



**Public Health  
Environmental Health Services**

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**2017 California State Association of Counties (CSAC) Challenge Awards**

**Executive Summary**

**Virtual Receptionist**

**OVERVIEW**

San Bernardino County Division of Environmental Health Services implements a virtual receptionist to improve staff efficiency and lower customer wait times in a remote location.

**CHALLENGE**

The San Bernardino County Division of Environmental Health Services (DEHS) has multiple offices geographically located throughout over 20,000 square miles of county land, including an office location in the remote High Desert area in the city of Hesperia. The Hesperia office is staffed with a few inspectors that go out on the field most of the day, along with one clerical person who covers the front counter to assist visiting customers. The clerical person usually helped an average of four customers a day, did not have direct supervision, and could not help with the workload and special assignments of the staff at the main office in San Bernardino. During breaks and lunches, customers were made to wait or come back for service; and due to the short staffing levels at the Hesperia office, there was lack of specialized staff available for customer concerns. This environment sometimes generated customer complaints, triggering a greater need to look into helping those customers in the High Desert. DEHS wanted to establish a way to provide customer service during all of its office hours, with little wait time, and provide the access to specialized staff.

**INNOVATIVE SOLUTION**

In efforts to continue to serve customers in the remote High Desert area while improving efficiency and reducing customer wait time, DEHS implemented a virtual receptionist in December 2014. With the use of existing staff and technology, collaboration with another department, and the addition of "A Live Interactive Customer Experience (ALICE)" Virtual Receptionist System, DEHS has been able to successfully help its customers in a remote and minimally staffed office. ALICE allows a customer in the Hesperia office to virtually speak to clerical staff in San Bernardino. The customer uses a monitor to "call" an available person in the San Bernardino office. When the clerical staff "answers", the customer and clerical person can now see each other "face-to-face" for a live interaction. With ALICE, customers are also able to make payments online, electronically by check (checking/savings accounts) or with a major credit card. DEHS enhanced the virtual receptionist experience by adding a printer and scanner to ALICE. When a customer needs a document or application, the clerical person in San Bernardino sends it to the printer that is located right next to ALICE and the customer in Hesperia. Customers have instant access to anything the clerical person prints for them, almost as if someone is there to personally hand it to them. If customers need to turn in documents or completed applications, they place them in the scanner and press the only existing button. The document is automatically converted to a portable document format (PDF) and saved in a common folder for the clerical person to access immediately. This allows the clerical person to process any application right away. DEHS

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piloted this new process for three months and tracked customer satisfaction through a customer service survey programmed in ALICE. Once the pilot was over, DEHS was satisfied with the results, as were most customers who used ALICE. DEHS decided to permanently re-assign the clerical person from Hesperia to the San Bernardino office and make the virtual receptionist a permanent process. It has now been in place for well over a year and minimal problems have arisen, but so many benefits have come from it. Customers in the High Desert can now access the same level of customer service as those coming to the main office in San Bernardino, almost forty miles away.

#### ORIGINALITY

The originality for this project stems from the unique use of DEHS' existing resources. All sources of technology used to implement the virtual receptionist, with the exception of the ALICE software and computer, were already in use by DEHS. These items include: Microsoft Windows, Microsoft Lync (Skype for Business), Forte online payments portal, internet, SurveyGizmo, DEHS website, printer, and scanner.

#### COST EFFECTIVENESS

The costs associated with implementing a virtual receptionist includes \$4,283 for the ALICE software, \$1,800 for a computer (both a one-time purchase), along with the time of an Automated Systems Analyst (ASA) I. A total of about 60 person-hours of the ASA I was required to obtain, test, and implement the virtual receptionist. The budgeted annual expense for employing one fulltime ASA I is approximately \$100,000 (salary and benefits). DEHS values this time at \$2,884.00. This brings the total estimated cost to implement a virtual receptionist to approximately \$8,967. There was minimal training for existing clerical staff, and they, in turn, guided customers through the new process.

#### RESULTS

Overall, there were over 800 customers served at the Hesperia office since January 2015, averaging about 75 a month. DEHS successfully relocated the clerical person from Hesperia to San Bernardino. This individual went from producing the work of half of a full-time employee to a full-time employee that can contribute all their time to the workload in the San Bernardino office. Once clerical staff began helping customers via ALICE, customers in the Hesperia office were able to receive service while staff take breaks and lunch periods as there was ongoing coverage, avoiding the need to have them wait unnecessarily or come back at a different day or time. ALICE has also allowed customers in Hesperia to speak directly to available fiscal, technical and professional staff in the San Bernardino office. Based on responses from the customer service survey included in ALICE, on average, 65% obtained the services needed; 75% were satisfied with the services received; 80% were helped in three minutes or less; 82% felt the person helping them was helpful; and 100% of customers were successfully connected to a representative. Through the implementation of ALICE, DEHS has been able to continue to provide excellent customer service in the best possible manner, while streamlining processes and improving productivity.

#### PROJECT CONTACT

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