



Legislative Budget and Finance Committee

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The Toll-Free Telephone Program at the Center for Local Government Services

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A Review Conducted Pursuant to Act 1996-58

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June 1997

Table of Contents

	<u>Page</u>
I. Introduction	1
II. Background Information.....	3
III. Findings and Recommendation	4
A. The Center Receives an Average of About 38 Calls a Day, Not Including Many Routine Calls and Calls to Regional Offices That Are Not Recorded	4
B. Caller Satisfaction Is High	6
C. The Toll-Free Number Has Been Well-Publicized, But Many Local Officials Remain Unaware of the Number	8
D. Direct Costs of the Toll-Free Telephone Service Are About \$67,000 Annually	10
IV. Appendix	
A. Response to This Report	11

Introduction

Section 301 (g) of Act 1996-58 directed the Legislative Budget and Finance Committee to review the activities relating to the toll-free telephone number program established by the Center for Local Government Services in the Department of Community and Economic Development and issue a report to the General Assembly not later than one year from the program's initiation date. The toll-free telephone program began in July 1996.

Audit Objectives

The objectives of this review were:

1. To determine the number of calls received on the toll-free telephone line.
2. To determine if questions and issues raised by callers were responded to in a timely and appropriate manner.
3. To determine how well publicized the toll-free number is among Pennsylvania's municipalities.
4. To determine the costs associated with the toll-free telephone line.

Scope and Methodology

Although the Center for Local Government Services provides a variety of services to county, township, and other local governments, this study focused only on the Center's toll-free telephone number program.

To determine the volume of calls received by the Center, we obtained copies of the toll-free telephone number logs from the Center for the first three months of this year. In addition to the logged calls, a significant portion of calls received are publication requests.

To assess the Center's responsiveness to callers, we conducted a telephone survey of a random sample of 211 callers from the Center's phone logs for the first three months of 1997. We also spoke with the executive directors of the Commonwealth's five local government associations.

To determine how well-publicized the toll-free telephone number is among local governments, we contacted 50 local government officials who were not listed on the phone logs as having called the Center during the first quarter of 1997 and the executive directors of the five local government associations. We asked the 50

officials if they were aware of the toll-free telephone number and, if so, how they learned of the number. We also asked the association executive directors about the efforts the Center makes to publicize the number.

To determine the costs associated with the Center's toll-free telephone number program, we obtained the toll-free line charges for six months in late 1996 and early 1997. We also reviewed personnel expenditures associated with the program.

Acknowledgments

We thank the management and staff of the Department of Community and Economic Development, and especially Mr. Kim Coon, Director of the Center for Local Government Services, and Mr. Jim Lombardo, Deputy Director, for their cooperation during this review.

This report was developed by Legislative Budget and Finance Committee staff. The release of this report should not be construed as indicating that the Committee's members endorse all the report's findings and recommendations.

Any questions or comments regarding the contents of this report should be directed to Philip R. Durgin, Executive Director, Legislative Budget and Finance Committee, P.O. Box 8737, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania 17105-8737.

Background Information

Act 1996-58, enacted in June 1996, disestablished the Department of Community Affairs (DCA) and transferred many of its duties and responsibilities to a new department, the Department of Community and Economic Development (DCED). DCED began operations on July 1, 1996.

The Bureau of Local Government Services of the former Department of Community Affairs provided technical and training assistance, both directly and by contract, to local governments and community institutions. Most of this responsibility was transferred to the Center for Local Government Services within DCED. The Center, which was created by Act 58, serves as the primary link between the Commonwealth and local governments.

The Center is intended to serve as a one-stop center for Pennsylvania's local governments and is empowered to draw upon the resources of other state agencies in response to local government needs. The Center is to provide services to local governments, to serve as the point of contact for local governments on issues and problems of local concern, to coordinate state program resources in response to local issues and problems, and to establish a systematic process for addressing local issues and problems involving resources of more than a single agency.

