



Customer Service Tests of Seven Large Agencies Show Mixed Results

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A Report by the Office of the District of Columbia Auditor
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Why ODCA Did This Audit

ODCA conducted this review to provide an independent assessment of how District government agencies treat residents, visitors, and employers who request information or assistance.

What ODCA Recommends

This report makes six recommendations to improve the quality of customer service provided by District government agencies.

First, the Mayor should update customer service standards issued by then-Mayor Anthony Williams. The standards should match service levels attained by leading public and private-sector organizations.

Second, the Mayor, City Administrator, and agency heads should implement and enforce clear time frames for responding to phone, e-mail, and written communications. Employees' failure to meet the standards should be reflected in their performance evaluations.

Third, the Mayor, City Administrator, and agency heads should ensure that customer service goals, measures, and results are included in annual agency performance plans and reports.

Fourth, agencies should use external assessments of customer service in order to provide objective measures.

Fifth, agencies should make greater use of scripts or templates that explain how to respond to common questions or problems and thereby ensure more consistent and accurate responses to customer service requests.

Finally, agencies should emphasize the need for "end-to-end" service that responds to the full scope of a customer's problem or request.

ODCA shared a draft of this report with the Office of the City Administrator (OCA) and the Office of the Chief Financial Officer (OCFO). OCA did not respond during the comment period and OCFO stated that it had no comments.

For more information regarding this report, please contact Anovia Daniels, Communications Analyst/ANC Outreach, at Anovia.Daniels@dc.gov or 202-727-3600.

What ODCA Found

ODCA employees served as testers who sought information or assistance from seven D.C. government agencies with high levels of public interaction: the 311 Operations Division (part of the Office of Unified Communications), Office of the Chief Financial Officer, Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs, Metropolitan Police Department, D.C. Public Schools, Department of Human Services, and Department of Public Works. These agencies provide critical services to residents, visitors, and employers.

The ODCA testers made telephone calls or sent e-mail requests to the seven agencies based on scripts designed to reflect common questions and problems. ODCA testers then rated the knowledge conveyed by agency employees in responding to telephone and e-mail inquiries as well as the courtesy displayed by employees on the telephone. ODCA's findings from the customer service tests include:

- Overall performance of the seven agencies in responding to customer service inquiries was generally fair to good.
- There was considerable variation in how cases were handled. For knowledge conveyed in telephone and e-mail responses, agencies received the top rating of "5" more than 50 percent of the time, but they also received the lowest rating of "1" in roughly 20 to 25 percent of cases.
- The failure to respond to telephone and e-mail messages was the main cause of poor performance.
- The complexity of a customer request did not seem to be closely related to agency performance. Sometimes agencies mishandled very simple requests while effectively handling more complex requests, and vice versa.
- The inconsistency of customer service at the seven agencies was reflected by varying responses to telephone and e-mail requests about the same subject.
- Agency responses often fell short of the top rating because an employee did not consider all aspects of the customer's request or provided an Internet link without any other information.

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Background

The term “customer service” encompasses the whole range of interactions between government employees and the people they serve – residents, visitors, and business owners. Although D.C. law defines “customer service” as “activities involved in the receipt and processing of emergency, non-emergency, and citizen service requests by the agencies’ call centers,”¹ D.C. government initiatives to improve customer service have sought to ensure that residents receive prompt, courteous, and effective service anytime and anywhere they request assistance from a government employee or agency.

Customer service by government agencies began to receive greater attention in the 1990s as part of a movement to apply business practices to government operations. David Osborne and Ted Gaebler’s 1992 bestseller, *Reinventing Government: How the Entrepreneurial Spirit Is Transforming the Public Sector*, emphasized “customer-driven government” as one of its guiding principles.² In 1993, the final report of Vice President Al Gore’s National Performance Review, *From Red Tape to Results: Creating a Government That Works Better and Costs Less*, called for “a new customer service contract with the American people, a new guarantee of effective, efficient, and responsive government.”³

One result of the National Performance Review was Executive Order 12862, “Setting Customer Service Standards,” which was issued by President Clinton on September 11, 1993. The Order directed federal government agencies to post customer service standards and measure results against them, benchmark customer service performance “against the best in the business,” and survey front-line employees on ways to improve customer service. The Order defined “customer” broadly, defining the term to mean “an individual or entity who is directly served by a department or agency.”

The emphasis on improving customer service spread to the District of Columbia government in the late 1990s. A major step to improve customer service in the D.C. government was the establishment of a citywide call center by Mayor Anthony Williams in 1999. The citywide call center enabled residents, employers, and visitors to call a single number, 727-1000, to request information and resolve problems with basic city services

¹ See D.C. Official Code § 1-327.51(4).

² David Osborne and Ted Gaebler, *Reinventing Government: How the Entrepreneurial Spirit Is Transforming the Public Sector*, (Plume/Penguin, 1992), pp. 166-194.

³ Vice President Al Gore, *From Red Tape to Results: Creating a Government That Works Better and Costs Less: Report of the National Performance Review* (1993), p. 7.

such as abandoned autos, trash collection, street and alley cleaning, potholes, and rodent control. To promote accountability for timely service delivery, the executive branch set time frames for responding to different types of service requests and tracked the requests to make sure they were resolved.

The Williams administration also issued customer service standards for correspondence and telephone requests⁴ and implemented a tester program in order to evaluate how agency employees were performing against the standards. The testers graded agency telephone operators on courtesy, knowledge, etiquette, and overall impression, and rated employees on their responses to voice mails, e-mails, and written correspondence. Agency performance on these customer service tests (rated on a 1 to 5 scale) was summarized in annual performance accountability reports issued by the Williams administration.

During the administration of Mayor Adrian Fenty, the central number for service requests was changed from 727-1000 to 311 in order to follow the practice of other cities and provide an easy-to-remember number for resident seeking information or assistance. Now part of the Office of Unified Communications (OUC), the 311 center reported receiving 1.8 million calls during FY 2015,⁵ and operates 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. In 2012, under Mayor Vincent Gray, the District introduced a 311 smartphone application that lets people report service requests using their mobile devices, complementing a 311 online service that was already in operation. The Gray administration also implemented grade.dc.gov, a platform that allows residents to grade the quality of services they receive from D.C. government agencies. Currently, Mayor Muriel Bowser's administration is working to implement a "text-to-311" application.

Efforts to improve customer service by the D.C. government appear to have yielded results. An external study of all calls made to 727-1000 and 311 from 2000 to 2009 (more than 1.5 million calls) showed that the average response time dropped from more than 40 days to 11 days during that period.⁶ Nevertheless, complaints about non-responsive agencies and unhelpful employees persist. There are also other indicators of problems concerning customer service provided by D.C. government agencies. For example:

⁴ See Mayor's Memorandum 2002-2, "Minimum Standards for Correspondence-based Customer Service," dated May 14, 2002, and Mayor's Memorandum 2003-4, "Minimum Standards for Telephone-based Customer Service," dated February 28, 2003.

⁵ Office of Unified Communications, "FY 2015 Performance Accountability Report," January 2016, p. 15.

⁶ These data are from an unpublished study by Georgetown University graduate student Lindsay Pettingill, described in Lindsay Pettingill, "Making Maps Talk," September 22, 2013, blog post at www.lindsaypettingill.com.

- In a September 2014 report, ODCA noted that more than 33,000 service requests from fiscal years 2011 through 2013 were still open.⁷
- In its FY 2015 performance accountability report, OUC stated that it did not meet its annual performance targets for the percentage of 311 calls abandoned; percentage of 311 calls answered within 90 seconds; or percentage of 311 calls handled in four minutes or less.⁸

In addition, 311 service requests focus on public works and transportation services, rather than the full range of D.C. government services such as education, human services, and economic development.⁹ Customer service tickets can be closed by D.C. government agencies even if the resident does not believe his or her problem or question has been resolved. Therefore, the available data about the quality of customer service by the D.C. government may not reflect the full range of government services and the number of cases that have been resolved may be overstated.

To provide a current, external assessment of customer service at key D.C. government agencies with a high volume of resident interactions, the Auditor initiated the evaluation presented in this report. As described in the next section (“Objectives, Scope, and Methodology”), the evaluation is based on the ratings of ODCA testers who sought assistance or information from seven major D.C. government agencies: 311 Operations Division (which is part of the Office of Unified Communications), Office of the Chief Financial Officer, Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs, Metropolitan Police Department, D.C. Public Schools, Department of Human Services, and Department of Public Works.

⁷ Office of the District of Columbia Auditor, *Management Letter Regarding the Office of Unified Communications’ 311 Operations Division*, September 11, 2014, p. 3.

⁸ Office of Unified Communications, “FY 2015 Performance Accountability Report,” January 2016, p. 7.

⁹ For example, the OUC web site highlights nine typical service requests, eight of which are related to public works and transportation (broken meters, trash collection problems, potholes, abandoned autos, parking enforcement, tree services, illegal dumping, and streetlight repair). The other type of request highlighted on the web site concerns the phone numbers, addresses, and hours of operation for D.C. government agencies. See <http://ouc.dc.gov/page/311-city-services>.

