



CITY OF HOUSTON

Annise D. Parker
City Controller

Mayor's Office

3-1-1 Houston Service Helpline

Performance Audit

Submitted by:
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September 28, 2005

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Certified Public Accountants
Report No. 05-29



OFFICE OF THE CITY CONTROLLER
CITY OF HOUSTON
TEXAS

ANNISE D. PARKER

October 27, 2005

The Honorable Bill White, Mayor
City of Houston, Texas

SUBJECT: Mayor's Office 3-1-1 Houston Service Helpline
Performance Audit (Report No. 05-29)

Dear Mayor White:

I am pleased to submit to you this independent Performance Audit of the Mayor's Office 3-1-1 Houston Service Helpline (Helpline) that was conducted by Mir Fox & Rodriguez, P.C. (MFR). The purpose of the engagement was to assess operational practices, resources, technology tools, training practices, organizational structure, and management practices to provide recommendations for improving the quality of the processes and the efficiency and effectiveness of Helpline functions. MFR also conducted an employee survey and a customer satisfaction survey to assess operational functions and performance.

The report identified observations, recommendations, commendations, and savings. The auditors noted that the Helpline is working effectively and efficiently in most respects pertaining to the organization and related functions. Opportunities for improvement were noted in several areas including the abandoned call rate; operating hours and scheduling; employee morale and reporting. Draft copies of the matters contained in the report were provided to Helpline management. The views of the responsible officials as to actions being taken are appended to the report as Exhibit 1.

We enjoyed working with the Helpline employees and appreciate their cooperation with MFR during this audit.

Respectfully submitted,

Annise D. Parker
City Controller

xc: City Council Members
Anthony Hall, Chief Administrative Officer
Michael Moore, Chief of Staff, Mayor's Office
Gloria Bingham, Director, Mayor's Office 3-1-1 Houston Service Helpline
Judy Gray Johnson, Director, Finance and Administration Department

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September 28, 2005

The Honorable Annise D. Parker
City Controller
City of Houston
901 Bagby, 8th Floor
Houston, TX 77002

Dear Controller Parker:

Mir•Fox & Rodriguez, P.C. (MFRPC) has completed our performance audit and independent assessment of the City of Houston (City) Mayor's Office 3-1-1 Houston Service Helpline (Helpline) as outlined in the engagement letter dated February 16, 2005 under City of Houston Contract No. 56546.

The purpose of our audit was to assess operational practices, resources, technology tools, training practices, organizational structure, and management practices to help ensure the functions and resources are being utilized as effectively and efficiently as possible.

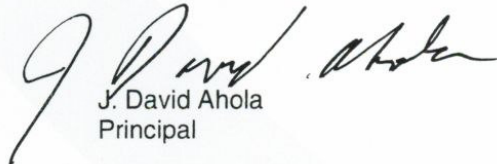
The audit noted that the Helpline is working effectively and efficiently in most respects pertaining to the organization and related functions. However, opportunities for improvements are possible in several areas, including the abandoned call rate, operating hours and scheduling, employee morale, and reporting.

Our observations, issues, commendations, cost savings, and recommendations noted in this report are those that came to our attention based upon the inquiries and procedures we performed through June 29, 2005. Additionally, management responses are included in Exhibit 1 of the report.

This report is intended solely for the information and use of the City and Office of the City Controller, and is not intended to be used for any other purpose. MFRPC is pleased to have been given the opportunity to work on this engagement, and we appreciate the cooperation given us by the Controller's Office as well as those in the Helpline.

Very truly yours,

Mir•Fox & Rodriguez, P.C.



J. David Ahola
Principal

3-1-1 Houston Service Helpline

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Executive Summary

MFRPC was engaged to perform a performance audit of the Mayor's Office 3-1-1 Houston Service Helpline by the City Controller in the February 16, 2005 engagement letter pursuant to Contract No. 56546, approved by City Council Ordinance No. 04-1296.

Scope and Objectives

The purpose of this performance audit was to perform an independent assessment of the Helpline by examining operational areas within the Helpline. The engagement began February 3, 2005 and the field work was concluded June 29, 2005. The primary objectives included the following:

- Examine and assess operational practices, resources, technology tools, and training practices to provide recommendations for improving the coordination, efficiency and effectiveness of Helpline functions.
- Assess the organization's structure and management practices to help ensure all available resources are being utilized as effectively as possible.
- Provide practical recommendations for improving the quality of the processes and the overall cost efficiency and deployment of resources related to Helpline operations.
- Determine the overall adequacy of the Helpline's systems of internal control as related to the Helpline processes.

Assessment

The Helpline is working effectively and efficiently in most respects as follows:

- The Helpline does provide a means for the City's citizens to make contact with their City Government, and the majority of those who use the service have been satisfied with their experience.
- The Helpline handles over 2 million communications a year, consisting not only of normal telephone calls, but also e-mails.
- The Helpline is also utilizing a web enabled solution for those citizens who want to use that capability.
- The Helpline has assembled a team of professionals who are committed to providing excellent customer service to the citizens.
- The Call Takers are trained to handle various situations which arise. These situations include areas such as an Amnesty program from the Municipal Court system, health concerns like immunizations and heat advisories, and emergency situations such as weather warnings.

Commendations

MFRPC would like to commend the efforts of the Helpline as it is well known throughout the United States, and is being offered as a model solution for other Cities to follow. Additionally, the Director should be commended as follows:

- The Director should be commended for being asked to make presentations at various conferences throughout the United States on how to successfully initiate a 3-1-1 call center.
- The Director receives many inquires and requests relating to sharing of information in various areas, including calculation of costs per call taken, hours of operation, staffing, training, routing of emergency calls, standard operating procedures, and others.
- The Director is known as a great resource by city governments throughout the nation, including New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Kansas City, Albuquerque, Baltimore, Austin, Miami, and others.
- The Director has been asked to make presentations to a number of groups, including the U.S. Department of Justice Office of Community Oriented Policing Service, National Community Policing Conference, National Crime Prevention Council, Leadership Houston, the Association of Public-Safety Communications Officials, and others.

Additionally, effective June 1st, the Helpline now has an online, web based solution which enables Citizens to alert the City of problems and issues at any time of the day or night. This process includes an e-mail confirming receipt of the notice, a Service Request number which can be used to track the problem, and an estimated time of resolution of the problem. Various comments regarding this new process have been favorable. In one instance, a Citizen's request via this online, web based solution resulted in a service crew being dispatched within an hour.



Opportunities for Improvement - Recommendations

During our performance audit we identified the following areas that could be improved:

- Reduce the abandoned call rate goal of 8% per week to 4%.
- Save approximately \$800,000 by adjusting the operational hours of the Helpline.
- Revise the ethnic mix of the workforce to reflect the diversity of the 3-1-1 customer base in the City.
- Improve the morale of the Call Takers at the Helpline by considering opportunities to work together while off the phones.
- Improve communications within the Helpline to better help inform the Call Takers.
- Improve communications between the Helpline and other City departments.

Mayor's Office

3-1-1 Houston Service Helpline

Performance Audit

Background

The Helpline began operations in August of 2001. Its mission is to provide access to City services and be a communication tool to help provide customer service to the City's citizens. A Federal grant helped create the Helpline, including funds to assist in the purchase of the necessary infrastructure and equipment.

In 1996, then President Bill Clinton had challenged the Department of Justice, law enforcement agencies, and the private sector to adopt a methodology to keep the 9-1-1 systems from being over-congested. The Federal Communications Commission established the 3-1-1 number as a start of that effort, with this number to be used specifically for non-emergency contact to local government service.

Relieving 9-1-1 congestion was just the beginning for the 3-1-1 services. More efficient access to City services is an additional benefit now being enjoyed by the City's citizens as many contact telephone numbers are consolidated into 3-1-1.

The 3-1-1 task force formed by then Mayor Lee Brown found the benefits of the 3-1-1 system to include:

- Providing a single easy-to-use number to access multiple City services
- Consolidating various non-emergency call centers into one, standardized and centralized intake system
- Reducing the non-emergency calls and inquiries to 9-1-1
- Implementing customer service standards that would be effective and efficient for all City departments
- Providing a methodology to measure citizen's satisfaction with services



The original budget for the start up of the Helpline was \$1.7 million plus a Federal grant of approximately \$637,000. The fiscal year 2004 budget was approximately \$3.6 million which is much less than the estimated budget of approximately \$5 million for the different call centers that existed at the time of the 3-1-1 Call Center Task Force study. The fiscal year 2005 budget was approximately \$4.1 million.

Today, the Helpline uses two major computer systems to track calls as follows:

- Genesys which tracks calls from the time the call comes in until completion.
- The Customer Service Request (CSR) system which creates the service request noted by the call and tracks the necessary service to completion.

Performance Audit Objectives

The purpose of this performance audit was to perform an independent assessment of the Helpline by examining operational areas within the department. The primary objectives included the following:

- Examining and assessing operational practices, resources, technology tools, and training practices to provide recommendations for improving the coordination, efficiency and effectiveness of the Helpline's functions.
- Assessing the organization's structure and management practices to help ensure all available resources are being utilized as effectively as possible.
- Providing practical recommendations for improving the quality of the processes and the overall cost efficiency and deployment of resources related to Helpline operations.
- Determining the overall adequacy of the Helpline's systems of internal control as related to the Helpline's processes.

Performance Audit Approach

Our approach to the work plan included steps as follows:

- Obtained and became familiar with applicable Federal, State, and Local laws, codes, ordinances, and guidelines related to the performance of the Helpline's activities.
- Compared appropriate performance standards to actual performance.
- Reviewed the overall internal control processes.
- Compared budgeted amounts to actual amounts expended for FY 2004 and FY 2005.
- Performed a risk assessment to identify the potential areas of noncompliance.
- Selected a sample of Helpline records and performed tests to ensure that policies and procedures as well as internal controls were in place, working as intended, and were being followed.
- Benchmarked the Helpline's performance with other cities, both within Texas and throughout the country, when feasible.

Overall Assessment

The Helpline is working effectively and efficiently in most respects. The Helpline does provide a means for the City's citizens to make contact with their City Government, and the majority of those who use the service have been satisfied with their experience. The Helpline handles over two million communications a year, consisting not only of normal telephone calls, but also e-mails. The Helpline is also utilizing a web enabled solution for those citizens who want to use that capability. The Helpline has assembled a team of professionals who are committed to providing excellent customer service to the citizens. The Call Takers are trained to handle various situations which arise. These situations include areas such as an Amnesty program from the Municipal Court system, health concerns like immunizations and heat advisories, and emergency situations such as weather warnings. The Helpline is well known throughout the United States, and is being offered as a model solution for other cities to follow.