In addition to the toll-free telephone program, the Center provides the following programs, services, and technical assistance to local governments:

Programs: The Center provides program assistance to municipalities regarding the Municipalities Financial Recovery Act, the Shared Municipal Service Program, the Local Government Capital Projects Loan Program, and the Federal Empowerment Zone/Enterprise Community Program.

Services: The Center provides training services to local governments, promotes intergovernmental cooperation, provides publications to local government officials and others, and provides information on the state's cooperative purchasing programs. Much of the Center's training is conducted through contracted providers rather than Center staff. The Center also maintains a directory of local government officials and data on local government finances.

Technical Assistance: The Center provides advice to local governments in a variety of areas. These include finance, personnel, police, volunteer fire company, and risk management as well as general public administration.

Findings and Recommendation

FINDING A

The Center Receives an Average of About 38 Calls a Day, Not Including Many Routine Calls And Calls to Regional Offices That Are Not Recorded

Act 58 required the Center to establish a toll-free number for local governments to use when requesting assistance. This number--888/2CENTER (888/223-6837)--became active with the opening of the Center on July 1, 1996. Although the number is intended primarily for the use of local government officials, other individuals and entities also use the number. These include legislative staff, other state and federal agencies, volunteer fire companies, and private entities and members of the general public.

The Center logged 2,303 calls during the first quarter of 1997. This averages 37.8 calls per workday. These figures include both the toll-free calls and calls received through nontoll-free lines because the Center's staff cannot determine whether the call came in on the toll-free line or the Center's regular telephone line. This is because the phone system is set up in such a way that a caller should never encounter a busy signal. If the toll-free line is in use the call bumps to one of the Center's nontoll-free phone lines. In neither case, however, is a caller who dials the toll-free number charged for the call.

The 2,303 reported calls do not include many of the routine calls received at the Center, such as requests for publications. The Center reported receiving 663 such requests during the period January through March 1997.

Many staffers also do not log those calls for which they can provide an immediate answer. One analyst whose telephone logs listed only 285 calls during the first quarter of 1997 was able to demonstrate that he had received 1,758 information requests (including the 285 logged calls). Although he could not distinguish between walk-in, telephone, and fax requests for the remaining 1,473 requests, he believes that over 80 percent were phone calls.

Toll-free calls may be rerouted to a regional office if an analyst in Harrisburg believes that a regional specialist is better qualified to answer the question.¹ Al-

¹The Center's regional offices are located in the Governor's regional offices in Philadelphia, Scranton, Pittsburgh, and Erie. Calls from the Harrisburg area are now handled by the Center's central office and are therefore included in our count of logged calls.

though these calls may be received over the toll-free line, they are often not logged-in by the Harrisburg staff. Calls handled directly by the Center's two telephone operators, rather than referred to one of the Center's analyst staff, are also not logged in. The telephone logs also do not include the calls made directly to any of the Center's four regional offices.

To obtain a fuller picture of the number of calls received, the Center made a special effort to log in all business calls received² by the Center's central office staff during the month of April 1997. The Center reported 1,373 such calls in April 1997, or an average of 62.4 calls per workday. CLGS officials believe call volume will increase as awareness of the toll-free telephone program increases.

² Excludes publication requests.

FINDING B

Caller Satisfaction Is High

LB&FC staff planned to survey 334 of the 2,303 callers the Center logged during the period January through March 1997. Our telephone survey began April 11, 1997. Although we could not obtain telephone numbers for everyone in our sample, by April 18, we had initiated 208 telephone inquiries which resulted in 124 completed surveys. We concluded that the 124 local government officials' responses to the survey questions were so similar that continuing the survey would not yield any additional meaningful information. We therefore did not initiate any further telephone inquiries to callers after April 18.

The vast majority of the 124 respondents reported being very satisfied with both the promptness of the Center's response and the quality of the service provided. All but 1 of 118 respondents said their call to the Center was answered promptly, and all but 1 of 98 respondents who said that they had left a message at the Center said the Center had returned their call promptly.