Objectives, Scope and Methodology

Objectives

Pursuant to District of Columbia Code § 1-204.55(b),¹⁰ the District of Columbia Auditor conducted an evaluation of the customer service practices of seven large District of Columbia government agencies. The objectives of the evaluation were to assess the quality of customer service provided by the D.C. government by rating the following aspects of customer service at the seven agencies:

1. Knowledge displayed by D.C. government employees in responding to telephone requests;
2. Courtesy displayed by D.C. government employees in responding to telephone requests; and
3. Knowledge displayed by D.C. government employees in responding to electronic requests.¹¹

Scope

The evaluation covered telephone and e-mail requests to seven large agencies: (1) the “311” call center, which is part of the Office of Unified Communications, (2) the Office of the Chief Financial Officer, (3) the Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs, (4) the Metropolitan Police Department, (5) the D.C. Public Schools, (6) the Department of Human Services, and (7) the Department of Public Works.

The Office of the District of Columbia Auditor (ODCA) selected the seven agencies for the customer service test based on their size as well as a judgment that each agency had a high volume of customer service contacts. In addition, to ensure that the evaluation covered a broad cross-section of important D.C. government programs and services, ODCA selected one agency from each of six main budget categories,¹² as well as

¹⁰ D.C. Code § 1-204.55(b) provides that, “The District of Columbia Auditor shall each year conduct a thorough audit of the accounts and operations of the District in accordance with such principles and procedures and under such rules and regulations as he may prescribe.”

¹¹ ODCA did not assess the courtesy of e-mail responses based on a judgment that courtesy is more relevant to oral communication than it is for written communication.

¹² These budget categories are known as “appropriation titles.” This evaluation includes six agencies from different appropriation titles which are shown in parentheses: Governmental Direction and Support (Office of the Chief Financial Officer), Economic Development and Regulation (Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs), Public Safety and Justice (Metropolitan Police Department), Public Education (D.C. Public

311, which serves as the main intake point for resident inquiries and service requests. Figure 1 (see next page) summarizes the mission of each agency included in the customer service evaluation, as well as the FY 2016 budget and staffing (full-time equivalent) levels for each agency.¹³ As shown in Figure 1, the seven agencies have important responsibilities to provide core public services to residents, businesses, and visitors.

Figure 1

Mission, Budget, and Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) Staffing Levels of Seven Agencies Included in ODCA’s Customer Service Evaluation

Agency	Mission	FY 2016 Budget and FTE Levels
311 Operations Division (part of Office of Unified Communications)	Provide fast, professional, and cost-effective response to non-emergency (311) calls in the District.	\$4.8 million 72.0 FTEs
Office of the Chief Financial Officer	Provide financial management services to sustain the District’s fiscal and economic viability.	\$170.9 million 969.9 FTEs
Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs	Protect the health, safety, economic interests, and quality of life of residents, businesses, and visitors in the District of Columbia by ensuring code compliance and regulating business.	\$44.0 million 356.0 FTEs
Metropolitan Police Department	Protect residents and visitors by providing the highest quality police service with integrity, compassion, and a commitment to innovation that integrates people, technology, and progressive business systems.	\$541.5 million 4,620.0 FTEs
D.C. Public Schools	Provide a world-class education that prepares all of our students, regardless of background or circumstance, for success in college, career, and life.	\$885.9 million 8,114.9 FTEs
Department of Human Services	Assist individuals and families to maximize their potential for economic security and self-sufficiency.	\$463.1 million 1,046.8 FTEs
Department of Public Works	Provide the highest quality sanitation, parking enforcement, and fleet management services that are both ecologically sound and cost-effective.	\$158.0 million 1,438.0 FTEs

The evaluation involved telephone and e-mail requests to the seven agencies based on a judgment that these are the most important channels for customer service requests and that written requests are relatively less important. For example, the 1.8 million calls received by 311 in FY 2015 dwarfed the 10,077 pieces of correspondence received by the Executive Office of the Mayor that same year.

Schools), Human Support Services (Department of Human Services), and Public Works (Department of Public Works).

¹³ “Full-time equivalent” is an employment indicator that translates the total number of hours worked in a year by all employees, including part-time workers, to an equivalent number of work years. One FTE, representing a year of full-time work, equals 2,080 hours.

Methodology

This evaluation used ODCA employees as testers who contacted the seven agencies previously mentioned and assessed their responses to common customer service inquiries. Covert testers have been used to evaluate a wide range of government programs and services,¹⁴ and as noted earlier, the executive branch under Mayor Anthony Williams used testers to rate the courtesy, knowledge, etiquette, and overall impression made by D.C. government employees in their interactions with the public.

The evaluation involved 10 telephone requests and 10 e-mail requests to each agency, which were made by ODCA testers between September 2015 and January 2016. ODCA made only a small number of requests to each agency in order to avoid interfering with the regular flow of agency work. To that end, ODCA also designed the requests to be relatively simple, such as asking for a form or report, a telephone number, or the address and operating hours of an office.

ODCA testers then documented the results of each telephone or e-mail request and rated the D.C. government agency's response on a 1 to 5 scale (with "1" representing the lowest point of the scale and "5" representing the highest point) with regard to employee knowledge (telephone and e-mail requests) and courtesy (telephone requests only). In rating the government response, ODCA testers were guided by rubrics created to promote consistent evaluations. The audit supervisor also reviewed the ratings for consistency and in several cases the ratings were adjusted because an important factor had been omitted.

The telephone and e-mail requests to each agency followed written scripts developed by ODCA staff to cover a range of common inquiries received by different programs and divisions within the agency. For example, the telephone and e-mail requests to the Office of the Chief Financial Officer (OCFO) were designed to cover several problems and questions that fall under the purview of major operating divisions such as the Office of Tax and Revenue, the Office of Budget and Planning, and the Office of Finance and Treasury.

The scripts were designed to simulate the experiences of D.C. residents seeking information (such as how to get a tax form or how to get a building permit) or assistance in solving problems (such as fixing a pothole or reporting a blighted property) from D.C. government agencies. In most

¹⁴ For example, the District's Alcoholic Beverage Regulation Administration has used underage testers to verify whether its licensees check the identification documents of young people seeking to purchase alcohol as required by law. Nationally, a variety of groups have also tried to measure the extent of unlawful discrimination by sending individuals who are virtually identical except for their race, gender, ethnicity, or other protected characteristic, to apply for jobs or housing and document the results. See for example U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, "Fair Housing Enforcement Organizations Use Testing to Expose Discrimination," *Evidence Matters*, Spring/Summer 2014.

cases, the telephone and e-mail inquiries were based on “Frequently Asked Questions” or other information posted on agency Internet sites.

Examples of the telephone and e-mail requests are as follows:

- What is the phone number for the Adult Protective Services hotline? (telephone call to 311)
- My child goes to Oyster Elementary School. How can I get a copy of the school’s budget for the current school year? (e-mail to D.C. Public Schools)
- What are the legal construction hours in the District? (telephone call to the Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs)

For each agency except 311, ODCA testers also made (1) one telephone and one e-mail request for a copy of the agency’s 2014 Open Government Report, and (2) one telephone and one e-mail request regarding a service that is not under the purview of the agency being contacted. The purpose of requesting the open government reports was to include one common inquiry of each agency for the sake of comparison and standardization, whereas the purpose of the requests for services not under the purview of an agency was to see if employees could make an appropriate referral. The ability to guide residents to the right agency is an important part of customer service because residents may not always know which agency is responsible for a particular function, particularly in a complex government like D.C.’s which has more than 100 agencies.

Overall, the ratings in this report may tend to overestimate the quality of customer service provided by the seven agencies, for the following reasons:

- Because ODCA sought to keep the telephone and e-mail inquiries fairly simple and straightforward, and incorporated information from agency web sites into the scenarios, this evaluation involved requests that should have been fairly easy for agencies to address. For example, the evaluation did not test how agencies handle complicated issues such as an appeal of a tax assessment, a request for special education services, or coordination of services to the homeless.
- Many of the telephone calls were made to central agency numbers (such as the phone number for the agency director’s office) or e-mail addresses (such as the “Ask the Director” link that is available on agency Internet home pages), where residents may receive above-average service because these intake points are highly visible and may be staffed by individuals who specialize in customer service.

- When ODCA testers did not receive a response to an e-mail request in two weeks, they sent a second request, giving the agency another chance to serve the customer.”¹⁵

Higher average ratings for an agency in this evaluation do not necessarily mean that its customer service is superior to that of an agency with lower ratings in the evaluation. The tests conducted for the evaluation provide valuable insight into customer service practices at the agencies, but they do not represent a statistically valid sample of agency customer service activities. It is also possible that different evaluators would have rated the agency responses differently, or that some agencies were subjected to more difficult questions and problems than others were.

Because this evaluation reports the results of a test of agency responses to simulated telephone and e-mail requests, rather than actual cases, it does not represent an audit as defined by the U.S. Government Accountability Office’s Government Auditing Standards.

¹⁵ ODCA testers did not provide a second “bite at the apple” for the telephone inquiries because many telephone calls can be immediately transferred to someone else while the caller remains on the line – in essence, providing two chances to respond to the request. The follow-up e-mail was intended to make the evaluation of telephone calls and e-mail messages roughly comparable by allowing for a second chance on e-mail requests.