Opportunities for Improvement

We noted opportunities for improvements, and those are explained as we continue our report on the pages which follow.

Abandoned Calls

Observation

Abandoned calls are those situations in which a call comes into the Helpline and the call is not responded to by the Helpline. This most often occurs when the caller hangs up, presumably because the caller is no longer interested in staying on hold. Per the management of the Helpline, an overall rate of 8% per week was felt to be the acceptable and normal rate.

A questionnaire was sent to other cities with 3-1-1 Centers, and they were asked to provide their statistics for abandoned calls. Several cities responded, and here is the information that they provided:

City	Target Abandoned Call Rate	Actual Rate Noted
Los Angeles	5.00%	2.00%
Chicago	5.00%	6.00%
Baltimore	2.00%	1.70%
New York	Not Provided	4.00%
Houston	8.00%	7.65%

We analyzed data for the period of January 1 through May 14, 2005 to gain an understanding of the Helpline's current abandoned call rate. The range of abandoned calls were as follows:

Day of the Week	Lowest Rate Noted	Highest Rate Noted
Sunday	5.71%	41.90%
Monday	2.21%	10.49%
Tuesday	2.23%	7.71%
Wednesday	1.46%	6.94%
Thursday	2.90%	10.50%
Friday	1.98%	13.07%
Saturday	2.12%	28.00%

The average daily rates for the same period of January 1 through May 14, 2005 were follows:

Day of the Week	Average Daily Rate Noted
Sunday	11.50%
Monday	6.76%
Tuesday	5.06%
Wednesday	3.53%
Thursday	5.24%
Friday	5.55%
Saturday	15.93%
Average	7.65%

The highest rates occur on the weekends, the days with the fewest number of Call Takers working. And the lowest rate on Wednesday is directly related to having the largest number of Call Takers working.

Through discussions with the Director of the Helpline, we learned that Supervisors, Managers, and even the Director have to occasionally answer phone calls because of the lack of available staff combined with heavy call volumes.



Recommendation

It is clear that the higher abandoned call rate is directly related to the number of Call Takers working, so to reduce the abandoned call rate, more Call Takers should be scheduled on the weekends. Additionally, to improve the service level, we recommend that the overall weekly rate of 8% be reduced to 4%. The management of the Helpline should assure that the staff be scheduled to meet this goal.

Scheduling

Observation

The responsibility for scheduling has been given to one of the supervisors in the Helpline. The supervisor is responsible for preparing the shift rotation schedule, and has had that assignment since the Helpline began. Each schedule is in effect for an eight week period. For example, we were provided the schedule covering the period of March 26 through May 20, 2005. Once the shift rotation schedule has been finalized, a copy is given to each employee. The process to create the next schedule starts about three to four weeks before the end of the existing schedule.

The primary resources used to create the schedule include the prior schedule, the Work Force Manager (WFM) report, the Contact Center Analyzer Queues Daily Report, CCA Volume Reports, and management's own input and experience. The vacation schedule is also considered. When the Helpline opened in 2001, the Call Takers on staff at that time were given the list of available shifts, and asked to select a first and second choice. Based on their replies and perceived need, the original shift groups were established. As new Call Takers are certified, they are also asked for their shift preference. This placement is determined by a combination of individual preferences, and needs for Call Takers on a particular shift. In most cases, the Call Takers will stay on the same shift from one rotation to the next.

Most of the Call Takers work from Monday through Friday; the first shift arrives at 6:00 A.M., and the last shift leaves at midnight. When a Call Taker is on the weekend shift, he or she typically is scheduled to work either Monday through Wednesday or Wednesday through Friday in addition to Saturday and Sunday. As a result, the Helpline is fully staffed on Wednesdays, with Mondays and Tuesdays being the next well-staffed days.

The major changes from one schedule to the next are caused by the need to schedule for weekends. While the weekend call volume is less than during the weekdays, it is apparent that calls do occur. There are approximately 14 Call Takers, 2 of which are generally more experienced, that work weekends over the eight week period. Each supervisor takes his or her turn working the weekend shift as well. The Call Takers are not paid an increased amount for the weekend shift, and have two days off during the regular workweek. Once one rotation has been completed, the weekend employees are given the opportunity to work an additional second eight week period.

There is a shift differential for the Call Takers who work the evening shift. This goes into effect for shifts beginning from noon through midnight.

There are occasions when additional Call Takers are needed. An example of this is during the month of "Amnesty", a period in which there is an opportunity for those citizens who have outstanding tickets and citations to come forward and take care of their fines so that "failure to appear" issues are forgiven. During this period, there is an increased volume of calls leading to a need for more Call Takers than during a regular month.

WFM, a component of Genesys, can be used to produce reports that predict staffing levels, showing the projections using a bar chart. Using the chart, management can identify periods during which there are under-staffing and over-staffing issues, and adjustments can be made accordingly. If the demand calls for an immediate change, employees will be moved between shifts to cover the shortage.

Employees can request vacation using the City of Houston Form 206. When an employee wants to schedule vacation, he or she is asked to review the vacation calendar. No more than three Call Takers can schedule vacation on any given day, and only one Call Taker is allowed to be off for the evening shift. Once an employee verifies that their preferred vacation time is available, he or she completes Form 206, stamps it using the time clock, and turns it into a supervisor. During the weekday shifts, there is rarely a need for additional personnel to cover employees on vacation. When a weekend employee wants to take vacation, another employee will be scheduled to take his or her place as the effect is considered to be more pronounced. In any event no employee can be absent more that two weekends during his or her period on weekend duty.

The reports available from the Genesys WFM are underutilized for scheduling. We were informed that the management of the Helpline has not been fully trained on some the capabilities of WFM. Training is offered in San Francisco, and it has been difficult to send management for training based on budget constraints. Another report known as the CCA Agents Daily Report provides inbound call volumes for each Call Taker, and this report also provides crucial information to assist with scheduling.

Many of the Call Takers work a Monday to Friday, 8 A.M. to 5 P.M. schedule. However, the call data seems to show that there should be more Call Takers starting earlier than 8 A.M. as well as more working after 5 P.M. More importantly, the call data indicates that there should be more Call Takers scheduled on Saturday. Our conclusions are taken from the call data and various reports provided. Even though the management of the Helpline is aware of this data, and may use it to some extent, it appears that the data is not being used effectively.



Recommendation

In order to reduce costs, significant changes should be made in the operating schedule of the Helpline. The Helpline is currently staffed from 6:00 A.M. until 12:00 A.M., seven days a week. It is our recommendation that the Helpline should be open fewer hours daily. Based upon the samples provided and our analysis, the call volume is greatest between 7:00 A.M. and 7:00 P.M. Monday through Friday. Please see the graph provided on page 47 of this report. Additionally, calls on Saturday and Sunday are significantly less than during the week, so the Helpline should consider operating fewer hours such as 8:00 A.M. until 5:00 P.M. and we propose that the Helpline be closed on Holidays. There are several approaches available to handle those calls when the Helpline is closed. The caller may leave a voice mail message or the caller can be referred to the Helpline's web site. We estimate this change would result in annual savings of approximately \$800,000. The employees would favor this change, resulting in less staff turnover. Additional savings would also be realized by the elimination of shift differentials.



Diversity in the Workforce

Observation

We made an observation that the diversity of the current workforce within the Helpline does not seem to parallel the diversity of the population in the City. Houston is a widely diverse international city with citizens from around the world with varying English skills. Please refer to the Employee Survey and the related comments for additional information.

Recommendation

More consideration of diversity within the Helpline should take place as positions become available, not only for Call Takers but also management positions. Additional consideration should be made to provide Call Takers with various bilingual skills to better serve those from other parts of the world.

Morale in the Helpline

Observation

As a part of the performance audit, MFRPC conducted an employee survey of the Helpline's employees. An independent firm that was subcontracted by MFRPC compiled a list of approximately 30 questions for the employee survey. Each respondent to the survey was asked to rate each question by using the following possible responses:

- "5" to indicate that they "Strongly Agree",
- "4" to indicate that they "Agree",
- "3" to indicate that they "Neither Agree or Disagree",
- "2" to indicate that they "Disagree", and
- "1" to indicate that they "Strongly Disagree".

There were two employee surveys conducted during our engagement. The first survey took place in May 2005. The surveys were given to the employees with no apparent consideration of control to make certain that one individual responded only one time. In a meeting on May 31st, the management of the Helpline voiced concern that the survey results would not be accurate as the Helpline's management suspected that employees had created a significant negative impact by responding multiple times. As a result, a second survey was conducted with new controls which MFRPC developed, including a system of unique serial numbers on each page of the documents, and the use of MFRPC stationary. The management of the Helpline assumed the control of passing out one survey per employee. The survey form used for both surveys encouraged employees to write additional comments on various areas of the Helpline.

The results of the second survey were very similar to the results of the first survey. There were no apparent significant differences. Both surveys indicated that there was a lack of morale on the part of certain employees in the Helpline. Additionally, as was determined during various Focus Groups conducted during the audit, it is the belief of some of those who work in the Helpline that the management of the Helpline creates a stressful environment caused by the management style used.

According to the surveys, there were individuals in the Helpline who do not respect some of those in management. This lack of respect causes undue stress to some of those who work in the Helpline. Call Takers indicated to us that they view some of the supervisors as being much more helpful than others, and the staff is more likely to rely on those supervisors than others. It was communicated to us that some supervisors are demeaning and belittling. It was also mentioned to us that some of the Senior Call Takers would like the Supervisors to delegate more duties.

Certain comments in the surveys were made regarding the management of the Helpline that included an indication that certain supervisors were more flexible and forgiving of the rules while others were not. Rules were not applied equally. Staff is somewhat distrustful of management.

The strict dress code in the Helpline was mentioned by some employees in their survey responses; however, during the audit we noted that the dress code appears reasonable under the circumstances. There are visitors touring the Helpline from time to time, and business attire is appropriate for those occasions. The employees have several opportunities during the week to dress down, including wearing the Helpline's official polo shirts 2 days weekly, and they can be casual on Friday, Saturday and Sunday.

According to the surveys, there were several positive comments including ones related to the Activity Based Compensation (ABC) program. Several employees felt very comfortable and satisfied with the work environment, and felt that it was like a "family", and that they could easily approach management for advice.

