



Montgomery County Government

AN EVALUATION OF THE HOUSING INFORMATION CENTER

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Delivering an effective and efficient information and referral service is part of being a customer-focused and responsive County Government. As David Osborne and Ted Gaebler observe in Reinventing Government: "Sometimes government can have a tremendous impact simply by providing information to the public."

Enacted in 1977, County Code Section 29-52 requires the County to develop a centralized housing information and referral service. Since its inception, the Housing Information Center has been staffed and managed by the Housing Opportunities Commission (HOC), and has never been competitively bid.

The County Government has consistently funded the information and referral component of the Housing Information Center. For FY93, the County Government will provide HOC with \$172,130 to operate the Center, an amount which represents approximately six percent of the County's total \$2.7 million contract with HOC.

The Center's customers are a large and divergent group. While most of the Center's business is conducted on the telephone, the Center also responds to walk-in inquiries. During the past 12 months, the Center averaged 150-165 telephone calls daily, with an additional 25-30 walk-in customers weekly.

The three full-time staff assigned to the Center spend 80 percent of their time providing general housing information and referrals, and 20 percent of their time helping callers or walk-in customers deal with a housing emergency, such as an eviction. A survey of Center customers indicates a high level of satisfaction with the assistance provided by Center staff.

Since the idea of a centralized clearinghouse for housing information was formulated in the 1970's, the County has grown significantly larger, more diverse, and complex. Today, the Housing Information Center is one among numerous County offices that members of the public (or customers) contact with housing-related questions. Recognizing that it is unrealistic for the Center to be the sole provider of housing information, OLO recommends restructuring the Center to strengthen its role as a resource to other providers of housing information.

With the goal of delivering the most cost-effective and efficient service possible, OLO also recommends a number of other changes to the structure and administration of the Center, including:

- Improve the flow of information about housing programs to the Housing Information Center, both from within and from outside of HOC;
- Explore alternative approaches to staffing the Center, including greater use of volunteers and/or contracting out some or all of the tasks associated with the Center's operations;
- Develop a memorandum of understanding between HOC and the Department of Social Services concerning how referrals should be made between the two offices, especially with respect to housing emergencies; and
- Rethink the Center's use of automated telephone system technology.

I. AUTHORITY, SCOPE, AND METHODOLOGY

A. Authority

Council Resolution No. 12-608, CY 1992 Work Program of the Office of Legislative Oversight, adopted April 7, 1992.

B. Scope

Enacted in 1977, County Code Section 29-52 of the Rent Stabilization Act requires the County to develop a centralized housing information and referral service. This report evaluates how this function is being performed by the Housing Information Center, which is operated by the Housing Opportunities Commission, on contract to the County Government.

The scope of this evaluation includes analysis of: who uses the Housing Information Center; the services offered by the Center; the funding, staffing and organizational placement of the Center; and how the Center's work is coordinated with that of related County Government offices.

C. Methodology

This project was conducted between March and June 1992 by Karen Orlansky, OLO Program Evaluator, with assistance from Debra Cammer, OLO Public Administration Intern.

The research design included: document and file reviews; quantitative analysis of program data; examination of legislative records; observation of Center operations; and phone interviews with a sample of customers who contacted the Center during the first six months of 1992.

OLO conducted interviews and obtained information from numerous management and line staff of the Housing Opportunities Commission and County Government, including: the Department of Housing and Community Development; the Department of Family Resources; the Department of Social Services; the County Government Centers (UpCounty, Silver Spring, Takoma Park-East Silver Spring, and Bethesda); the Office of Management and Budget; the Office of Consumer Affairs; the Department of Public Libraries; the Commission for Women and Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning. OLO also consulted with representatives from: the Montgomery County Board of Realtors and a number of non-profit service providers.

D. Acknowledgements

Throughout this study, OLO received full cooperation from all parties. In particular, OLO extends special thanks to Bernard Tetreault, Executive Director of the Housing Opportunities Commission; and the many other HOC staff members who spent time working with us throughout the evaluation process, including: Roy Appletree, Joyce Siegel, Donna Boxer, Pat Scissors, Mary Jo Zenk, Mary Jones, Juliette Kitts, Delores Roberts, and Sylvia Zaldivar.

E. Organization of Report

This report is organized as follows:

Chapter II, **BACKGROUND**, reviews the legislative and funding history of the Housing Information Center;

Chapter III, **EVALUATION**, is divided into four sections:

Section A: The Housing Information Center's Customers;

Section B: Services the Housing Information Center Provides;

Section C: The Center's Current Budget, Staffing, and Organizational Location; and

Section D: The Coordination of the Housing Information Center with Related County Government Functions

Chapter IV contains OLO's **CONCLUSIONS**, and Chapter V sets forth OLO's **RECOMMENDATIONS**.

II. BACKGROUND

A. Legislative History of the Housing Information Center

The County's legal requirement to develop and operate a central housing information and referral service was enacted in December 1977 as part of the Omnibus Tenant Protection Act (Emergency Bill 35-77). This legislation repealed the County's rent control statute, and replaced it with a program that included rent reporting and voluntary rent guidelines.

The requirement for a central housing referral service was included as part of this legislative package and was intended to ease the County's transition away from rent control to a competitive rental market. According to the legislative record, the primary intent of the housing referral service was to centralize information, and to counsel tenants, landlords, and government officials on the availability of housing and related financial assistance.

The idea for the County to establish a centralized housing information and referral service had first been suggested in 1973 at a forum of public and private representatives convened with the specific intent to improve housing services in the County. Following this forum, a housing task force also recommended that the County establish a centralized housing information service that would listen to, counsel, and refer people to the appropriate housing resources.

During the Council's worksessions on Emergency Bill 35-77, the debate on the housing information and referral service focused on the location of the function. As introduced, the proposed legislation placed the housing information and referral service at the Office of Landlord-Tenant Affairs. However, before final enactment, Bill 35-77 was amended to provide that operation of the housing referral service could be contracted to the Housing Opportunities Commission (HOC).^{*} The major argument in favor of this amendment was that, as the County's housing agency, HOC was already performing a housing information and referral function. In addition, HOC's responsibilities already included validating tenants' incomes for participation in Federal housing assistance programs.

The requirement for the housing information and referral service is codified as Section 29-52 of the Rent Stabilization Act (County Code Chapter 29, Article VI).^{**} Section 29-52 requires that the service shall include, but not be limited to:

- Counseling to tenants in need of alternative housing or financial assistance;
- Validation of tenants' need for alternative housing;
- Determining tenants' eligibility for housing financial assistance based upon income;
- Listing of agencies which can assist in locating housing; and
- Listing of available financial assistance programs.

In addition to the housing referral service, Section 29-52 requires that the County Government, in coordination with other public and private agencies, maintain a listing of available data concerning the location and characteristics of vacant dwelling units and their rent rates.

Since 1977, Section 29-52 has been amended once. In May 1984, as part of an Executive Branch reorganization (Bill 13-84), the law was amended to replace references to the Office of Landlord-Tenant Affairs (OLTA) with the Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD). To be consistent with the reorganization, Section 29-52 was amended to change the responsibility for coordinating the listing of data on vacant units from OLTA to DHCD.

^{*} The Housing Opportunities Commission of Montgomery County (HOC) is a public corporation authorized by State and County law to act as builder, developer, financier, owner, and manager of housing for low- and moderate-income persons. The policies and programs of HOC are determined by seven HOC Commissioners, who are appointed by the County Executive and confirmed by the County Council for five year terms. The Commissioners appoint an Executive Director, who carries out policy and administers activities of HOC.

^{**} Appendix A contains a copy of Section 29-52. Unless otherwise indicated, all County law citations reference the Montgomery County Code (1984), as amended.

B. Funding History

1. General. Operation of the Housing Information Center (the Center) began in September 1978. Since its inception, the Center has been staffed and managed by the Housing Opportunities Commission (HOC), as part of HOC's general contract with the County Government. The task of operating the Center has never been competitively bid.

Over time, the Center has been funded through a combination of Federal, HOC, and County Government dollars. The total budget and sources of funding for the Center have varied as the functions performed by the Center and the availability of Federal funds changed.

When it was first established, the Housing Information Center served as an umbrella organization within HOC for a number of different functions. In addition to providing housing information and referral, the Center originally included HOC's Operation Match.* During the 1980's, the Center was also certified by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development as a comprehensive housing counseling agency to provide counseling on a broad range of housing issues, to include: mortgage default, rent delinquency, money management, energy conservation, and eviction prevention. At one time, the Center also included staff to maintain HOC's waiting list and to perform the intake and eligibility functions for rental assistance programs administered by HOC.

The County Government has consistently funded the information and referral components of the Housing Information Center. For fiscal years 1987-92, Table 1 (page 4a) summarizes the budget and revenue sources for the Center's information and referral function.** The data show that the County Government's support for the Center more than doubled from \$80,890 in FY87 to \$169,190 in FY92. During the past five years, personnel costs have consistently accounted for 70 to 80 percent of the Center's total budget.

According to HOC budget staff, the major increases in the Center's budget since FY87 are explained by:

- The addition in FY89 of a third Information Specialist to the Center's staff;
- The implementation in FY90 of an agency-wide classification (Quantitative Evaluation System) review, which resulted in an upgrade of all positions in the Center; and
- The purchase of an automated telephone system in FY91.

* Operation Match is a HOC program that matches individuals who want to share their home or apartment with individuals interested in a shared housing arrangement.

** The Center's FY93 budget is reviewed in the following chapter, see page 19.

Table 1

Center Funding History
FY87 - FY92*

<u>Funding Source</u>	<u>FY87</u>	<u>FY88</u>	<u>FY89</u>	<u>FY90</u>	<u>FY91</u>	<u>FY92</u>
County Funds	\$80,890	\$86,076	\$127,020	\$146,700	\$160,750	\$169,190
HOC Funds	<u>0</u>	<u>11,098</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>5,694</u>	<u>5,807</u>	<u>4,057</u>
TOTAL:	\$80,890	\$94,174	\$127,020	\$152,394	\$166,557	\$173,247
 <u>Center Budget</u>						
Personnel**	\$64,480	\$76,174	\$101,830	\$125,266	\$130,389	\$138,537
Op Expenses	16,410	18,000	25,190	26,367	36,058	34,230
Mgmt. Fee	11,158	11,050	15,010	20,250	19,770	25,850
Other Op Exp.	5,252	6,950	10,180	6,117	16,288	8,380
Capital Items	<u> </u>	<u> </u>	<u>0</u>	<u>761</u>	<u>110</u>	<u>480</u>
TOTAL:	\$80,890	\$94,174	\$127,020	\$152,394	\$166,557	\$173,247
Workyears	2.0	2.6	3.0	3.0	3.0	3.0

* The budget data reflect actual expenditures with the exception of FY92 which is the revised FY92 budget as reported in HOC's FY93 budget. These amounts include only the Information and Referral functions of the Center.

** Includes salaries and fringe benefits.

Another factor affecting the Center's budget in recent years was the filling of two out of the three staff positions with employees who have been with the agency for more than 20 years. In addition to being paid near the top of their personnel grades, the annual retirement contribution for these two employees is substantial. In FY92, for example, the benefits-to-salary ratio for the Center is approximately 40 percent.*

2. HOC's Contract with the County Government. County Government funds to support the Housing Information Center are incorporated into the County's annual contract with the Housing Opportunities Commission. In FY92, the County provided HOC with \$2.8 million in General Revenue to support a number of HOC programs, including: Resident Services, Community Relations, Operation Match, Day Care, and Opportunity Housing. In FY92, the County's contribution of \$169,190 for the Housing Information Center constituted approximately six percent of the County Government's total contract with HOC.

The data in Table 1 indicate that the management fee paid by the County to HOC for the Housing Information Center increased from \$11,158 in FY87 to \$25,850 in FY92. The administrative portion of the fee is calculated as 20 percent of the salary expense for the Center.

The calculation of HOC's management fee, or overhead rate, is renegotiated periodically between the County's Office of Management and Budget and HOC. According to HOC budget staff, the management fee was adjusted in 1991 to more accurately reflect HOC's actual overhead costs, and is currently calculated to include indirect costs for: communications, custodial work, office space, office supplies, and printed forms.

The County's Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) is responsible for overseeing the implementation of the County's contract with HOC. Funds are provided to HOC on a monthly basis, based upon actual expense invoices HOC submits to the County. In accordance with the contract, HOC also submits quarterly progress reports to DHCD. DHCD and HOC staff describe DHCD's oversight of the HOC contract, in practice, as minimal.

* HOC participates in the County Government's retirement plan.

III. EVALUATION

As reviewed in the previous chapter, the legislative intent behind the Housing Information Center was to establish a centralized provider of housing information in the County. The importance of providing effective information and referral functions should not be underestimated. According to David Osborne and Ted Gaebler in Reinventing Government, providing information is a key component of customer-driven government. As Osborne/Gaebler write:

Sometimes government can have a tremendous impact simply by providing information to the public.*

The value of receiving questions and providing answers to customers is also discussed at length by W. Edward Deming in Out of the Crisis.** An office set up for the primary purpose of receiving inquiries provides an opportunity to receive customer feedback; and Deming advocates using customer feedback as an important source of data upon which to base improvements and changes in service delivery.