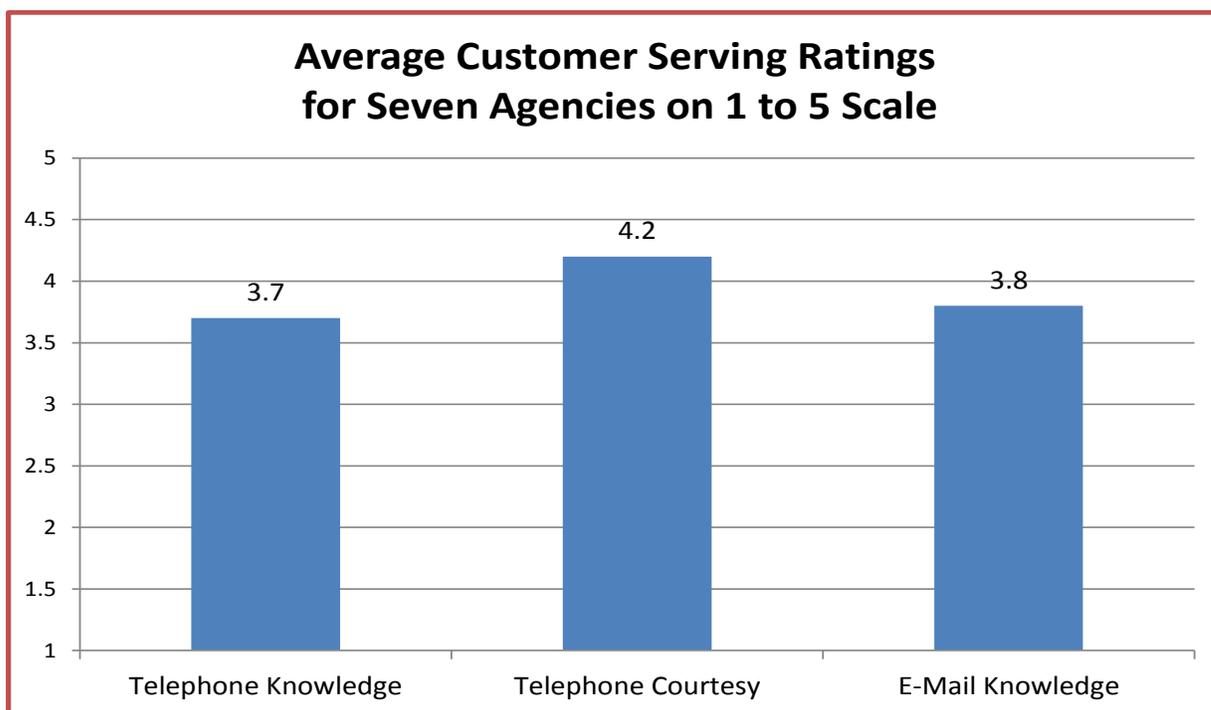
Evaluation Results

Overall performance of the seven agencies in responding to customer service inquiries was generally fair to good.

Overall, the seven agencies included in ODCA's testing of customer service performed reasonably well but did not display excellent customer service on a consistent basis. On a scale of 1 to 5, in which "1" represents poor service and "5" represents excellent service, the average scores for the seven agencies were 3.7 for telephone knowledge, 4.2 for telephone courtesy, and 3.8 for e-mail knowledge (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

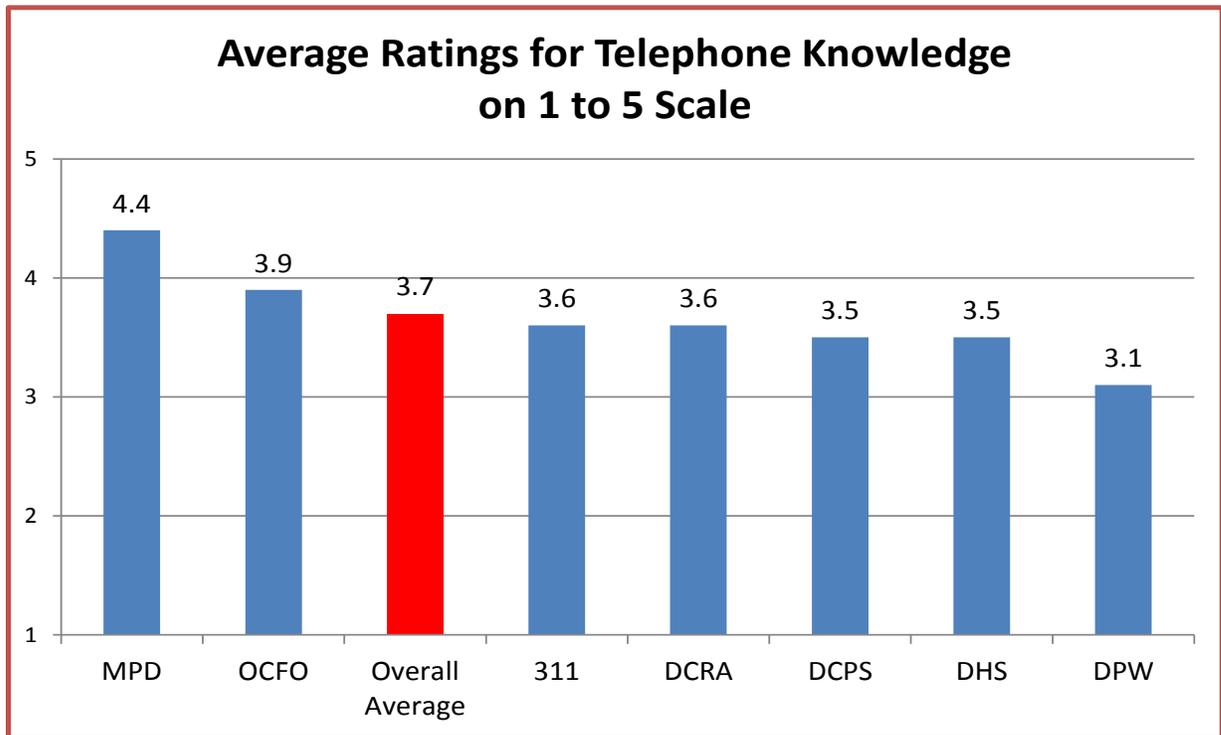
Average Customer Service Ratings for Seven District of Columbia Agencies



Although most of the agencies were clustered around these average ratings, there were some significant variations in agency performance on ODCA's customer service tests. In terms of knowledge demonstrated by employees in response to telephone requests for information and assistance, the Metropolitan Police Department earned the highest average score (4.4), while the Department of Public Works recorded the lowest average score (3.1). The average scores for telephone knowledge are shown in Figure3 on the next page.

Figure 3

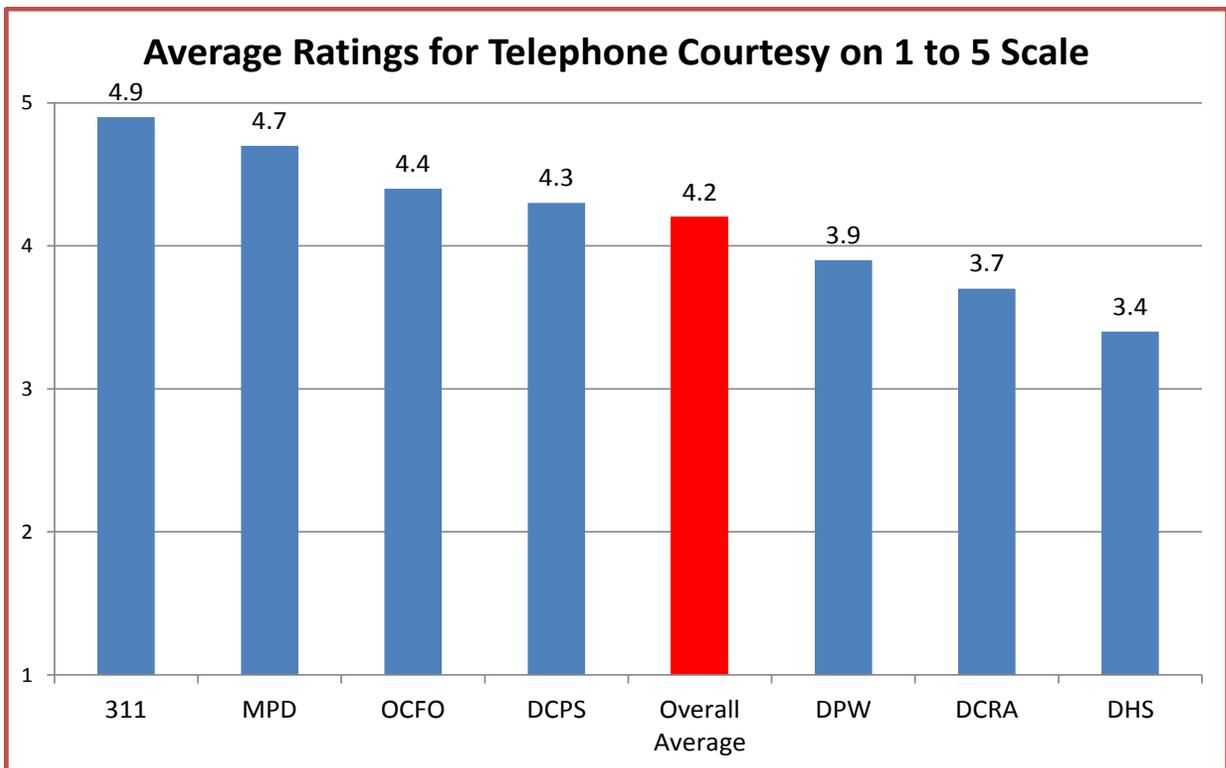
Average Ratings on Telephone Knowledge for Seven District of Columbia Agencies



In terms of courtesy demonstrated by employees in response to telephone requests for information and assistance, 311 earned the highest score (4.9), while the Department of Human Services recorded the lowest score (3.4). The average scores for telephone courtesy are shown in Figure 4 (see next page).