Recommendation

We would recommend that management take positive steps to improve morale for those who are discontented. Management should be consistent in the way that employees are treated, and inconsistent treatment must not be allowed. As mentioned earlier, based upon the survey, there was a strong indication that employees were not being treated equally.

The management of the Helpline must be united and consistent in both appearance and in fact. For those employees in the Helpline who simply cannot be made happy, it would be best for those individuals to consider another job by transferring to another City department or resigning from the City.

There needs to be positive steps taken to improving the morale at the Helpline, and uniting everyone to perform the common goal of serving the citizens. Positive steps would include retreats, getaways, coming together to work on certain charities. Motivational presentations may be useful. The City has many training resources available to assist with these issues.

Communication within the Helpline

Observation

The most important function of the Helpline is to provide a means to communicate between the citizens and City government. However, the communication within the Helpline is lacking. There is a great deal of communication by e-mail, but the e-mails are sometimes difficult to read on the "run" as the Call Takers are on the telephones. A system exists to provide constant updates on a banner which runs on the bottom of the computer screens used by the Call Takers. The database containing current updates of new information needed by the Call Takers is being constantly updated; however, for the Call Taker to view the latest information, they must sign off their workstation and sign back in. It is our understanding that regularly scheduled team or staff meetings are inconsistent and infrequent. Some supervisors have regular meetings with their team while others do not.

Recommendation

Management should have regular meetings to update their teams. Regular meetings should be the norm, and not a random occurrence. Ongoing training is also a very efficient way to facilitate communication within the Helpline. Additionally, the banner which runs along the bottom of the computer screen should be utilized more to communicate significant current event topics. When the database is updated, the information should be made available immediately to the Call Takers without the step of signing off their workstations.

Communication with Other City Departments

Observation

Communication within the Helpline is very important while communication with other City departments is critical. The Helpline appears to have significant problems with communication with other City departments. There needs to be better communication within the City department to department. Problems may arise when a department has an event, and the event information is not shared with the Helpline. Many of the problems handled by the Helpline are not followed up on by the responsible City department on a timely basis, or the department may fail to inform the citizen of the current status of the problem. For example, further action may be needed to complete the service order, by that is not communicated to the citizen. This causes the customers (the citizens of the City) to perceive the Helpline as not doing their job.

Recommendation

We recommend that a cross selling type of campaign be undertaken by the Helpline, so that the other City departments are made aware of what the Helpline is designed to accomplish. This could be done in various ways including on the internet, the City cable channel as well as through printed media.

Another solution is for the Call Takers to become more familiar with other City departments through the use of field trips. For example, allow them to follow a service request through the process and into the field.

All City departments need better follow-up on the problems phoned into the Helpline. It does not appear that the other City departments follow a protocol, policy and procedure for handling the problems that come to them from the Helpline. During our engagement, we heard several times that other City departments should improve their customer service skills.

And finally, the management of the Helpline can use their training and skills to become the City's experts on providing quality customer service to the entire City.

Summary of Employee Survey

As we previously discussed in this report, two surveys were provided to the employees of the Helpline. The first one took place in May 2005 and the second survey took place in June 2005.

The tables below show the results of both surveys. In the first survey, 90 surveys were distributed, and 65 were completed and returned, or 72%. For the second survey, 87 were distributed, and 56, or 64%, were completed and returned.

The responses range from "5" meaning "Strongly Agree", "4" meaning "Agree", "3" meaning "Neither Agree nor Disagree", "2" meaning "Disagree", and "1" meaning "Strongly Disagree". An average of "3.00" or higher would generally indicate a level of agreement with the survey question. The surveys have been reviewed and tabulated, and the amounts shown reflect the overall average response to each of the questions.

You will note that the average response in the first survey is higher than that of the second in all but one question.

You will also note in the tables which follow that there is not a significant difference between the first and second survey for most questions.

A response of "3" indicates neither agreement nor disagreement with the various questions on the survey, while an average response of below 3 indicates disagreement or strong disagreement. Based upon the responses, it appears that the Call Takers are not satisfied with their job. It also appears that there is a general lack of team spirit in the Helpline.

The following table reflects the responses noted by all participants in the Helpline, including Call Takers, Administrative Support, and Management.

Your Job	First Survey	Second Survey	Change
1. My job is challenging	4.22	3.60	-.62
2. My skills are effectively used in my current position	4.05	3.30	-.75
3. The job orientation I received was effective	3.97	3.15	-.82
4. The workload is reasonable	3.38	2.88	-.50
5. The work environment is safe, comfortable	3.80	3.16	-.64
6. The work environment is appropriately equipped	3.78	3.36	-.42
7. I am provided with enough training to do my job properly	3.74	3.25	-.49
8. I am provided with enough information to do my job properly	3.82	3.13	-.69
9. I understand what is expected of me in the workplace	4.03	3.36	-.67
10. High quality work is stressed	3.77	3.34	-.43
11. There is a high degree of team spirit on my job	2.86	2.40	-.46
12. My job provides equal opportunities for all employees	2.98	2.73	-.25

Your Managers/Supervisors	First Survey	Second Survey	Change
13. Managers/Supervisors give fair and equal treatment to all employees	2.52	2.40	-.12
14. Managers/Supervisors are available to discuss job related issues	3.26	2.90	-.36
15. Managers/Supervisors welcome suggestions and feedback	3.03	2.73	-.30
16. Managers/Supervisors tell employees how they are doing	3.45	3.15	-.30
17. Managers/Supervisors have trust and confidence in their staff	3.11	2.79	-.32
18. Managers/Supervisors give recognition for improvement and achievement	3.98	2.91	-1.07
19. Managers/Supervisors encourage cooperation in the workplace	3.14	2.96	-.18
20. Managers/Supervisors provide development and training opportunities	3.02	3.12	.10
21. Managers/Supervisors offer assistance for various job advancement opportunities	N/A	2.43	N/A
22. Managers/Supervisors practice fair and consistent policies and procedures	2.78	2.46	-.32
23. Staff have trust and confidence in their managers/supervisors	2.66	2.27	-.39

Satisfaction with Your Job	First Survey	Second Survey	Change
24. I am satisfied with my salary	2.54	2.18	-.36
25. My compensation matches my responsibilities	2.63	2.21	-.42
26. I am empowered to influence the quality of my work	3.25	3.68	.43
27. I am comfortable with the professionalism of my co-workers	3.27	3.38	.11
28. I am able to achieve balance between my work and my family life	3.42	3.47	.05
29. I enjoy the physical working environment	3.15	3.35	.20
30. I am satisfied with the City as a place to work	3.56	3.94	.38
31. Overall, how would you rate your job experience	2.96	3.29	.33

The next group of tables reflects the responses from the Call Takers working at the Helpline. It's interesting that the average response appears to have slightly increased in the second survey in all but six questions. However, there is not an overall significant difference between the first and second survey for most questions.

Your Job	First Survey	Second Survey	Change
1. My job is challenging	4.13	4.44	.31
2. My skills are effectively used in my current position	3.98	4.06	.08
3. The job orientation I received was effective	3.92	3.88	-.04
4. The workload is reasonable	3.23	3.15	-.08
5. The work environment is safe, comfortable	3.62	3.47	-.15
6. The work environment is appropriately equipped	3.71	4.03	.32
7. I am provided with enough training to do my job properly	3.81	4.06	.25
8. I am provided with enough information to do my job properly	3.79	3.88	.09
9. I understand what is expected of me in the workplace	4.04	4.00	-.04
10. High quality work is stressed	3.77	4.00	.23
11. There is a high degree of team spirit on my job	2.73	2.88	.15
12. My job provides equal opportunities for all employees	2.79	3.32	.53

Your Managers/Supervisors	First Survey	Second Survey	Change
13. Managers/Supervisors give fair and equal treatment to all employees	2.29	2.71	.42
14. Managers/Supervisors are available to discuss job related issues	3.12	3.38	.26
15. Managers/Supervisors welcome suggestions and feedback	2.87	3.15	.28
16. Managers/Supervisors tell employees how they are doing	3.35	3.76	.41
17. Managers/Supervisors have trust and confidence in their staff	2.94	3.32	.38
18. Managers/Supervisors give recognition for improvement and achievement	2.90	3.32	.42
19. Managers/Supervisors encourage cooperation in the workplace	2.92	3.32	.40
20. Managers/Supervisors provide development and training opportunities	2.85	3.71	.86
21. Managers/Supervisors offer assistance for various job advancement opportunities	N/A	2.79	N/A
22. Managers/Supervisors practice fair and consistent policies and procedures	2.54	2.71	.17
23. Staff have trust and confidence in their managers/supervisors	2.46	2.62	.16

	First Survey	Second Survey	Change
24. I am satisfied with my salary	2.58	1.96	-.62
25. My compensation matches my responsibilities	2.69	2.03	-.66
26. I am empowered to influence the quality of my work	3.40	3.06	-.34
27. I am comfortable with the professionalism of my co-workers	3.38	2.78	-.60
28. I am able to achieve balance between my work and my family life	3.54	3.12	-.42
29. I enjoy the physical working environment	3.43	2.97	-.46
30. I am satisfied with the City as a place to work	3.69	3.27	-.42
31. Overall, how would you rate your job experience	3.12	2.78	-.34

Adequate space was provided on the survey form for respondents to make individual comments. In one of the spaces, we asked “that respondents describe good things observed at the Helpline”, and here are the unedited responses in no particular order. MFRPC did not prepare these responses.

We are family. Consistency in performance appraisal EPE. Communication between management and employees has improved. Training and flow of information. Job has become less stressful for me due to the above plus my efforts to overcome some obstacles.

Many times supervisors and managers have worked with employees to help them through personal issues. As a whole, when there's a need, an employee can count on 3-1-1 to help them out. On several occasions, we have pulled together and donated funds for several employees who need monetary support.

I strongly agree with managers/supervisor duties. I think 3-1-1 management is the best managers I have ever worked under, and they have been good mentors. They are willing to work with you, listen to opinions, and make decisions when needed. Basically, they are good team builders. Building good, motivated competent teams is hard. I am happy to recommend Mr. Kendall Baker who sees his job as helping supervisors and other employees to do their job well. He is proficient in management skills, intelligent, dependable, and well organized.

We come together as a family when there is a crisis. We enjoy the people in our department. Even though we work hard, we still manage to laugh.

I love the opportunity helping people, and working with great people. Ms. Bingham is a great boss, and I love working for the City.