This chapter, which evaluates the Housing Information Center, is organized into four sections:

Section A: **The Housing Information Center's Customers**, identifies the Center's customers; reviews the number and type of customer inquiries; and discusses the ways in which customers learn about the Center.

Section B: **Services the Center Provides**, identifies the statutory and legal requirements for services to be provided; and analyzes the services provided by the Center in practice.

Section C: **The Center's Current Budget, Staffing, and Organizational Location**, focuses on how the Center fits into HOC's overall structure, and how the Center is currently budgeted and staffed.

Section D: **Coordination of the Center with Related County Government Functions**, assesses how the work of the Center is coordinated with County Government offices that either administer housing-related activities and/or routinely receive housing-related inquiries.

* David Osborne and Ted Gaebler, Reinventing Government (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley, 1992), page 338.

** W. Edwards Deming, Out of the Crisis (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Center, 1986).

A. The Housing Information Center's Customers*

1. Legislative and Contractual Requirements. The law (County Code Section 29-52) identifies "tenants, landlords, and government agencies" as the group of citizens, or "customers", to be served by the County's central housing information and referral service. The reference to tenants and landlords in the law reflects the origin of the Housing Information Center as part of the 1977 Omnibus Tenant Protection Act.

Compared to the law, the County's contract with the Housing Opportunities Commission (HOC) identifies a broader customer base for the Housing Information Center (the Center). The contract states that the Center will "provide housing information and referral services for Montgomery County residents". In addition, the contract provides HOC staff with some discretion to decide whom to serve. The scope of services section of the contract states that:

. . . the Commission shall provide information services to any County resident, regardless of income, but may at its discretion, refer persons who are not of low-to-moderate income to available private resources within their economic means.**

2. Overview of the Center's Customers. Data compiled by Housing Information Center staff indicate that a large and divergent group of individuals make inquiries to the Center. While most of the Center's business is conducted on the telephone, the Center also responds to walk-in customers. The use of the Housing Information Center by other government agencies is discussed in detail later in this chapter, see page 23.

Almost all of the Center's telephone calls come directly to the Center through the Center's dedicated telephone lines. The remainder are transferred to the Center by the HOC receptionist, who answers the central HOC telephone number.

The Housing Information Center performs an important screening function for the Housing Opportunities Commission by handling many of the public's general inquiries. By sending only appropriate referrals to the program offices, the Housing Information Center staff serve to minimize the time that other HOC staff spend handling public inquiries that are unrelated to their specific program or activity.

* Customers are identified as the individual or group that uses products and services being offered by the Housing Information Center.

** Scope of Services and Requirements Section of the contract between the County and HOC, entered into on October 16, 1991.

The County's contract with HOC requires the Housing Information Center to submit quarterly reports to the County. These reports include data on the number and type of telephone inquiries, and selected demographic data on the Center's walk-in customers.

Although the Center's quarterly reports are informative, the data contained in the reports cannot be used to evaluate the extent to which the Center is serving the specific constituent groups identified in the law and in the contract. This is because the categories of customers tracked by the Center do not coincide with the categories of customers listed in the law and in the contract, e.g., tenants, landlords, government agencies, County residents.

3. Number of phone inquiries/Number of Customers. Using information contained in the Center's quarterly reports, Table 2 (page 8a) summarizes the total number of telephone inquiries received by the Center between FY84-FY92. For FY93, Table 2 shows HOC's projection of the number of inquiries expected to be received during the coming fiscal year.

The Center's data show that the number of inquiries to the Center has increased each year. The total number of inquiries reported in FY92 (69,400) is almost four times the number reported in FY84 (18,690). The largest single-year increases occurred between FY87 and FY88 when inquiries grew by 52 percent, and between FY90 and FY91 when inquiries increased another 22 percent. HOC staff project that the number of inquiries in FY93 will be almost 7,000 (1%) higher than the number reported in FY92.

When reviewing these data, it is important to keep in mind that the number of inquiries is a different workload measure than the number of customers. As described in the footnote to Table 2, the inquiry data compiled by Center staff reflect the number of questions asked by persons contacting the Center; since FY90, the number of inquiries also includes the number of information lines listened to on the Center's automated telephone system.*

Historically, the Center has not tracked the number of customers that call for information. However, using available telephone data and some reasonable assumptions, the number of Center customers for the past 12 months can be estimated. According to HOC's budget office, the Center's automated telephone system recorded approximately 39,000 separate incoming calls. By assuming that an additional 2,000-4,000 telephone calls were transferred directly to individual staff members, the total number of calls the Center receives is estimated between 41,000 and 43,000 for FY92. On a daily basis, this represents an average of 155-165 separate telephone calls.

While recognizing that it is a gross measure, the cost-per-telephone call illustrates the relationship between the Center's funding and the number of telephone calls the Center receives. In FY92, the total funding for the Information Center divided by the number of calls the Center answered gives an approximate cost-per-call of \$4.00. When the cost-per-inquiry is calculated, the resulting cost-per-call is \$2.50.

* See explanatory footnote to Table 2, page 8a.

Table 2

Housing Information Center: Total Number of Telephone Inquiries*
FY84-FY93

<u>Fiscal Year</u>	<u>Number of Inquiries</u>
1984	18,690
1985	19,335
1986	21,600
1987	31,431
1988	47,730
1989	47,934
1990	51,900
1991	63,070
1992	69,400
1993	76,340 (projected)

* The number of inquiries is not the same as the total number of individuals that call the Center each year. The inquiry data reflect the number of questions asked of staff, and (since implementation of the automated phone system in 1990) also include the number of different information lines that customers listen to when they call.

Data are compiled from reports produced through the automated phone system and manual logs kept by Center staff of the questions asked by customers who contact the Center. According to Center staff, the logs kept are probably 80-90 percent accurate, with gaps occurring when the volume of inquiries is such that staff do not have time to maintain the logs. Monthly and quarterly reports are issued detailing the totals from the staff log sheets.

Source: HOC budget documents, FY84-FY93.

4. Types of Inquiries. The data in Table 3 (page 9a) summarize the types of inquiries the Center staff and the telephone information system received during the most recent two years. The substance of most telephone calls received by the Center can be divided into one of the following categories:

- Questions about rental assistance programs;
- Questions about an individual's status on HOC's waiting list;
- Questions about homebuyer assistance programs; or
- Questions about how to deal with a housing emergency such as a rent delinquency, an eviction, or some other type of displacement.

In addition, there are telephone calls that deal with other housing-related issues such as credit/financial counseling and mortgage default counseling.

According to the Center's quarterly reports, the distribution of inquiries by category has remained relatively consistent for the past two years. The data indicate that:

- The most common inquiry is a request for information about rental assistance programs; rental assistance inquiries represented 29 percent of all requests in 1990 and 34 percent of all requests in 1991;
- The next most frequent inquiry concerns the status of an individual on HOC's waiting list; for the past two years, waiting list inquiries have constituted approximately one-fourth of all telephone inquiries received by the Center; and
- The percent of inquiries concerning some type of housing emergency increased four percent between 1990 and 1991, while the percent of inquiries related to homeownership programs declined.

5. Data on the Center's Walk-in Customers. According to the Center's monthly reports, the Center handled a total of 1,607 walk-in requests for information in 1990, and 1,413 walk-in requests in 1991. The data in Table 4 (page 9b) show that during 1990 and 1991, almost three-fourths of the questions asked by walk-in customers concerned rental assistance. Most of the remaining walk-in customers needed assistance with a housing emergency, such as an eviction or other kind of displacement.

The Housing Information Center collects some demographic data on walk-in clients. (See Table 5, page 9c.) According to the Center's monthly reports, during the past two years: the great majority of walk-in clients (73%) have been female; approximately half have been African American; one fourth have been Caucasian, and 15 percent Hispanic.

Table 3

Subject of the Center's Telephone Inquiries
1990 - 1991

	<u>1990</u>		<u>1991</u>	
	<u>Number of Inquiries</u>	<u>Percent of Total</u>	<u>Number of Inquiries</u>	<u>Percent of Total</u>
Rental Assistance Programs	13,990	29%	21,990	34%
Waiting List	12,271	26	15,393	24
Homeownership Programs	8,822	18	8,856	14
General Informations*	8,461	18	9,653	15
Emergencies**	4,352	9	8,372	13

* General information includes: general rental, credit and financial counseling and general referrals which were the categories on the Center's monthly reports.

** Emergencies include: general emergencies, rent delinquencies, evictions, and displacement calls which were the categories on the Center's monthly reports.

Source: The Housing Information Center's monthly reports, 1990-91.

Table 4

Subject of the Center's Walk-in Inquiries
1990-1991

	<u>1990</u>		<u>1991</u>	
	<u>Number of Inquiries</u>	<u>Percent of Total</u>	<u>Number of Inquiries</u>	<u>Percent of Total</u>
Mortgage Purchase Program	40	3%	118	8%
Rental Assistance	1,192	74	1,004	71
Emergency Assistance	375	23	291	21

Source: The Housing Information Center's monthly reports, 1990-1991.

Table 5

Demographic Data on the Center's Walk-In Consumers
1990 and 1991

<u>Racial</u>	<u>1990</u>	<u>1991</u>	<u>TOTAL</u>	<u>Percent</u>
American Indian	5	3	8	- * -
Asian	95	77	172	6%
Black	885	715	1,600	53
Hispanic	192	252	444	15
Caucasian	<u>425</u>	<u>366</u>	<u>791</u>	<u>26</u>
TOTAL:	1,602	1,413	3,015	100

	<u>1990</u>	<u>1991</u>	<u>TOTAL</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Female	<u>1,204</u>	1,010	2,214	73%
Male	<u>403</u>	<u>403</u>	<u>806</u>	<u>27</u>
TOTAL:	1,607	1,413	3,020	100

* Less than one percent.

Source: Housing Information Center monthly reports, 1990-91.

6. How Customers Learn about the Center. Persons who contact the Center are not routinely asked how they learned about it. Although it is relatively limited sample data, OLO was able to obtain some insight into how inquiries get routed to the Center through interviews with a sample of customers who telephoned the Center during recent months.*

OLO's sample data suggest that the overwhelming majority of persons who telephone the Center learn about the Center from their friends or relatives. Based upon OLO's interviews, it appears that the second most common way that persons learn of the Center is via a referral from the Department of Social Services.

7. Center Publicity. The Housing Information Center is listed in the Montgomery County Resources Directory as well as the C&P Telephone Directory. In both cases, the Housing Information Center is listed as an information office within the Housing Opportunities Commission, and not as a central housing information service for the County Government.

According to Housing Information Center staff, there has been no active marketing of the Center in recent years. At one time, there was a separate pamphlet produced that described the services offered by the Center; such a pamphlet has not been available for the past four to five years.

Although promotional activities for the Center are listed as program objectives in HOC's budget, Center staff report that they have not been allocated the time in recent years to conduct workshops. According to former Center staff, during the early 1980's, when the Housing Information Center served as an umbrella for multiple HOC activities, Center staff routinely conducted workshops and training sessions. These workshops were useful in promoting the services offered by the Center.**

B. Services the Housing Information Center Provides

1. Legislative and Contractual Requirements. County Code Section 29-52(b) requires that services offered by the County's housing information and referral center include:

- Counseling services to tenants in need of alternative housing or financial assistance;

* OLO drew a random sample of customers from a list of names and telephone numbers collected by Center staff. The Center does not routinely collect this information and did so only for purposes of our survey. Many of the Center's customers were unreachable at the telephone numbers they gave to Center staff. Overall, OLO successfully interviewed 20 customers, who contacted the Center by telephone between February and May 1992.

** See page 23 for more information on the perception of the Center by agencies outside of HOC.

- Validation of tenants' need for alternative housing;
- Determination of eligibility for available financial assistance for housing programs based upon income;
- Listing of agencies which can assist in locating housing; and
- Listing of available financial assistance programs.

Section 29-52(c) adds that, in coordination with other public and private agencies, the Director of the Department of Housing and Community Development shall maintain a listing of available data concerning the location and characteristics of vacant dwelling units and their rent rates.

The County's contract with the Housing Opportunities Commission describes the scope of services for the Housing Information Center as follows:

Activities will include providing housing information and referral services for County residents. Such services shall include but not be limited to:

- a. Information regarding both the availability of the service and of existing or planned housing resources and programs including rental assistance programs;
- b. Counseling to determine housing needs and to evaluate and qualify applicants for financial assistance;
- c. Referral to appropriate agencies, programs, and resources for housing or financial assistance, including private sources, if appropriate.*

2. Description of Housing Information Center Services in HOC's Budget. HOC's budget lists the major program objectives for the Housing Information Center. The FY93 program objectives listed for the Center are similar but not identical to the services required by law and HOC's contract with the County.

