

Human Services Division COVID-19 Pop Up Call Center

OVERVIEW: Placer County Human Services developed a pop-up call center to handle a growing number of calls during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic.

CHALLENGE: In early March, Placer County's first cases of COVID-19 emerged and Public Health nurses' work tracking new infections and tracing contacts increased. At the same time, there were growing calls from county residents to the infectious disease office, with questions the nurses struggled to find time to answer given their increased workload. Calls started coming into the Office of Emergency Services (OES) at a higher rate as well. Calls were on range of topics, from school closures, to event cancellations, testing, exposure, and people wanting to make donations. As residents began to need more help with finances, food and taking care of loved ones, demand only got heavier. At the time, Placer County was still the largest county in California without a 211 system, as the county had approved 211 but was waiting for approval from the California Public Utilities Commission to move forward.

SOLUTION: Human Services, a division within Health and Human Services that has long operated a call center for client aid programs, learned about this increased need and just three days later, a pop up call center was up and running, fielding all the calls regarding COVID-19 that did not relate to individual cases managed by contact tracers. Callers to the line were greeted with a phone tree that allowed people to choose different options for assistance, including an option for business owners to be connected to staff in the Business Resource Center. Healthcare providers were routed to Public Health nurses; school administrators were routed to a voicemail where messages were returned by Children's System of Care staff; and all other questions coming into the general phone line and a homeless services phone line were fielded, answered, tracked and logged by Human Services staff. In addition to the hard work of Health and Human Services staff, this project necessitated rapid response and collaboration from our Telecommunications Division Manager, our Information Technology Manager, and our Business Process Analyst with the CEO's office. They were able to quickly develop the technology to accommodate staff's vision for the special call center.

INNOVATION: The Human Services division is experienced in fielding a variety of calls through its client aid call center. With the new variety of calls Placer County was receiving, those staff were able to step outside of their knowledge base and transition their skills to quickly research answers. Staff worked together to create a generalized answer guide, train new staff and assess patterns of calls. The answer guide was organized by categories for easy navigation (such as business questions, testing questions, state order questions, etc.) and ensured consistent answers were given to residents. This was a unique and rapid solution to leverage existing information and referral experience of staff.

RESULTS: Between early March and late May, staff from the Human Services division fielded approximately 2,527 calls. This alleviated the strain put on the Public Health nurses, who then were able to focus on their efforts to track and curb the spread of COVID-19. The OES was able to focus on supporting joint operations partners. The call center team worked daily, through weekends and on holidays, to staff the call center. The vital role this call center played in serving the people of Placer County highlighted the value of a 211 system to serve Placer County, which had been in the works for some time. It was not up and running in March, but by the end of May, the call center's duties and all the data that had been collected were shifted over to our 211 operators, Connecting Point. This shift allowed Human Services staff to return to their regular duties, but the infrastructure and knowledgebase they had built allowed 211 Placer operators to transition into COVID-19 information and referral much more quickly and seamlessly.

REPLICABILITY: Placer County has now implemented 211 to allow for future call center needs. Smaller counties not equipped with 211 would do well to implement a similar pop-up call center in emergency situations. Developing a phone tree to filter the most repetitive calls proved to save staff time. Utilizing staff experienced with answering a multitude of calls and quickly retrieving answers is an efficient use of staff time. County residents benefit from hearing a consistent message and speaking to a live person.

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OPTIONAL SUBMISSION: [Link to photos, a call tree matrix and snapshot of call log.](#)