Promotion opportunities and the ABC program.

Family

The caring about each other. The willingness to help. Staying abreast of current events in the city. Sharing of information.

The ABC program. The training classes. Raises according to EPE. I love the fact that from the Director down, everyone is so knowledgeable and always in the position of helping. As a rule, they seem to always have the employee's best interest at hand.

Organization, teamwork, pleasant environment.

ABC compensation. Supervisors, managers, Director helping out. Training is excellent.

The people are all overall good and hardworking and most of them do not have a problem working with or helping each other.

The idea you can call one number to get assistance with City of Houston government when 75% of the time you cannot.

We have a great initial call taker and employee training program. We have great and timely follow-up training programs. The management team is very helpful and promotes an open door policy. We are always informed of all issues. Our Director exemplifies an outstanding job performance. She has the employee's best interest in mind and it shows in her actions. She believes in servicing both the internal and external customer in an efficient and professional manner. The Manager also exemplifies an outstanding job performance. He's very knowledgeable. We also have retreats, quarterly birthday celebrations, and these are morale boosters. Our EPE is always on time. I request that the management team get a "pat on the back" for such outstanding job performance.

The floor call takers really pull together to get the job done.

Strong charismatic leaders. Ms. Bingham and Mr. Baker. An emphasis on professionalism/customer service. Quality training.

I have observed that working in the 3-1-1 Call Center is very challenging. It gives you a good feeling to see people helping and trying to make a difference. Team work. I truly enjoy my job.

The things I have observed that are good directions, good management team, team work, good leadership, good co-workers who work well together.

The ABC pay as a morale booster. Rotating weekends and Holidays so everyone will have the opportunity to be with their families, and plan weekend and Holiday trips. Award ceremonies to show recognition for hard work and dedication to the department.

I am mostly satisfied because every time I have a problem at work, I will bring it up to my supervisor or manager without a problem, and they will help me work it out. Important visitors. I work around nice people. They have flexible hours. ABC program. Overtime and comp time available. Bilingual pay. Part of the Mayor's Office. Our phone number is everywhere. Wear uniforms and Friday is casual day.

Employees work together to help each other and keep spirits lifted. Employees share and are willing to cover for each other.

The way we pull together if there is a tragedy, or for a birthday.

Good humor and resiliency of most of the agents.

I have observed promotional opportunities for the staff. Time is always allotted for training. The employees rally together as a family when there are tragedies in their families. Lunch has been brought in for the group to promote morale. Counseling and mentoring employees to enhance performance. The Center is very organized and structured. With a group of this size and awesome responsibilities we have, it must not be a loose ship. Procedures and policies are followed and enforced to aide in delivering the best product. The product is to provide the best service and deliver excellent customer service.

Training is excellent. There are regular updates and weekly staff meetings. Work together as a team. Overall a very cooperative group except for 3 or 4 who are not. There's an open door policy. There are annual retreats for morale booster plus monthly dinners and birthday recognition. The customer service attitude starts from the top and is promoted downward. EPEs are always current and timely with consistent feedback. Family professional atmosphere in the center.

3-1-1 provides an enormous amount of training to its employees. Our call center employees are better versed and held to a higher standard of professionalism that most City employees. The structure of the center and the discipline required by its employees, if used anywhere else in City government, would insure exceptional service and competence in duty for our Citizens.

I think the customers say it best with positive feedback. It's very easy access oriented.

I love my co-workers, my fellow call takers. They make my job worthwhile. Plus we are able to assist a lot of citizens and make their life easier.

Rotation of weekends so no one has to work every weekend.

They hired more people, and we needed that a lot. New supervisors are very nice. People are getting more calls which is less stressful for some people. I wish all the supervisors could be like Mr. Green, responsible, caring, he listens, and he never makes us feel like we don't know anything.

One good thing which is very good is that the Center has a family environment or aura. You can always find someone whether it's a supervisor, manager, or co-worker who can play the role of a mother, father, brother, sister, or friend. And there is always someone you can turn to for help when it comes to the job.

The center has a lot of great things going for it. Our technology and resources are top-notch. We have great training opportunities, and our certification training is very beneficial, not just in terms of “learning the ropes”, but also in terms of learning how to become an overall well-rounded employee. 3-1-1 in and of itself is just a wonderful resource to have available to this City. I have had wonderful experiences while working for 3-1-1. I find the nature of the work itself to be very rewarding and I have never had a dull day. I especially enjoy being able to work on the phones, answering questions, and helping citizens resolve their problems and concerns. As in any call center, there are always areas to improve, but overall, I think that things are run effectively and fairly. My experiences have been good ones, and I feel that since starting here, I have grown professionally and personally. I am happy to be employed with 3-1-1.

We also asked for respondents on the survey form for comments on the topic of “what would be a change you would like to see made at the Helpline”, and here are those unedited responses in no particular order. MFRPC did not prepare these responses.

Flow of air in the office. Improve team spirit. More efficient means of locating solid waste collection dates for garbage, heavy trash and recycle.

It would be good to implement a Quarterly recognition of the call takers. Maybe have call takers of the Month. They all work hard in a very stressful environment and need to know that they count.

Fairness

Transfer

I would love to have better communication with other departments. Sometimes, other departments make our jobs so hard. In some situations, the customer needs attention from the department which actually handles the problem. We're all here to perform a service. Why can't we just work together? This job is so stressful, there's so much to remember each and everyday.

If all departments could follow through with our reports, our jobs would be less stressful. By them not making contact, not letting the citizen know what's going on, it makes the citizen mad and upset with us. It makes it seem like we did not do our job. People (the citizen) think we send people (employees from other city departments) out there. When they (employees from other city departments) do not do their job effectively, it affects us greatly.

No more work load please.

I would hire more managers with the professionalism of Mrs. Mares, Mr. Green, Ms. Whitaker, Ms. Olson, and show and tell the other managers to stop thinking they have the power, and to treat us all equally.

Close on Sundays. Let employees who wish to have a permanent weekend shift have it. Allow 5 people to be off on vacation (at one time).

More money.

Management should be more consistent. I would change the management team. There are too many petty rules. Management is mostly concerned about themselves. There should definitely be some changes in management.

More availability on the calendar to get vacation/time off.

The way the vacation calendar is structured; there has to be a better way.

They need to be more professional, and provide more opportunities to all races. We need to be fair and hire enough white and Hispanic employees. Most of the employees are African-American which is fine, but we need to be fair and provide equal opportunities to all. Also need more employees that speak Spanish and other languages. 3-1-1 is a great place to work; however, there is a lot of discrimination against white and Hispanic employees as well as Asian. The majority of management is African-American which like I said is fine. But we need to be fair to everyone.

No changes.

Stop acting like people who have never had power, and start acting like supervisors and a manager that cares about this job and the people that make this whole thing work as a team. You should not be told that it is not your job to help others by the management. Management makes it hard to do your work without unneeded problems. The manager should observe his behavior and compare it to other personnel. He should learn and practice responding to complaints the same as he responds to compliments. He needs more experience on how to handle comments and complaints in a professional manner, and he should not start acting mean and start picking on a person or persons. The call takers are better trained to help maintain the CSR Overview system. We should all have copies of the Rules and Regulations Manual, solid waste and recycling books, list of supervisors in the departments we work with. Professionalism is not just how a person is dressed; it's a person's method of handling different situations. 3-1-1 has a Director and manager that may be professional on paper but they are not leaders. Leaders do not sit in a lunchroom and constantly make demeaning comments of their employees in open were everyone that walks in and out can hear, and then batters an employee for telling their co-worker that their Director is speaking ugly of them. It is not professional to respond to a number of your employee's questions when asking "why" to a topic for management to respond by saying "if you don't like it you can leave". There is not anyone in the office that dresses inappropriate for this job where they should be sent home without pay. The manager says he is a reverend and this is nice, but I am constantly offended when he preaches and sings in the office. I did not choose him to be my shepherd and guide to the afterlife. If changes are not made soon, the 3-1-1 Call Center will always have high turnover. People and myself are scared they will loose their jobs if they speak to anyone in person. The backlash has already started.

I would ask for an equity increase in my salary or a promotion to my correct position. Also expand the call taker staff by ten. Also promote the service in the community.

Stop open conversations about employee's personal situations. Employees choose not to come to certain management staff because it gets back to them what was said. Everyone on the floor does not like to be ridiculed whether they smile about it or not. Social committee's assistance should change per event. Everyone that pays fees should get to rate events. Now only select few are asked to and allowed to participate.

More feedback. Regular team meetings. Haven't had a team meeting in over 3 months. No feedback from supervisors unless you do something wrong. Stronger first line managers needed. More communication between supervisors and staff.

To be compensated for all the extra service requests the Mayor is adding to our workload. The 3-1-1 team has very large shoes to fill.

I would like for the 3-1-1 call takers to visit other departments and view their operation.

We use to have retreats to relieve stress, and it should be brought back. We should receive some sort of hourly increase for each division we take on. Very stressful - a lot of information to remember.

Close on weekends and Holidays.

The supervisors are great for the most part, and I realize that their hands are tied. There is really nothing that they can do; they have little or no power. Turn the workplace into a democracy where everyone's views are heard and respected. More casual dress code to fit a call center environment. More flexible work schedule. Honest and open leadership that I could feel comfortable expressing my feelings without fear of retaliation. Leadership that respects me and listens to my needs as a person. Management who is concerned how I feel rather than how I look. Less politics. There is an environment where getting a day off to go to the doctor or to just de-stress is harder than winning the lottery. Confrontational environment. The administration does a very good job of administering the day-to-day functions of providing a good service to its citizens; however, there is a lot to be desired in the area of relating to the happiness and satisfaction of the employees. The department has a very skilled support team; however, too much time and attention is given to things that are neither a plus or minus in the delivery of service that 3-1-1 provides. Time is wasted on things that have no bearing on the quality of real operation that the department provides. You may or may not get the full picture from my peers either because they are unable to express themselves or because they fear retaliation.

The probation period.

Find a manager with a better education and much better communication skills. Create real accountability to City departments all the way up to the Director when they do not service their customers. As a fairly new-hire coming to the City from a lifetime of the private sector, I must say that I have experienced more than a little culture shock on a number of fronts. I encountered a period of a rocky relationship with the Manager which has since improved. I experienced a period of a few months where I was chastised for not always knowing what to do and asking too many questions. Because of poor communication skills of the Manager, I would ask repeated questions and rephrase his questions to insure that we both understood my assignment so as to not waste a lot of time. I was the recipient of very petty and unnecessary bad treatment on several occasions, but that has subsided. The biggest frustration is the frequent inability to actually resolve problems for the Citizens. We report and provide status for the caller and even escalate the problem to management of the respective department, yet ultimately cannot force someone in another department to do their job. The Director does amazingly well with the constraints and pressures she must operate under. She is outspoken, straightforward, and has garnered a high level of my respect.