HOC's budget lists the Housing Information Center as a discrete activity within the agency. As described in HOC's FY93 budget, the first program objective of the Center is:

To provide information and/or make appropriate referrals for a minimum of 50,000 clients and applicants needing housing assistance in the following areas: rental assistance, homeownership, senior rental assistance, general market rentals, MPDUs, housing resources for persons with disabilities, and assistance to citizens of Montgomery County facing displacement or evictions or needing emergency/crisis housing resources.

* Scope of Services and Requirements Section of the Contract between the County and HOC, entered into on October 16, 1991.

The budget also lists six other program objectives for the Housing Information Center:

- To update, develop, and create informational brochures summarizing the major programs administered by HOC;
- To market HOC-administered housing programs to eligible clients as well as other privately owned/private managed assisted housing developments;
- To update and maintain a Directory of Housing Resources for distribution to housing/human service providers and HOC staff;
- To make public presentations and conduct workshops for appropriate community groups/agencies;
- To serve as advocates, as appropriate, for clients/applicants/tenants working within the framework of HOC policies and procedures and Federal, State, and local County programs; and
- To provide information for the D.C. Metropolitan Area on subsidized housing by networking with different jurisdictions.

The law, contract, and HOC budget are consistent to the extent that they all describe the Center with a primary mission to perform a housing information and referral function. In certain respects, however, the specific services listed as Center activities are not identical throughout these three documents. According to the County Attorney, these inconsistencies do not evidence non-compliance with the statute. (See County Attorney's memorandum of July 16, 1992, page 55.)

Compared to the list of services mandated by law or contract to be provided by the Housing Information Center, the list of program objectives for the Center contained in HOC's budget describes a broader array of services for the Center. In particular, neither the law nor the contract mention: advocacy work, promotional/marketing activities, or networking with neighboring jurisdictions as services to be performed by the Housing Information Center.

In other respects, however, the budget describes a more narrow array of services. Specifically, the law and contract both use the term "counseling" to describe one of the Center's services, and "counseling" is no longer included as a specific program objective of the Center. In addition, the law describes the Center's services to include "validation of tenant's needs" and "determination of eligibility". Although Center staff ask questions about a person's situation in order to make an appropriate referral, the Center has not included HOC's intake and eligibility function since FY89.

The only requirement in Code Section 29-52 that has not been performed by either the Department of Housing and Community Development or HOC is the requirement to maintain data concerning the location and characteristics of vacant dwelling units and their rent rates. Although DHCD

compiles and periodically updates a directory of licensed multifamily rental facilities in the County, neither DHCD nor HOC maintains a database that tracks, at any given time, which specific units are vacant.

The inconsistencies among the law, the contract, and the budget most likely derive from the fact that, as reviewed in the background section (see page 4), the functions located within the Housing Information Center have varied since the Center was established in 1978. At one time, in addition to general information and referral, the Center included Operation Match, mortgage default counseling, and the intake/eligibility functions for rental assistance programs administered by HOC.

The remaining sections of this chapter discuss how the Housing Information Center is currently performing the program objectives listed in HOC's budget for the Center.

3. Allocation of Staff Time. Housing Information Center staff estimate that 80 percent of their collective time is spent providing general housing information and referrals, either on the telephone or in-person to walk-in clients. According to Center staff, most of the remaining 20 percent of their time is spent helping individuals in need of emergency housing assistance, because of eviction or other type of housing displacement. For a discussion of how the Center handles such emergencies, see page 15.

The Lead Information and Referral Specialist in the Center allocates some time each month to preparing monthly workload reports, and to obtaining updated information about housing programs and services. According to Center staff, they have rarely had time in recent years to get out of the office to either gather new information or make presentations.

4. How General Housing Inquiries are Handled by the Center. As reviewed earlier, the Center receives a large volume of housing inquiries. During FY92, the Center averaged 3,300 telephone calls and 100 walk-in inquiries each month.

Telephone calls reach the Center either directly (the Center has had its own dedicated phone lines since November 1990) or by being transferred from the main HOC switchboard. According to HOC's receptionist, (who sits at HOC's front desk and operates the main HOC switchboard), most of the calls that the Center receives come directly into the Center without going through the main switchboard. HOC's receptionist screens all incoming calls herself, and transfers calls to the appropriate office if a caller requests a specific type of information. Callers who are seeking general housing information are transferred to the Housing Information Center for assistance.

In response to criticism that the Center's telephone was frequently busy, in FY91, the Center's operating budget included an additional \$11,000 to purchase an automated telephone system. The automated telephone system was installed in November 1990.

Since that time, almost all incoming calls to the Center are answered first by the automated telephone system. (When an individual calls HOC's main switchboard, it can be transferred either to the automated

telephone system or directly to a staff member.) The message on the automated telephone system informs the caller that he/she has the option (by pressing different numbers on a touch-tone phone) of receiving a prerecorded message about the following subjects:

- How to receive a HOC housing assistance application;
- The length of HOC's waiting list for different bedroom sizes;
- Available services for emergency housing;
- HOC's housing programs; or
- Directions to HOC or translator assistance.

The caller is also informed that he/she has the option of pushing "0" to speak to a Center staff member. The caller is instructed that if he/she is calling from a dial telephone, then he/she can stay on the line and a staff member will answer. If a caller selects a subject option, then he/she is presented with another list of choices for specific information within each category. At each stage of the process, the caller is also given instructions about how to bypass the prerecorded phone system to reach a Center staff member. According to Center records, approximately 40 percent of all callers listen to at least one prerecorded message.

When a caller opts for talking directly to a Center staff member, the length of time that the caller waits before being assisted depends upon the current office conditions: the volume of incoming calls; the number of walk-in customers, and the number of staff in the office. Although Center staff strive to answer all telephone calls as quickly as possible, callers may have to wait for assistance. According to Center staff, most callers wait less than five minutes before their telephone call is answered by a staff member.

All three Center staff members answer general housing inquiries. Interviews with Center staff indicate that callers are screened for basic information so the appropriate referral can be made. For callers seeking information about rental assistance programs, staff routinely ask questions about: the number of family members; the family income; the family structure, including the ages of family members; the caller's current living situation; and whether the caller has previously applied to HOC or lived in HOC housing.* Based upon the information obtained about a caller's needs, Center staff explain how to apply for the various rental assistance programs administered by HOC or the County Government. The Center gives out applications for: Section 8 housing; the County's Rental Assistance Program (administered by DHCD); and the Moderately Priced Dwelling Unit program (administered by DHCD).

* While not all calls follow this script, these are the questions that most commonly get asked.

The length of time a Center staff member spends with a caller varies and is influenced by a number of factors, including how busy the Center is and the number of staff available. According to Center staff, the most time consuming calls are from customers with multiple or complex problems and questions. In addition, staff members tend to spend more time providing details on programs with which they are most familiar. When staff cannot answer a particular question about a specific program, the customer is referred to that program office for additional information.

The Center maintains a large volume of printed materials that can be either mailed or picked up by customers who visit the Center in person. An inventory of brochures on display at the Center indicated that approximately half of the printed materials concern programs administered by HOC. Most of the remaining handouts describe other housing-related County, State, and Federal programs. Copies of the Apartment Guide (compiled by the Office of Landlord-Tenant Affairs) and the monthly Apartment Shoppers Guide (compiled by a private sector real estate company) are also available in the Center. Center staff are in the process of developing some printed materials in other languages.

As reviewed in the previous section, approximately one-fourth of all telephone calls to the Center are from customers seeking current information about their status on HOC's waiting list. In order to answer these calls, the Center has direct access to HOC's computerized data base that contains waiting list information for Section 8 and public housing. Center staff are authorized to retrieve waiting list information with a last name or social security number, and can provide the customer with updated information over the telephone.

Information Center staff estimate that, overall, they answer approximately half of all inquiries received directly, and refer the other half to some other office or agency for further information. Although the Center does not maintain comprehensive data about the disposition of all inquiries, the records that have been kept indicate that approximately 15-20 percent of all callers to the Center are referred to an office or agency outside of HOC; the other 20-30 percent, not answered directly by Center staff, are referred from the Center to other offices within HOC.

The referral information contained in the Center's monthly reports for the past year indicate that the Center routinely refers callers to County Government departments, nonprofit agencies, and private companies. The two most common places that callers are referred to are the Department of Social Services (for emergency services), and the County's Department of Housing and Community Development for the Rental Assistance Program. The other most common referrals are to nonprofit organizations that provide assistance, such as: Catholic Charities, Community Ministries, and HELP/FISH.

5. How Selected Housing Emergency Situations are Handled.

According to Center staff, they spent approximately 20 percent of their collective time during the past year assisting callers and walk-in customers with more than a one-time provision of information or a referral. For the most part, the involvement of staff beyond simple information/referral comes about with individuals who are facing some type of housing emergency, such as an eviction.

Center staff use their own judgment to decide when to become "involved" with a particular customer's emergency situation. Interviews with Center staff suggest that they most frequently get involved when, in their judgment, the person in crisis is desperate with nowhere else to turn. Although there are no established rules for the extent of Center staff's involvement, the Center's most common approach is to assist the customer obtain financial assistance either through the County or a non-profit agency such as Community Ministries.

Based upon interviews with Center and Department of Social Services (DSS) staff, it appears that the degree of coordination between the two agencies on these emergency cases is inconsistent. Although in some cases there is communication back and forth between Center and DSS staff, there have been cases where Center staff have reportedly become involved without coordinating their efforts with the Department of Social Services. While recognizing that Center staff are only trying their best to help, this area of Center activity has apparently been the source of some concern to DSS staff because DSS is the agency assigned lead responsibility for dealing with housing emergency situations.

6. The Housing Resources Directory. In 1983, the Housing Information Center produced the first Housing Resources Directory. Between 1983 and 1990, the Directory was updated three times. As of this writing, Center staff are in the process of producing an updated 1992 version of the Directory.

According to Center staff, the intent of the Housing Resources Directory is to provide housing information about housing opportunities for certain special needs populations, i.e., individuals needing subsidized housing and/or special services due to a handicap. The intended audience for the Directory is not the general public, but rather government and non-profit agency staff who routinely receive questions about the availability of housing for special needs populations.

The most recent Housing Resources Directory was issued in 1990 and is 729 pages. The 1990 directory includes: a list of HUD Certified Counseling Agencies located in the area; and special sections on "Housing for Families", "HOC Apartment Communities", "Housing for Persons with Physical/Behavior Problems", "Housing for the Physically Handicapped", and "Housing for Seniors and Disabled Adults", each of which lists the location, amenities, and rents for selected properties that match the identified special needs populations. The Directory also includes a list of other resource agencies and a description of the services provided.

The Housing Resources Directory contains some of the same information provided in the Apartment Directory, which is compiled and published by the County's Office of Landlord-Tenant Affairs (OLTA). Although the collection of data by the Housing Information Center was partially coordinated once with the data collection efforts of the Office of Landlord-Tenant Affairs (OLTA), the general practice has been for each agency to conduct its own survey. OLTA's rental housing data collection activities are summarized below.

OLTA's Apartment Directory. The Rent Stabilization Act (Chapter 29, Article 6) charges the County Executive with the general mission to collect and analyze housing data about rental dwelling units in the County. The law requires that such data collection be centralized in order to minimize the reporting burden of landlords.

In accordance with the Rent Stabilization Act, the Office of Landlord-Tenant Affairs (OLTA) collects holdover and turnover rent increase data on a monthly basis. On an annual basis, OLTA conducts a survey to obtain current data on rent levels, vacancy rates, and other general information about all rental facilities containing 12 or more units. Every three years, the vacancy survey is extended to landlords of rental facilities containing fewer than 12 units. OLTA staff verify all information that is received, and enter it into a computer data base which becomes the basis for OLTA's annual vacancy report. OLTA also uses the rental facility data to compile the Apartment Directory.

OLTA's Apartment Directory has generally been updated and re-published every three years. It lists rental properties according to market areas and identifies special buildings for elderly, the handicapped and families. The entry for each rental facility includes: the property's name, address, and rental office telephone number; the structure type, the number of units by standard bedroom size; if and which utilities are included, deposit information, and what amenities come with the apartment.

The Apartment Directory is distributed to the public free of charge and is available at County libraries, Government Service Centers, the Housing Information Center, and other County offices upon request. According to OLTA records, approximately 15,000 apartment directories were published and distributed during the past three years.

7. How the Center Obtains Information. According to Center staff, their primary source of information about HOC programs is through informal networking with other HOC staff members, and through reading Commission minutes. Center staff report that they often become aware that a change has occurred based upon the types of questions being asked by Center callers. Once a pattern of questioning is identified, Center staff attempt to research the answer to determine whether there have been any significant program changes. Within the past several months, HOC's Executive Director has allocated time at HOC staff meetings for program staff to inform Center staff about recent developments that might affect how Center staff are answering questions about HOC programs.

