

NASPAA Competency: Policy Process

Memorandum to Human Services Director to Prioritize the Public

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To: Janet R. Smithson, Director, Department of Human Services
 From: Deirdre M. Bassin, Clerk
 Date: September 28, 2023
 Subject: Prioritizing Client Phone Calls

The lack of client satisfaction in the Department of Human Services is unsettling. Recently, I have received many phone calls from clients that say they feel they are being ignored and disrespected by our staff. The clients are especially upset because they cannot get in touch with anyone when they are at their lowest point asking for help. We tout that we are here to help people, but when they are reaching out, we give them our voicemail and ask them to leave a message to a generic voicemail message. As a result, clients feel neglected and mistreated. These are residents who are desperately in need of temporary assistance in the form of food stamps, rental assistance, or shelter. There is currently no priority granted regarding the answering of phone calls as they come in. Indeed, we are neglecting to provide temporary assistance to those who desperately need it in the most expedient manner possible. Our current closed environment is not conducive to an ever-changing client-centered environment and needs extensive improvement.

The external environment of any organization affects its internal processes. We are currently operating as if we are a closed system, unaffected by outside influences in a stable and machinelike environment (Rainey, Fernandez, & Malatesta, 2021). Closed systems are not affected by external stimuli such as responding to client needs. Indeed, in a closed system, “the internal processes remain the same regardless of environmental changes” (p. 16). The way we function now is akin to a closed system because we are systematically responding to client phone calls. However, each phone call is not just “a phone call,” it is the outward reach of a resident in need; each phone call is our external environment begging for help. We must treat each phone call with respect to the resident’s needs and acknowledge our external environment’s influence on us when deciding how to conduct our internal processes. The external processes in this case are how we each go about our day and the work that we do.

Furthermore, according to the research of Burns and Stalker, “mechanistic firms that succeeded in stable environments” are those with “relative stability in products, technology, and competitors” (p. 81). Our products are the services which we render to clients in need. These products cannot be “stable” by their very nature of being in response to specific client needs. By allowing all calls to go straight to voicemail, we are treating clients as if they do not matter “right now” and can be answered later. However, many clients are hanging up on the voicemail and calling back the Division of Administration. The Division of Administration then fields calls of clients crying in desperation that their needs are not being met. This only exacerbates the problem. Now, instead of just the clients in need of temporary assistance, there is more paperwork to be done and more phone calls to be made, as the Division of Administration needs to forward the calls back to the Division of Temporary Assistance before the clients can get the help they need.

What we need to do at the Department of Human Services is adopt an open and adaptive system, with differentiated units and high levels of integration. An open and adaptive system is more organic and can respond better to the basic human needs of our clients. Right now, our external environment, our clients' phone call requests, dictates that our internal processes be open and adaptive. Being open and adaptive means we need to philosophically and literally treat each phone call as unique and important. An illustration of what this would look like in our department is as follows:

- First and foremost, phone calls must be picked up before going to voicemail.
 - In order to achieve this goal, we must train reception clerks to expertly and attentively answer phone calls, put calls on hold, and transfer calls to available caseworkers.
 - There need to be more receptionists available at one time. At least 2 or 3 receptionists should be able to pick up the phone on the second ring.
 - Our phone systems need to be upgraded so that the receptionists can see who is already on the phone with another client.
 - Phone calls need to be logged and analyzed to determine if more receptionists are needed or if more caseworkers are needed in certain units.
- Institute a Quality Circle (Holzer & Schwester, 2020).
 - Volunteers from each unit need to meet weekly to discuss how to modify our phone call processing to better meet the needs of the clients.
 - Recommendations from the Quality Circle should be brought to higher management to delineate ways to integrate these processes.

We need to reorganize our external environment, processes, and ideals to change a basic, but I would argue the most important function that our office has: to answer client phone calls. We have a responsibility to our citizenry to treat the most fragile of our clients with the utmost respect.

I welcome the opportunity to discuss how we can prioritize client phone calls. Please let me know if you have any questions or concerns.

References

- Holzer, M., & Schwester, R. W. (2020). *Public Administration: An Introduction* (3rd ed.). Routledge.
- Rainey, H. G., Fernandez, S., & Malatesta, D. (2021). *Understanding and Managing Public Organizations* (6th Ed. ed.). Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.