Unfortunately, the center has been working since inception on a negativity that finds itself a part of the work group. 95% of the employees respond well to constructive feedback but like any organization you will have that 5% that doesn't respond well, and that 5% will try and recruit others. Depending on the maturity levels of those they recruit, the negativity may or may not escalate. Many of the employees came from other areas in the City where there was no structure, and the Center is run by a Policy and Procedure environment.

Management should start worrying about better things. Often call takers are called into the office and reprimanded about things that in the bigger picture are very insignificant. For example, the dress code. It really shouldn't matter what I'm wearing as long as I'm doing my job and doing it well. I shouldn't be taken off the phones to be lectured about shoes that one supervisor feels are not professional, because in that time period I could have helped 5 or 6 citizens who could care less about what my shoes look like. I would implement compromise and flexibility. For example, management should be more compromising about switching shifts. I would like more training such as going on field trips to have a better idea of what people are talking about. When you ask certain supervisors for assistance, often times you are given a major attitude or are belittled.

I feel there needs to be more professionalism in the work place. And everyone to work as a team.

More supplies are needed. Better working environment. Training needed outside of 3-1-1 such as at the City's E.B. Cape. More people allowed on the vacation calendar. Stop with the pettiness and be more professional so that the entire department will shine as a whole. New Director and Management is needed. Unfair scheduling of supervisors on Holidays – white supervisors always get the worse schedule. Why do white supervisors always get the later schedule? Not a comfortable work environment. High quality of work is not stressed, just quantity of calls. Not every call can be handled in 2 to 4 minutes. City's phone list needs to be constantly updated – it is not currently being done. Compensation does not match responsibilities. Management lacks professionalism.

I think some supervisors are racist towards Hispanics. Some supervisors make us feel like we are stupid and that some questions are ridiculous to ask. The call center telecomm should be quieter. We should have high walls to have our privacy in each cubicle. If it were like that, I think we would be much more professional.

One suggestion I would like to pass forth is if there can be some kind of workshop offered to the community and public like with civic clubs to further educate the citizens about 3-1-1. Because most of our stress as Call Takers comes from the public who thinks 3-1-1 is to blame for their service request not being taken care of. And since we're the first main contact for the citizens to the different departments, it'll be easier on us. The citizens won't jump on the phone irate and screaming at us saying that we didn't send them a supervisor. And that we didn't get the sewer problem fixed.

Although having a structured attendance policy is indisputably critical to the department, I feel that the number of allowed occurrences per year is not adequate, considering that a cumulative total does not distinguish between sick, being late past 10 minutes, or taking a full day of EV (emergency vacation) – an occurrence is an occurrence. A person who is absent for a full day (EV or S) (S = sick) has much more of an impact on the center's productivity than someone who may arrive 15 minutes late, yet the weight for each type of occurrence is the same when having to consider an employee's cumulative attendance record. Also, an employee who may be having issues with tardiness or EV may not be abusing sick leave at all, or vice versa. If I could change one thing, I think it would be considering the above, the maximum number of allowed occurrences per year be increased (for example, 12) and/or each type of occurrence be weighed/disciplined separately. For example, a person who has chronic tardy issues should receive different consequences than a person who is abusing sick/EV leave. I think it would be helpful to have an in-house 3-1-1 supervisor training program. With on-line service request capability, I think it would be to our benefit to tighten how e-mails are processed and who processes them. E-mails should be assigned to those agents who possess excellent written skills and have the dependability to perform this task with a consistent level of quality.

Not all seniors have demonstrated the ability and or desire to process e-mails. Another concern is the time clock area. I hope management will consider investing in a computer based time system that is more secure, password protected and allow discrepancies to be caught efficiently. It would also provide management with more timely data, and allow for more precise accountability for tracking breaks.

Comparison to Other 3-1-1 Call Centers

As part of the performance audit, a survey was conducted of other cities that have 3-1-1 call centers. Those cities contacted were Baltimore, Chicago, Dallas, Los Angeles, San Antonio, and New York. San Antonio did not respond to our request. For comparison purposes, the City of Houston 3-1-1 department completed the same survey.

An initial telephone contact took place with each of the cities. Questions were sent via e-mail using a Word document. The questions covered services provided, staffing, training, data processing & reporting, and Internet issues.

In general, it seems that the centers each answer different types of calls, and it was difficult to ascertain true benchmark information for call statistics.

Staffing levels seem to vary widely, with New York having the lowest percentage of call takers compared to the department on a whole. Houston is the only center that does not operate 24 hours a day, seven days a week. It appears that Houston has the most comprehensive training program. Based on the data supplied by each city, there seems to be a wide variation in the average number of calls taken each day.

Houston is the only city surveyed that has a system of incentive pay based on the number of calls taken each day. While all the cities in the survey have 3-1-1 web sites, there are varying levels of interaction between each City's web site and their 3-1-1 center. In all the responding cities except Chicago, it is possible to send service requests through the 3-1-1 web site directly to the applicable City department. Houston seems to be the only center in this survey that uses e-mail as an additional means of communication with the 3-1-1 center. New York, Dallas, and Houston are the only cities surveyed which serve the Municipal Courts. All cities offer the expected services such as pot holes, problems with water and sewer lines, trash, traffic light failures, etc. Only New York and Chicago deal with a larger call volume than Houston.

Due to the various geographic areas of these major cities, salary comparisons are difficult. However, comparing the salary information provided by Dallas to those in Houston, it does appear that the Houston salaries are higher than Dallas for call takers and lower than Dallas for supervisors and managers. Houston was the only City offering incentive pay for calls handled over established standards.

Introduction

This section describes the background of the survey and the methodology used.

Background

Decision Information Resources, Inc. (DIR) was subcontracted by Mir•Fox & Rodriguez, P.C. to conduct a customer satisfaction survey for the 3-1-1 Houston Service Helpline (Helpline).

This report presents a brief narrative of findings and conclusions from the telephone survey of 117 residents who accessed the Helpline between January and March 2005. It also presents tables for interpretation of data about the following topics:

- Timeliness of client service
- Quality of client service
- Ratings of the Helpline representatives
- Perceptions of how Helpline representatives can improve their service
- Ratings of the overall Helpline experience
- Perceptions of how the Helpline experience can be improved overall
- Client demographics

Methodology

DIR developed a telephone survey in consultation with Mir•Fox & Rodriguez, P.C. DIR conducted the surveys from its computer-automated telephone-interviewing (CATI) center. The survey sample was supplied by the City of Houston from a database of residents who had accessed the Helpline between January 2005 and March 2005.

DIR completed a total of 117 surveys. To review a copy of the survey instrument, see pages 42 – 45.

Survey Findings

This section presents findings about

- Demographic characteristics of the respondents to the Helpline survey
- Respondents' experiences in accessing the Helpline
- Respondents' perceptions of their experience with the Helpline representative
- Respondents' overall satisfaction with the Helpline

Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents to the Helpline Survey

Data were collected from survey respondents on a variety of demographic characteristics, including age, total household income, ethnicity, and gender. The respondents' demographic characteristics are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Survey Respondents

	Number	%
Age		
18–24 years old	2	2
25–34 years old	27	23
35–54 years old	48	41
55 years old and above	39	33
Refused	2	<1
Total Household Income		
Less than \$14,999	8	7
\$15,000–\$24,999	3	3
\$25,000–\$34,999	6	5
\$35,000–\$49,999	17	15
\$50,000–\$74,999	12	10
\$75,000–\$99,999	6	5
\$100,000 and above	15	13
Missing or refused	50	42
Ethnicity		
Caucasian	42	37
African American	43	36
Hispanic	26	22
Asian American	3	5
Other	3	3
Missing/Refused	0	0
Gender		
Male	58	50
Female	57	49
Missing	2	1

We derived the following conclusions about demographic characteristics:

-
-
- The majority of respondents were 35 years and above.
 - Forty-three percent of survey respondents had a total household income of \$35,000 or higher.
 - Minorities comprised more than half of the survey respondents.
 - The percentages of male and female were relatively the same.

A total of 65 Zip codes were reported. No significant concentration of respondents resided in any specific Zip code. The largest percentage of respondents lived in 77035 (5%) and 77096 (4%).

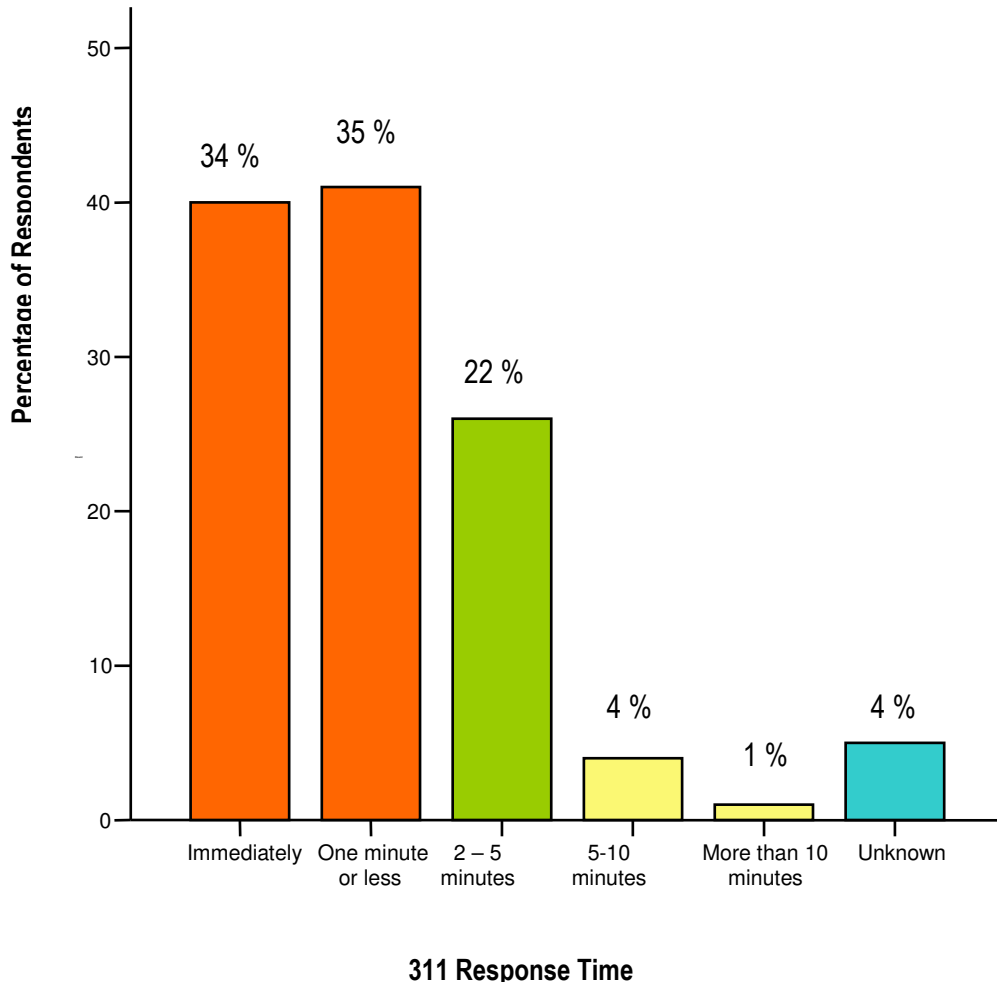
Respondents' Experiences in Accessing the Helpline

Respondents were asked a series of questions regarding their experience in accessing the Helpline. These questions included the timeliness of the service they received, the purpose of their call, and the frequency with which they contacted the Helpline. The findings from these questions are illustrated in the following tables and figures.

