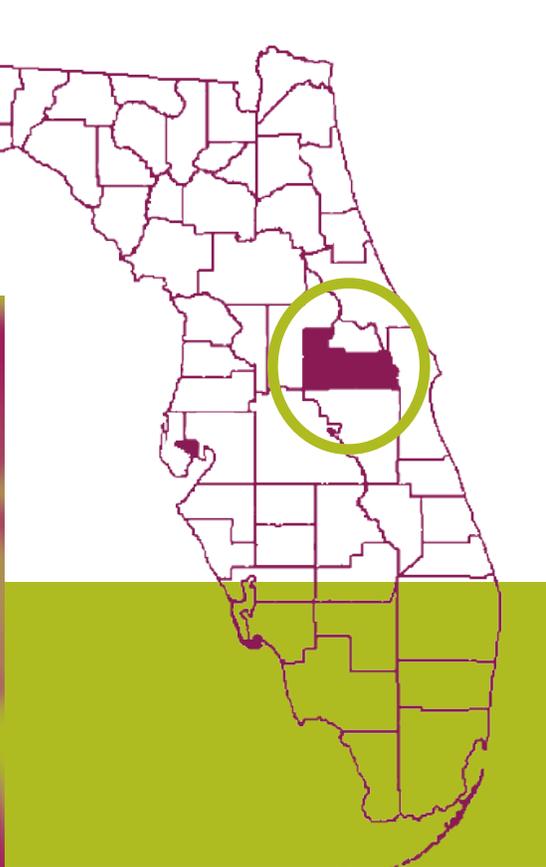
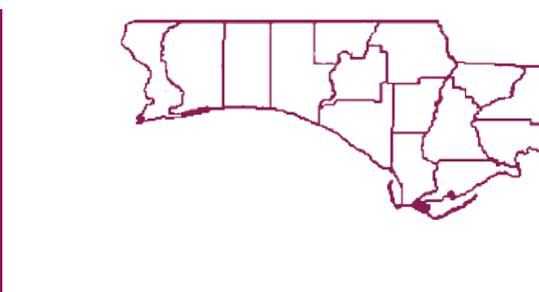




# Building a 311 System: A Case Study of the Orange County, Florida, Government Service Center



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May 2007



COMMUNITY ORIENTED POLICING SERVICES  
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE

*This project was supported by Cooperative Agreement 2000-CK-WX-K115, awarded by the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions contained herein are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official position of the U.S. Department of Justice. References to specific companies, products, or services should not be considered an endorsement of a product by the author(s) or the U.S. Department of Justice. Rather, the references are illustrations to supplement discussion of the issues.*

*Any errors of fact, omission, or interpretation are those of the author and are not the responsibility of the Orange County Sheriff's Office or the COPS Office.*

## Acknowledgments

Special recognition is bestowed on Orange County Mayor Richard Crotty and the Orange County Commissioners for their understanding of the issues; County Administrator Ajit Lalchandani; and the many other county staff who provided a great deal of support, time, energy, and direction throughout this process.

Thanks to Orange County Sheriff Kevin Beary. Without his vision recognizing the need for a 311 Center in Orange County, none of this would have been possible.

Our sincere appreciation goes to Debra Cohen, Ph.D., with the U.S. Department of Justice Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS Office), for her guidance and advice during the entire process.

Special thanks go to Marilyn Ward. As the manager of the Public Safety Communications Division, Marilyn Ward was consistently the driving factor and visionary behind this project. She worked long hours, and her incessant energy helped get this project off the ground.

Lorenzo Williams, Vicki Pegram, and all employees of the Government Service Center also deserve special recognition. These individuals were part of the project from its very inception and were primarily responsible for the center's implementation. Without the dedication and belief in this project by the staff of the Government Service Center, it is questionable whether this project would ever have become a reality.

Jeffery Templeton of the Orange County Sheriff's Office also deserves credit for his efforts in facilitating the work of this project. He was responsible for its implementation and making sure all timelines were met. These efforts included editing the various drafts and prodding the chief author to make sure that the document was completed in a timely manner. Very few people saw or could really appreciate all of his work behind the scenes to keep the project moving forward. He was truly one of this project's unsung heroes.

Finally, this report could not have been completed without the full cooperation of the men and women of the Orange County Public Safety Communications Division who helped lead and guide this project since its inception. This program began almost 7 years ago and finally became a reality in 2006. In that time, the leadership of this division changed hands; however, none of the managers of this division ever wavered in their support of the Government Service Center. For that, kudos go again to Marilyn Ward, Carol Burkett (interim manager), and Tom Sorley.

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## Introduction

In almost every major metropolitan area, city planners and police personnel have witnessed times when citizens' calls for service exceed the resources of police agencies and emergency communications centers. Whether it is a storm, natural disaster, terror plot, or simply an active weekend evening, citizens expect a timely response when they call 911. Citizens themselves are not to blame for their high expectations. They often pay special assessments to police agencies or are levied a special fee for these services. Regardless of the nature of the calls, citizens expect answers and want services from their government in times of crisis.

The native population of Orange County, located in east central Florida, is an estimated 1.23 million citizens within the 907 square mile jurisdictional limits. The population fluctuates tremendously depending on the season and the number of tourists vacationing in the area. During peak season, for example, the population in the region can reach as many as 3 million people. While many other cities also have large numbers of tourists visiting their area, Orlando is said to be the number one tourist destination in the United States and one of the top three in the world. Common vacation destinations include Disney World, Sea World, and Universal Studios.

The size of the population, including its visitors, compounds even further the Orange County government's ability to respond to calls for service. When a thunder storm hits, residents routinely lose power and many traffic signals malfunction. Since many people staying in the area are unfamiliar with the contact numbers of the local power, telephone, or other utility companies, they often call 911 out of convenience. These calls place an unnecessary burden on Orange County's Emergency Communications Center and many callers wait minutes before their concerns can be addressed.

Inevitably, situations arise when a citizen calls 911 in a true emergency and he or she is not able to receive the anticipated service. Such was the case in August 1999 when 911 lag time was blamed for the death of a citizen in Orange County. When the local news media caught wind of the story, there was much public outcry. The 911 tapes were played on the evening news and a series of stories appeared in the *Orlando Sentinel* concerning the lag time between when calls to 911 were placed and when they were answered. The article stated that on a given day, as many as 50 calls to 911 rang for more than 10 seconds, and many remained unanswered for as long as a minute.

In response, Sheriff Kevin Beary proposed three solutions. First, he said he would raise the salaries of 911 operators by 5 percent, then 3 percent the following year. This would ensure that more qualified staff would be attracted to the profession. Second, he stated that he would hire additional call takers. This solution would alleviate the burden within the agency. And third, he would implement a non-emergency 311 system to eliminate some of the pressure on the overburdened 911 system.

Cases like this illustrate the need for an alternative to the 911 system that citizens can call to receive service from their local government in non-emergency situations.

The goal of the police and any emergency communications center is to provide timely and prompt service to citizens in times of need. Coupled with that is the goal of county governments to provide seamless service to its citizens 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. For these reasons, the Orange County Board of Commissioners and the Orange County Sheriff's Office decided that implementing a 311 system was the only way to provide the level of service that its citizens expected.

## Chapter I: Need for 311

Improving the operating efficiency of the 911 system was the major impetus for developing the 311 system in Orange County;<sup>§</sup> however, that was not the only reason. Many other objectives were considered, including providing seamless service and information to county residents, delaying the need to add additional expensive capacity to the Emergency Communications Center, limiting the liability of county government when citizens could not get through to 911, and to save money through the consolidation of many of the 52 county-operated call centers. It is difficult to assess the order in which these goals were considered because each was viewed as critical. Chief in the minds of the 311 Center's planners was to improve operational efficiency and provide better customer service to county residents.

### Goals of the Government Service Center/311 System

- Improve operational efficiency of 911
- Provide seamless government service
- Provide a low-cost alternative to increasing the capacity of the 911 center
- Limit liability from not meeting mandatory performance minimums
- Decrease the cost of providing the existing level of service to county residents through call center consolidation.

It is important to note that before the 311 Center was established, the 911 Centers were having difficulty meeting their mandatory performance standard of answering 90 percent of all calls within 10 seconds. There appeared to be two primary reasons for the problem. First was the number of calls to the 911 Center that were of a non-emergency nature. Many of these calls were unintentional “phantom wireless 911 calls.” Such calls occur when a cell phone user inadvertently presses the 9 or 1 key on a telephone preprogrammed to dial 911, or, after completing a 911 call, the user accidentally presses the redial or send key. The National Emergency Number Association reported that phantom wireless calls accounted for between 25 and 70 percent of all 911 calls in some communities in the United States.<sup>§§</sup>

The second issue dealt with how Orange County's Emergency Operations Center counted its calls. Many of the calls placed to the system were counted multiple times through a coding error; hence, the statistics reported to the state were often based on misleading and inaccurate information. The coding problem was eliminated in 2003 when the computer-aided dispatch (CAD) system was upgraded.

The goals that led to the development of the 311 Center (which eventually became the Government Service Center [GSC]) in Orange County made it clear that adopting a 311 model seemed to be the only option that was both politically and financially feasible. With the population explosion that was taking place in Orange County, the call centers were going to reach capacity within a few years. Coupled with the population growth was the increasing use of, and dependence on, cell phones.