One of the greatest concerns of Center staff is that there is no formal mechanism established for the Center to receive updated information about housing-related programs administered by agencies outside of HOC. Because the Housing Information Center is not routinely notified by other offices administering housing programs that a change has occurred, the Center relies upon an informal network of contacts to stay informed.

Similar to their practice for finding out about HOC program changes, Center staff often become alerted to changes outside the agency through the pattern of questions being asked by Center customers. According to Center staff, they do not feel empowered to directly contact management level program staff in other agencies.

Center staff have developed an informal working relationship with a number of private sector individuals and organizations. Staff of the Center are notified by several local banks when there is money available for mortgages through the Community Reinvestment program. According to Center staff, a number of real estate agents use the Center as a resource when they have a question about housing programs available in the County. In addition, some resident managers in the private apartment communities contact the Center when they have questions about a housing certificate or to inform the Center about a rental vacancy.

8. How Effective is the Center at Providing Housing Information and Referral? As discussed earlier in this report, the Housing Information Center collects data concerning the volume and substance of inquiries received by the Center, and tracks how many referrals are made to which offices/agencies outside of HOC. However, none of these data can be used to evaluate whether the services provided by Center staff have been effective, that is, whether the information provided and/or referral made was appropriate and responsive to the inquiry posed by the customer.

To get some customer feedback on whether the information and referrals given out by the Housing Information Center are effective, OLO conducted a telephone survey of a sample of callers who spoke with Center staff during the past few months.* When questioned about their experience with the Information Center, the overwhelming response of those interviewed was positive. In general, the great majority of customers interviewed voiced their view that Center staff were knowledgeable, responsive, and polite. Several customers used adjectives such as "supportive", "patient" and "compassionate" to describe their contact with the Center. One customer said that the staff member they spoke with was the "ideal person for the job".

Most of the customers interviewed indicated that they had contacted the Center because they needed information about rental assistance programs administered by HOC. The majority of the customers surveyed report having problems paying their rent. Those interviewed confirmed the Center was generally able to provide answers or referrals in response to questions asked. For the most part, the sample group reported following the suggestions provided by the Center staff. Two out of the 20 customers interviewed reported that the Center was not able to assist them.

* See footnote on page 10 for description of OLO's survey.

Almost all of the customers surveyed offered negative comments about the Center's automated telephone system. Specifically, those surveyed indicated that they did not like getting the automated telephone system when they called the Center. These customers said that the automated telephone system was not user friendly, and that by the time they contacted the Information Center, they were completely frustrated and wanted to talk with a live person.

C. The Center's Current Budget, Staffing, and Organizational Location

1. FY93 Budget and Staffing. The Center's FY93 budget is summarized in Table 6 (page 19a).^{*} The Center is funded at the same service level as FY92, with the only increase budgeted for salary increments. Compared to FY92, the County's contribution is increasing from \$169,190 to \$172,130, an increase of \$2,940, or 1.7 percent. The data indicate that for the fiscal year beginning July 1, 1992:

- 99.5 percent of the Center's budget is funded as part of the County Government's contract with HOC, with the remaining \$870 (one-half of one percent) funded with HOC funds;
- Salaries and benefits constitute 80 percent of the Center's budget; and
- Management fees (HOC's overhead charge to the County Government) represent 15 percent of the Center's total budget, with an additional four percent for other operating costs.

Three HOC staff positions (workyears) are assigned to the Housing Information Center: two Information and Referral Specialists (Grade 15), and one Lead Information and Referral Specialist (Grade 17). The Center's staffing has consisted of these three full-time positions since FY89. In addition, Center staff are currently being supplemented with support from a volunteer for 15 hours per week. According to Center staff, it was relatively easy to train the volunteer, and the addition of the volunteer has proven quite successful.

In practice, the work of the three staff assigned directly to the Center is also supplemented by HOC's main receptionist. Although not considered part of the Center, (nor funded by the County Government's contract with HOC), the receptionist answers and directs all telephone calls that come into the main HOC switchboard. The receptionist screens calls and determines which should be transferred to the Information Center and which should be directed to other offices, either within or outside of HOC. This decision is made based on the type of information the caller is looking for.

^{*} This year, in coordination with the County's Division on Handicapped (DFR), the Housing Information Center had applied for \$10,000 in CDBG funds to develop a data base to track the vacancies in units adapted for persons with disabilities. This grant request was not funded.

Table 6

Housing Information Center Budget
FY93

Revenue Sources

HOC Funds	\$ 870
County Funds	172,130
	<hr/>
Total:	\$173,000

Expenses

Salary	\$ 97,260
Benefits	42,190
Operating Expenses	33,150
Training/Travel	\$800
Office Supplies	0
Print/Reproduction	6,000
Communications	360
Subscriptions and Dues	150
Management Fee	25,840
Capital Items	<hr/> 400
Total:	\$173,000

Source: Approved FY93 HOC Budget.

2. Description of the Information and Referral Specialist Positions. The HOC Personnel Department's position description form for the Information and Referral Specialist position defines the class and lists examples of duties. The position is described as one that "provides assistance to clients regarding public housing programs administered by HOC, and makes appropriate referrals." In addition, the position's duties are described to include: interviewing clients to explain housing programs; referring clients to other departments within HOC and to social service providers; preparing monthly statistical reports; processing credit references; monitoring and updating the computerized waiting list of housing applicants; and responding to the public's telephone inquiries.

The position description form for the Lead Information and Referral Specialist describes the responsibilities of the position as one that "may also lead or supervise other employees." In addition, this position is given responsibility for "coordinating the activities of the Housing Information Center and counseling clients." The examples from the duties section on the Lead Information and Referral Specialist position description form are the same as listed above for the Information and Referral Specialist with the exception of "preparing workshop presentations and conducting training sessions". (As noted earlier in this report, Center staff report that they have not done any workshops in the past two years.)

3. Staff Coverage of the Center During the Past 12 Months. The assignment of three full-time staff members to the Center does not describe, in practice, the staff coverage of the Center during the past 12 months. A review of the leave records of Center personnel show a relatively high use of leave.

According to HOC records for the past 12 months, due to the use of leave (combination of annual, sick, and personal leave days), the Center staff consisted of its full complement only slightly more than half of the time. Out of the 251 possible workdays (not counting holidays when the entire agency was closed) there were 116 days when the Center was not fully staffed. Of those 116 days*:

- There were 96 days when one staff member was out of the office on leave; and
- There were 20 days when two staff members were out of the office on leave.

A simple staffing model (see Appendix B) was designed to analyze the number of staff necessary to handle the volume of calls the Center receives. OLO recognizes that this model may oversimplify the staffing situation, and is based upon the assumption that the rate of telephone calls received by the Center is even throughout the day. However, the model can be

* Of the 116 days when the Center was not fully staffed, there were 18 days when a staff member was out for a half day or less.

useful to help determine possible staffing patterns. The assumptions used in the model suggest that two work-years assigned to telephone duty should be able to handle the Center's current volume of 40-45,000 telephone calls per year.

4. Organizational Location of the Center. As of this writing, the organizational location of the Housing Information Center within HOC is in the midst of change.

Until recently, HOC was organized into four major divisions: Finance, Development, Resident Services, and Housing Management. For the past seven years, the Housing Information Center was located (alongside Rental Assistance and Occupancy) as one of the three major activities of the Housing Resources Branch, which was one of the five branches within the Housing Management Division. This location of the Center is depicted on HOC's current organizational chart (see Appendix C).

On-site, the two Information and Referral Specialists are supervised by the Lead Information and Referral Specialist. Organizationally, the Information Center reports to the Manager for Housing Resources. The Manager of this division reports to the Assistant Executive Director, who is responsible for Asset Management and Systems, Scattered Family Programs, Clustered Family Programs, and Elderly Programs, in addition to the Housing Resources Section.

During the past several months, HOC has been conducting an internal review that is intended to develop a clear vision for the agency's future. As described in the budget message included in HOC's recommended FY93 budget, HOC's vision process has been an intensive staff effort involving four steps: an environmental scan, a business scan, the development of a mission, and the creation of a vision for a certain date in the future.

HOC's FY93 budget proposes to structure the agency into five distinct yet interrelated "businesses": Real Estate Development, Mortgage Finance, Property Management, Rental Assistance, and Social Services. (HOC uses the term "business" to define an entity that must generate revenues to survive and has clear results expected from it.) Overall policy coordination and central administrative support to the five operating businesses will be provided by the "Parent Company".

Although HOC's mission and visioning process is not yet finalized, senior HOC staff have discussed relocating the Housing Information Center either to the Social Services business or to the Parent Company. The Parent Company will likely contain the Executive Offices, the Public Affairs Office, most of the Finance Division, and Facilities Management. With the exception of the Public Affairs Office, funding for most of the Parent Company activities is provided through overhead and other fees generated by the five businesses.

5. The Working Relationships Between the Center and Other HOC Offices. Interviews with HOC staff indicate that the consistent perception within the agency is that the Housing Information Center performs an invaluable screening function for the agency as a whole. In particular, staff in other HOC offices appreciate how the Center handles the numerous general housing inquiries that come to the agency, and how the Center transfers only appropriate telephone calls to the program offices.

The frequency of the Center's interaction with other HOC offices varies. For the most part, the relationship is limited to one of information exchange. In particular, HOC staff throughout the agency are supposed to keep the Center informed about changes to HOC programs that might affect what Center staff should tell members of the public; and Center staff will refer a customer to a program office if they cannot answer a particular question themselves.

There are some HOC offices with which Center staff report a working relationship beyond routine information exchange. Through referrals, Center staff help HOC's Occupancy Office fill slots in special Public Housing programs, and send eligible applicants to the Mortgage Purchase Program Office. In addition, Center staff work closely with: the Section 8 Office; the Public Affairs Office; and Operation Match.

- Section 8 Housing Office. Center staff work closely with the Section 8 Office staff. Center staff directly assist the Section 8 Office by sending out applications to individuals who contact HOC. In addition, the staff of the Center maintain the waiting list for Section 8 housing, and update the information when a change in status occurs. During the 1980's, Center staff routinely conducted training seminars for individuals who were about to receive Section 8 certificates; these seminars were discontinued in 1991.

- Public Affairs Office. The role of the Public Affairs Office is to maintain relations with all segments of the public with which HOC interacts. The Center staff work with the staff of the Office of Public Affairs primarily when it comes to producing written materials that go to the public. The Public Affairs Office works with the Center to package information to the community.

- Operation Match/Mortgage Counseling. Operation Match is a program administered by HOC to assist individuals to find shared housing arrangements; it primarily serves one- and two-person families. According to Operation Match staff, they refer customers who are elderly or part of a large family to the Housing Information Center. In turn, Center staff refer selected customers to Operation Match, either to pursue a shared housing arrangement or to obtain mortgage counseling. (The mortgage counseling function, which used to be part of the Center, has been under management of Operation Match staff since FY88.)

D. Coordination of the Housing Information Center with Related County Government Functions

1. Legal and Contractual Requirements. Code Section 29-52 requires that the County's housing information and referral service be developed and operated for the use of tenants, landlords, and government agencies. The idea that the Housing Information Center was intended to be used by related government agencies as well as the general public is incorporated into the County's contract with HOC. Specifically, the scope of services for the Housing Information Center states that:

The Commission shall coordinate fully with other County Government agencies and departments, and other groups funded by the County in the development of housing information, and in the referral of persons to agencies for financial assistance and housing resources.*

2. Related County Government Agencies and Departments. The Housing Opportunities Commission is the agency (authorized by State and County law) with the primary mission to make housing and related services available to low- and moderate-income people. However, housing-related programs and services are also administered by a number of other County Government departments. In addition, there are other offices within the County Government that routinely receive inquiries from members of the public about housing-related programs and issues.

Within the County Government, housing-related programs are administered by the following departments and offices: Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD), Office of Consumer Affairs (OCA), and Department of Social Services (DSS); Department of Family Resources (DFR), and the Department of Addiction, Victim, and Mental Health Services (DAVMHS). The housing-related programs and functions of these five departments are summarized below:

- The Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) administers a broad range of housing-related programs and functions including: the County-funded Rental Assistance Program and Supplemental Rental Assistance Program for Families with Dependent Children; the Moderately Priced Dwelling Unit (MPDU) program; the Montgomery Housing Initiative; the Community Development Block Grant program; the Home Investment Partnerships (HOME) program; the Rehabilitation Loan Fund; the Homeowners Replacement Loan Fund; the Office of Landlord-Tenant Affairs; and the Office of Common Ownership Communities. In addition, DHCD is responsible for: the inspection and annual renewal of rental facility licenses, the management of rental housing data surveys for the County; housing code inspection and enforcement; and the coordination of the County's activities to prevent discrimination in housing.

* Scope of Services and Requirements Section of the contract between the County and HOC, entered into on October 16, 1991.

- The Housing Group in the Office of Consumer Affairs (OCA) handles complaints related to new homes, new home warranty plans, and home improvement and repairs. The Housing Group also manages the licensing of new home building contractors and approval of private new home warranty plans. In addition, OCA has the lead responsibility for administering the County's laws related to condominium conversion (Chapter 11A, Condominiums), and tenant displacement (Chapter 53A).