Timeliness of Service

Figure 1 indicates that 69% of the respondents spoke with a Helpline representative either immediately or within one minute or less. Twenty-two percent reported that it took between 2 and 5 minutes to speak with a 311 service representative. Fewer than 4% of respondents surveyed reported that they were unsure about the length of time it took to speak to a Helpline representative.

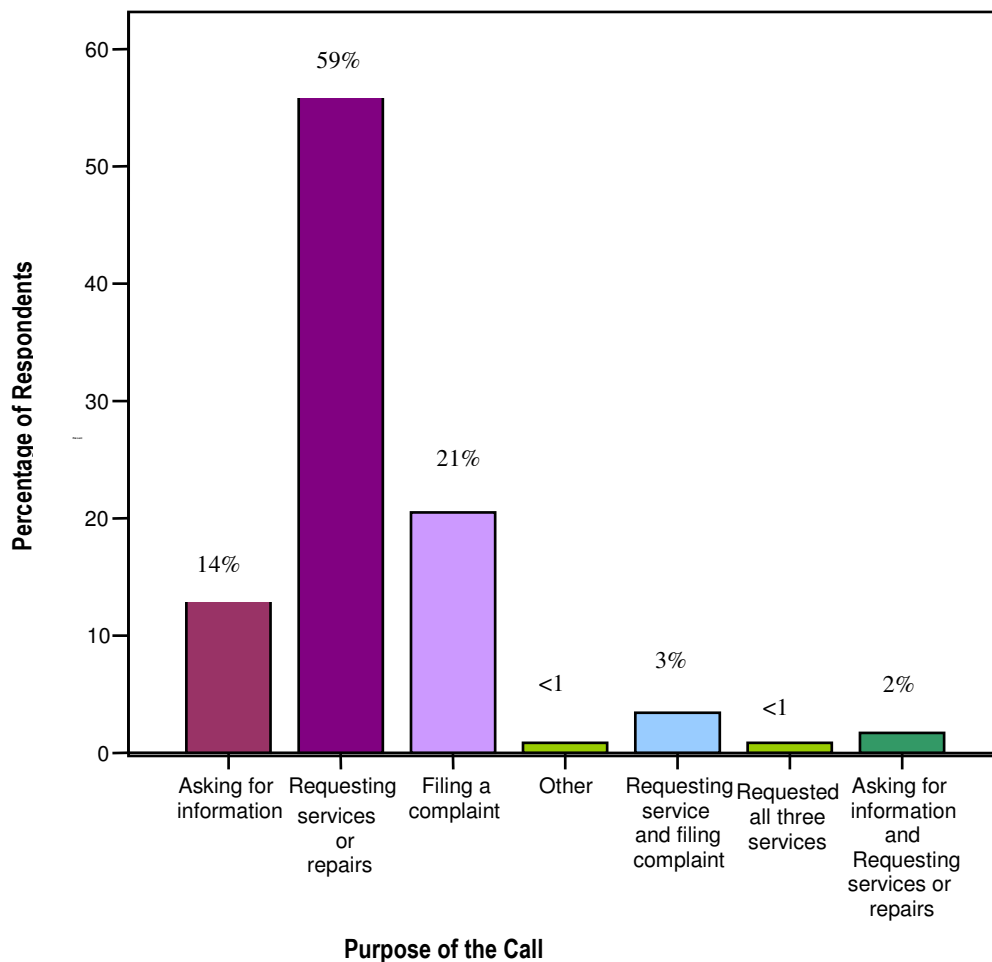
Figure 1. Average Time It Takes to Speak with a 311 Service Representative



Reason for contacting the Helpline

The primary purpose reported for contacting 311 was to request services or repairs (59% of the respondents surveyed). Six percent of the respondents reported contacting 311 for some combination of services: requesting services or repairs and filing a complaint or asking for information and requesting services, and two percent of the respondents surveyed reported that they requested all three types of services (see Figure 2).

Figure 2 –Reason for Contacting the Helpline



The majority of respondents (43%) reported that they had to make only one call to the Helpline before their problem was resolved. However, it is important to note that 17% of surveyed respondents said that the problem they reported had yet to be resolved to their satisfaction (see Table 2).

Table 2. Number of Times a Respondent Contacted 311 before the Problem Was Resolved

	Number	%
Once	50	43
Twice	22	19
Three times	12	10
More than three times	14	12
Problem still not resolved	19	17

Respondents' Perceptions of Their Experience with the 311 Representative

Respondents were asked a series of questions to determine their perception of the Helpline representative who handled their calls. Table 3 shows the overall findings for each category.

The majority of respondents reported that their Helpline service representatives were knowledgeable, courteous, and professional and communicated clearly and concisely. Although the majority of respondents reported that the Helpline service representative explained the resolution process, it is worth noting that 27% of the respondents reported that the resolution process was not communicated.

Table 3. Experience with 311 Service Representative

	Yes (%)	No (%)	Missing or "Don't Know" (%)
Knowledgeable and competent	88	9	3
Courteous and professional	94	3	3
Clear and concise communication	94	5	1
Issued a reference number	74	16	10
Explained resolution process	68	27	5

The following categories of ratings for service representatives provided significant respondent feedback:

- Knowledgeable and competent
- Issued a reference number
- Explained the resolution process

Respondents who did not feel that their service representative was *knowledgeable and competent* cited the following reasons:

- Respondents were given incorrect information.
- Helpline service representatives continued to transfer respondents to the wrong departments.
- Helpline service representatives were rude.

Only 16% of the survey respondents reported that they were not *issued a reference number*.

Respondents gave the following reasons why they felt that the Helpline service representatives did not *explain the resolution process*:

- The Helpline service representative was not able to articulate the resolution process.
- The Helpline service representative referred the respondent to another number.
- The resolution took much longer than the respondent anticipated.

Table 4. Overall Experience with the Helpline Service Representatives

	Number	%
Very satisfied	53	45
Mostly satisfied	12	10
Satisfied	35	30
Not very satisfied	9	8
Not at all satisfied	7	6
Missing	1	<1

We derived the following conclusions about survey respondents' overall experience with the Helpline service representatives:

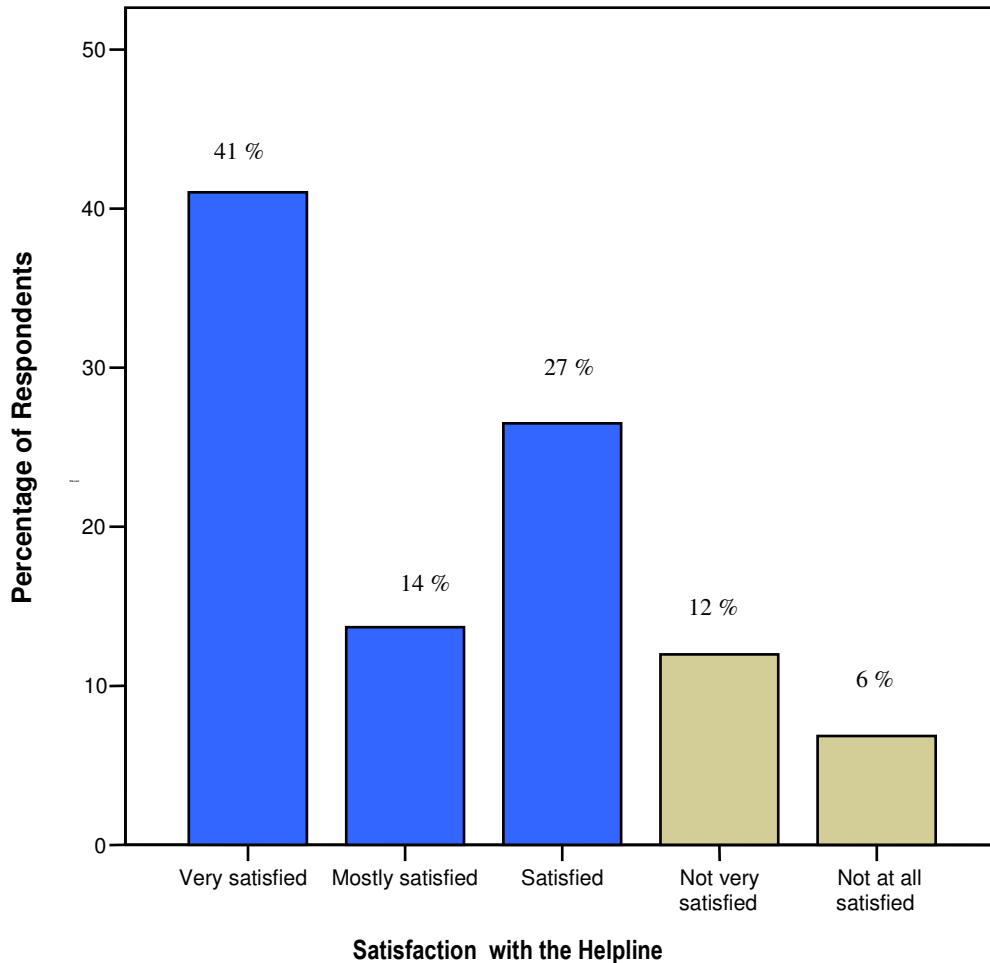
- Over 85% of survey respondents indicated that they were very satisfied, mostly satisfied, or satisfied with the Helpline service representatives.
- Fourteen percent of the survey respondents reported that they were *not very satisfied or not at all satisfied* with their Helpline service representative experience.