Figure 4

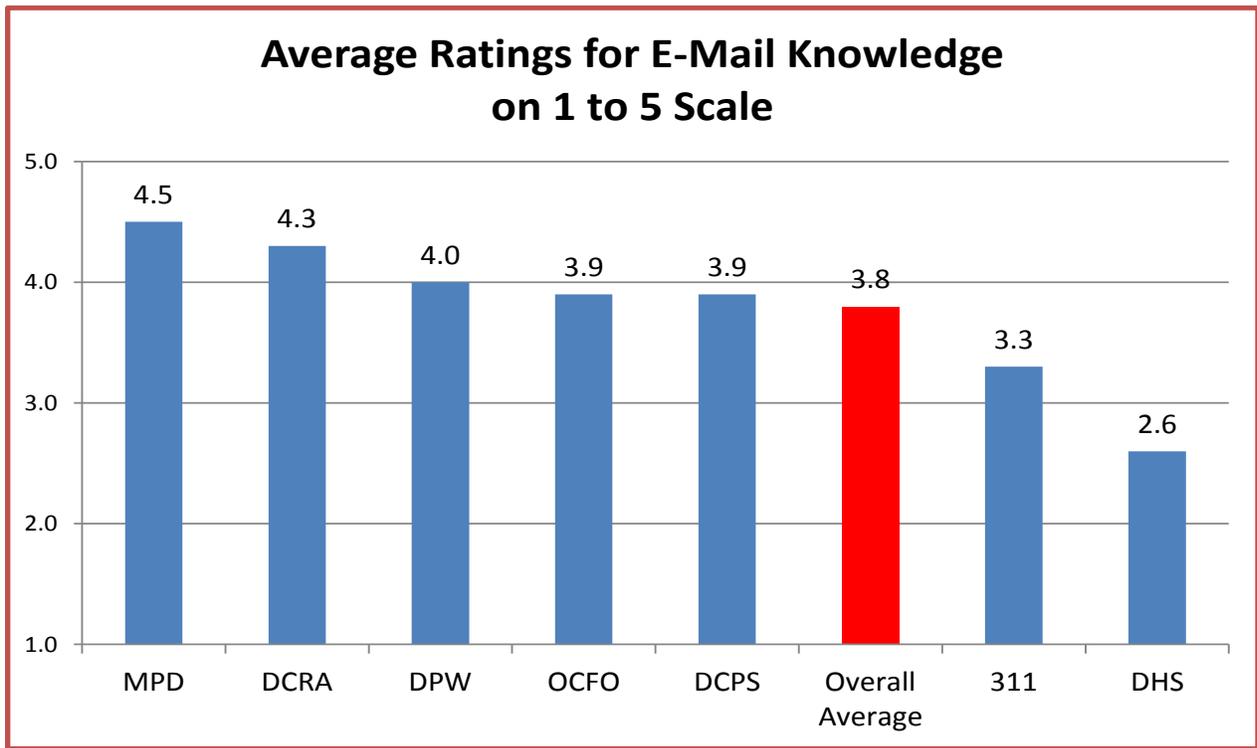
Average Ratings on Telephone Courtesy for Seven District of Columbia Agencies



In terms of knowledge demonstrated by employees in response to e-mail and online requests for information and assistance, the Metropolitan Police Department again earned the highest score (4.5), while the Department of Human Services recorded the lowest score (2.6). The average scores for e-mail knowledge are shown in Figure 5 (see next page).

Figure 5

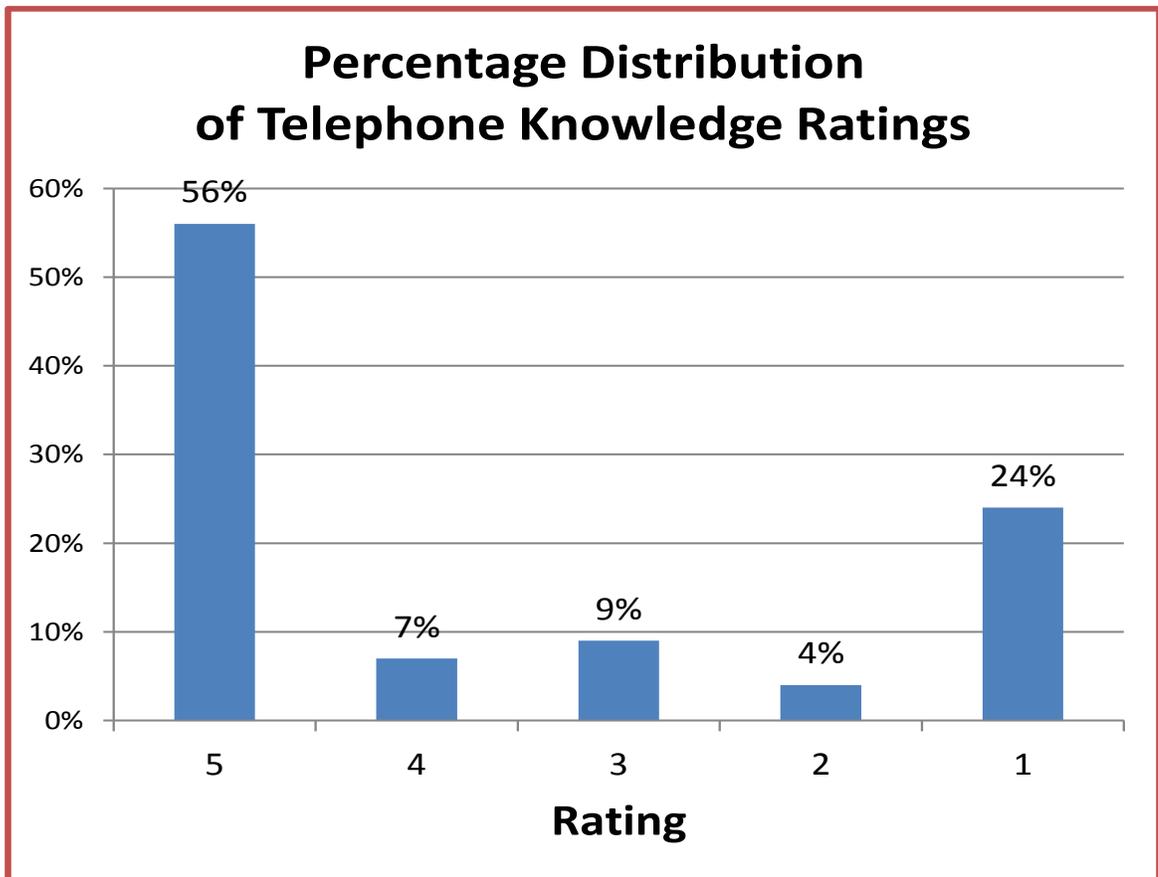
Average Ratings on E-Mail Knowledge for Seven District of Columbia Agencies



The average ratings for customer service reported in this evaluation conceal considerable variation in how cases were handled. For both telephone and e-mail responses, there was a bi-modal distribution in which more than half of customers received excellent service but 20 to 25 percent of customers received poor service or no service.

Although the average ratings for customer service reported in the previous section are useful, they do not tell the whole story because there was considerable variation in how cases were handled. ODCA testers who made telephone requests for information or assistance received an excellent response (a rating of “5”) in more than half (56 percent) of total calls. At the same time, almost one-quarter (24 percent) of ODCA testers received poor or no service (a rating of “1”) when they sought information or assistance by phone. Figure 6 displays the distribution of ratings for knowledge conveyed by agency employees in response to telephone requests.