In 1997 the U.S. Department of Justice's COPS Office made a concerted effort to assist agencies with problems associated with non-emergency phone calls being made to 911 lines by requesting that the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) reserve the 311 number for non-emergency calls. At the time, it was believed that given the growing volume of 911 calls, nearly all call centers in the United States would be overloaded within the next 10 years.

<sup>§</sup> In this report, the 311 Center is often referred to by two different names. To be consistent with the organizational goals of the agency, 311 Center refers to the original model that the agency was to assume. After the project shifted direction, the name was changed to the Government Service Center (GSC).

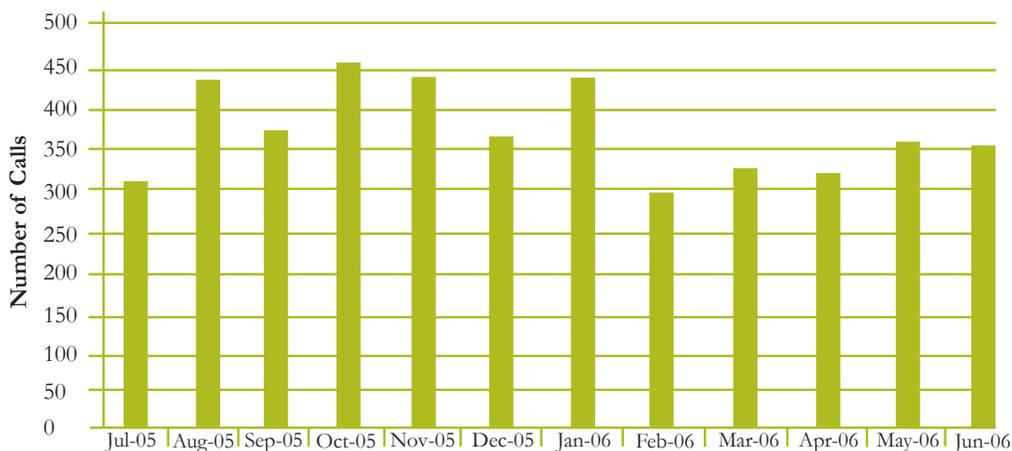
<sup>§§</sup> Sampson, Rana, *Misuse and Abuse of 911*. Problem-Oriented Guides for Police, Problem-Specific Guides Series No. 19, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, 2004. [www.cops.usdoj.gov/ric/ResourceDetail.aspx?RID=141](http://www.cops.usdoj.gov/ric/ResourceDetail.aspx?RID=141)

In 1998 the National Institute of Justice, with funding from the COPS Office, sponsored an evaluation of four non-emergency call management systems in Dallas, Texas; Baltimore, Maryland; Phoenix, Arizona; and Buffalo, New York. Conducted by the University of Cincinnati, the study compared and contrasted four approaches to handling non-emergency calls for police services. The resulting report made clear that each city had adapted different approaches for different reasons. For example, the city of Dallas used a full-service 311 model where citizens could call for any service that the city offered, while Baltimore's 311 service was primarily for public safety non-emergencies.<sup>§</sup>

In Fiscal Year 2000, the Orange County Sheriff's Office applied for and received funding from the COPS Office under the *311 Technical Assistance for Start-Ups* program.<sup>§§</sup> This funding provided capital to purchase hardware and software for a 311 system, as well as to support an evaluation of the system and develop a guidebook or case study of lessons learned.

The 311 model deemed the most appropriate for Orange County was intended to be a low-cost solution to expanding the operations of the 911 Center and to keep the county in compliance with state-mandated operational measures. The model, with its easy-to-recall number, allowed citizens and visiting vacationers to access one centralized center where they could receive information about government services.

**Figure 1: Inbound Non-Emergency Calls from Orange County 911 to the Government Service Center.**



<sup>§</sup> Mazerolle, Loraine, Dennis Rogan, James Frank, Christine Famega, and John E. Eck, *Managing Citizen Calls to the Police: An Assessment of Non-Emergency Call Systems*. Washington, D.C.: National Institute of Justice, U.S. Department of Justice, 2003. [www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/199060.pdf](http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/199060.pdf).

<sup>§§</sup> *311 for Non-Emergencies: Helping Communities One Call at a Time*. COPS Fact Sheet. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, 2006. [www.cops.usdoj.gov/ric/ResourceDetail.aspx?RID=2](http://www.cops.usdoj.gov/ric/ResourceDetail.aspx?RID=2).

Many of the calls to 911 were not emergencies. The policy of the 911 Center was to assist each caller within the time constraints and workload of the center. Before the activation of the 311 number, 911 operators had no place to route these callers so that they could be given the information or assistance requested. The operators making a good faith effort to assist the citizens often missed the mandatory minimums when other callers were placed in the queue or were dismissed tactfully.

To relieve the 911 Center of the non-emergency calls, today, callers are greeted on a special administrative line by a voice prompt informing them that if the call is not an emergency, they should instead call the Government Service Center (GSC) at 311. Figure 1 shows the call volume to the GSC from the 911 line. From July 2005 through June 2006, the average time it took for the GSC to answer these calls was 17 seconds.

While needed, the GSC typically does not handle that many calls from the 911 Center. As shown in Figure 2, on a typical day, only 11 or 12 calls are transferred from the Orange County 911 Center. While this may not seem like a lot, it is important to remember that many of the routine calls that were previously placed to the center (after-hours Animal Control and Code Enforcement calls) were already offloaded when the GSC was formed. So these data constitute the bulk of the calls the 911 Center previously fielded on its own.

**Figure 2: Average Non-Emergency Calls Per Day from Orange County 911 to the Government Service Center.**





## Chapter II: Choosing the Model

Recognizing the need for an alternative model to handle public safety non-emergency calls and to provide a more cost-efficient alternative to handling the variety of calls that were coming into the 911 Center, members of the Orange County Sheriff's Office and the Emergency Operations Center looked at the variety of 311 models in operation. Initially, the project and future center was to proceed in two stages. Stage One would encompass building a 311 Center to handle public safety non-emergency calls. Once the 311 Center was firmly established, it would be reassessed to determine if it was feasible to move to Stage Two: a full-service model. In this second stage, the project would handle all calls for service and information for the county and would serve as a consolidated call center much like the one in Dallas, Texas.

### Goals of the Orange County Government Service Center

- Alleviate the burden on the county's 911 emergency response resources.
- Offload calls to cost-effective self-service options such as Interactive Voice Response (IVR), e-mail, and web access
- Implement system components that will be cost-effective to install, integrate, use, and maintain.

Operating under the principle that a 311 Center in Orange County would be formed initially as a clearinghouse for public safety non-emergency calls, the first challenge was to obtain input from the various municipal police agencies within the county. Some of these law enforcement agencies were experiencing a similar problem with their 911 centers being overburdened at high peak hours or in times of crisis and their buy-in and organizational support seemed plausible.

The project planners envisioned a strategy in which the participants from each agency would meet once a month to develop a model whereby the non-emergency calls could be offloaded into a new consolidated 311 call center. At first, it was thought the best way this could be accomplished was to assemble representatives from the different Public Safety Answering Points (PSAP) in Orange County because it would be those individuals who would recognize the true need for the system and could provide the best input so that all participating agencies' concerns could be addressed. These representatives, therefore, would become the logical ones to carry the information back to the city managers, mayors, and other political sovereigns in the municipalities they represented.

The initial meetings with representatives from the PSAPs and members of the project planning staff took place in the fall of 2000. During the first discussions in this 311 PSAP Steering Committee, the representatives became very concerned about the model that Orange County's 311 Center would eventually become. They determined that the county planned to use Stage One to assess the value of the concept; then, after the 311 Center was firmly established, there would be a discussion about moving to a full-service model that included all county services.

To alleviate any concerns, all members of the 311 PSAP Steering Committee visited agencies that had developed or were in the process of developing 311 centers: Austin and Dallas, Texas; and Chicago, Illinois.

The visits enabled the project staff to see firsthand the range of duties that each agency was performing and the level of financial and political support that would be necessary to make each a reality. For example, at the time, the 311 Center in Dallas was stationed next to the 911 Center and fielded calls from each of the city's divisions and provided performance statistics to the city manager. The model used by Austin focused exclusively on public safety non-emergency calls. The representatives from Austin claimed they had met absolutely no resistance to this model and that it was heralded by all in the jurisdiction as a model program.

The project team members reported their findings to the 311 PSAP Steering Committee. It was clear that very few of the participants envisioned the 311 Center becoming a full-service center. Some felt that if Orange County moved to a full-service model it would have a negative effect on their interaction with residents. Others felt it would indeed alleviate a lot of the routine calls, but nevertheless they still had staffing and fiscal concerns.

Based on the initial reaction of many of the PSAPs, it was clear that at least in the beginning the project would focus solely on implementing a 311 Center that would respond to public safety non-emergency calls. Further, all discussions concerning a move to a full-service model would be postponed until the 311 Center was operational and there was full agreement among all members of the 311 PSAP Steering Committee.