The primary reason respondents cited for *not being satisfied* with their Helpline service representative experience was that the Helpline service representatives should be more knowledgeable overall, specifically regarding the routing of calls to the appropriate departments.

Respondents' Overall Satisfaction with the Helpline

Figure 3 presents the survey respondents' ratings of their overall satisfaction with the Helpline.

Figure 3. Overall Satisfaction with the Helpline Service



Survey respondents cited the following reasons most often for not having a satisfying Helpline experience:

- Response to complaints should be faster (5%).
- Problems should be resolved faster (4%).
- Problems should be resolved to clients' satisfaction (4%).

Conclusions

In conclusion the majority of survey respondents reported that they were satisfied with their overall Helpline experience. We also found that respondents were mostly satisfied with their interaction with the Helpline representatives. However, it is important to note that respondents indicated a need for the Helpline representatives to be more knowledgeable in responding to requests and routing problems.

Although most respondents reported that they were pleased with the service they received, a significant number of respondents also reported that there was a delay in the time that a respondent reported a problem and the actual resolution of the problem.

311 Service Helpline Customer Service Satisfaction Survey

Hello. May I speak to _____?

IF or WHEN RESPONDENT COMES TO THE PHONE:

Hello, I'm _____ with Decision Information Resources, Inc., a local research firm. We are conducting a brief survey on behalf of the City of Houston's 311 service helpline. The 311 service helpline was designed so that Houston's citizens would have easy access to report or inquire about non-emergency problems. Our records show that you contacted 311 over the past few months. We would like to talk with you about your experience.

It will take us only about five minutes to conduct the survey. May we begin?

Yes **GO TO Q.1**

IF THE RESPONDENT IS NOT AVAILABLE, ASK: When is the best time for me to call back to speak with _____? **RECORD THE TIME ON THE CONTACT SHEET.**

IF RESPONDENT IS HOME BUT NOT AVAILABLE: What's a better time for us to call back to speak with you? **RECORD THE TIME ON THE CONTACT SHEET.** Thank you for speaking with us; we'll get back with you.

First, I would like to ask some questions about your most recent experiences in accessing the City of Houston's 311 Service Helpline.

1. How quickly did it take you to actually talk to a 311 service representative?

- Immediately
- One minute or less
- 2-5 minutes
- 5-10 minutes
- More than 10 minutes
- Prompted to leave a voice message
- Other (Specify): _____

2. Was your call to 311 primarily for the purpose of asking for information, requesting service, or filing a complaint?

- Asking for information
- Requesting services or repairs
- Filing a complaint
- Some other purpose. Specify: _____

3. How many times did you have to contact the 311 service helpline before the problem you reported was resolved to your satisfaction?

- Once
- Twice
- Three times (list continues on next page)
- More than three times
- The problem is still not resolved to your satisfaction

These next few questions are about your experience with the 311 service representative—the person you actually talked with on the phone.

Did your 311 service representative...?	Yes	No	Q a. IF NO: Please describe your experience:
4. appear knowledgeable and competent?			
5. handle your issues in a courteous and professional manner?			
6. communicate in a clear and concise manner?			
7. issue you a reference number?			
8. explain the process for resolution to your satisfaction?			

9. Overall, how would you rate your experience with the 311 service representative? Would you say that you were:

- Very satisfied (GO TO Q.11)
- Mostly satisfied (GO TO Q.11)
- Satisfied (GO TO Q.11)
- Not very satisfied (GO TO Q.10)
- Not at all satisfied (GO TO Q.10)

10. What could the 311 service representative have done to serve you better?

11. Overall, how satisfied were you with your 311 service helpline experience?

- Very satisfied (GO TO Q.13)
- Mostly satisfied (GO TO Q.13)
- Satisfied (GO TO Q.13)
- Not very satisfied (GO TO Q.12)
- Not at all satisfied (GO TO Q.12)

12. What could have been done to serve you better?

These last few questions are for classification purposes only.

13. Which of the following categories best describes your age?

- 18–24 years old
- 25–34 years old
- 35–54 years old
- 55+ years old

14. Which category best describes your total household income?

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> A. Less than \$15,000 | <input type="checkbox"/> E. \$50,000–\$74,999 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> B. \$15,000–\$24,999 | <input type="checkbox"/> F. \$75,000–\$99,999 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> C. \$25,000–\$34,999 | <input type="checkbox"/> G. \$100,000 or more |
| <input type="checkbox"/> D. \$35,000–\$49,999 | <input type="checkbox"/> H. REFUSED |

15. Gender of respondent. IF KNOWN, ENTER

- MALE FEMALE

16. What is your ethnicity?

- Caucasian

-
-
- African American
 - Hispanic
 - Asian American
 - Native American
 - Other _____

17. Are you renting your home, do you own, or are you buying?

- Renting
- Own
- Buying

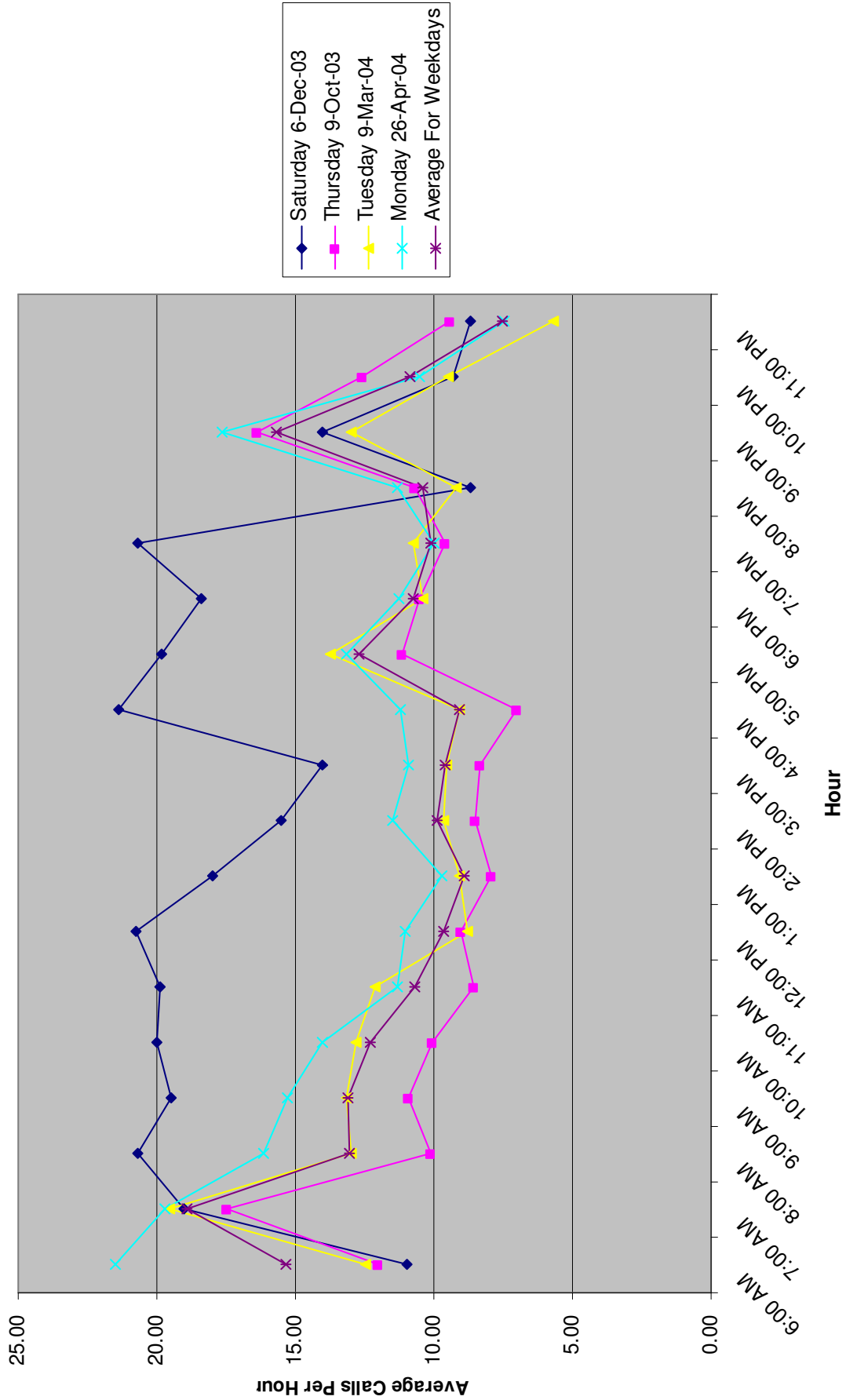
18. What is your Zip code? [_____]

Thank you for participating in this very important survey. We appreciate your honest opinion and will take your input into consideration.

Hourly Staffing Graph

This graph has been provided to gain further understanding of the recommendation that the hours of operation at the Helpline be reduced.

Inbound Calls Per Scheduled Employee Per Hour



Views of Responsible Officials

Exhibit 1



CITY of HOUSTON

Post Office Box 1562 Houston, Texas 77251 713-837-03-1-1

OFFICE of the MAYOR
3-1-1 Houston Service Helpline

Bill White, Mayor

September 30, 2005

Annise D. Parker, Controller
P O Box 1562
Houston, Texas 77251

Re: Audit of 3-1-1 Houston Service Helpline
Mir•Fox and Rodriguez, P. C., Certified Public Accountants

Dear Controller Parker:

The 3-1-1 Houston Service Helpline has completed its participation in the performance audit assessment as outlined in the engagement letter dated February 16, 2005 under City of Houston Contract No. 56546. We would like to thank you and the accounting firm of Mir•Fox and Rodriguez, P. C. for the auditing opportunity to advance our customer service center.

As expected the audit confirmed that the Helpline is working effectively and efficiently.