All but 5 of the 124 callers with whom we spoke rated the helpfulness of the Center's response to their call on a scale of 1 to 5, with one being not helpful at all and five being extremely helpful. All but 7 of these 119 callers rated the helpfulness of the Center's response at level 4 or 5 (see Table 1). Six of these seven callers rated the response at level 3. The seventh, who rated a level 1 rating, felt that the policy specialist should have been more tactful.

Table 1

Helpfulness of CLGS Response: Caller Ratings

<u>Rating^a</u>	<u># of Callers</u>	<u>% of Callers</u>
Level 5: Extremely Helpful	85	71%
Between Level 4 and Level 5.....	5	4
Level 4.....	22	18
Below Level 4.....	<u>7</u>	<u>6</u>
Total	119	100% ^b

^aLB&FC staff question: How helpful was the response you received? Please rate this on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being not helpful at all and 5 being extremely helpful.

^bRounded.

Source: LB&FC staff survey of 121 callers who contacted the DCED Center for Local Government Services during the period January - March 1997.

We also contacted the executive directors of the Commonwealth's five local government associations, each of whom expressed a high degree of satisfaction with the Center for Local Government Services' toll-free telephone program. These include the County Commissioners Association of Pennsylvania, the Pennsylvania State Association of Boroughs, the Pennsylvania League of Cities and Municipalities, the Pennsylvania State Association of Township Commissioners, and the Pennsylvania State Association of Township Supervisors.

FINDING C

The Toll-Free Number Has Been Well-Publicized, But Many Local Officials Remain Unaware of the Number

The Center has widely publicized its toll-free number among Pennsylvania's local government officials. Even so, we found that nearly six of every ten local government officials we surveyed who had not called the Center during the first quarter of 1997 were unaware of the toll-free number.

The Center has printed a brochure explaining its services and publicizing the toll-free number. The brochure was mailed to each municipality in Pennsylvania in October 1996. Center staff also reported they announce the number every time they appear before local government groups and associations. The Center's executive director and deputy director together average 20 to 30 appearances per month. Plastic bags with the Center's number are distributed by Center staff at some public appearances, and the Center plans to prominently display the toll-free telephone number on a homepage it is developing for the Internet.

The toll free number is included in some of the Center's training brochures, and a township supervisors' training video promotes the number. The Local Government Handbook, which the PA Department of Environmental Protection distributes to Pennsylvania municipalities, also includes the Center's toll-free number. The current Liquid Fuels Calendar, which the PA Department of Transportation distributes to municipalities, devotes the display page facing December 1997 to the Center's toll-free number. Additionally, the County Commissioners Association of Pennsylvania has printed the number in one of its publications, and the toll-free number is publicized in the monthly newsletter of the Pennsylvania State Association of Township Supervisors.

The new Harrisburg area phone book (May 1997-April 1998) has the toll-free number listed under the Department of Community and Economic Development in the government blue pages. However, the Center's director told us that he did not request, and does not anticipate, that the toll-free number will be listed in telephone directories outside the Harrisburg area. We found that new 1997-98 telephone directories in several areas outside Harrisburg, including Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Scranton and Erie, did not list the toll-free number.

Despite the efforts that have been made to publicize the toll-free number, we found that many local government officials still appear to be unaware of the number. To assess the extent to which local government officials who had not called the Center during the first quarter of 1997 were aware of the toll-free number, we sur-

veyed a representative sample of 50 local government officials from throughout Pennsylvania. Fifty-nine percent of the individuals that responded to our survey (26 of the 44) told us that they were unaware of the Center's toll-free number.

Recommendation

- 1. The Center for Local Government Services should include its toll-free telephone number in the government blue pages of the Bell Atlantic telephone directories that are distributed to Commonwealth communities.**

FINDING D

Direct Costs of the Toll-Free Telephone Service Are About \$67,000 Annually

The Center's FY 1996-97 rebudget of \$2.5 million includes \$1.8 million in personnel expenditures and \$600,000 in operating expenditures. The \$2.5 million rebudget is comprised of \$1.7 million in state funds and \$800,000 in augmentations. These funds support all the Center's programs and services, including the toll-free telephone program.