The situation changed dramatically in the coming months and years as the project began to take shape. The efforts of the project staff to develop this new center are detailed in the following chapters.

#### **Original Partners in the Orange County 311 Cooperative Agreement**

- Orange County Sheriff's Office
- Orange County Fire Department
- Orlando Police Department
- Orlando Fire Department
- Edgewood Police Department
- Eatonville Police Department
- Greater Orlando Aviation Authority
- Maitland Police Department
- Winter Park Police Department
- Apopka Police Department
- Winter Garden Police Department
- Ocoee Police Department
- Oakland Police Department
- Windermere Police Department
- University of Central Florida Police Department

## Chapter III: Partnerships

The strength of any cooperative agreement between federal, state, county, or municipal agencies depends heavily on the level of trust between each entity. In Orange County, the level of trust and the strength of the bond between the original municipalities and county participants significantly diminished as the project moved from planning to implementation because of several unfortunate circumstances.

*“The strength of any cooperative agreement between federal, state, county, or municipal agencies depends heavily on the level of trust between each entity.”*

### *Political and Financial Fallout*

Whenever a law enforcement officer issues a moving traffic violation in Orange County, a \$12.50 surcharge is added to the fine. The surcharge is designated for the development, maintenance, and improvement of radio systems throughout the county. In the fall of 2002 it was brought to the attention of county officials that Orange County had been reimbursing traffic surcharge funds to the smaller municipalities that maintained their own communication/radio systems. The Orange County Attorney’s Office informed the head of the 311 project (who also was the manager of the county’s Public Safety Communications Division), that traffic reimbursements to these cities had to stop. This news was not well-received by many of the municipalities and many felt that this, like the proposed 311 Center (even if it focused only on public safety non-emergency calls), was simply another step to diminish the authority and autonomy of the small municipalities located within the county and at the same time broaden Orange County’s jurisdiction over these small cities. Others felt that Orange County was retaliating for the jurisdictions’ unwillingness to wholeheartedly endorse the 311 project. And still others felt that the motives of the county for repealing their funding were more sinister.

*“..this external mandate handed down from the county appeared to be the ‘straw that broke the camel’s back.’ It resulted in the unwillingness of many of the 311 PSAP Steering Committee members to continue to work on planning the center....”*

In any event, this external mandate handed down from the county appeared to be the “straw that broke the camel’s back.” It resulted in the unwillingness of many of the 311 PSAP Steering Committee members to continue to work on planning the center, and many jurisdictions decided that they would no longer be a part of this group and pulled back. Others said that they would continue to come to the meetings to protect what autonomy they had, but would not participate in any appreciable terms. While a few jurisdictions stood by and supported the project, they were clearly in the minority.

At this point the project was for all purposes stalled. The research team interviewed each member of the committee to see exactly what the issues were and gave the information to the project staff. One of the major concerns that many of the jurisdictions had was that participation in the 311 project would cost them financially because the county funds a majority of the 911 Centers’ needs based on call volume. Thus, if calls, even non-emergency calls, are routed to a central location maintained by the county, then routed back to the individual jurisdiction, revenue for each municipality would be reduced. Further, the capital needed to run their 911 system was so tight that any drawback of funds would be devastating because they did not have any way to make up for this loss of revenue.

Realizing that the project was going nowhere with the current 311 PSAP Steering Committee, the project staff adopted a new strategy. Instead of working with the PSAPs and trying to build the center from the ground up, the project leaders met with each city manager or mayor to try to gain their support. During the fall of 2002, each was briefed on the goals of the project and how the 311 center was to be founded to increase the quality of service to the residents of their jurisdictions. Most were supportive of the concept but were reluctant or refused full cooperation at least until the City of Orlando pledged support. This never happened partially because Orlando had just built a new state-of-the-art communications facility and was not experiencing capacity problems. If Orlando signed on and its non-emergency calls were routed to 311, the city would also lose part of its valuable revenue stream. Perhaps one city manager said it best when he said, “Supporting the system right now is akin to the city taking a 50 percent pay cut and doubling its workload.” To complicate the matter, even the employees of the Orange County Sheriff’s Office were reluctant to participate because it diminished their contact with residents and they could not control the level and type of interaction once these calls were offloaded to a third party.

To address this issue, the Orange County Public Safety Communications Division and the project team contracted with several legal consultants in Tallahassee, the state capital, to draft model legislation that would govern, fund, and set legislative parameters for the establishment of 311 systems in Florida. The language of this “Florida Non-Emergency Telephone Act” included provisions that allowed cities and other municipal areas to tax services provided by the county to fund 311 centers up to 2 years before implementation. It was envisioned that if the project staff could create its own revenue stream, the concerns of more agencies and original partners would be alleviated and they might rejoin the partnership if the legislation passed. The original 311 PSAP Steering Committee agreed that this was a start. To move forward, the project board asked for and received the support of the Florida Association of Counties Working Group on 911—as long as the language in the bill contained a provision that allowed funding for 911 systems in the state to increase. With this change in language, the group also gained support from the Florida Chapter of the Association of Public-Safety Communications Officials–International, Inc. (APCO).

Despite reaching an agreement with the 911 Working Group of the Florida Association of Counties and the Florida Chapter of APCO, the bill was not supported by the wireless carriers’ powerful lobbyists. While members of the wireless industry had no issue with the concept of 311, they were concerned about three specific issues. First, they feared a loss of revenue if cell phone bills were increased by the addition of another government tax. Second, they were concerned about the public perception of another increase in fees. The wireless carriers stated that it would be hard to explain to their customers that it was not a rate hike but rather an additional government fee. And finally, they said it may be likely that if the bill passed, there was the potential for reduced funding of 911 systems by individual jurisdictions because the broad language in the bill allowed local jurisdictions to adjust the prescribed rates for both 911 and 311.

#### **Concerns of Wireless Carriers about the 311 Funding Bill**

- Loss of revenue due to rate increase
- Perception of rate hike by carriers
- Loss of current or future revenue already under-funded to 911 system.

Concurrent with the effort to acquire a dedicated funding mechanism for 311 to keep the concept alive in Orange County, the project planners also helped form a statewide coalition of agencies and personnel engaged in the 311 process to work on the model legislation and talk to their local representatives to try to convince them to support the bill. Unfortunately, the bill did not pass.



## Chapter IV: Developing the Government Service Center Model

Realizing that the county and project staff were not going to be able to overcome the political considerations and obtain passage of enabling legislation to fund 311, the executive committee was left with three options. First, adopt a radically different approach and centralize a select number of county services under one roof, with the hope that as the project moved forward, other county entities would join. Second, continue with a small but devout group of supporters. Third, discontinue efforts to implement 311 in the county.

The first option was more salient for three reasons: 1. It prevented other interested parties from independently using the concept; 2. The county's Code Enforcement and Animal Services Divisions were looking for help with their call centers; and 3. This option kept the promise of providing the citizens of Orange County with better government service.

In September 2002, the executive committee began to develop the new countywide Government Service Center (GSC) under the premise that "if we build it, they will come."

The Orange County Mayor's Office approved the proposed center and the project staff received permission to relocate agents and personnel to the vacant Cassady Building. The GSC officially began operations in July 2003, using the 10-digit telephone number 407.836.3111.

As originally envisioned, the GSC served as a pilot project to see if call center centralization would improve the overall efficiency of the county's former contact points, and save money by maintaining one database and technological resource instead of the many that were needed before.

### Original Partners of the Government Service Center

- Animal Services
- Code Enforcement
- Citizens' Action Link

After naming Animal Services, Code Enforcement, and the Citizens' Action Link (a clearinghouse of information for county residents) as partners, the planners of the Orange County 311 project chose Lorenzo Williams as the new Public Safety Communications Division Assistant Manager because of his experience in running the Citizens' Action Link. Vicki Pegram, who had been one of the founding members of the 311 PSAP Steering Committee as a representative from the Greater Orlando Aviation Authority 911 Communications Center and had managed the call center at the Orlando International Airport, came out of retirement to manage the new call center.

Williams, Pegram, and key project staff were given the better part of 6 months to set up the center, train the operators, and draft and implement policies and procedures. They held biweekly meetings with representatives from the three partners to learn their business processes as well as to see how the GSC's different management information systems could be integrated into one. In July 2003, the GSC began answering calls for Code Enforcement and the Citizens' Action Link. In August, calls for Animal Services were routed to the center.

The GSC began with a bare-bones budget. Staff who had occupied positions in the other agencies were transferred into the GSC. The move was not easy. Many of the call takers who had answered calls for only one unit had to learn the goals, missions, and practices of not only the other two partners but also learn where to find information related to countywide operations, such as when is garbage picked up, who is the county commissioner, and where public utility meetings take place. This was challenging for some of the call takers because many of these positions were not considered skilled.

While the call takers had to overcome a learning curve, many reported to be happy with the center because it was a more professional arrangement conducive to a true call center environment. In the old Animal Services Call Center, for example, each operator worked in a space approximately 4 feet wide and under excessive office noise.

### *Rapid Consolidation of the Pilot Project*

In January 2004, the county commissioned Technology Research Consulting Inc., to study potential cost savings of a further consolidation. The firm's final report recommended that the county move forward, and listed 46 departments and units that should be considered for consolidation.