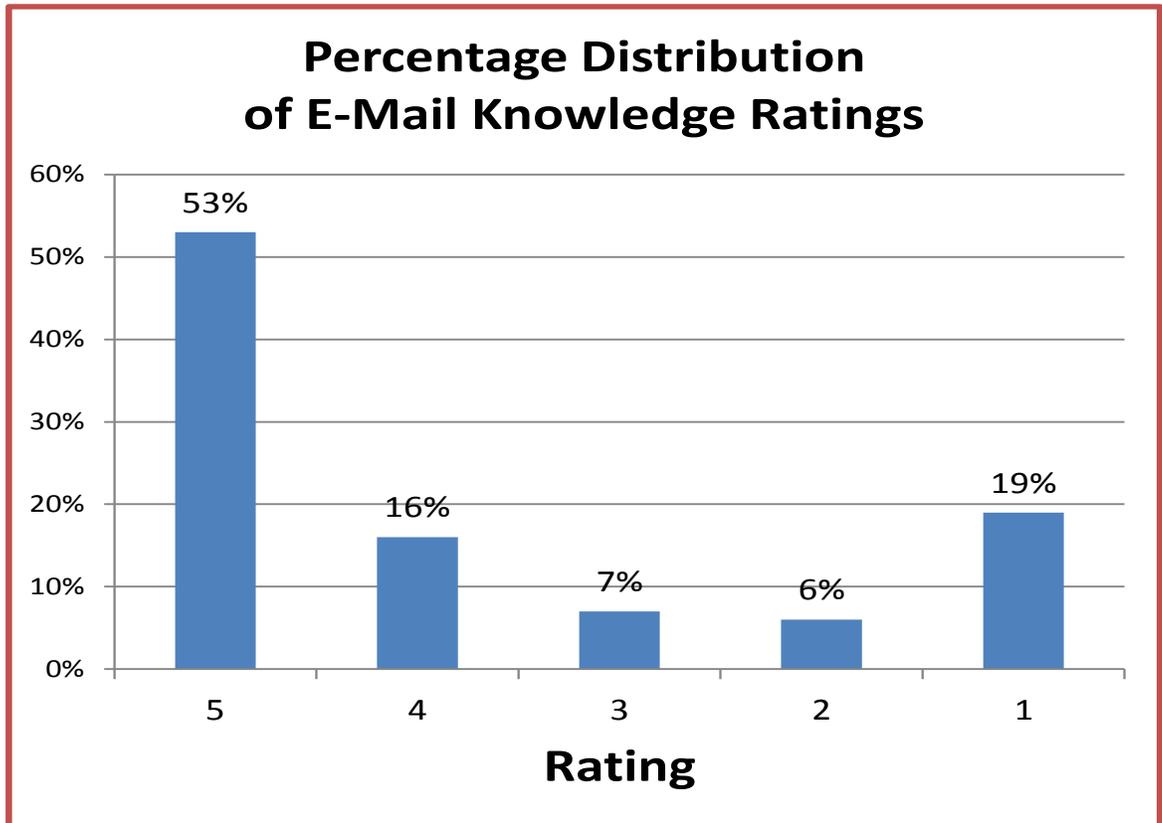
Figure 6 **Distribution of Ratings on Telephone Knowledge for Seven District of Columbia Agencies (Combined)**



The distribution of ratings by ODCA testers who made e-mail or online requests for information or assistance followed a similar pattern. Once again, more than half of the responses (52 percent) received the top rating of 5, indicating excellent service, while the second-largest percentage (19 percent) of responses received the lowest rating of 1, indicating poor or no service. Figure 7 displays the distribution of ratings for knowledge conveyed by agency employees in response to e-mail or online requests.

Figure 7

Overall Distribution of Ratings on E-Mail Knowledge for Seven District of Columbia Agencies

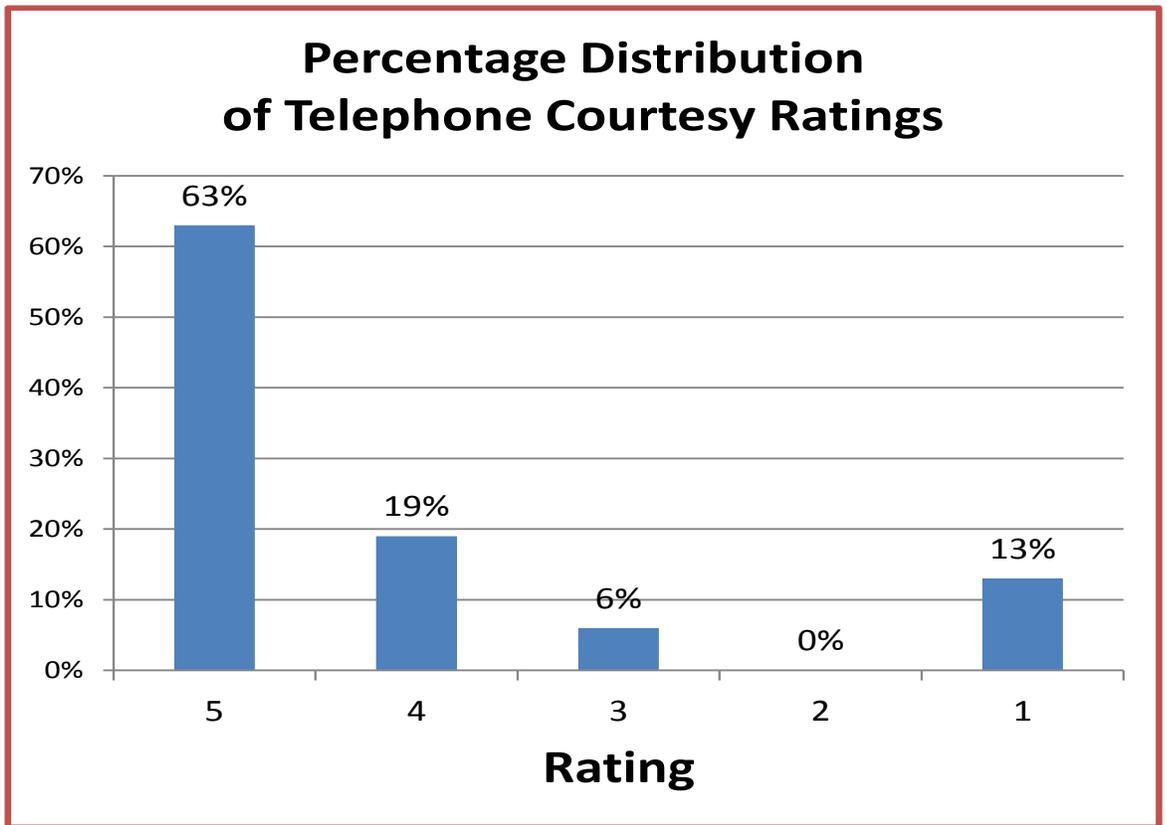


Note: The percentages shown in Figure 7 do not add to 100 due to rounding.

ODCA’s ratings of telephone courtesy did not show the same bi-modal distribution that characterized the ratings of telephone and e-mail knowledge, but there was still a significant subset of cases (13 percent) in which telephone courtesy received the lowest rating of 1 (see Figure 8 on the next page). In fact, all of the cases in which telephone courtesy was rated as “1” were cases in which the caller left a message (usually by voice mail) that was not returned.

Figure 8

Overall Distribution of Telephone Courtesy Ratings for Seven District of Columbia Agencies



Note: The percentages shown in Figure 8 do not add to 100 due to rounding.

The failure to respond to telephone and e-mail messages was the main cause of poor performance.

Most of the lowest ratings (scores of “1” on the 1-to-5 scale) recorded in ODCA’s customer service testing were due to telephone calls and e-mails that were not returned by agency staff. Specifically, 79 percent of the lowest ratings were due to unreturned calls or messages (see Figure 9). This finding suggests that customer service standards issued during the administration of Mayor Anthony Williams -- which required employees to acknowledge or respond to written correspondence within two days¹⁶ and to return telephone calls within 24 hours or the next business day¹⁷ – have fallen into disuse.

Figure 9 Unreturned Telephone Calls and E-Mails as the Main Cause of Poor Customer Service

Type of Case	Number of Cases with Lowest Rating of “1”	Number and Percentage of “1” Ratings Due to Unreturned Messages
Telephone Knowledge	17	11 (65%)
Telephone Courtesy	9	9 (100%)
E-Mail Knowledge	13	11 (85%)
Total	39	31 (79%)

Note: There are fewer telephone courtesy ratings of “1” that were due to an unanswered call (9 instances) than there are telephone knowledge ratings of “1” that were due to an unanswered call (11 instances) because in two cases the phone was answered by someone who treated the caller courteously, but then forwarded the call to someone who did not return a message.

A particular source of concern stemming from ODCA’s customer service tests is that the Department of Human Services did not respond to 5 of 10 e-mail requests. Some of these requests concerned urgent social welfare needs. The five unanswered e-mails involved the following topics:

- Help in identifying the Economic Security Administration service center closest to the resident’s home, so the resident could apply for Food Stamps and medical assistance;
- The eligibility requirements and maximum level of assistance provided under the burial assistance program;
- A request for the agency’s 2014 Open Government report;
- Who to contact to report a possible case of elder abuse; and
- Eligibility requirements for the child care voucher program.

¹⁶ See Mayor’s Memorandum 2002-2, “Minimum Standards for Correspondence-based Customer Service,” dated May 14, 2002, p. 1.

¹⁷ See Mayor’s Memorandum 2003-4, “Minimum Standards for Telephone-based Customer Service,” dated February 28, 2003, p. 2.

The complexity of a customer service request did not seem to be closely related to agency performance. Sometimes agencies mishandled very simple, straightforward inquiries, while effectively handling more complex requests.

Although ODCA designed its customer service tests to be fairly simple and straightforward, there were still differences in the complexity of the test cases, which ranged from single questions (asking for a phone number) to multi-part inquiries of slightly greater complexity (asking a question about service delivery and requesting a brochure). It might seem logical to predict that D.C. government agencies would respond to the simplest customer service requests more effectively and have more difficulty with the more complex requests, but ODCA's customer service tests did not detect such a clear relationship. Sometimes, the simplest requests were mishandled while more complex questions were handled flawlessly, and vice versa. The following examples depict the varied quality of agency responses to requests of different complexity.

MPD, which was the highest-rated agency in ODCA's customer service testing (MPD ranked first both in telephone and e-mail knowledge, and second in telephone courtesy), performed well in responding to simple and more complex customer inquiries. For example, employees contacted at MPD's main number (727-9099) gave correct responses to callers who asked, respectively, for the phone numbers of the hate crimes hotline and the child abuse hotline. In responding to a more complex request from a putative victim of identity theft, an employee from MPD's Financial and Cyber Crimes Unit asked how the theft occurred and where the victim lived, and patiently explained several ways to report the crime.