- The Department of Social Services' (DSS) administers numerous programs, many of which include a housing or shelter component. DSS' Crisis Intervention offices provide assessment and financial help for shelter placements, past due rent and utilities, security deposits, and other emergency needs. The Transitional Housing program (which DSS administers in partnership with HOC) provides housing assistance and case management to enable families to become self-sufficient. Other DSS programs with a significant housing component include: the AIDS project; the Child Foster Care program; the Adult Foster Care program; the Long Term Care program, and the Home Care program.

- The Department of Family Resources (DFR) administers housing-related programs for seniors, juveniles, handicapped, and homeless individuals. DFR coordinates the County's homeless shelter system, manages 17 contracts to provide shelters and food for homeless individuals, and administers a matching grant contract to Community Ministry to provide emergency cash grants to low-income families for food, clothing, shelter, etc. DFR administers the Handicapped Rental Assistance program, the Sheltered Housing for the Elderly program, and programs for long-term and shelter home placement for juveniles. In addition, DFR staffs two information and referral functions, one for individuals with disabilities and another for senior citizens; these information services include providing information and referral on housing-related issues. DFR also administers a contract with La Comunidad to provide human services assistance to the Hispanic community; this contract specifically includes a requirement to provide housing counseling, information and referral.

- The Department of Addiction, Victim, and Mental Health Services (DAVMHS) administers housing-related programs that focus on residential treatment for special needs populations. DAVMHS operates a range of short-term and longer-term treatment facilities. In particular, DAVMHS manages, either directly or on contract, residential treatment facilities for addicted adults, mentally-ill persons, and victims of domestic violence. DAVMHS' services for victims of domestic violence include a transitional housing program.

Based upon interviews conducted throughout the course of this study, it is apparent that citizens bring their housing-related problems and inquiries to numerous County Government offices. In addition to the Housing Information Center, the following offices within County Government routinely receive inquiries from customers about the County's housing programs and functions:

- The Government Service Center offices: UpCounty, Wheaton, Silver Spring (with a satellite office in Takoma Park-East Silver Spring), and Bethesda;
- The Department of Social Services, Division of Emergency Services offices located in Rockville, Silver Spring, and the UpCounty Government Center;
- The Commission for Women;
- The Crisis Center (operated by DAVMHS);
- The Housing Division and Office of Landlord-Tenant Affairs located in the Department of Housing and Community Development;
- The Information and Referral Offices for senior citizens and individuals with disabilities located in the Department of Family Resources; and
- The Community Action Office located in the Department of Family Resources.

In addition, housing-related questions are received by the County Government's main information number (217-6500), the County libraries, and the Office of the County Council.

Most of the offices that receive housing-related inquiries also handle public inquiries in many other subject areas. It should be noted, however, that in addition to funding the Housing Information Center itself, the County allocates funds specifically for the purpose of providing housing counseling and housing information to UpCounty residents and members of the County's Hispanic community. These two services are briefly described below.

- The UpCounty Housing Services Project: During the past three fiscal years, DHCD has provided Community Development Block Grant funds to the UpCounty Government Center to staff the UpCounty Housing Services Project. The funds (\$25,000 in FY90, \$30,000 in FY91, \$33,000 in FY92, and \$16,000 in FY93) were used to hire a Community Services Aide (CSA), whose major duties include:

- Maintaining an updated computerized listing of housing resources;
- Doing outreach to enlist the support of property and rental managers;
- Developing a list of funding resources both public and private (to include rental assistance programs and funding for paying past due rent/mortgages and utilities)

- Counseling clients to assist in solving housing problems; and
- Providing clients with information to address related problems.

• Hispanic Human Services Contract: For the past eight years, La Comunidad (The Spanish Speaking Community of Maryland, Inc.) has received funds through the Department of Family Resources, Division of Community Action, to provide Hispanic Human Services. For the first three years, La Comunidad received CDBG funds to provide these services. For the past five years, the contract for Hispanic Human Services has been funded with County General Revenue; the total contract amount budgeted for FY93 is \$47,770.

One of the specific components of the County's current contract with La Comunidad is for housing counseling and housing information and referral services. As stated in the contract, La Comunidad's housing services requirements are to:

- Design and update a resource/referral network with public and private housing agencies which meet the housing needs of moderate and low-income Hispanic persons;
- Provide counseling (e.g., rental and purchase procedures, default counseling, eviction emergencies, rental delinquencies) to enable 600 eligible participants to obtain and maintain adequate housing;
- Recruit and refer 240 Hispanic households per year to HOC for subsidized housing, and 12 referrals to Operation Match;
- Refer 108 Hispanic households to the County's Rental Assistance Program; and
- Submit an apartment property manager outreach plan to the County.

3. A Discussion of the Connections/Relationships Between the Housing Information Center and Related County Government Offices. During the course of this study, OLO interviewed numerous staff that work in (or on contract to) the County Government departments and offices that either offer housing-related services directly and/or routinely receive housing-related questions. The individuals interviewed provided a range of views about the role of the Housing Information Center and how the Center's work is coordinated with the County's other housing-related services.

While almost everyone interviewed was aware that the Housing Information Center existed, it is apparent that the Center does not have a strong identity separate and apart from that of the Housing Opportunities Commission. When asked about the role of the Center, the great majority of County Government staff members interviewed responded that they perceive the Center as primarily performing an information and telephone-answering service for the Housing Opportunities Commission.

Most of those interviewed perceive the Center as being very knowledgeable about HOC programs and activities. When asked what kind of questions they (or members of their staff) routinely refer to the Center, the most frequent responses were: questions about HOC's waiting list, Section 8, public housing, HOC's mortgage purchase program, and Operation Match. While a number of those interviewed perceive the Center as also being informed about housing programs not administered by HOC, it appears that the Center is not generally perceived by County Government staff as a clearinghouse of information about all housing-related programs.

It appears the Center is more closely connected with certain County Government offices than with others. In particular, the County's Rental Assistance Program Office (located within DHCD's Housing Division) and the Center seem to have developed a strong working relationship. The supervisor of the Rental Assistance Program has instructed her staff to refer all general housing inquiries to the Housing Information Center, and Rental Assistance Office staff estimate that they refer between 20-25 general housing inquiries to the Center daily. In return, the Center refers persons (5-10 each day) interested in applying for rental assistance to the Rental Assistance Program office.

Another example of cooperation between the Housing Information Center and a related County Government office is with DFR's Disability Resources Division. For a number of years, DFR and Center staff have discussed the need to provide better housing information to individuals with mobility disabilities. During FY92, DFR and the Center jointly submitted a CDBG proposal for the "Accessible Housing Hotline" project; this project would have enhanced the Center's ability to provide vacancy information on accessible and potentially accessible units. Although the grant request was not funded, HOC's FY93 budget proposal states that the Housing Information Center will begin tracking units adapted for persons with disabilities throughout the County.

Other offices report different degrees of cooperation with the Housing Information Center. For example, interviews with Government Service Center and Department of Social Services staff suggest that the frequency of interaction with the Housing Information Center varies among individual staff members. While a number of Government Service Center and DSS staff members have developed working relationships with Center staff, others report that they rarely refer a client to the Center or even consult with the Center.

Many of the individuals interviewed indicated that, although they do not routinely use the Housing Information Center, they have good working relationships with other HOC staff, and in particular, with staff who work directly in HOC's intake/eligibility or other program offices. The comments of those interviewed suggest that when County Government staff need housing answers (either for themselves or for their clients), they frequently go directly to their contacts within HOC's program staff, instead of relying upon the Housing Information Center.

As reviewed above, in addition to the Center, there are other offices who are also in the housing information and referral business themselves. The housing counseling and information services offered in the Department of Family Resources (Division of Elder Affairs, Division of Disability Resources) and contracted for in the UpCounty Housing Services Project and the Hispanic Human Services contract serve as examples of where housing services are being tailored to the needs of a special interest group, e.g., seniors, disabled individuals, the Hispanic community.

Based upon the interviews conducted, it is also evident that each of the offices that provide housing information to an identified sector of the community assume responsibility themselves for remaining up-to-date on the various housing programs. When asked how they remain current, the most common response was through reading the newspaper and initiating telephone calls to different places "when I have time".

In sum, although the Housing Information Center is used as a resource to some County Government offices, it is not universally regarded as the clearinghouse for all housing-related information in the County. In general, the Center is perceived as part of the Housing Opportunities Commission, and has a general reputation for being knowledgeable about HOC-related programs. The Center has a good working relationship with a number of related County Government offices, but is not closely connected with all housing-related and other offices throughout the County Government.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

General

1. County Code Section 29-52 of the Rent Stabilization Act contains a requirement for the County to develop and operate a centralized housing information and referral service. This section of law was enacted in December 1977 as part of the Omnibus Tenant Protection Act (Bill 35-77).

2. The law requires the information and referral services offered to include: counseling tenants; determining tenants' eligibility for financial assistance; validating tenants' need for alternative housing; listing of agencies which can assist in locating housing; and listing of available financial assistance programs. The law also requires DHCD to maintain a listing of available data concerning the location and characteristics of vacant dwelling units and their rent rates.

3. The law provides the County Government with the option of contracting with the Housing Opportunities Commission (HOC) to operate the housing information and referral service. The legislative record indicates that this option was included because, as the County's housing agency, HOC was already in the business of providing housing information, counseling tenants, and validating applicants' incomes for participation in Federal housing assistance programs.

4. Operation of the Housing Information Center (the Center) began in September 1978. Since its inception, the Center has been staffed and managed by the Housing Opportunities Commission as part of the County Government's general contract with HOC. The task of operating the Housing Information Center has never been competitively bid. The Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) is assigned responsibility for managing the County's contract with HOC. In practice, DHCD exercises only minimal oversight of HOC's contractual performance.

5. When it was first established, the Housing Information Center served as an umbrella organization within HOC for a number of different functions. In addition to providing information and referral, the Center at one time included: Operation Match; HOC's intake/eligibility function; and comprehensive housing counseling on subjects ranging from money management to energy conservation. Since FY89, the Center's primary activity has been to provide housing information and related referrals.

Funding

1. The County Government has consistently funded the information and referral component of the Housing Information Center. In recent years, as the focus of Center activities has been limited to providing information and referral, the Center has become almost 100 percent funded by the County Government.

2. During the past five years, the County Government's support for the Center more than doubled from \$80,890 in FY87 to \$173,247 in FY92. The County's contract with HOC for FY93 will include \$172,130 for operation of the

Housing Information Center; this funding represents 99.5 percent of the total Center's budget, with the remaining .5 percent (\$870) being funded by HOC.

3. The County's FY93 funding for the Housing Information Center represents approximately six percent of the County's total \$2.7 million contract with HOC. The remaining funds in HOC's contract with the County support a number of HOC programs, including Resident Services, Community Relations, Operation Match, and Opportunity Housing.

4. For FY93, salaries and benefits constitute 81 percent of the Center's budget, and management fees (HOC's overhead charge to the County Government) represent 15 percent of the Center's budget. The remaining four percent of the Center's budget is allocated to other miscellaneous operating costs.

5. For FY92, the total cost of the Information Center divided by the number of telephone calls received indicates that the cost per telephone call is approximately \$4.00; the average cost per inquiry is substantially lower, approximately \$2.50. (See page 8a for explanation of how data are kept on inquiries vs. telephone calls.)

Organizational Location

1. The organizational location of the Housing Information Center within HOC is in the midst of change. Its future location will be affected by the outcome of HOC's current project to review HOC's mission and future agency structure.

2. For the past seven years, the Housing Information Center was organizationally located as one of three activities (along with rental assistance and occupancy) within the Housing Resources Branch, which in turn was one of five branches within the Housing Management Division.

3. HOC's FY93 budget proposes to structure the agency into five distinct yet interrelated "businesses": Real Estate Development, Mortgage Finance, Property Management, Rental Assistance, and Social Services. Overall policy coordination and central administrative support will be provided by the "Parent Company". Although the decision is not yet final, senior HOC management have discussed relocating the Housing Information Center either to the Social Services business or to the Parent Company.

4. In recent years, the Housing Information Center has had a relatively low profile outside of HOC. Based upon numerous interviews conducted throughout this evaluation, it appears that the most common perception of the Housing Information Center is that it answers questions from the public about HOC programs, and serves as the first point of contact for people interested in applying for assistance through one of the housing programs administered by HOC.

5. The Center's previous location within one of HOC's program divisions likely contributed to the perception of the Center as a resource for HOC, instead of as a source of information on a broader range of housing programs

and issues. In addition, the Center's location may also help to explain the less than optimal flow of information to the Center, and the self-perception of Center employees that they are not empowered to contact management level employees outside of the agency.

Staffing

1. Since FY89, three full-time workyears have been assigned to perform the information and referral function of the Center: one Lead Information and Referral Specialist (Grade 17) and two Information and Referral Specialists (Grade 15). The positions were most recently upgraded in FY91, as a result of HOC's comprehensive reclassification (Quantitative Evaluation System) study.