Seven agencies with 33 subunits, each with its own set of operating principles, policies, and tasking requirements, required study. The original schedule called for the consolidation of 17 of the 33 subunits by June 1, 2004 (see Table 1).

GSC staff met with agency heads to incorporate the missions, goals, and policies of each subunit and discovered that certain subunits within agencies would not generate the financial or operational benefit on which the consolidation plan was based. Division staff, therefore, analyzed the tasks performed by the departments and their divisions to determine how the inclusion of an agency would benefit the citizens, the county, or both. Other considerations included workload, cost of conversion, and training requirements, and the space required in the existing GSC.

**Table 1: The Original Consolidation Plan.**

<b>County Agency</b>	<b>Subunit</b>
Public Works	Roads and Drainage Traffic Engineering Storm Water Management
Growth Management	Zoning Housing and Community Development Building Planning
Health and Family Services	Health Services Division Head Start Youth and Family Services Cooperative Extension Citizens Commission for Children Mosquito Control Community Action Regional History Center
Community and Environmental Services	Environmental Protection Neighborhood Services

## Benefit to the Citizens

To benefit citizens, an agency had to perform some kind of useful service that a citizen could access by calling an easily remembered 3-digit telephone number without having to consult a telephone book. If, for example, someone wanted to report a dangerous animal in a residential area or a dead animal on the road, he or she should be able to call the GSC and talk to a call taker who is knowledgeable about the policies and procedures of Animal Control and is able to complete the service request while on the phone with the citizen. These services are a clear benefit to the citizens.

## Benefit to the County

The second primary consideration was whether the consolidation of each division or subunit would benefit Orange County as a whole. Initially this consideration sparked the interest of the county when Mayor Richard Crotty commissioned the GSC. Building on and solidifying the concepts of political trust, accountability, and open access—a key theme of the mayor and his government agenda—would benefit the county.

*“..the benefit to the county not only involved monetary resources but enrolling the support of the citizenry behind county efforts to improve the quality of life for its residents.”*

Other considerations were analyzed before subunits were selected for consolidation including workload, human capital, cost of conversion, and space requirements.

**Workload.** The program planners were concerned about excessive call volume. Their research revealed, for example, that the previous Animal Services call takers were able to respond to only approximately 75 percent of their calls. It was feared that once GSC took over this function, the volume of calls would overtax the staff and facility resources. Converting a call center that has a highly technical call volume, therefore, required due consideration.

**Human Capital.** Also important regarding workload was the volume of calls that a division or subunit received, which determined the number of operators that the GSC had to employ to fulfill call volume requests adequately. When the first few divisions were consolidated, host divisions transferred their existing call takers to the GSC. This seemingly reasonable approach proved to be problematic. Some of the transferred personnel clearly were not good matches for handling both the volume of calls and the variety.

Even experienced call takers who are outstanding performers in their current positions can have problems when placed in an environment where their scope of responsibility is as large as that required by GSC operators. For this reason, there was considerable turnover among the call takers who were transferred. The lesson learned from the first consolidation (Animal Services, Code Enforcement, and Citizens’ Action Link) indicated that it was not wise to simply transfer existing personnel. Instead, the strategy in the future would be to hire personnel for existing or vacated positions.

*“Some of the transferred personnel clearly were not good matches for handling both the volume of calls and the variety.”*

**Cost of Conversion.** Here, we are referring to writing a conversion algorithm (or script) for an existing software system so that the front end can be handled by the GSC's management information system. In most cases, the GSC software appeared to exist on the front end where all calls began. Some agencies, however, had an existing database that the software could pull from to check for existing work orders and/or calls from a specific address. This script between the GSC software and the database application of choice was often a customized application written by the county's IT staff or purchased from an outside vendor. The time, effort, and financial cost of writing such scripts, as well as the existing practices of an agency, should be considered before consolidation is recommended or completed.

**Space Needed.** Space was also another consideration. While the project planners projected that the Cassady Building was large enough to accommodate the agencies slated for consolidation, the current space would be filled to capacity. To accommodate the new agencies within the existing infrastructure of the GSC, a capital improvement proposal was submitted to the County Commission to expand the current building's usable workspace, but the proposal was not funded. The County Commission, however, decided to reconsider the rapid expansion plans. Details of this process will be examined later.

### *Tasks and Administrative Planning for Conversion*

Once an agency was selected for consolidation, the real work began for the project staff. The considerations mentioned earlier in this chapter set the priorities for inclusion in the GSC but did not include the volume of work that followed to make sure there was an orderly transition into the Center. Most of the work of integrating the agencies into the GSC was spent working with the agencies' staffs designing the work orders, processes, policies, and screens used in the software.

### **The Frequently Asked Questions Database**

GSC staff also completed a set of frequently asked questions (FAQ) that would serve as a critical tool for educating the new call takers about the functions of the particular divisions, and streamlining the learning process so they could focus on the unique and infrequent calls that all too often take up so much of their time.

To assist the GSC staff in this process, the GSC purchased a knowledge-base module to be part of the existing software application that was used to maintain the FAQs for all potential partnering agencies.

### **Design Process of Work Orders and Interface between IT Products**

Another important step in the consolidation process was completing the design requirements for service requests. This was critical because many of the targeted agencies' call centers completed internal service requests while a call taker was on the telephone with a citizen. In the past, these service requests had been native to the host agency's database application. This process had to be replicated in the GSC software to allow agencies and their callers to track service requests. To achieve this, scripts between the GSC software and the host agencies' database packages had to be generated, integrated, and synchronized.

## IT Needs and Assessment

The project group's plans were driven by the technology available in the county at the time. When the project first started, key personnel visited other sites with 311 systems that used Motorola's *Suncoast* software. This Windows®-based software allowed the call centers to customize their application to each department's specific IT needs. While impressed with the system, representatives from the county's IT staff were reluctant to spend the amount quoted by Motorola. Further, the county was already using *Magic*, a help desk application that could be modified to fit current needs. It was also operational in some existing county agencies, including the Citizens' Action Link, which had become a part of the GSC.

Anticipating future demand, project staff commissioned a study to determine if *Magic* could meet both current and future demands of the Center. The consultant expressed reservations about whether the *Magic* system was the best possible solution for the future of the GSC.

## The Front End of the GSC's Operations

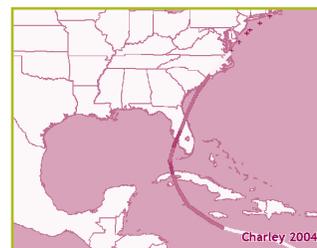
Also considered in this early stage of consolidation was an interactive voice recognition (IVR) system that would provide automated options to the caller prior to reaching a call taker. While the county had several IVRs in place, none actively made use of natural voice recognition to expedite and triage the calls. The *Avaya* IVR system uses a person's natural voice and asks for prompts instead of using electronic digit signatures to route calls to specific boxes. These prompts could be set up in different languages to cater to the county's large ethnic populations. Similar systems are used by large corporations to increase the efficiency of their operations. The proposed and preferred *Avaya* system was estimated to cost a little more than \$800,000. The project staff submitted another capital improvement request to cover these costs but the proposal was not funded because of the county's other urgent priorities—although the county continually showed its support for the venture.

### *A Series of Unfortunate Events: Hurricane Season 2004*

The three major hurricanes that battered Orange County and other parts of Florida in August and September 2004—Hurricane Charley, August 13; Hurricane Frances, September 5; and Hurricane Jeanne, September 26—reemphasized the importance of providing citizens with timely and accurate information in times of crisis. While the aftermath of the hurricanes was not as devastating as when Hurricane Katrina hit Louisiana and Mississippi in 2005, three storms within 30 days challenged the county government to find more innovative ways to provide key information to its constituents. It could be said that the three storms gave the GSC the notoriety it needed and its place in Orange County government.

## The Impact of these Storms on the Government Service Center

Just prior to hurricane Charley, there was relative calm in Orange County. Few ever expected to see a storm of that size and magnitude come through Central Florida. While everyone realized it was a possibility, no storm had ever hit low on the west coast of Florida and traveled up through the center of the state without losing a considerable amount of energy. Even up to 15 minutes before people in Orlando started feeling the effects of Charley, there was a pleasant calm enjoyed by many residents. That changed rapidly as the storm passed through.

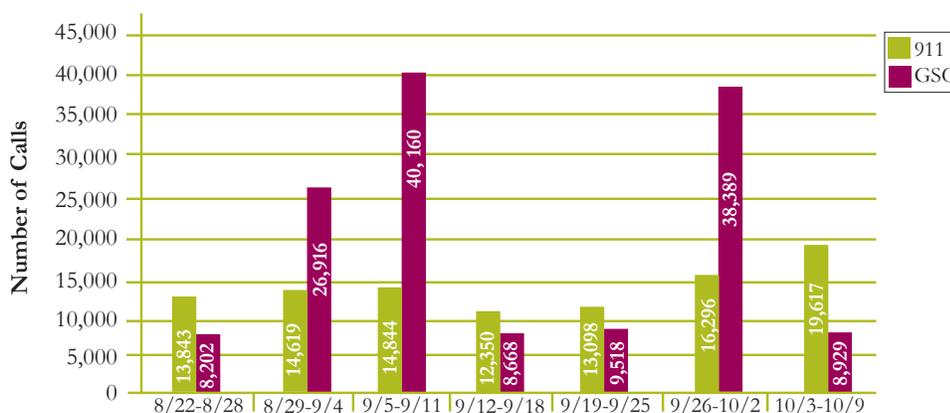


With wind speeds exceeding 120 miles an hour, the residents in Orange County fled to what shelter they had. As the winds circulated, residents began hearing the shingles being ripped off their homes, and many feared that the storm would tear their roofs off.