The Helpline opened in August of 2001 with the monumental task of training and shaping the organization into the consistent customer service culture that it is today. As you may recall council voted to add several new 3-1-1 classifications to the master alphabetical listing of classifications for 3-1-1. Per the request of the previous administration, each department provided personnel to staff the 3-1-1 call center. Right away it became apparent that the center did not inherit the best personnel from participating departments. Many of the employees had a difficult time operating under such a structured environment. They were now being recorded, as each call is recorded in 3-1-1, and many had attendance problems. Therefore, discipline played a great part in getting attendance regulated and adherence into compliance. Employees were challenged to deal with multiple disciplines and processes of all departments, and were no longer performing for one concentrated area. Most importantly, the management team worked day and night to help improve the customer service skills of many of the employees. Some could be rehabilitated but many could not, which lead to our initial round of turnover. It is noteworthy to mention that the above issues did not include call-takers who migrated from Public Works Customer Response Center, as they were already functioning as a true call center and a team.

Houston's 3-1-1 Helpline has been recognized nationally as "the center that did it right." Internally, the call center has been recognized as a division that works together on charity functions such as CMC, a group that comes together when a crisis affects their own work group.

Operationally, 3-1-1 is always in compliance with employee performance evaluations, provide constant training either one-on-one or as group, and hold weekly group meetings. We are a strong disciplinary group that complies with the policies and ordinances of the city; we have provided production incentives such as the Activity Based Compensation (ABC) Program for those employees that produce at an exceptional level. Lastly, the 3-1-1 Houston Service Helpline is a reliable and resourceful team-playing organization throughout the city.

This audit does note room for improvement with the abandonment rate, ethnic mix of workforce, morale, and with communication via email between Helpline call-takers and city departments. The center concurs fully or partially with these findings and has a work plan to correct them. In most respects, the call center has already corrected these concerns as we take every opportunity to improve the service and image of the 3-1-1 call center. The Helpline however, does not agree with the assertion that a savings of approximately \$800,000 can be obtained by adjusting the operational hours. I strongly urge the City of Houston against this. This justification is provided in the work plan.

Finally, the audit compared salaries of Helpline personnel in other cities against salaries of personnel of Houston's 3-1-1 Helpline. While the call-taker salaries were competitive, salaries for Houston's management and director was substantially lower than other cities. This should be addressed through the administration.

Again, the 3-1-1 Helpline wishes to thank Mir, Fox and Rodriguez for their successful completion of the performance audit of the 3-1-1 Helpline. It truly is our desire to improve the center and maximize its potential.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Gloria Bingham", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Gloria Bingham
Director

Implementation Plan

The summary table attached to this report outlines the proposed plan for implementing the recommendations designed to further improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the 3-1-1 Houston Service Helpline. The table includes the following categories:

- Audit Recommendation
- Initial Response
- Current Status / or Proposed Status
- Completion Date

The highest priority areas include the following:

- Reorganizing the weekend schedule (Completed)
- Redesigning the process to reconcile reports in the event of a computer failure (Completed)
- Develop a meaningful internal method for all email communications to be articulated and clarified within the 3-1-1 Helpline (In Progress)
- The call center had not been provided the Data Dictionary by the vendor to know where tables were to build better reports. The Director and IT through a better partnership with the vendor recently obtained the Data Dictionary and it is now being reviewed for consideration of meaningful reports. (In Progress)

Other considerations following the acceptance of this report are to:

- Communicate the study of this report with all 3-1-1 employees
- Prioritize and oversee the implementation process of all feasible recommendations

Most of the suggested recommendations were implemented during the audit process. We increased the number of employees scheduled for weekends; we have secured funding in our training budget and will be sending a staff member to training for full certification in Workforce Management. We have developed a standard operating procedure for reconciling reports in the event of a computer failure, and increased the number of employees allowed off on a given day to improve vacation availability. Sensitivity training will also become a part of annual training for the entire group.

The recommendation relating to reduction in business hours to help achieve a cost savings are not favorably observed, or accepted by the 3-1-1 Management Team. There are several important dynamics that must be considered. The number of calls that come in daily and most importantly the nature of these calls. Only management, 3-1-1 staff, and affected departments share this knowledge. The auditor merely mentions that this can be done, and takes no consideration for the nature of certain urgent calls requiring immediate personal handling. Our customers are far too important to risk the liability and law suits that could jeopardize our commitment to reliable, easy access and total customer service delivery on each call. Annually, the number of citizens that will be directly affected by this change is 262,652, or greater, and we are still growing. I will be happy to sit down and share these statistics with you from start to finish. We do not accept this recommendation at this time as we believe the risk or liability far outweigh the benefit. Additionally, the management team is totally committed to customer service from the top down.

While the report indicates several morale concerns, the tension levels increased, as never before, during the review of this audit. There were multiple disciplinary actions in progress and executed during the period of the audit and it is believed that employees may have seen this as an opportunity to draw undue attention toward the Helpline. If you review the section of this topic where it indicates the good things 3-1-1 does, it just doesn't correlate with the need improvement morale sections where mentions such as no meetings and no training, retreats etc. vs. the things that we do good, such as good training, regular meetings, ABC, retreats and others. There is no doubt in my heart that employees are being treated fairly. Every organization has a few unhappy employees and the negative comments in this report are believed to have been written by 3 or 4 individuals. However, in reality whether you have one employee concern, or five, they still must be addressed. Classes are now in progress and should conclude by the last week of October 2005.

The overall implementation process should be guided by the management team and employee participation encouraged to the maximum extent possible. This will help to ensure buy-in.

The successful implementation of these strategies contained in this report requires no financial investment. However, it does require commitment, sincerity and an open mind to work in harmony.

Conclusion

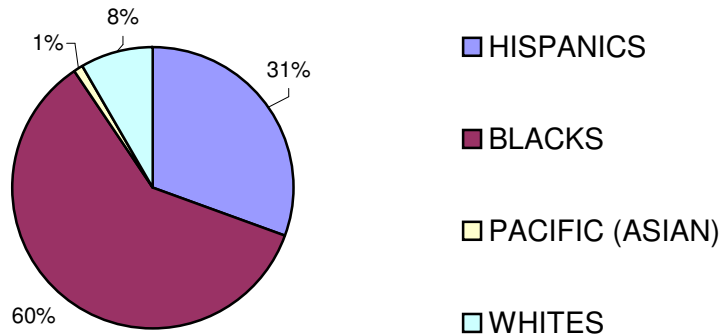
The performance review of the City of Houston 3-1-1 Houston Service Helpline revealed that the department is operating efficiently and effectively, and in addition to the operation and management function of the audit, as a part of the audit a private and separate survey was conducted whereby 85% of the citizens of Houston concurred that they have received professional accurate information from the 3-1-1 Houston Service Helpline.

The findings and recommendations presented in this report confirm to the administration, and to the public that the 3-1-1 Houston Service Helpline is operating in an efficient, effective and customer service manner consistent with all related responsibilities and operational policies and procedures.

	Audit Recommendation	Initial Response	Current Status or Proposed Status and Completion Date
1.	Reduce the abandoned call rate. Goal of 8% per week to 4%	Partially Concur	<p>At the time of the audit the newer call-takers had not completed their skill building training and were not ready to work a weekend schedule. Weekend staffing requires employees to be independent and capable of working with little or no assistance. Our new call-takers have completed the observation period for effectiveness and are now certified 3-1-1 Telecommunicators. These employees have been added to the weekend schedule.</p> <p>When the call center originally opened its abandonment goal was 4% and the center maintained a 3% abandonment rate. However, due to turnover and pension retirements, the center adjusted its goal from 4% to 8%, in consideration of staff shortages and the lengthy process of re-staffing and training new employees.</p> <p>By the end of physical year 06, the call center should be operating at 4% or lower.</p> <p>Additionally, on June 1, 2005, the WEB Solution was released as an added benefit and should reflect an improved customer wait time and an improved abandonment rate.</p>
2.	Save approximately \$800,000 by adjusting the operational hours of the call center	Do Not Concur	<p>The call center does not concur with this recommendation, as the statistics or liability risks does not support this theory. The statistics do not support the recommendation of this audit. Closing the center at the recommended hours will result in an annual average of 262,652 customers not receiving adequate services. These statistics were derived strictly from the hours the audit recommended the call center be closed. Municipal Courts is a revenue generating department and 3-1-1 supports this department. Citizens inquire up to our closing hour regarding courts matters on how to pay fines and police matters. We have experienced phenomenal call growth in this area since inception. Initial call volume was 20,000 monthly and we are currently trending 73,000 monthly for this entity alone. Additionally the call center has the opportunity to receive urgent calls up to 12 midnight, every night. This requires personal and immediate handling.</p>

	Audit Recommendation	Initial Response	Current Status or Proposed Status and Completion Date
3.	Revise the ethnic mix of the workforce to reflect the diversity of the 3-1-1 customer base in the city.	Concur	<p>While the 3-1-1 Helpline is an equal opportunity employer, every effort has always been to hire a diversified workforce. It has been our experience that the ethnicities of most applicants for this high stress career are African Americans and Hispanics.</p> <p>From department to department you may find a percentage of people from various ethnicities appear at an imbalance, when in fact the job functions may attract specific ethnic groups over others.</p> <p>To achieve diversity in our call center, we have often specify bi-lingual preference, to serve the various languages spoken by the population of Houston.</p> <p>We will continue to actively recruit based on the equal employment opportunity laws with diversity in mind and as job openings occur. Completion date: as job openings permits.</p>

3-1-1 ETHNIC BREAKDOWN



4.	Improve the morale of the call-takers by considering opportunities to work together while off the phones	Concur	The department shall complete sensitivity and motivational training by October 2005
5.	Improve email communications within the center to better inform the call takers	Concur	The call center manager shall employ additional processes to update those call-takers who from time-to-time do not have the time to read and interpret all email changes due to the demands of achieving their daily

	Audit Recommendation	Initial Response	Current Status or Proposed Status and Completion Date
			service levels. The department shall complete this process by October 2005.
6.	Enhance communications with other city departments to improve the quality of service	Concur	One of the most critical communications problems customer service managers and service centers face is lack of stature and authority in dealing with other departments. 3-1-1 can only be as successful as departments allow us to be. The first and foremost priority should be to provide timely information to the Helpline. The 3-1-1 Director attends the Mayor's Staff meetings, which is a good forum and opportunity to express the importance of communications. The city's top executives have the ability to influence their respective areas of responsibility and convey the importance of communicating information that affects the general public. To date there are some departments that are great at keeping 3-1-1 informed of all processes and situations of the moment, while there are opportunities for others to improve inter-departmental communications.