2. During the past several years, the Center has occasionally been assigned a volunteer. At present, there is one volunteer who works in the Center approximately 15 hours per week. According to Center staff, although their experience with volunteers has been relatively limited, it has proved successful.

3. In practice, the work of the staff assigned directly to the Center is supplemented by HOC's main receptionist. Although not formally considered part of the Center (nor funded by the County), the receptionist answers and directs all telephone calls that come into the main HOC switchboard. The receptionist screens calls and determines which should be sent to the Housing Information Center and which should be directed to other offices, either inside or outside of HOC.

4. Center records for the past 12 months indicate that, in practice, due to the use of leave (combination of annual, sick, and personal leave days), the Center was staffed with its full complement of three people only slightly more than half of the time. Approximately 40 percent of the time, the Center was staffed with two people, and 10 percent of the time with only one person.

5. OLO determined that a detailed examination of the use of leave by Center staff was beyond the scope of this report, and more appropriately an issue for HOC management to look into. However, it is relevant for this evaluation to note that the pattern of leave during the past 12 months has affected how the Information Center is staffed in practice.

6. A simple staffing model (see Appendix B) suggests that the volume of telephone calls currently received by the Center can be handled by two people assigned to phone duty. With three workyears assigned to the Center, this means that staff time should be available to perform activities beyond responding to inquiries.

Workload

1. In accordance with contractual requirements, the Housing information Center submits quarterly progress reports to the Department of Housing and Community Development. These reports include workload and performance data collected by Center staff. The Center is in the process of simplifying the form and content of these reports.

2. Data compiled by the Housing Information Center indicate that the Center's customers are a large and divergent group. While most of the Center's business is conducted on the telephone, the Center also responds to walk-in inquiries. According to Center staff, working in the Center is very stressful; Center staff perceive their workload as demanding and especially difficult because the availability of affordable housing and housing assistance is limited.

3. The Center's monthly reports show that inquiries to the Center have increased every year. The 69,400 inquiries reported in FY92 are almost four times the 18,690 inquiries reported in FY84. When reviewing these data, it must be kept in mind that the number of inquiries is greater than the number of individuals that contact the Center because a customer with multiple questions is recorded as more than one inquiry.

4. Although the Center has not historically tracked the number of telephone calls (as opposed to the number of inquiries), data available for the past 12 months indicate that the Center's automated telephone system has logged approximately 39,000 separate telephone calls during the past year. Using some assumptions about the number of additional calls answered directly by Center staff, it can be concluded that approximately 40,000-43,000 telephone calls came into the Center during FY92. This volume of calls translates into an average of 150-165 telephone calls a day.

5. As the office responsible for handling many of the public's general inquiries to HOC, the Housing Information Center performs an important screening function for the agency as a whole. By sending only appropriate referrals to the program offices, the Housing Information Center staff serve to minimize the time that other HOC staff spend handling public inquiries that are unrelated to their specific program area. Center staff additionally assist HOC program staff by taking care of routine activities such as mailing applications and checking applicants' waiting list status.

Substance of Inquiries

1. Data maintained by Center staff indicate that the questions routinely received by the Center are relatively consistent from month to month. Data for 1991 show that out of all telephone inquiries received: approximately 35 percent were requests for information about rental assistance programs; 25 percent were questions about HOC's waiting list; 10-15 percent were questions from persons facing some sort of housing emergency; and the remaining were either questions about homeownership programs or other types of general housing inquiries.

2. In addition to telephone inquiries, the Center also answers questions posed by 25-30 walk-in customers each week. According to the Center's monthly reports, almost 75 percent of the walk-in questions concern rental assistance, with the remaining questions coming from individuals facing a housing emergency, such as an eviction. Demographic data kept on walk-in customers indicate that almost three-fourths are female and approximately half are African-Americans; approximately 15 percent of the Center's walk-in customers are Hispanic.

Publicity

1. Interviews with a sample of Center customers suggest that the majority of callers learn about the Center from their friends or relatives. The second most common way that customers learn about the Center is through a referral from the Department of Social Services.

2. The Housing Information Center is not widely publicized. Although it is listed in both the County's Resource Directory as well as the C&P Telephone Directory, in both cases, the Housing Information Center is listed as a subsidiary HOC office and not as a housing information/referral service for the County Government as a whole.

3. Although HOC's budget lists promotional activities as objectives for the Housing Information Center, interviews with Center staff indicate that they have done little outreach in recent years. According to former Center staff, during the early 1980's, when the Housing Information Center served as an umbrella for multiple HOC activities, Center staff did conduct workshops and training sessions, which served to publicize the services offered by the Center.

Information Services

1. The services currently performed by the Center today are not identical to the services listed in the law (Code Section 29-52). The inconsistencies derive from the fact that, as reviewed in the report, the functions located within the Housing Information Center have varied since the Center was established in 1978. According to the County Attorney, these inconsistencies do not evidence non-compliance with the statute. (See memorandum at page 55.)

2. Today, Center staff estimate that 80 percent of their collective time is spent providing general housing information and referrals, either on the telephone or in-person to walk-in clients. According to Center staff, most of the remaining 20 percent of their time is spent helping individuals facing a housing emergency, such as an eviction or other type of housing displacement.

3. In response to criticism that the Center's telephone was too often busy, the Center installed an automated telephone system. Since November 1990, almost all incoming calls are answered first by the automated system. The automated telephone system provides callers with options (selected by pressing different numbers on a touch-tone phone) for listening to various prerecorded messages. Callers can opt to speak with a staff person by pressing "0".

4. According to the Center's telephone records, callers listening to one or more prerecorded messages account for approximately 40 percent of all Center inquiries. The remaining 60 percent are handled by Center staff, who estimate that callers who opt to talk to a person generally wait less than five minutes before their call is answered by a Center staff member.

5. Although the Center does not maintain comprehensive data about the disposition of all calls, the referral records that are available indicate that approximately 50 percent of all inquiries are answered by Center staff, another 20-30 percent are referred to an office within HOC, and the remaining 15-20 percent are referred to an office or agency outside of HOC. The two most common referrals are the Department of Social Services for emergency housing services, and the County's Department of Housing and Community Development for the Rental Assistance Program.

Housing Emergencies

1. As indicated above, Center staff currently spend about 20 percent of their time assisting callers or walk-in customers with more than a one-time provision of information or referral. In general, these are individuals facing some kind of housing emergency, such as an eviction. Although there are no guidelines established for the Center's involvement in such cases, the most common approach is for Center staff to try and help these customers obtain financial assistance, either through the County Government or a non-profit organization.

2. The degree of coordination between the Center and Department of Social Services (DSS) staff on these emergency cases is inconsistent. Although in some cases there is communication between the two agencies, there have been cases where Center staff have reportedly become involved without coordinating their efforts with DSS.

Housing Resources Directory

1. According to Center staff, the intent of the Housing Resources Directory is to provide written information about housing for certain special needs populations. The intended audience for the Directory is government and non-profit agency staff.

2. The most recent version of the Directory (1990) was lengthy and cumbersome to use, and duplicated some of the data contained in the Apartment Directory, which is produced by the Office of Landlord-Tenant Affairs. Center staff are currently in the process of producing an updated Directory, and are working to develop a new format that responds to criticism received about the 1990 version.

3. At present, HOC's data collection for the Housing Resources Directory is not coordinated with the data collection activities of the Office of Landlord-Tenant Affairs. The Rent Stabilization Act charges the County Executive with the general mission to collect and analyze housing data about rental units in the County; the law requires that such data collection be centralized in order to minimize the reporting burden of landlords.

Feedback from the Center's Customers

1. A telephone survey of callers who contacted the Center during the first six months of 1992 indicated a high level of customer satisfaction with the usefulness of information provided by the Center. When asked about their experience with the Information Center staff, the overwhelming response of those interviewed was positive.

2. Center staff were described by those interviewed as supportive, patient, responsive, and polite. Although callers are not always pleased with the message that the Center provides (e.g., the length of the waiting list, the income limits of certain programs), those interviewed seemed able to make a distinction between the messenger (Center staff) and the message.

3. The one area of criticism voiced almost universally by those interviewed concerned the automated phone system. In particular, those surveyed indicated that they disliked getting the computer when they called the Center, and felt that the automated phone system was not user-friendly. In addition, the automated system presents a problem for non-English speaking clients, who have difficulty understanding how the system works and the substance of what is said.

Coordination with County Government

1. Both the law that establishes the Center and the contract (between the County and HOC) for operating the Center include language about the use of the Center by related government agencies. In particular, the contractual scope of services for the Center states that HOC shall coordinate fully with other County Government agencies and other groups funded by the County in the development of housing information.

2. Although HOC is the agency (authorized by State and County law) with the primary mission to make housing and related services available to low and moderate income people, housing-related programs and services are administered by a number of other County Government departments, e.g., Departments of Housing and Community Development, Social Services, Family Resources, Office of Consumer Affairs, and the Department of Addiction, Victim, and Mental Health Services. In addition, there are numerous other offices across County agencies that routinely receive inquiries from the public about housing-related problems and issues, e.g., County Government Centers, the Crisis Center, libraries, the County's main information number (217-6500), and the Commission for Women.

3. Many of the offices that receive housing-related inquiries also handle public inquiries about many other subjects. However, in addition to the Housing Information Center, the County allocates funds explicitly for the purpose of providing housing information services through two other contracts: the UpCounty Housing Services Project (administered by the UpCounty Government Center) and the Hispanic Human Services Project (administered by the Department of Family Resources).

4. County Government staff who routinely receive housing-related questions report different degrees of cooperation with the Housing Information Center. Based upon the many interviews conducted throughout this study, it appears that the frequency of interaction between County Government staff and Housing Information Center staff varies significantly. While individual staff in several offices (such as DHCD's Rental Assistance Office, DFR's Disability Resources Division, the Wheaton Government Center) report a close working relationship with the Center, others report that they rarely refer a client to the Center or consult with the Center staff themselves.

5. The flow of updated information to the Housing Information Center is also inconsistent. Some County Government staff report that they routinely exchange information with Center staff; however, others candidly admitted that informing the Center about a new initiative or program change is something they do not think of doing on a regular basis. The less than optimal flow of information about non-HOC programs to the Center is likely related to a common perception of the Housing Information Center as a source of information about HOC programs, as opposed to a broader information resource for all housing-related activities.

6. The degree of communication and coordination between the Center and other government offices appears to depend upon a number of factors, to include: the direction staff receive from their supervisors; the individual staff member's perception of what the Housing Information Center has to offer; the individual staff member's own knowledge of HOC programs and contacts with HOC program staff; the frequency of housing inquiries received; and the physical proximity to HOC offices. Perhaps the most significant factor is the staff member's own knowledge about the array of housing programs in the County; in other words, County staff who are themselves familiar with the availability of housing assistance tend to offer the information themselves instead of referring the person needing help to another information/referral agency.

Perceptions of the Center

The many interviews conducted during the course of this study indicate that the Housing Information Center is perceived in different ways by staff both within and from outside of HOC.

1. The most common perceptions of the Center by other HOC staff are that:

- The Center provides an invaluable service to the agency by handling the large volume of general information telephone calls;
- Center staff are extremely diligent and deserve a lot of credit for performing what is a very stressful job; and
- The Center probably does not belong (organizationally) where it has been located in recent years (as part of the Housing Resources Branch within the Housing Management Division), and should be elevated within the HOC organizational structure.

2. From the point of view of other County Government agencies, the most common perceptions of the Housing Information Center are that:

- The Center has a relatively low profile and is not widely publicized;
- Even among those who know the Center exists, there is not a consistent awareness that the Center is supposed to be providing housing information about all housing programs; the most common perception of the Center's role is that it provides reliable information about HOC programs and serves as the first contact office for individuals interested in applying for assistance from HOC;

- Those who are familiar with the Center regard it as providing a valuable service to the general public and to HOC;
- Although the Center may, in fact, be reducing the number of housing information requests coming to County Government offices, the Center is not generally perceived as handling a volume of inquiries that would otherwise come to the County Government; and
- HOC's Public Affairs Office (and not the Housing Information Center) is generally perceived as the disseminator of information about HOC and related housing programs.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

Delivering an effective and efficient information and referral service is part of being a County Government that is customer-focused and responsive. As David Osborne and Ted Gaebler observe in Reinventing Government, "Sometimes government can have a tremendous impact simply by providing information to the public." In addition, the value of using information functions as sources of customer feedback for making improvements is advocated by Dr. W. Edwards Deming in his book, Out of the Crisis.

The Housing Information Center has accomplished much during its past 12 years of operation, and OLO recommends that one office should continue to be assigned the lead responsibility for compiling and tracking the complex array of housing-related programs and activities in the County. However, with the goal of delivering the most cost-effective and efficient service possible, OLO also recommends that a number of changes to the structure and administration of the Housing Information Center be considered.