Despite the fact that emergency personnel were put on alert and additional personnel in the communication division were called in hours before, the telephone banks to 911 were flooded with calls from frantic citizens. As shown in Figure 3, the volume of calls that the GSC received in the days immediately following the hurricanes was tremendous. While not all of these calls may have gone to 911, it is conceivable that many would have.

Even when the winds subsided, many citizens were left without power, shelter, and anywhere to go for help or assistance. These citizens, without knowing anywhere else to call, dialed 911. As a result, the 911 system was severely affected.

Figure 3: Calls to 911 and the GSC Following the 2004 Hurricanes.



### Public Education

Before, during, and after the storms, county government officials used television and radio broadcasts continually to provide vital information to the citizens on where to go for assistance. Taking a proactive stance, the county mayor conducted a series of press conferences advertising the GSC as a place where citizens could call to get the latest information on locating tarps, ice, roofing supplies, shelter availability, and details on curfews. During the next 6 weeks in daily updates, the GSC's number was advertised in the news and on local television and radio. Citizens began to rely on this number as the primary conduit for supplies and critical information. (See figure 4)

Because of this valuable service the GSC performed, it is now one of the chief agencies that county government relies on, particularly during hurricanes and other natural disasters. The county sees the GSC as an essential part of the operations of local government that should be maintained.



Figure 4: Bumper Stickers Provided the GSC's Telephone Number.

One of the critical elements in making the Government Service Center (GSC) in Orange County a success is making sure that citizens are aware of its service and use it more as a community resource instead of placing calls to 911. While GSC staff are invited to community events, neighborhood association meetings, and schools, the center has deferred implementing a direct and focused community education effort.

*"Because of this valuable service the GSC performed, it is now one of the chief agencies that county government relies on, particularly during hurricanes and other natural disasters."*

During the GSC's period of introspection, efforts were focused on call volume and on developing internal policies and procedures to assist in the organization's efficiency. This focus will inevitably change as the center solidifies its direction. More than likely, that will come with the assimilation of new partners and challenges.

### *Refocusing the Efforts of the GSC*

After seeing what a valuable service the GSC could perform in times of crisis, the county refocused the consolidation strategies. When the county administrator presented the consolidation plan to members of the countywide users' group, representatives of each agency expressed serious concerns about the level and quality of customer service that would result from a fast and potentially ill-conceived consolidation plan. It became clear after a series of discussions that it was in the best interest of the county to scale back the plan and allow the GSC to mature gradually. It did not mean that other agencies were not being considered for consolidation; they were. It meant only that the rush to add them to the GSC was placed in the proper context.

### **Organizational Change**

As discussed in the preceding sections, the GSC has had a rich history in its development as a full service contact center. During this time, the center experienced several managerial changes including the appointment of Carol Burkett to serve as interim director of the Public Safety Communications Division. It was during her tenure that the 311 number was officially turned on and formally announced at a press conference at the Orange County Board of Commissioners meeting in June 2005. This was a major victory for those who had worked on the project during the previous 5 years.



## Chapter V: The Government Service Center

Both the operation and mission of the Government Service Center (GSC) have changed since the GSC's inception. Originally envisioned as a public safety, non-emergency center designed to offload calls from the overloaded 911 system, plans were redirected because of functional and financial considerations.

Today, the GSC is a full-service county clearinghouse for government information available to the public 7 days a week from 7:00 a.m. until 11:00 p.m. It houses six divisions: Animal Services, Citizens' Action Link, Code Enforcement, Road and Drainage, Traffic Engineering, and Zoning. Each partner is an active participant in the GSC and representatives sit on its advisory board. The business processes of these agencies have been assimilated into the GSC and each partner is satisfied with the level of service it is receiving.

As of this writing, project staff are examining GSC business practices to determine what they can improve before receiving permission to move ahead with further expansion. One primary activity is an examination of the training curriculum for the call takers and other staff. The training coordinator and GSC administrative staff have been studying ways to improve customer service, including how calls are processed. These efforts center on providing data to the sponsoring agencies in a timely and efficient manner, ensuring that work orders do not fall between the cracks, and developing ways to improve the efficiency of, and decrease the time that, a call taker spends on completing a work order while the citizen is on the phone.

As part of the process, the call taker advises the citizen of the operational parameters of the agency and of anticipated response time. Through effective training, the GSC call takers have continually decreased the amount of time that it takes to answer calls. Although GSC staff have been working on these issues since the GSC's foundation, the task is becoming more challenging and complex as more agencies are being considered for consolidation.

### *Time-and-Effort Study of the Government Service Center*

As with other 311 centers across the United States, the project in Orange County placed a priority on the time that staff dedicated to calls; specifically, the effort and level of support to field calls for Animal Services. Currently, only 12.5 percent of all calls to the GSC deal with issues related to Animal Services. Handling these calls and recording all the necessary information needed by the agency comprises approximately 55.9 percent of the call takers' time and effort.

**Table 2: Orange County Government Service Center Time and Call Processing Report March 2006.**

	Research	Time on Call	After Call Processing	Total Time on Call	Percent of Activities	Percent of Calls
Animal Services						
Bite Calls	1:41	5:51	5:05	12:37	0.6%	0.2%
All Others	1:35	1:54	1:38	5:07	55.3%	12.3%
Code Enforcement	0:34	1:06	0:42	2:21	23.0%	5.1%
Roads and Drainage	2:08	2:03	2:21	6:32	12.9%	2.9%
Traffic Engineering	2:56	1:35	1:49	6:20	4.0%	0.9%
Zoning	0:03	0:46	0:00	0:49	0.7%	0.1%
Other	0:00	1:29	0:00	1:29	3.5%	78.5%

When the development of the GSC was first discussed, it was understood that the calls to Animal Services were a significant concern to the operators of the 911 centers. Citizens were often confused about whom to call when they saw a stray, wild, rabid, or aggressive animal roaming the streets. Often, citizens called 911. While some of these calls still come into the 911 Center, they are now screened and transferred to the GSC. As shown in Table 2, these calls constitute only a relatively small portion of citizen contacts, but the time and effort spent on the calls can be nearly double the amount of time an operator spends on any other kind of call.

*“..because the software was not a true call center application, the series of screens that the call taker must process through is overly cumbersome.”*

The time spent to process calls to other partners within the GSC varies depending on the type of call. For instance, calls for Code Enforcement issues take on average 1.5 minutes to process while calls for Roads and Drainage or Traffic Engineering take, on average, 6.5 minutes to clear. The reason for these differences is the level of detailed information that each agency needs to generate a work ticket. This is not the only problem. Agency staff also report that because the software was not a true call center application, the series of screens that the call taker must process through is overly cumbersome. Further, there are some limitations within the product to query previous calls and self-populate the existing fields from the originating phone number. These and other problems with the current software are addressed in the next chapter.

### *Call Processing and the Communications Loop*

Aside from general information requests, any work order created within the GSC is transferred to the agency of choice by direct transfer through the software (Roads and Drainage and Traffic Engineering) or is electronically converted to a medium that can be picked up by the host agency’s system (Animal Services and Code Enforcement). The agency marks the orders as received, updates the status, and provides a resolution. Should a citizen call the center again to get an update on the status of his or her work order; the call taker can provide the most current information.

### *Alternative Forms of Communication from Citizens: Web/E-Mail Inquiries*

Inquiries also come into the GSC by e-mail through the county’s central web site. To facilitate this process, county government has provided access on its central web site for citizens to e-mail general inquiries to the center.<sup>§</sup> Most inquiries are for general government information; however, many citizens use this format to generate work order tickets. In cases such as this, a citizen may report seeing a wild animal on the street or a notice possible code violation. While not all of these reports constitute enough information to generate a work order, the citizen inquiries are responded to and, when applicable, the notice is sent electronically to the host agency in question. The official policy of the GSC is to respond to electronic inquiries within 24 hours of the initial call.

§ [www.orangecountyfl.net/cms/default.htm](http://www.orangecountyfl.net/cms/default.htm).

### *The Current Focus of the Government Service Center*

In summary, when the county officially opened the GSC, it was conceptualized as a pilot project to provide seamless government service to its citizens, as well as a test site to see if the county could save money through the consolidation of its more than 50 call centers. With the focus on consolidation, the county set forth a plan of rapid consolidation that was later reconsidered. As of this writing, the GSC is reviewing and revising its current policies and procedures, as well as ways to upgrade its existing facilities and hardware and software needs so that when called on it can assimilate additional partners readily. Further, the center has been given the task of updating its emergency operations procedures to better serve the citizens of Orange County in times of crisis.



