience and cut the abandonment rate. They are reluctant to expand the duties of customer service representatives as long as the volume of calls to the Division is on the rise and the call abandonment rate stands at 25 percent. As one administrator observed:

I have mixed feelings about them doing more. Their statute knowledge is limited, so they may not know as much as they think they know. And if we have 25 percent of calls not being answered, how can they take on more work? How can they spend time doing wage assignments?

Similarly, Lockheed Martin administrators are dubious about the advisability of expanding the scope of work that representatives perform. Although they concede that representatives might be able to handle more calls if their duties were broadened, they too are concerned about handling calls to the Unit in a timely manner in light of higher than expected volumes and existing contractual constraints.

Technicians also have concerns about customer representatives doing more child support work that involves more access to case files, advising clients and performing the technical aspects of child support. They worry about whether the knowledge base that

representatives possess about child support can support additional duties. Child support, as they note, is not a "black and white industry" and procedures depend on "case interpretations." Procedures may also depend on the attitudes of the key players, like the presiding judge in interstate cases. Finally, technicians may also have concerns about job security. As one Division supervisor observed:

If they want to do more, the next step for them would be to become accounting clerks. They would have to come to Denver County to do that work.

These rival goals are not easily resolved. If call volume declines and/or representatives handle callers more quickly as they become more experienced, it may be possible to expand their role in the child support process without sacrificing the Unit's ability to provide prompt service to clients. However, it will be important to continue to monitor the volume of calls, the abandonment rate and the time each call requires before making a definitive decision about this matter.

6. Increasing the representative's ability to answer child support questions without referring them to technicians. Representatives and technicians would both like to see more questions handled at the Unit without referral to the technician for follow-up attention. Many technicians are confident that this will happen over time as representatives become more familiar with child support. They believe that representatives will become more fluent about child support and that clients will be less apt to insist on speaking with a technician. They acknowledge that everyone is "overwhelmed" at first, and that time and experience are the best teachers. As one technician put it:

If the customer service representatives stumble over an answer, clients question their reliability and generally demand to talk to a technician.

While representatives feel that their problem-solving skills will continue to improve over time, they would welcome some help in handling unusual or more technical client questions. They feel that with a little bit of timely assistance, they could wrap up many more

matters and reduce the number of calls referred to technicians. For example, one suggestion made by the representatives is that the Division designate a daily, on-call technician, to handle questions from the customer service representatives. In order to be helpful to representatives and clients, the individual serving in this capacity would need to commit to be at a phone all day to take calls from the Unit. Moreover, if Division technicians are extremely specialized, it might be necessary to have several technicians on daily call, in order to accommodate the range of questions posed by clients.

Division administrators have mixed feelings about this proposal. While they would like to reduce the number of calls referred to technicians, they are reluctant to dedicate scarce personnel to provide backup to the Unit since the intent of the Unit is to relieve technicians of their telephone duties. They do not want to create a parallel customer service unit at the Division.

The steering committee proposes to augment the representatives' ability to answer child support questions by developing more detailed question and answer guides. One area they have targeted for special attention is interstate child support cases. In coming weeks, it is anticipated that interstate technicians and supervisors will work together to produce a comprehensive "cheat sheet" for representatives.

The adequacy of these measures will need to be reviewed as the Division continues to monitor the incidence of referrals to technicians and the reasons for these referrals.

7. Improving training for customer service representatives. Some technicians would like customer service representatives to be better trained in order to "see the big picture" of child support. Because they deal with uneducated people who are often inarticulate, representatives may have a "hard time understanding what clients want." Indeed, the customer service representative may be the one to have to help the "client get to the point."

Other technicians would like representatives better trained in "cross referencing" and other techniques utilized in cases with more than one absent parent. Still others would like them better versed in accounting procedures, interstate matters and interviewing techniques.

Customer service representatives themselves would welcome more training that is "grounded in reality." Now that they have been on the job, they feel that they could better absorb child support information than they did in February and March, before the job started. They would welcome "continuing education sessions" with division personnel.

8. Reviewing time frames for responses by technicians and other child support actions. Technicians and customer service representatives would both like to review the time frames for responses to clients. Technicians who handle interstate matters, for example, believe that the two day turn around is unrealistic given the frequent need to contact agencies in other states,.

Customer service representatives would like technicians to give them more realistic expectations about how long it might take for things to happen on various cases. They feel that they are misleading clients and inviting call backs when they give them a time frame for action that is unrealistic and abbreviated. Representatives would like to be able to tell clients that "nothing will happen on your case for at least 75 days" rather than having hopeful clients call them every few weeks. They would like technicians to give them more detailed information on the steps being taken in cases so that they can provide clients with better guesstimates of case progress or inactivity.

CONCLUSIONS

In April 1996, Lockheed Martin, Inc., initiated a privatized and specialized customer service unit to handle all telephone calls to the Denver County Child Support Division. The purpose of the intervention was to improve services to clients and relieve child support technicians

of time-consuming telephone duties, routine information requests, and simple case actions associated with many of these calls.

Interviews and focus groups conducted with Division technicians, supervisors, administrators and clients reveal that all parties had serious reservations about the Unit before its inception. Clients feared that the Unit would insulate them from their technicians and lead to additional delay and case inaction. Technicians were apprehensive about having their work scrutinized by outsiders, feared losing case control, and worried about the quality of work performed by non-child support personnel. Supervisors and administrators questioned whether clients could be efficiently served by outsiders and favored developing a customer service capacity within the agency.

Despite these apprehensions, Division personnel report substantial satisfaction with the Unit's first quarter of operation. Seventy percent of client calls are being handled by customer service representatives; thirty percent are referred back to technicians for additional attention. Technicians face far fewer interruptions due to telephone calls and increased capacity to perform other child support duties. Preliminary reactions from clients are favorable.

One factor that has affected the implementation of the Unit is a higher than anticipated volume of calls. Prior to the start of the Unit, project architects estimated that there would be an average of 300 calls per day when in actual fact there have been approximately 450. This is 50 percent higher than expected. Not surprisingly, this volume has resulted in higher than anticipated wait times and abandonment rates for clients. The volume of calls has also posed particular challenges for customer service representatives who have had to learn their job under very intense and demanding circumstances

Implementing a privatized and specialized customer service intervention requires that contractual and Division personnel address a number of key issues. This includes improving the quality of computerized messages conveyed between customer service

representatives and technicians; establishing and reviewing time frames for response by technicians; developing accountability procedures and other mechanisms to insure that needed follow-up actions are taken; and defining the scope of duties that representatives perform. These issues have been the subject of considerable attention by a steering committee comprised of technician supervisors and administrators in the Denver Division of Child Support Enforcement as well as project administrators and supervisors at Lockheed Martin. In future months, the steering committee will continue to work on these issues as well as to explore ways to reduce the abandonment rate and the number of calls referred to child support technicians. This might require tracking the nature of calls referred to technicians to identify the appropriateness of referrals and possible areas of additional training for representatives.

During the coming months, it will also be important to monitor the reactions of clients to the Unit in a more systematic fashion. Finally, and most importantly, it will be important to monitor the level of child support collections and other actions taken by the Division and assess the impact of the Unit on performance.