DCPS, which scored in the middle or below in ODCA's customer service testing (DCPS ranked fifth in both telephone and e-mail knowledge, and fourth in telephone courtesy), was more inconsistent in its performance. For example, no one responded to two e-mail requests (sent to lsat.help@dc.gov) for the name and contact information for Savoy Elementary School's local school advisory team. On the other hand, a resident who sent an e-mail asking how to get a copy of Oyster Elementary School's 2015-2016 budget received a detailed response from DCPS' Office of Family and Parent Engagement about how to locate the information online using DCPS' Interactive Data Center and offered the resident a number to call if he needed help navigating the website.

DPW, which recorded the lowest score on ODCA's tests of telephone knowledge (while ranking fifth in telephone courtesy and third in e-mail knowledge), mishandled both simple and more complex telephone requests. A caller asking how to buy a new Supercan never received a response to a message she left after being transferred from DPW's main line (673-6833). Similarly, a caller with a more specialized question about commercial recycling requirements never received a response to a message she left for DPW's Office of Recycling (645-7191).

The inconsistency of customer service in the seven sample agencies is reflected by the varying responses to telephone and e-mail requests about the same subject.

As part of the customer service tests, ODCA employees often made the same inquiry of an agency twice: once by telephone and once by e-mail. These cases provided additional evidence of the uneven, inconsistent handling of customer service requests by the seven agencies that were part of this evaluation. Sometimes a case that was handled poorly in a telephone call was handled flawlessly by e-mail, and vice versa. This pattern suggests that D.C. government agencies can make significant improvements in customer service, because some employees appear to be using information or scripts that can be followed more broadly and consistently by their colleagues.

Several examples of varying quality in agency responses to the same request are described below:

- When an ODCA tester called the OCFO's Office of Finance and Treasury (OFT) to ask if the District offers a tax-favored college savings plan and, if so, how she could get information on the plan, she was told that OFT was not the right office and transferred to the Office of Tax and Revenue, even though OFT administers the college savings plan. When an ODCA tester e-mailed the OCFO (using the "Ask the Chief Financial Officer" link at www.cfo.dc.gov) to request the same information, she received a response on the same day with a link to the D.C. college savings plan web site.
- When an ODCA tester called DCRA's illegal construction unit (442-7867) to ask about the legal hours of construction hours in the District, she was told that they were 7 am to 7 pm, Monday through Friday, and 7 am to 6 pm on Saturday. When an ODCA tester e-mailed DCRA (using the "Ask the Director" function at www.dkra.dc.gov) to ask the same question, he was told that the legal hours of construction were 7 am to 7 pm, Monday through Friday, but there was no mention of Saturday hours.
- When an ODCA tester called DHS' main line (671-4200) to ask how to report a possible case of elder abuse, he was advised to call the Adult Protective Services unit and given the phone number. When an ODCA tester e-mailed DHS (using the "Ask the Director" link at www.dhs.dc.gov) to ask how to report a case of elder abuse, she received no response.
- When an ODCA tester called DPW to ask how he could obtain a visitor parking pass (which is actually the responsibility of the D.C. Department of Transportation), he was transferred to DPW's parking enforcement office, which in turn told him to go to the neighborhood police station. When an ODCA tester e-mailed DPW (dpw@dc.gov) to request the same information, he received

instructions on how to get a visitor's parking pass that had been downloaded from the D.C. Department of Transportation's web site.

Agency customer service responses often failed to meet standards of excellence because an employee did not consider all aspects of the customer’s request or simply provided an Internet link without any other information.

In many cases during this evaluation, agencies did not provide high-quality service because employees responded only to one part of the resident’s question or problem, or provided an Internet link without any other information. These responses often reflected the most minimal effort and seemed designed to close cases rather than serve residents. By contrast, agency responses that received the highest rating of “5” were characterized by “end-to-end” service in which employees responded to all aspects of the customer’s request and often provided a way for him or her to follow up if the information was unclear or inadequate.

The following are examples of customer service requests for which agencies provided only partial or minimal responses.

- When an ODCA tester e-mailed the OCFO to ask if *printed* copies of the District’s FY 2016 budget were available – and if not, whether compact disc copies were available – she was referred to the OCFO’s website (www.cfo.dc.gov). The response did not say anything about printed copies or compact discs, and did not even provide a link to the budget page of the OCFO’s web site (www.cfo.dc.gov/budget).
- When an ODCA tester e-mailed DCRA to request information about the housing code and how to report that his apartment was infested by rats and lacked a working fire alarm, DCRA responded by giving him the phone number for the Residential Inspection Office to schedule an inspection, but ignored the request for information about the housing code.
- When an ODCA tester called DCPS to ask about how to apply for a mid-year teaching position, he was told to go to the DCPS website. The employee did not provide the relevant website address (www.joinpublicschools.com) until the caller asked for it, and she responded to his follow-up questions by referring him to the web site once again.
- When an ODCA tester e-mailed DPW to ask for the address and hours of operation for the Fort Totten trash transfer station, she was given the hours of operation but not the address.

In contrast, examples of thorough customer service responses are shown below. Because the agency employees gathered the information for the customer, rather than simply directing them to a source of information, and offered opportunities for follow-up in case the information provided was not clear or sufficient, these responses reflect true “end-to-end” service. Additional examples of outstanding customer service responses are described in the Appendix.

- When an ODCA tester e-mailed the OCFO's unclaimed property unit (dcunclaimedproperty@dc.gov) to ask if there is a searchable data base for unclaimed property, the customer service representative searched the data base on the customer's behalf and advised her that she couldn't locate any property in her name. In addition, the representative told the customer that she should feel free to contact the unclaimed property office, provided the phone number, and suggested that the customer check www.missingmoney.com as another useful source of unclaimed property information.
- When an ODCA tester called DCPS' Office of Out-of-School Time Programs to ask for a list of after-school programs, the employee asked if she was interested in programs at a particular school, looked up the relevant school (Peabody Elementary School) and told the customer that DCPS did not operate any after-school programs at Peabody. The employee then looked up additional information, advised the customer that Peabody offers wrap-around services, and gave her the number of the school so she could get more information.

The agencies' responses to 12 requests for an open government report suggest that the quality of customer service may drop when residents contact employees who perform more specialized duties in the bureaucracy.

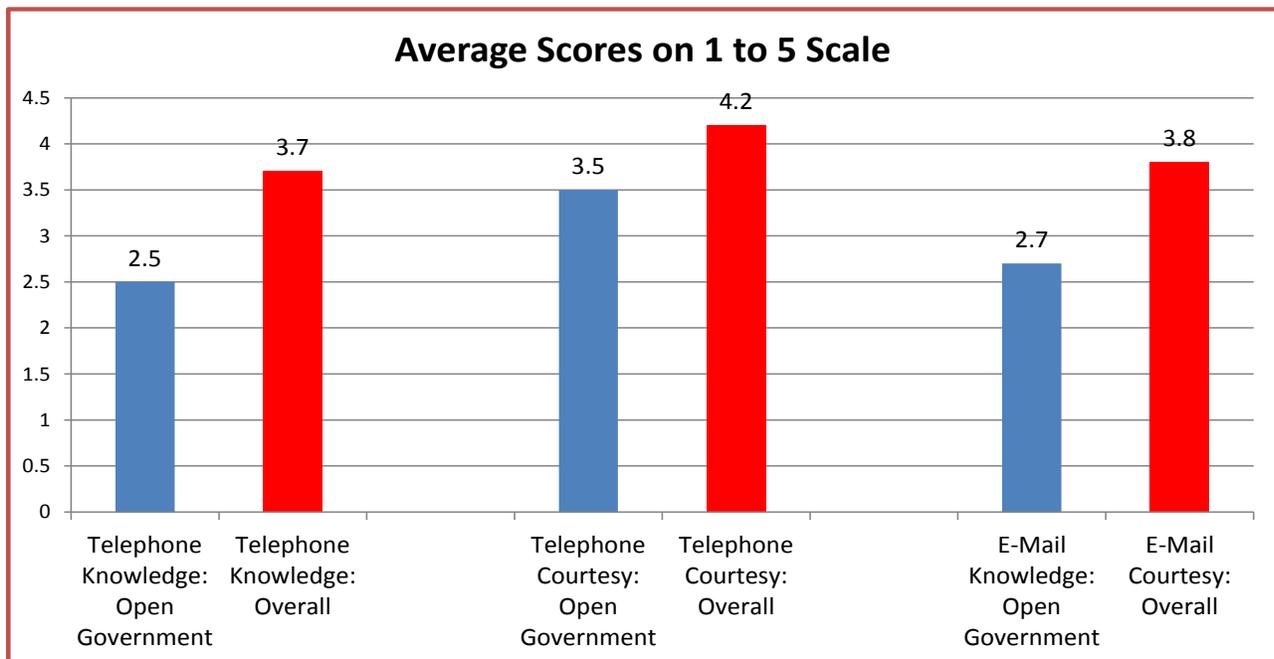
To include a common element to the customer service tests at the different agencies, ODCA made two requests (one by telephone and one by e-mail) for an agency's 2014 Open Government Report to each of the following agencies: OCFO, DCRA, MPD, DCPS, DHS, and DPW. ODCA testers did not request an Open Government Report using 311 because 311 serves as a clearinghouse function and focuses largely on neighborhood services such as public works and transportation. The ODCA requests for copies of Open Government reports also provided an example of how agencies deal with a highly specialized request that may require a response from individuals, such as Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) officers, who are not "front-line" customer service specialists.