## Chapter VI: Equipment and Technology: Call Routing and Call Tracking

Since the initial discussions regarding the potential establishment of a 311 center in Orange County began, a great deal of attention was paid to how calls would be routed to the different agencies within the county. In lieu of developing a countywide system to handle public safety non-emergency calls for the county's 13 Public Safety Answering Points (PSAP), the Government Service Center (GSC) assumed an alternative mission and goal: to consolidate the agencies within the county that welcomed their services, but also whose calls were affecting the 911 centers after hours.

Realizing the benefits that the GSC could provide, the Orange County Sheriff's Office spearheaded efforts to obtain funding from the Department of Justice Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (the COPS Office) to obtain hardware, software, equipment, and the necessary infrastructure for a 311 center.

### *Growing Pains: Hardware and Software Requirements*

The current software application, *Magic*, is widely used throughout Orange County. It is a Windows-based client care system that is easy to customize with existing applications and can track clients on many different levels. It is used in many justice agencies across the United States. It is, for example, the client care software of choice for the Phoenix (Arizona) Police Department and the United Nations. When it comes to handling the variety of calls and customer requests of a 311 center, however, the application's utility presents some challenges. Throughout the development of the center, the project staff and the 311 PSAP Steering Committee had been concerned with the software's ability to handle the volume of calls and future needs.

In visits to 311 centers across the country, committee members learned that many were using Motorola's *Suncoast* system, and that it worked extremely well. In 2003, representatives from Motorola demonstrated their software to the partners of the GSC project who recognized it as the software of choice when compared with similar systems. Two primary issues, however, prohibited its adoption: 1. During the initial meetings, the quote for the purchase of this system was a little more than \$1 million. The county, the original partners, and the funds provided by the COPS Office funding could not cover the costs. 2. There was limited support from members of the original steering committee to buy into the concept of 311 and adopt a new management information system. This would mean a radical change to their existing business practices and result in a net increase in their IT support costs. Based on these considerations, everyone involved decided that the move to a true 311 management information system was not feasible.

When the team changed the focus of the project and decided to rely solely on agencies within the county, Orange County's IT staff concluded that since the client care software was used by two of the original partners it would be best to stay with this software solution. Further, they concluded that it could be customized enough to make it work in this call center environment. They pledged the resources, adding that the new upgrades would allow them to provide additional capacity to the system to accommodate future partners.

Still concerned about the software's capacity, the project team hired an independent consultant, Technology Research Consulting Inc., to study the issue. The consultant's report claimed that, while the software was adequate for the duties of the GSC at the time, there was no assurance that it would be able to handle the sheer volume of calls as the center matured and more county agency call centers were assimilated. Further, the report stated that while the software may be the current logical solution because the county already had the adequate number of licenses and in-house technical expertise to customize the application, new software solutions had to be considered.

Although the *Magic* software has continued to be the solution of choice for the GSC, there has been some dissatisfaction with its capabilities. The GSC's administrative core began to assess and evaluate the time it takes to handle calls and evaluate individual call taker performance. When the center staff completed the first time and motion study, call takers and the administrative staff openly acknowledged that to complete any call, the number of screens that operators must process to clear each call were difficult to navigate through and were not in any logical order.

According to agency staff, it simply takes too long to fill out basic demographic and call information. In this regard, opening screens do not autopopulate with information from previous calls from the same phone number or address. Hence, operators must search the database to see if a previous call has come from this location, check on the status, confirm that the call is located in the county by jumping to an external mapping solution, then record the address location before recording the type of call, and generate a service request.

The GSC staff proposed a number of modifications to the system to make it work for the time being (see Table 3).

**Table 3: Suggested *Magic* 311 Application Modifications.**

Notification when a duplicate record is made.	Default city and state fields set to Orlando, Florida.	If a query on a name, phone number, or subject is conducted, let the user select the record instead of autopopulating fields.
Search records in chronological order.	Update date and times of calls automatically.	Hide company name.
Create and print letters on behalf of department or county officials.	Create templates for county agencies.	Ability to view previous records on the same work order ticket.
Ability to query fields in plain English instead of subject codes.	Ability to automap address of current and new tickets to obtain jurisdiction.	Ability to identify maintenance facility by incident address for Roads and Drainage.
Quick and easy procedure to validate addresses for addresses not in the system.	Ability to enter and retrieve reports by intersections.	Ability to view property records without leaving the main screen.
Ability to query by more than one phone number at a time.	Ability to send and receive e-mail attachments through <i>Magic</i> from customers.	Data exchanged via the agencies should share same data structure as the customer database in <i>Magic</i> .
Ability to send and receive faxes from workstations.	User-friendly system that provides standardized and ad hoc reports.	Customer/client database should accept both real time and batch updates.

### *The Call Routing Process During Normal Operations*

Despite the problems associated with using software not originally designed as a 311 call center application, the GSC staff continue to operate and field calls in the most cost effective and timely manner possible. Currently, the center's average call handling time is approximately 3 minutes; however, the goal of the GSC is to conform to industry standards recognized by the Statewide 311 Coalition which states that 90 percent of all calls should be closed out in less than 2 minutes.

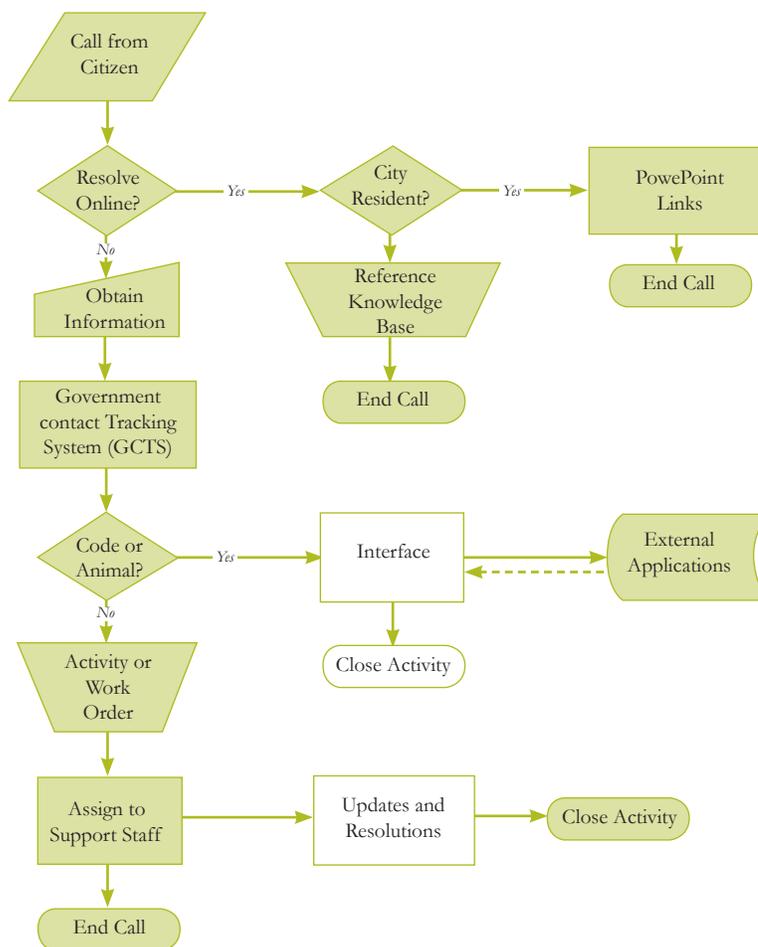
Callers to the GSC are greeted by an automated voice system that announces "Orange County 311" and prompts the caller to select a language (currently, English or Spanish.) The caller is notified of the hours of operation (7 a.m. to 11 p.m., 7 days a week) and advised to dial 911 if the call is an emergency. Once the caller completes this common cycle, the call is routed to the GSC's automated call distribution system where an operator asks the caller for the jurisdiction in which he or she resides. The operator uses an external mapping solution to validate the jurisdiction, the jurisdictional boundary of the incident, as well as the caller's address or the location of the incident. The operator prompts the caller for his or her name, and asks how the GSC can be of assistance.

If the call is from one of the cities not participating in the GSC, the call taker searches the knowledge base to see if he or she can be of assistance and attempts to answer the resident's question. If the call taker is unable to help, he or she refers the citizen to the general help line of the jurisdiction in question or the specific agency that can provide assistance.

If the caller is a resident of unincorporated Orange County, the call taker obtains the demographic information of the caller and places it in the Government Contact Tracking System (GCTS). If the call is for information only, the call taker searches the knowledge base and tries to answer the citizen's question. However, if the caller needs service from one of the partnership agencies, another application within the GCTS is opened where the specific fields required by that agency are completed. Once the call ticket is completed, the citizen is given a work order number and the work order is sent electronically to the host agency for resolution. The host agency is responsible for updating the status of the work order so that if the citizen calls to check on the status of the request, the call taker can provide timely information.

The flow of calls within the GSC is displayed in Figure 5.