The Center employs 19 full time staff, including three employees at the Pittsburgh regional office and one each at the Philadelphia, Scranton, and Erie regional offices.¹ Although many of the Center's staff are involved in responding to requests for assistance that are received over the toll-free telephone line, the only full-time staff assigned to the toll-free telephone program are two telephone operators. The salary and benefits of these two operators totals about \$63,000 a year.

We also reviewed telephone company invoices for six months in late 1996 and early 1997. These invoices show that the toll-free telephone line cost is \$2,023 for these six months, or \$4,046 when annualized. Total direct costs for the toll-free telephone program are therefore about \$67,000 annually.

¹ The Central Office staff of the DCED Center for Local Government Services now directly serves the Harrisburg area in addition to performing their other duties.

APPENDIX A
Response to This Report



COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA
DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNITY AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT
HARRISBURG, PA 17120

1007-800 27 1007

OFFICE OF SECRETARY

June 24, 1997

Philip Durgin, Executive Director
Legislative Budget and Finance Committee
400 Finance Building
Harrisburg, PA 17120

Dear Mr. Durgin:

RE: Center for Local Government Services' Toll-Free Telephone Audit

I have reviewed the report completed by the Legislative Budget and Finance Committee on the Center for Local Government Services' toll-free telephone program, including the audit objectives and the scope of work. I have also asked Kim Coon, Executive Director of the Center, to attend the committee's hearing on June 30 to address any questions when the audit is presented.

The Department of Community and Economic Development is committed to providing first class service to its customers. Therefore, I am pleased your audit reveals that the vast majority of those using the toll-free number are very satisfied with both the promptness of the Center's response and the quality of the service provided.

The Department of Community and Economic Development is committed to the Center's mission to serve the state's local governments in an efficient and effective manner. The toll-free telephone service is an important resource to ensure access to the Center's staff, and your review demonstrates the Department's investment in a state-of-the-art telephone system and personnel to answer the calls promptly was an excellent one.

Regarding the continued promotion of the toll-free number, you recommend that it be included in the government blue pages of the Bell Atlantic telephone directories that are distributed to Commonwealth communities. This is an excellent recommendation, and I have instructed the appropriate staff here in the Department to begin the process to have the number listed. During the next year, the Center will continue its efforts to aggressively promote the toll-free number. Currently, Center staff are working on an annual report that will be distributed to every local government unit in the Commonwealth, and the toll-free number will be prominently displayed in the report. Staff will continue their outreach by attending the hundreds of local government

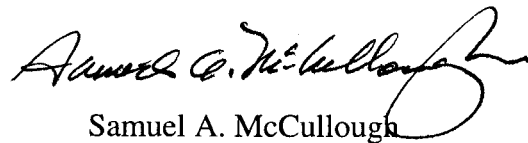
Philip Durgin, Executive Director
Legislative Budget and Finance Committee
June 24, 1997
Page Two

meetings around the state and the five major local government associations' annual conferences. At each of these gatherings, brochures and municipal publications listing the number will be distributed.

As the report describes, the Center received many routine calls and calls to the regional offices that were not recorded. I commend your staff for taking the time to discern this fact, and for including in the background information section of the report the comprehensive services provided to local governments by Center staff. No doubt, as the number becomes more widely known, the amount of calls will increase. In fact, this is already occurring as detailed on page five of the report under Finding A. I am confident that as more and more local government officials and others use the toll-free number, they will continue to receive prompt and courteous service.

Finally, after speaking with Kim Coon concerning your agencies audit, I want to compliment your staff on the professional manner in which the review was conducted.

Sincerely,



Samuel A. McCullough
Secretary

cc: Kim T. Coon