Mayor's Order 2014-170, dated July 21, 2014, requires District government agencies to issue an annual Open Government Report describing "how the agency has or will enhance and develop transparency, public participation, and collaboration." The Mayor's Order identifies a number of topics that must be covered in an Open Government Report and notes that the reports are intended to "institutionalize a culture of transparent and open government, accountability, and to expand opportunities for resident participation and collaboration."

Although the open government requests constituted a small sample (12 requests), the results were not encouraging. All of the agencies tested in this evaluation except for the OCFO had posted their 2014 Open Government Reports on their websites (the ODCA testers' requests to the agencies were based on a script in which residents did not know that the reports were posted on agency websites). Even though the open government reports should have been readily available for five of the six agencies, the agencies' average scores on the open government requests were mediocre: 2.5 for telephone knowledge, 3.5 for telephone courtesy, and 2.7 for e-mail knowledge. As shown in Figure 10 (see next page), these averages were well below the overall averages for telephone knowledge, telephone courtesy, and e-mail knowledge for the agencies tested in this evaluation.

Figure 10

Average Customer Service Ratings on Open Government Requests Compared to Average Customer Service Ratings on All Requests



One reason why performance was relatively low on the open government requests was that agency staff, such as FOIA and public information officers, did not respond to messages or follow up on promises to get back to the resident in six of the 12 cases. For example, when an ODCA tester called MPD’s main telephone number (727-9099) to ask for a copy of the department’s 2014 Open Government Report, the operator suggested that he call MPD’s press office. The ODCA tester called MPD’s public information office, which asked him to e-mail his request to mpd.press@dc.gov. The ODCA tester e-mailed his request to mpd.press@dc.gov and did not receive a response.

The agencies performed relatively well on 12 requests that were designed to test whether they could refer the resident to another agency responsible for the program or activity in question.

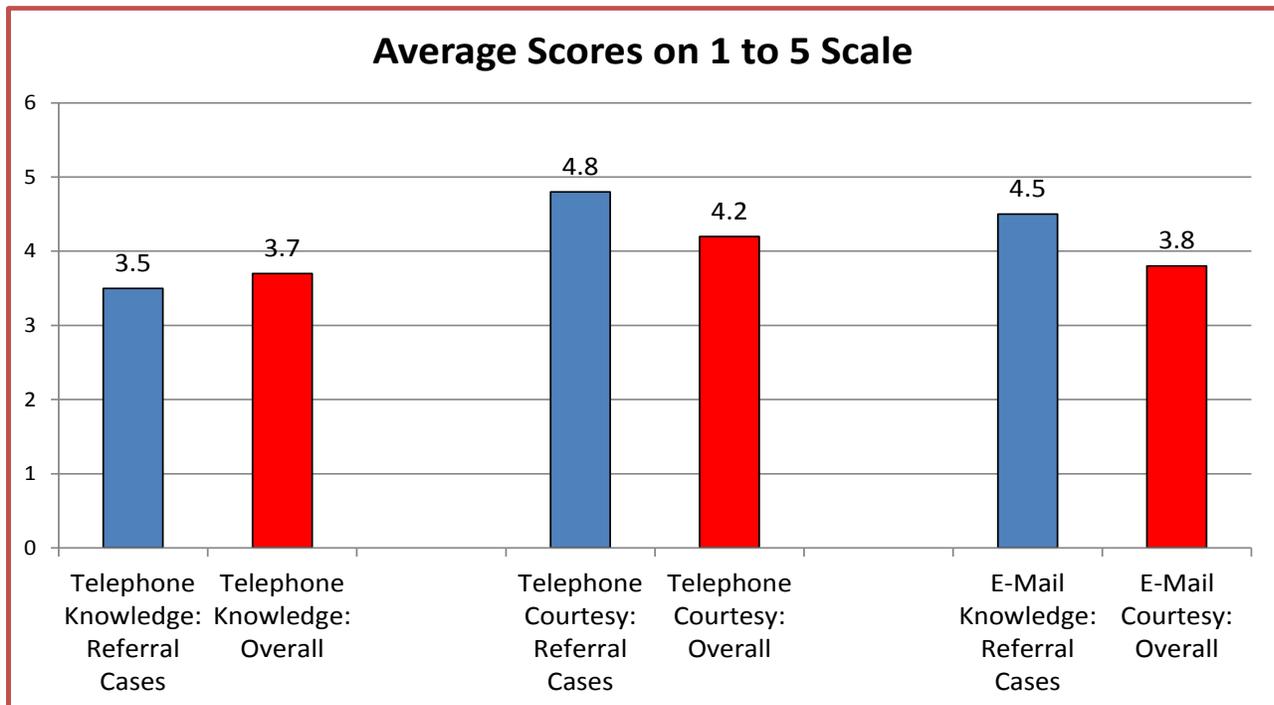
Because the D.C. government is large and complex, overseeing state, county, and city functions, residents needing assistance or information from the government may not always know which agency to contact. For example, someone inquiring about services to people with disabilities might not know that the lead agency is the Department of Disability Services, rather than the Department of Human Services. Similarly, a resident requesting a public space permit might not know that the administering agency is the D.C. Department of Transportation, not the Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs.

Because making appropriate referrals is an important part of high-quality customer service, ODCA's customer services tests included two requests (one by telephone and one by e-mail) designed to test the ability of six agencies (OCFO, DCRA, MPD, DCPS, DHS, and DPW) to provide such referrals. The 311 call center is not included in this discussion because it serves as a customer service clearinghouse; therefore, referring cases to the appropriate agency is an intrinsic part of all of its activities and is covered by the customer service inquiries ODCA directed to 311.

The results for this subset of customer service tests were generally encouraging. For these 12 "referral cases," the six agencies scored higher on telephone courtesy (4.8) and e-mail knowledge (4.5) than the average for all cases, while scoring below average on telephone knowledge (3.5), as shown in Figure 11 (see next page).

Figure 11

Average Customer Service Ratings on “Referral Cases” Compared to Average Customer Service Ratings on All Cases



The following are two examples from ODCA’s customer service tests of excellent responses to “referral cases,” along with an example of a poor response:

- In both cases (by phone and by e-mail) when an ODCA tester contacted MPD to ask for the name and phone number of the agency that handles complaints about police misconduct, the MPD employee provided the correct information for the Office of Police Complaints.
- In both cases (by phone and e-mail) when an ODCA tester contacted the Department of Human Services about eligibility requirements and available services for someone with a developmental disability, the DHS employee made the correct referral to the Department of Disability Services.
- When an ODCA tester called the main line (727-4829) at the OCFO’s Office of Tax and Revenue to ask how to report a vacant property that should be charged higher property tax rates, the employee was unsure but suggested that the resident contact DCRA or the Department of Housing and Community Development. DCRA is the responsible agency: it inspects properties to determine if they are vacant or blighted, and the Office of Tax and Revenue then applies the higher tax rate to the property. The OCFO employee should have known this information and been able to make the right referral.

Recommendations

1. The Mayor should issue customer service standards that (a) update standards for written and telephone communication issued during the Williams administration,¹⁸ and (b) match service levels attained by leading public and private-sector organizations. Two federal executive orders – Executive Order 12862, “Setting Customer Service Standards,” issued by President Clinton on September 14, 1993, and Executive Order 13571, “Streamlining Service Delivery and Improving Customer Service,” issued by President Obama on April 27, 2011 – could serve as useful resources.
2. The Mayor, City Administrator, and agency directors should implement and enforce clear time frames for responding to telephone, e-mail, and written requests for information or assistance. Employees’ failure to respond to customer service requests on a timely basis should be reflected in their performance evaluations.
3. The Mayor, City Administrator, and agency heads should ensure that customer service goals, measures, and results are included in annual performance plans and reports (required by D.C. Law 11-16, the “Government Managers Accountability Amendment Act of 1995”) in order to promote consistent, high-quality service.
4. Agencies should use external assessments (such as customer surveys) of customer service or independent verification of customer service data, whenever possible, in order to ensure that the data are valid and reliable.
5. Agencies should make greater use of scripts or templates that explain how to respond to common questions or problems in order to ensure more consistent and accurate responses to customer service requests, while training employees to adapt these guides as necessary to reflect the particulars of each case.
6. Agencies should emphasize the need for high-quality “end-to-end” service that responds to the full scope of a customer’s problem or request and provides specific information rather than generic information (such as an agency’s website address). These principles should be reinforced in customer service training and performance evaluation for employees.

¹⁸ See Mayor’s Memorandum 2002-2, “Minimum Standards for Correspondence-based Customer Service,” dated May 14, 2002, and Mayor’s Memorandum 2003-4, “Minimum Standards for Telephone-based Customer Service,” dated February 28, 2003.

Conclusion

The District of Columbia government has made considerable efforts since the late 1990s to improve the quality of service it provides to residents, visitors, and employers who contact D.C. government agencies to seek information or assistance. The executive branch has established a single point of access (311) to handle customer service requests, set time frames for responding to different types of requests, and implemented systems to track the status of the requests.