**Figure 5: Call Flow of the GSC During Normal Operations.**

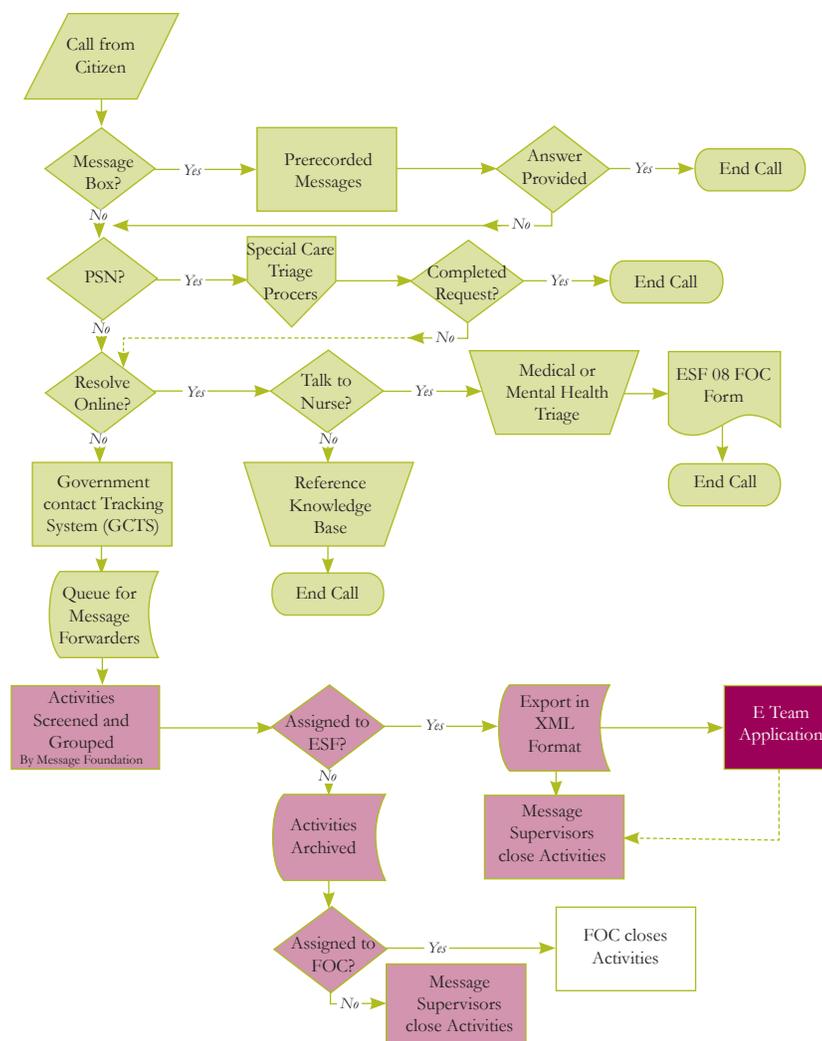


## The Call Routing Process During Emergency Operations

Should the GSC be called into emergency operations status, the call routing process follows a similar procedure with a few minor differences. For instance, as was done successfully in the aftermath of Hurricanes Charlie, Frances, and Jeanne, citizens are greeted with a choice of selecting informational message boxes on where to get generators, ice, sandbags, tarps, batteries, or receive other information such as details of the curfew.

Other changes to the call routing process include bringing voluntary staff into the center to assist callers with public safety and health needs. If a caller needs assistance in these areas, professionals are stationed on location to assist residents with their questions. For instance, a nurse is available to talk to residents and allay their public health concerns; or if a resident is in need of mental health counseling, a certified mental health counselor in the GSC will provide the assistance necessary until the crisis has passed. Figure 6 illustrates call flow within the GSC during an emergency.

Figure 6: Call Flow of the GSC During Emergency Operations.



### *The Knowledge Base*

One of the essential elements in the GSC environment is the reliance on staff to have the most up-to-date information on all county-run agencies. Because Orange County is so large and provides such a variety of services to its citizens, there is no way that the call takers can be relied on to have all of this information at their fingertips. To expedite this process, the county bought the *Knowledge Base* to assist operators with information. The module is essentially a query-based application where call takers can search the software memory banks for answers to preprogrammed questions.

### *INFOMAP*

Orange County's Growth Management department has a mapping solution called INFOMAP. Widely used, it is available to citizens through the county's web site and is tied to the county's Geographic Information System. The map not only validates jurisdictions but provides information related to Code Enforcement officer assignments and Roads and Drainage Maintenance facilities. During emergencies, this mapping is used exclusively because it provides up-to-date information about county services and identifies the area or areas affected by the emergency.

### *GEO 911 Mapping*

Another resource available to call takers in the GSC is the *Geo 911 Mapping* database. This new software application was delivered to the GSC in 2005 as part of the new Emergency Preparedness Plan. It allows call takers to map calls to the proper jurisdiction using address information. It is important to note that this is the same application that the 911 Center uses to validate addresses. What makes this application so unique is that it is a stand-alone system that receives daily updates from Orange County but can run on its own in an emergency or during a computer power outage.

## Chapter VII: Staffing the Government Service Center

Close attention was paid to staffing the Government Service Center (GSC) throughout its development. The participants who devised the center were former communications employees; therefore, they recognized early on that staff in the GSC had to be proficient in their knowledge of Orange County services and capable of handling a variety of calls.

When the GSC was originally conceived, it was envisioned that its development would proceed through a two-step process. The first step would encompass its opening as a public safety non-emergency center. With this in mind, the project team envisioned that the call takers would hold qualifications similar to those of 911 operators. Further, the original plan called for the GSC to serve as a backup should Orange County's 911 Center cease operations. That plan fell through.

To implement a viable 311 center and as a cost-saving measure, Orange County consolidated a select group of agencies whose calls are now fielded by the GSC. Discussions among GSC staff, the County Commission, and the participating agencies determined how best to consolidate existing personnel and services and dictated that no existing county employee would lose his or her job. Further, the positions of existing call takers from Animal Services, Code Enforcement, and the Citizens' Action Link were transferred into the newly formed center.

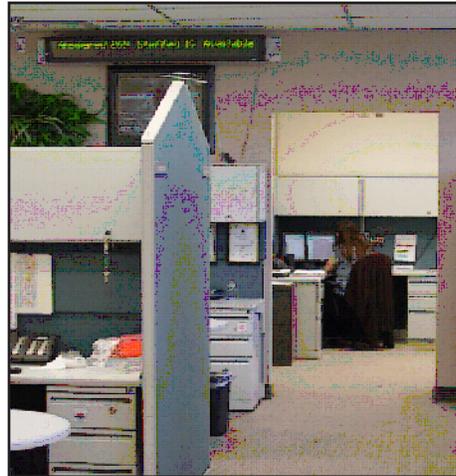


Figure 7: The Government Service Center.

While the staff were pleased to have the center founded and officially recognized by the county government, there was the realization that personnel transferred from these existing agencies would need additional training. Quite often, personnel transferring from one occupation to another had limited abilities because of their previous work requirements. When acquiring staff from other areas, it is important to ascertain that they are flexible and can demonstrate the basic knowledge, skills, and abilities to perform the newly required duties.

### *The Hurricanes and Additional Personnel*

When the three hurricanes hit Florida in the summer of 2004, personnel from the GSC were called on to help staff and distribute critical information to the county's million plus residents. At the daily press conferences held by the mayor of Orange County and the City of Orlando, the GSC's telephone number was displayed. Because the center did such an outstanding job of providing timely and relevant information to the citizens, the mayor of Orange County in February 2005 agreed to transfer 13 vacant positions to the GSC. In addition, the county approved the funding for three new positions: training coordinator, customer service liaison, and administrative specialist.

The training coordinator's primary responsibilities are to develop training programs for the call takers and monitor the learning objectives and outcomes. The customer service liaison serves as the liaison between citizens, the county commissioner's office, the GSC, and the participating agencies. He or she monitors the quality of calls and the information provided to citizens and conducts routine audits to make sure that the information provided is both timely and accurate. If problems arise or complaints are received from either the GSC or the host agencies, the liaison provides reports to all interested parties on what went wrong and how these problems can be prevented in the future. The administrative specialist supports and provides assistance to the assistant manager of the GSC.

### *The Staffing Schedule*

The current staffing model calls for the center to be staffed from 7:00 a.m. until 11:00 p.m., 7 days a week, with 26 call takers and 5 additional positions occupying the administrative cadre. Staffing is based on a modified, rotating schedule for employees. Four overlapping shifts cover calls during peak periods. As of this writing, 22 call takers and four leads (floor supervisors) are on staff.

### *Staff Development and Personnel Policies*

A critical component of any organization is retaining the staff it has trained and finding ways in which personnel can advance in the organization. In a call center environment, many of these opportunities are limited. The GSC, however, devised a unique way to compensate its exceptional employees both internally and financially: the "Lead" system.

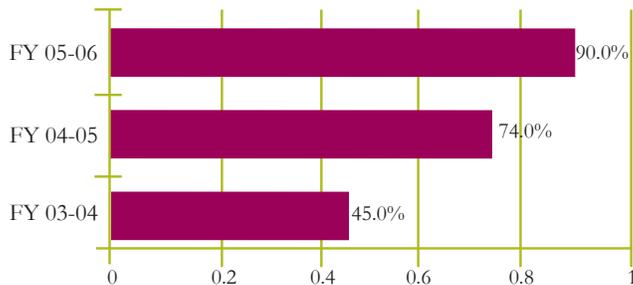
### **The Lead System**

In the Lead system approach, call takers who exhibit exceptional knowledge and skills may have the opportunity to be promoted to vacant lead positions. These positions carry with it institutional prestige as well as a minimal increase in pay. The leads work with teams of call takers and monitor the workload and accuracy of those within their team through the use of software that allows them to perform quality checks by passively listening to calls, and monitoring the active personal computers of call takers under their supervision.