Almost all of the recommendations outlined in this chapter are written on the assumption that the Housing Information Center will continue to be located at the Housing Opportunities Commission. The arguments for locating the Center at HOC are basically the same as they were when the law mandating the housing information function was enacted:

- The Housing Opportunities Commission is the agency authorized by State and County law to act as builder, developer, financier, owner, and manager of housing for low- and moderate-income persons;
- HOC's responsibilities already include validating potential tenants' incomes for participation in Federal housing assistance programs; and
- Because of its overall housing mission, HOC will undoubtedly continue to receive many housing-related inquiries, regardless of whether a formal housing information function is located at the agency.

While acknowledging that HOC is certainly a logical provider of housing information services, Recommendation No. 4 includes a recommendation that an alternative service delivery approach be considered. This recommendation is made because the structure of providing housing information/referral services deserves review in the same way that the mechanism for delivering all government services should be examined as the County strives to maximize its limited resources.

Recommendation 1: Restructure the mission of the Housing Information Center to strengthen its role as a resource to other providers of housing information.

Since the idea of a centralized clearinghouse for housing information was formulated in the 1970's, the County has grown significantly larger, more diverse, and complex. Today, the Housing Information Center is one among numerous County offices that members of the public contact with housing-related questions.

The future role of the Housing Information Center should take into account that the public will continue to contact the government office or agency with which they are either familiar and/or most comfortable. Although in many cases, this will mean the Housing Opportunities Commission, in other cases, it will mean places such as the Division of Elder Affairs, a County Government Center, the Commission for Women, or one of the Department of Social Services' Crisis Intervention offices.

The array of housing-related programs administered in the County is complex enough that one office (i.e., the Housing Information Center) should continue to be assigned the lead responsibility for gathering and maintaining current and complete information. The Center's responsibilities, however, should also include disseminating housing information to others who also find themselves in the position of answering housing-related inquiries from the public. This approach is more customer-focused, and recognizes that the Center is not the sole provider of housing-related information.

The Housing Information Center's capacity to serve as a resource to other providers of housing information should be strengthened. While the Center has, at certain times during the past 12 years, conducted some training and outreach activities, the Center's current efforts in this area are limited. (See Recommendation No. 8 concerning the Housing Resources Directory.)

The Housing Opportunities Commission should develop a plan to coordinate and better assist other providers of housing information. This plan should include: identifying who else is routinely asked housing questions; finding out what information would be useful for the Housing Information Center to compile and disseminate on a regular basis; and establishing a network for communicating among the various providers of housing information. In consultation with County Government staff, the plan should also articulate how the work of the Housing Information Center connects with the scope and implementation of the UpCounty Housing Services Project and the Hispanic Human Services contract. (As noted in the report, providing housing information and making referrals are included as specific components of these two other projects.)

Special attention should be given to changing how the Housing Information Center is currently promoted. The Center should be publicized as a source of information for all housing-related programs, and not just programs administered by HOC. For example, instead of its current listing as an office within HOC, the Housing Information Center should be listed in the County's Resource Directory and C&P telephone directory as a separate housing information entity.

Note: It should be possible to strengthen the Housing Information Center as a resource for other housing information providers without additional cost. Especially if certain other OLO recommendations are implemented, such as reducing the staff time spent getting involved in specific cases and increasing the use of volunteers (see Recommendations 4 and 5), existing staff resources can be made available to enhance the Center's ability to serve other government agencies.

Recommendation 2: Improve the flow of information about housing programs to the Housing Information Center, both from within and from outside of HOC.

If the Housing Information Center is going to enhance its ability to serve as the expert consultant on housing programs to the public and other government agencies, then it is crucial that the Center be kept informed about new housing initiatives and changes to existing housing programs. Compiling and disseminating the most current information should be one of the highest priorities of the Housing Information Center.

Keeping the Center up to date will require greater initiative on the part of Center staff, support from within HOC, and cooperation from other agencies involved in housing programs. One suggestion is for senior HOC management to develop a more formal mechanism for regularly gathering information about housing programs, both from within HOC and from offices/departments outside of HOC that are also in the housing business.

As part of building a network among those who administer housing programs and those who answer housing-related questions, HOC should request that each related office/department appoint a staff member at the appropriate level to serve as the Center's contact. In addition to being a person for Center staff to call when they have a specific question, the Center's contacts could also be responsible for communicating relevant changes to the Center on a regular basis.

Recommendation 3: Relocate the organizational placement of the Housing Information Center within HOC.

HOC's FY93 budget proposes structuring the agency into five distinct yet interrelated businesses: Real Estate Development, Mortgage Finance, Property Management, Rental Assistance, and Social Services. Overall policy coordination and central administrative support to the five businesses will be provided by the HOC "Parent Company". Senior HOC management have already discussed moving the Housing Information Center from its current organizational location. (The Center is currently located within the Housing Resources Branch, which under the newly proposed structure will be part of the Property Management business).

OLO concurs with HOC's own recommendation to relocate the Housing Information Center, and further recommends that location within the Parent Company be given strong consideration. Making the Center part of HOC's Parent Company is appropriate because questions coming into the Center concern issues across all five of HOC's businesses. In addition, a Parent Company location would help raise the visibility of the Center both within HOC and from outside the agency, as well as support HOC's efforts to improve the flow of current information to the Center.

Recommendation 4: Explore alternative approaches to staffing the Housing Information Center.

Option A: Consider different staffing patterns within HOC.

Senior HOC management should explore alternative staffing patterns for the Housing Information Center. In particular, alternatives should be considered that: reduce the cost of staffing the Center; increase the number of hours that the Center is staffed with its full complement of three persons; and/or reduce the stress level of staff assigned to work in the Center.

Specific ideas that should be examined include: increasing the use of volunteers; and rotating staff between the Center and other offices within HOC. Senior HOC management should also review current procedures for scheduling/approving use of leave by staff assigned to the Center.

Increasing the use of volunteers in the Center has tremendous potential both for reducing the public cost of staffing the Center and for increasing the capacity of the Center to handle public inquiries. The Center's current experience with volunteers suggests that the use of volunteers in the Center is both possible and mutually beneficial. In addition, the fact that the Commission for Women staffs its extremely active information and referral function with a cadre of 60 volunteers further evidences that the use of volunteers in the Center is an idea worth pursuing.

Feedback from Center employees suggests that staffing the Housing Information Center telephones is a very stressful job. Rotating staff between the Center and other offices within HOC could serve to reduce the stress level of Center employees, and also increase the number of hours that the Center is staffed with its full complement of three employees.

Option B: Consider contracting out some or all of the tasks associated with the Housing Information Center to a private or non-profit organization.

DHCD and HOC management should jointly consider the feasibility of contracting out some or all of the tasks associated with the Housing Information Center to a private or non-profit organization.

In Reinventing Government, David Osborne and Ted Gaebler argue in support of putting the delivery of many public services into private hands (whether for-profit or non-profit), if by doing so a government can get more effectiveness, efficiency, equity, or accountability. While recognizing that there are both advantages and disadvantages to shifting the delivery of services from the public to the private or non-profit sector, Osborne/Gaebler recommend that government at least consider alternative service delivery options.

In fact, Osborne/Gaebler list information and referral functions as examples of government services that are good candidates for alternative service delivery. In their chapter on competitive government, Osborne/Gaebler cite John Donahue, author of The Privatization Decision, who observes that contracting can save significant sums and tends to work best when public agencies can:

- Define precisely what they want done;
- Generate competition for the job;
- Evaluate a contractor's performance; and
- Replace or penalize those who fail to achieve expected performance levels.

It can be argued that under the current arrangement, operation of the Housing Information Center is already contracted out, from the County Government to the Housing Opportunities Commission. However, while funding for the Center is technically provided from the County to HOC on a contractual basis, the arrangement lacks certain key benefits of most contractual situations, i.e., there is no competition for award of the contract; and the County Government exercises only minimal oversight of HOC's performance.

A review of Osborne/Gaebler's advice on choosing the best alternative suggests that the activities of the Housing Information Center are consistent with the strengths of the third (i.e., non-profit) sector. In particular, the Housing Information Center is an activity that:

- Generates little or no profit;
- Requires compassion and commitment to other humans;
- Requires a compassionate approach;

- Requires extensive trust on the part of customers;
- Requires volunteer labor; and
- Requires hands-on personal attention.

When evaluating whether contracting out is a service delivery option worth pursuing for the Housing Information Center, DHCD and HOC should also consider the possible disadvantages of such an arrangement. In particular, the contracting out decision should take into account:

- The time and costs associated with effectively monitoring a contract;
- Whether a contractual arrangement will provide sufficient continuity;
- The fact that contracting out can displace incumbent public sector employees; and
- The importance of ensuring that any cost savings is due to greater efficiency and not a decreased level of service delivery.

Recommendation 5: **Develop a memorandum of understanding between the Housing Information Center and the Department of Social Services concerning how referrals should be made between the two offices.**

As reviewed in the report, Center staff currently spend about 20 percent of their time trying to help tenants facing housing emergencies, such as eviction or other forms of displacement. In their efforts to assist persons facing such emergencies, Center staff go beyond their primary role of providing information and referral.

The Department of Social Services (DSS) and the Housing Opportunities Commission should enter into a memorandum of understanding that articulates how the Housing Information Center should handle contacts from persons facing a housing crisis. Given that DSS is assigned the lead responsibility in County Government to deal with persons facing housing emergencies, the relationship between DSS and the Center should be structured to reduce the time Center staff spend on individual housing emergencies, and to avoid situations where the work of one office either duplicates or complicates the work of the other.

Recommendation 6: **Modify the monthly reports produced by the Housing Information Center.**

The Housing Information Center should be applauded for the staff effort already devoted to tracking workload and performance data. The questions and issues raised by customers calling the Center are important indicators of the County's housing needs. To maximize the utility of the monthly reports, a number of changes are recommended.

The Center should continue its recent efforts to simplify the data reported on the number and type of inquiries received. Although Center staff may have internal reasons for tracking inquiries in numerous categories, these categories should be combined and summarized for the purpose of the monthly report. To reduce the amount of staff time needed to collect data on inquiries, the Center should consider using some sort of sampling technique, such as, collecting comprehensive data only during one week of the month.

The monthly reports should include data on the number of telephone calls received. As noted earlier in this report, the number of inquiries is greater than the number of telephone calls, and the number of telephone calls is probably the best indicator of the number of individuals who are making use of the Center. It would also be beneficial for HOC to think about ways to collect and compile some output data. Almost all of the data currently reported by the Center is input data, e.g., the number/type of inquiries coming into the Center. At present, even the data reported on where callers are referred provide no information about what happens after a referral is made.

As Deming notes in Out of the Crisis, "This process of communication (with customers) may be carried out reliably and economically today by sampling procedures." To implement Deming's suggestion, on a limited sample basis, the Center could conduct follow-up interviews with customers (both individual citizens and other government agencies) in order to obtain feedback about whether the information/referral provided by the Center proved to be accurate and helpful. This kind of feedback could be very valuable, both to Center staff and to the other agencies, which are the subject of the Center's referrals.

Recommendation 7: Rethink the Housing Information Center's use of automated telephone system technology.

While recognizing why an investment was made in the automated telephone system for the Housing Information Center, the feedback obtained from the Center's customers suggests that HOC should rethink how this technology is currently being used. As noted in the report, most of those interviewed voiced their view that the current system of prerecorded messages is too complicated, and is a source of frustration to many who contact the Center.

This negative feedback does not mean that the Center should abandon the use of available technology. Instead, it suggests that the Center should experiment with a simpler set of prerecorded messages, and/or a different approach such as sending callers to the automated system only after they have had contact with a staff member. After implementing some changes, the Center should seek feedback both from the general public and other government agencies as to their effectiveness.

Recommendation 8: Before issuing another Housing Resources Directory, HOC staff should consult with users of the Directory, and coordinate the data collection with the Office of Landlord-Tenant Affairs.

The idea of producing a written resource directory for providers of housing information complements the idea of the Housing Information Center serving as an expert consultant to other government agencies. However, to address some of the criticisms of the current Housing Resources Directory, HOC staff should sit down with representatives from user (and potential user) agencies and find out what data would be useful to include in any future Directory. The possibilities of placing information in a data base that can be accessed by other agencies should also be explored.

Special attention should be given to avoid including information in the Housing Resources Directory that duplicates information contained in the Apartment Directory (produced by the Office of Landlord-Tenant Affairs). In addition, any future data collection undertaken for the Housing Resources Directory should be piggybacked to OLTA's ongoing data collection activities. (As noted in the report, the Rent Stabilization Act charges the County Executive with the general mission to collect and analyze housing data about rental dwelling units in the County, and requires that such data collection be centralized in order to minimize the reporting burden of landlords.)

Recommendation 9: Amend or delete the section of the County Code (Section 29-52) that mandates the development and operation of a centralized housing information service.