In addition to calling 311 with a service request, residents, visitors, and employers can make service requests electronically using the Internet or a smartphone app. Agencies also provide a wealth of information to the public through their Internet sites, which not only describe available services but include phone numbers, e-mail addresses, and “Ask the Director” links. Members of the public are using these communication and service delivery channels in large numbers: in fiscal year 2015, the 311 Operations Division (part of the Office of Unified Communications) reported receiving 1.8 million calls and entering 335,000 service requests into its customer relationship management system.

Having established these systems to receive customer service requests, the District government has an obligation to ensure that residents, visitors, and employers receive courteous, effective, and efficient responses when they call 311, enter a service request electronically, or contact agencies directly. ODCA’s tests of customer service at seven large agencies with major customer service responsibilities indicate that the D.C. government has room for improvement in helping the public navigate a complex bureaucracy (comprised of more than 100 agencies) to access information or resolve problems with service delivery.

Although the service provided by D.C. government agencies in response to inquiries by ODCA testers was frequently good to excellent, the agencies did not provide high-quality service on a consistent basis. There was a troubling subset of cases in which agencies provided poor or no service, best exemplified by telephone and e-mail messages that went unanswered or promised follow-ups that did not occur. As noted in this report, ODCA’s test results may overstate the quality of customer service provided by D.C. government agencies because ODCA deliberately made its requests simple in order to avoid interfering with the normal operations of government.

The report identifies a number of ways that D.C. government agencies can more consistently achieve excellence in customer service: by updating and

enforcing customer service standards; including customer service targets and measures in annual agency performance plans and reports; using independent, external assessments of agency customer service; and developing and disseminating templates and other training tools for “front-line” customer service staff. ODCA’s finding that agency staff sometimes responded differently to identical or nearly identical inquiries suggests that more intensive training and sharing of information could yield significant improvements in the quality of customer service.

Agency Comments

On June 8, 2016, we sent a draft copy of this report to the Office of the City Administrator (OCA) and the Office of the Chief Financial Officer (OCFO) for review and written comment. OCA did not respond during the comment period and the OCFO informed us that it would not be submitting written comments.

Appendix: Summary and Examples of Agency Performance

This appendix summarizes the average customer service ratings for each of the seven agencies included in this study and also presents an example of excellent performance and poor performance by each agency in order to provide a sense of the strengths and weaknesses of the District's government's customer service operations.

1. 311 Operations Division (Office of Unified Communications)

On a five-point scale in which "1" is the lowest and "5" is the highest, 311's average ratings were 3.6 for telephone quality, 4.9 for telephone courtesy, and 3.3 for e-mail quality.

Example of excellent performance by 311:

An ODCA tester used 311's online system on September 14, 2015, to report a large pothole near 4400 36th Street, N.W. The tester was notified on September 16, 2015 that the pothole been filled, well within the 72-hour target time frame established by the 311 center. The District Department of Transportation employee who closed the case provided exemplary service by attaching screen shots of the filled pothole and providing her name. The ODCA tester went to the site and verified that the pothole had been filled.

Example of poor performance by 311:

An ODCA tester used 311's online system on October 14, 2015, to ask if he was eligible for the A'sia Sutton Smoke Alarm Program, which installs free smoke alarms in District of Columbia homes. This program is one of the featured services on the 311 Internet site. The ODCA tester did not receive any response.

2. Office of the Chief Financial Officer

On a five-point scale in which "1" is the lowest and "5" is the highest, the OCFO's average ratings were 3.9 for telephone quality, 4.4 for telephone courtesy, and 3.9 for e-mail quality.

Example of excellent performance by the OCFO:

An ODCA tester sent an e-mail to one of the OCFO's general e-mail boxes (ocfo@dc.gov) on October 19, 2015, to ask for a brochure or other written information about how to buy D.C. municipal bonds and about the range

of possible investments. Two employees responded to this inquiry within 24 hours. The first respondent promised to send information in the mail and fulfilled that promise. The second respondent provided an Internet link (www.buydcbonds.com) offering the relevant information, but also invited the tester to contact her with any additional questions after reviewing the information on the website.

Example of poor performance by the OCFO:

An ODCA tester e-mailed the OCFO on September 30, 2015 (using the “Ask the Chief Financial Officer” link at www.cfo.dc.gov) to ask about the basic requirements for becoming a lottery retailer and steps he needed to take in order to apply. In response, the OCFO advised him to visit the D.C. Lottery web site, www.dclottery.com.

3. Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs

On a five-point scale in which “1” is the lowest and “5” is the highest, DCRA’s average ratings were 3.6 for telephone quality, 3.7 for telephone courtesy, and 4.3 for e-mail quality.

Example of excellent performance by DCRA:

An ODCA tester called DCRA’s main number (442-4400) on October 14, 2015, to ask for a pamphlet or brochure that summarizes D.C.’s green building laws and regulations. The customer service representative gave the caller the number of a program support specialist in the green building unit, who followed up on a voice message and eventually provided an e-mail link to information about the green building program (www.buildgreendc.org). The program support specialist also concluded the e-mail message by inviting the caller to follow up with him on any questions he had after reviewing the website material.

Example of poor performance by DCRA:

An ODCA tester called DCRA’s main number (442-4400) on November 5, 2015, to ask how to get a building plat for his property. The tester used the automated prompts to describe his request and was transferred to the surveyor’s office, where he left a voice message asking for the relevant information. Even though the voice-mail message promised that calls would be returned within 24 hours or the next business day, the caller did not receive a response.

4. Metropolitan Police Department

On a five-point scale in which “1” is the lowest and “5” is the highest, MPD’s average ratings were 4.4 for telephone quality, 4.7 for telephone courtesy, and 4.5 for e-mail quality.

Example of excellent performance by MPD:

An ODCA tester sent an e-mail to MPD's Financial and Cyber Crimes Unit (mpd.fraud-unit@dc.gov) to request information about how to file a police report about an apparent case of identity theft. A detective responded one minute later and summarized the options for filing a report of identity theft.

Example of poor performance by MPD:

An ODCA tester sent an e-mail to MPD's general e-mail box (mpd@dc.gov) on September 30, 2015, asking about the time and place for Citizen's Advisory Council meetings in her police district (7D). She was advised to call the police district to for the relevant information.

5. D.C. Public Schools

On a five-point scale in which "1" is the lowest and "5" is the highest, DCPS' average ratings were 3.5 for telephone quality, 4.3 for telephone courtesy, and 3.9 for e-mail quality.

Example of excellent performance by DCPS:

An ODCA tester used the e-mail address for DCPS job inquiries (dcps.careers@dc.gov) to request information on October 19, 2015, about the process for filling mid-year teaching position vacancies and how to get an application. DCPS immediately responded with a message acknowledging the inquiry; providing e-mail addresses tailored for master educator, instructional coach, counselor, substitute teacher, principal, and assistant principal applications; and describing a glitch with the recruitment website. DCPS then followed up later the same day with a message containing a link for mid-year teaching applications and details about how to apply.

Example of poor performance by DCPS:

An ODCA tester sent an e-mail to DCPS' Office of Food and Nutrition Services (food.dcps@dc.gov) on October 22, 2015, to request an application for free or reduced-price school breakfasts and lunches for her child, who would be enrolling at Savoy Elementary School. She also asked if applications were necessary for the program at all schools. DCPS responded by providing her with a link to the school lunch application, but did not say whether applications are required at all schools. In fact, Savoy Elementary School is one of 84 DCPS schools where applications for free lunches were not required for 2015-2016.

6. Department of Human Services

On a five-point scale in which “1” is the lowest and “5” is the highest, DHS’s average ratings were 3.5 for telephone quality, 3.4 for telephone courtesy, and 2.6 for e-mail quality.

Example of excellent performance by DHS:

An ODCA tester concerned about his truant son e-mailed DHS’ Parent and Adolescent Support Services program (dhs.pass@dc.gov) on October 26, 2015, to ask about services offered and eligibility requirements. A supervisory social worker followed up several times by phone and e-mail to offer to discuss the family situation.

Example of poor performance by DHS:

An ODCA tester called DHS’ main number (671-4200) on November 17, 2015, to ask about the types of assistance provided through the agency’s Emergency Rental Assistance Program. The employee who answered the call told the caller to contact the Virginia Williams Family Resource Center. The caller contacted the Virginia Williams Family Resource Center and was told to contact the Community Partnership for the Homeless. The caller contacted the Community Partnership for the Homeless and finally got the information he sought.

7. Department of Public Works

On a five-point scale in which “1” is the lowest and “5” is the highest, DPW’s average ratings were 3.1 for telephone quality, 3.9 for telephone courtesy, and 4.0 for e-mail quality.

Example of excellent performance by DPW:

An ODCA tester e-mailed on November 2, 2015 DPW (using the “Ask the Director” link at www.dpw.dc.gov), to ask how and where to dispose of a desktop computer. He received a response the same day providing information about how and when to dispose of unwanted electronics at the Fort Totten Transfer Station.

Example of poor performance by DPW:

An ODCA tester who described herself as a new homeowner in the District e-mailed DPW on November 3, 2015 (using the “Ask the Director” link at www.dpw.dc.gov), to ask about the schedule for leaf collection and how she should prepare leaves for pickup by DPW. After receiving no response, she e-mailed DPW once again on November 17, 2015, but still did not receive a response.

022:16:JJ:cm:LP:KP