The leads are also responsible for providing a weekly report to the administration of the activities on the floor. One of the major pushes under this system is the development of benchmarks. In this endeavor, these individuals are the key players in the organization's time and motion study. The idea is to calculate within broad parameters how much time call takers should spend on specific calls and evaluate the staff according to these benchmarks.

The leads also respond to e-mail inquiries and develop standard responses to the routine questions that are often asked. While it is too early to assess the effectiveness of this system, it is clear that the GSC has vastly improved one of its primary performance measures by answering 90 percent of calls within 45 seconds. Figure 8 denotes the variance from that goal. In Fiscal Year 2003–04, only 45 percent of calls met this goal. In Fiscal Year 2004–05, 74 percent were answered in 45 seconds. And in Fiscal Year 2005–06, more than 90 percent of calls have been answered in this time frame.

**Figure 8: Percent of Calls to the GSC Answered in 45 Seconds or Less.**



### **Tardiness and Absenteeism**

The GSC call takers' prompt arrival at their work stations each day is similar to those standards set for 911 operators. In a call center environment, one cannot afford to be lenient when it comes to tardiness and absenteeism. Citizens' expectation that they will receive an answer to their call during advertised business hours demands a more aggressive policy. It became evident that the GSC was going to be evaluated by the quality of its engagement with the public. The center had to revise its personnel standards in excess of what was typically expected because of the variety of calls where some required immediate response, such as animal bites or traffic signal malfunctions. Higher expectations of these and other agents of the public trust were not only required, but essential.

### **Progressive Discipline**

The GSC administration understands and recognizes the importance of the talent contained within the organization. And as such, it has implemented the doctrine of progressive discipline with its employees. Under this method, violators of the policy are first given a verbal warning. If the behavior continues after additional documented verbal warnings, a written reprimand is delivered along with a developmental action plan notifying the call taker of the possible consequences of his or her behavior, as well as a plan to rectify the situation. While it is impossible to completely eradicate the problems of tardiness and absenteeism, the problem has diminished significantly since this policy was put into place.

## Employee Awards Program

As with any agency in the private or government sector, an employee recognition plan for denoting outstanding performance is an integral part of not only building, but sustaining employee morale. The GSC is no different. In the fall of 2005, the GSC staff implemented a three-tier program to recognize the best performers and has dedicated the building's front hall to those individuals. The program includes three distinct awards: the MVP, Employee of the Year, and Employee of the Quarter.



Figure 9: 311 Star Hall of Fame.

Each award carries the distinction of some type of tangible reward along with the honor of having one's name and picture hung in the 311 Star Hall of Fame. The MVP is awarded quarterly through a peer vote and the call taker given this honor is given a trophy to place in his or her cubicle. The employee of the quarter is given lunch with the manager, a parking space, gift certificates for dinner, and a trophy. The employee of the year receives a similar distinction as a reward.

It is important to note that each award is paid for with donations collected from the administrative staff, and not taken from agency funds. Agency personnel report intense competition for these awards and a collective desire for the bragging rights associated with winning this small, but meaningful competition over their peers.

## Uniforms

Another one of the changes that was proposed to increase staff morale and build a common culture of those employed within the GSC was the adoption of uniforms. Similar arguments have been made with other labor-intensive agencies, but the work in a call center is unique. To perform at peak levels, employees must be comfortable in their attire. To this end, some of the call takers suggested the adoption of a uniform so that call takers could be comfortable, not worry about spending too much money on their work attire, and could be easily recognizable in the community. To this end, the administration approved this request and ordered polo shirts with each employee's name and the GSC logo imprinted on the shirts. This appears to have pleased all and may make a large difference in building the culture and morale of GSC employees.

Each of these small but critical policy changes has been essential in building and creating the synergy necessary to run and staff this extremely diverse and complicated call center.

## Chapter VIII: Staff Training and Continuing Education

Perhaps nothing that the Government Service Center (GSC) has done has exceeded the importance of the training and continuing education of the call takers. These needs were always understood but after the 2004 hurricanes, it was clear that the center needed a full-time training coordinator, a position that was subsequently created in 2005.

One of the first things the GSC did was to work with representatives from Valencia Community College to develop an in-house training module for all new employees. This 4-day training class orients new employees in the basic tenets of the call center environment, covers quality control and assurance, and tests their knowledge and skills to ensure that they can handle the job.

In addition, new employees are required to complete 2 weeks of orientation at the center relating to the goals, mission, and tasks of the five entities for which the GSC is the primary conduit. Here, representatives from Animal Control, Traffic Engineering, Code Enforcement, Zoning, and Roads and Drainage departments take the new employees through every step of their operations. Further, the GSC implemented a policy of employee ride-alongs with each partner in a code enforcement vehicle (Figure 10) so that call takers can begin to understand the complexity of their jobs.

Next, each new call taker spends anywhere from 4 to 6 weeks working one-on-one with a trainer, while the leads monitor performance, before the employee is approved and released to work alone on the floor.

This rigorous training and orientation schedule does not conclude the training initiative. The staff at the GSC have also introduced a series of continuing education refresher courses for existing employees because policies of the respective host agencies can change and the volume of information the employees are required to assimilate is large. The program also provides time for the call takers to get out into the field with the host agents just as a new hire would. Those participating in these special programs have found this exercise invaluable.



**Figure 10: Orange County Code Enforcement Vehicle.**

Call center operators who have taken part in this program stated that, while they knew the policies and procedures of many of the host agencies, they did not truly appreciate the complexity of many of the agent's jobs. They report that seeing the problems first hand and getting to know the agents responsible for resolving these issues has greatly increased their awareness of the various duties in the county.



## Chapter IX: Lessons Learned

Since the inception of Orange County's 311 project, the Government Service Center (GSC) staff have seen their fair share of events over which they had little control. Originally conceived as a traditional 311 center focusing on public safety non-emergencies, the GSC operations, as of this writing, only marginally reflect the original plan. This report has detailed the many forces that shaped the center as it is today. Chief among them was the challenging political relationships between county and local municipal operations.

While no one in the beginning debated the fact that it was going to be difficult to consolidate non-emergency calls that previously were routed to each of the 13 jurisdictions in the county into one center, few realized the dynamic climate and educational demands involved. The most common disagreements that the cities had against consolidation was that it would cost money and force them to lose touch with residents.

Orange County continued to move forward with the adoption of the GSC and officially launched 311 in June 2005. Working on a shoestring budget, the GSC accepted three partners: Animal Control, Code Enforcement, and Citizens' Action Link. Animal Control and Code Enforcement lacked sufficient staff to satisfy the public's expectations and the Citizens' Action Link was chosen because it served as the county's central information clearinghouse.

When the initial meetings took place to plan the GSC, the project staff went out of their way to accommodate the needs of each partner. Tasks were assigned and existing personnel positions were transferred. As mentioned previously, this probably was not the best staffing model; however, it was deemed a politically prudent move at the time.

Further, to establish a viable service and gain more visibility as a county entity, concessions were made to standardized procedures with the existing partners. In this regard, members of the GSC and the administrative cadre report that in hindsight it would have been beneficial to establish service level agreements with the various departments before consolidation. Based on this reflection, the GSC staff have begun new talks with their current partners to draft and execute these agreements.

Without these agreements in place, misunderstandings and communication between the GSC and the host agency could falter. While not debating the communication breakdown, service level agreements clearly define each other's roles. In the future, the formal drafting and signing of the service level agreements will be an integral part of the organization's practices and will be implemented before adopting any new partner.

Another major lesson learned in this project deals with the level of support needed to implement a consolidated call center in a large county or municipal agency. As dictated by the history of the project and the iterations that the GSC took on before implementation, the absolute and unwavering support of upper county administration is needed before a project of this size and scope can begin. The mayor and county administrator held several meetings with their directors, outlining 311 objectives and goals for the future emphasizing that cooperation and support of the 311 system was vital. Their support has been constant and unwavering throughout development of the system.

*“..the absolute and unwavering support of the county administrators is needed before a project of this size and scope can begin operations.”*

The final point to be made is that while the staff and administration of the GSC proceeded to get the center operational, the available system technology to handle the volume and variety of calls continued to evolve. This was especially true of the software used to run the call center. While the *Government Contact Tracking System* software was a robust system that was fully customizable to many agencies' needs, it still fell short of a true call center software application. The county's IT staff went above and beyond dedicating numerous hours trying to accommodate and meet the call center's needs.

Despite the number of obstacles that have faced the GSC since its inception, the future of Orange County's GSC is extremely bright. As of this writing, consolidation discussions are underway with several other county departments. At the same time, the GSC is in the process of refining its operational procedures and streamlining its administrative processes and is able to answer calls within 21 seconds.





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