Enacted in 1978 as part of Omnibus Tenant Protection Act, Code Section 29-52 requires the development and operation of a centralized housing information/referral function, and lists specific services that should be included. At present, as noted in the report, the services currently performed by the Center today are not identical to the list of services outlined in the law.

Code Section 29-52 should be amended in one of two ways. One option is to amend the law to articulate the role of the Housing Information Center as the office assigned responsibility for compiling and disseminating housing-related information, both to the public and to other providers of housing information. The other option is to delete the section entirely.

The advantage of amending Section 29-52 to be consistent with the future mission of the Housing Information Center is that there would continue to be a legal mandate that outlines the legislative intent of this function. On the other hand, operation of an information and referral function does not normally require a statutory basis, and future decisions about the funding and scope of this activity can be made through the budget process. Eliminating the statutory description of the housing information function also avoids the need to amend the law when decisions are made (either administratively or through the budget process) to change the scope of services offered.

Recommendation 10: Revisit the role and structure of the Housing Information Center once the County Government has implemented a common intake system for health and human service programs.

During FY92, the County (through a public-private partnership with the United Way) conducted a demonstration common intake project at the UpCounty Government Service Center. The FY93 budget includes funds to develop a design for a Countywide system of common intake for all health and human services programs. HOC staff are actively involved in the common intake project.

Recognizing that the future of all information and referral functions may be affected by the final design of common intake, the role of the Housing Information Center should be revisited once common intake is implemented.

VI. AGENCY DEPARTMENT COMMENTS ON DRAFT REPORT

On June 29, 1992, OLO circulated a draft of this report to the Executive Director of the Housing Opportunities Commission, appropriate Executive Branch staff, and Council staff. Written comments received on the draft report by July 20, 1992, are included in their entirety beginning on page 47. As noted in the memorandum on page 49, comments from the Director of DHCD will be available in early August.

All technical corrections received either orally or in writing are incorporated into this final report. In addition, the text in Chapter III and the corresponding conclusions in Chapter IV have been amended to reference the County Attorney's comments concerning the distinction between inconsistency and non-compliance.

OLO once again expresses appreciation to the many individuals who contributed their time and effort to this study.



10400 Detrick Avenue
Kensington, Maryland 20895
(301) 929-6700
Fax numbers:
(301) 929-8523 - Development
(301) 929-8499 - Client Services

July 20, 1992

Ms. Karen Orlansky
Office of Legislative Oversight
Montgomery County, Maryland
Council Office Building
100 Maryland Avenue
Rockville, MD 20850

RE: OLO Study of the Housing Information Center

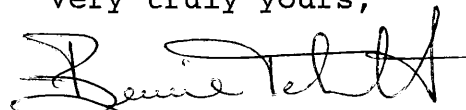
Dear Ms. Orlansky:

The Housing Opportunities Commission has reviewed the report on the operation of the Housing Information Center. Our staff was fully involved in the work that went into the preparation of this report. We were also afforded the opportunity to review a draft and make comments and input to the draft before the final report was prepared.

We feel that the report reflects the work of the Housing Information Center and that the report is factually correct.

The conclusions touch on areas that we think have some real merit. They offer some opportunity for change that could prove beneficial to citizens of the County. We look forward to working with the Council as it reviews this report.

Very truly yours,



Bernard L. Tetreault
Executive Director

BLT/dp






Montgomery County Government

ROCKVILLE, MARYLAND 20850

MEMORANDUM

July 20, 1992

TO: Andrew Mansinne, Jr., Director, Office of Legislative Oversight

FROM: William H. Hussmann, Chief Administrative Officer 

SUBJECT: DRAFT OLO Report #92-2, An Evaluation of the Housing Information Center

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Draft OLO Report #92-2, An Evaluation of the Housing Information Center. This report provides a comprehensive discussion of the Housing Information Center's operations, including its services and customers. The preliminary comments from various departments of the Executive Branch are attached.

The Executive Branch appreciates OLO's initiative to incorporate some of the principles from Reinventing Government and Deming's Out of Crisis into this report. We look forward to discussing OLO Report #92-2 upon its release by the County Council. Thank you again for the opportunity to comment.

WHH/rm


Attachments

1992 JUL -9 PM 1:35

M E M O R A N D U M

July 7, 1992

TO: Deborah J. Snead, Assistant for Total Quality Management

FROM: Richard J. Ferrara, Director 
Department of Housing and Community Development

SUBJECT: Draft OLO Report #92-2, An Evaluation of the Housing
Information Center

The Department of Housing and Community Development is developing comments on the above referenced Office of Legislative Oversight report. While we support the general direction of the report, there are many areas upon which the Department wishes to comment. Unfortunately, we do not expect our responses to be ready until early August. I have talked to Mr. Mansinne and Ms. Orlansky, informing them that our comments will be available to the County Council committee in time for its consideration.

Please call me at 217-3600 if you have any questions about DHCD's comments on this report.

0964F



Montgomery County Government

July 13, 1992

TO: Andrew Mansine, Jr., Director
Office of Legislative Oversight

FROM: Ann Bishop, Director *Ann Bishop*

SUBJECT: DRAFT Office of Legislative Oversight Report 92-2
An Evaluation of the Housing Information Center

I have reviewed the findings of the Draft OLO Report which evaluates the Housing Information Center, operated by the Housing Opportunities Commission (HOC). In general, I agree with OLO's observations and recommendations. I believe they are consistent with the changes that have occurred in the Department of Social Services (DSS) and in the broader community since the Center first began operations in 1978.

I strongly support Recommendation #3 to relocate the organizational placement of the Housing Information Center within HOC. Placement within the Public Affairs Office of the "Parent Company" should be given serious consideration. The Public Affairs Office has a proven ability to collect and disseminate up-to-date information, which could further support the functions of the Housing Information Center.

I further support the restructuring recommendations that would strengthen the Center's role as a resource to other providers of housing information. This would be of significant benefit to the staff of DSS, which over recent years is increasingly required to provide housing information to more and more of our clients. To assist in facilitating this effort, I am committed to working with HOC to develop a Memorandum of Understanding concerning how referrals should be made between our two agencies, especially with respect to housing emergencies. DSS and HOC have demonstrated their ability to work effectively and collaboratively in a number of other areas in recent years. I believe that the same level of coordination we have achieved with the Transitional Housing Programs and the State Rental Allowance Program can also be achieved with the Housing Information Center.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this report.

Department of Social Services, 5630 Fishers Lane, Rockville, Maryland 20852



Montgomery County Government

MEMORANDUM

July 10, 1992

TO: Andrew Mansinne, Jr., Director
Office of Legislative Oversight

FROM: Robert K. Kendal, Director
Office of Management and Budget *RK*

SUBJECT: DRAFT OLO Report No. 92-2, An Evaluation of the Housing Information Center

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to this report. As usual, OLO staff provide a clear and thorough presentation of the relevant issues. I understand that OMB staff have given technical comments and corrections by phone. The following comments address Section V, RECOMMENDATIONS.

Regarding Recommendation 4, OMB concurs that alternative service delivery mechanisms should be considered to address identified needs. In particular, the use of volunteers as proposed under Option A would address several needs, including ensuring consistent staffing of the Center and allowing volunteers to answer phone inquiries, one of the more stressful of the Center's functions. Assuming that a steady and dependable base of volunteers is available to perform work that lends itself to such staffing is a useful proposal that could ensure the same or better quality of service without drastically increasing the cost of County funded services.

As regards Option B, OLO has presented a preliminary assessment which would appear to make a case for further exploration of contracting as an option for service provision. Council Resolution 12-596 establishes a requirement that County agencies consider contracting out by encouraging agency studies of contracting potential using Council established criteria to determine viability of this option. This program would appear to be a good candidate for a study to see if the DHCD contract should be subcontracted by HOC, regardless of whether Option A is implemented. HOC and DHCD should consider collaborating on such a study during FY 93 or FY 94 as a follow-up to the OLO report.



Montgomery County Government

MEMORANDUM

July 14, 1992

TO: Deborah Snead, Assistant for Total Quality Management

FROM: C. Stephen Poteat, Director *CSP/CD*
Upcounty Government Services Center

RE: Response to DRAFT OLO Report #92-2, An Evaluation of the Housing Information Center

Although my staff only occasionally uses the HIC's services, we feel that the HIC's role is indeed important and necessary. The following are comments offered in response to recommendations made in the report noted above.

1) With the number, variety, and lifespans of housing assistance programs provided in the County by government, non-profit organizations, and volunteer groups, there is a definite need for a lead office (such as the HIC) that has the responsibility for gathering and maintaining a current and complete database of housing assistance resources. It can reduce duplicative efforts of multiple agencies assisting the same client/customer. Also, the client is better served if the first agency contacted by the client can perform an easy and comprehensive research of housing assistance resources. This offers clients the opportunity to receive an optimal level of assistance.

The Upcounty Housing Services Project will expire in FY93 and that housing information/referral service will no longer be available in the Upcounty region. Therefore, this centralized clearinghouse must have knowledge of HOC programs, other government-related housing assistance programs, the non-profit sector, and volunteer groups throughout the entire County.

2) We suggest that more automation be used in facilitating this service. For example, HIC could collect and disseminate information about new programs and changes via the computer. Making HIC's database accessible to workers and clients through computer terminals in satellite sites such as the regional Government Services Centers could help make the service more customer-friendly. Having the information and referral service accessible regionally would reduce distance, time, and convenience problems for citizens located in the outer areas of the County.

Upcounty Government Services Center

12900 Middlebrook Road, Germantown, Maryland 20874, 301/217-3400, TTY 217-3402

3) Certain demographic data collected and compiled for HIC's monthly reports may enhance efforts to assess housing issues if the data was sorted geographically (i.e. by zip codes).

4) Due to the nature of a number of HIC's inquirers, the telephone answering service must be easy to use, especially if used as a primary screening and referral tool. Non-English speaking members of the community should be considered in designing the technology. Procedures and waiting time must be especially considerate of the anxious caller with an emergency.

#0300C



Montgomery County Government

M E M O R A N D U M

July 14, 1992

TO: Deborah Snead, Assistant, for Total Quality Management
FROM: *Ineda J. Mauldin*
Freda J. Mauldin, Director
Mid-County Government Service Center
SUBJECT: Response to DRAFT OLO Report #92-2, An Evaluation of
the Housing Information Center

The following comments are offered in response to recommendations made in the report noted above.

- 1) As stated by the Mid-County Center's Community Service Aide's, the Housing Information Center (HIC) has been helpful to this office and plays an important function in the County.
- 2) The Housing Information Center is in the population center of the County so should stay in the present location at the Housing Opportunity Commission (HOC). However, since the HIC is inside the HOC, it may be hard to locate by outsiders, so it should have higher visibility.
- 3) In these days of tight resources, greater use of volunteers is a good idea.
- 4) Demographic data collected and compiled by HIC could assist efforts to assess housing issues geographically.

M E M O R A N D U M

July 16, 1992

TO: ANDREW MANSINNE, Director
Office of Legislative Oversight

VIA: JOYCE R. STERN, County Attorney

FROM: CHRISTOPHER E. HITCHENS, Assistant County Attorney

SUBJECT: COMMENTS ON DRAFT OLO REPORT #92-2
(An Evaluation of the Housing Information Center)

Thank you for the opportunity to review the above-referenced report. While much of the report analyzes policy and operational aspects of the Housing Information Center which are outside the usual scope of review of this office, OLO's analysis of the statutory and contractual requirements relating to the center do warrant our attention.

Sections III.A and III.B of the report identify inconsistencies between the user population and scope of services enumerated in the referral services required by Section 29-52 and those enumerated in the current contract between the County and HOC to operate the Housing Information Center. We would recommend a statement in the report clarifying that the finding of inconsistencies is not a finding that the statute is not being complied with. Our reasoning is as follows.

Our analysis of Section 29-52 of the County Code is that it requires that the County provide a referral service relating primarily to rental housing. This interpretation is based on the specific language in the statute of providing the service for landlords, tenants and government agencies. Additionally, we note the placement of the section within Chapter 29, dealing with landlord-tenant relations.

The statutory requirements are met if such a service is provided; the statute does not require that a service providing all of the services of the Housing Information Center be provided. Nor does it prohibit a more comprehensive service from being provided. Apparently, over the years since the statute was enacted, the County's housing concerns have evolved beyond initial concerns regarding shortages of affordable rental housing to include home ownership and concomitant financing issues as well. This evolution has been reflected in the tasks that have been included in the County's contract with HOC. As long as the basic requirements of Section 29-52 are met, the County may contract with HOC to provide service to parties beyond those named in the statute and to provide services in addition to those named in the statute.

Mansinne from Stern
July 16, 1992
OLO Report 92-2
Page 2

Section III.B(2) of the report briefly discusses the absence of "counseling" as an objective in the HOC budget document description of the center and also indicates that the center does not perform HOC's intake and eligibility function. Please note that these two facts do not represent non-compliance with the law. Both Section 29-52 and the contract with HOC require counseling as a service, and anecdotal evidence presented in the report indicates that this service is being provided, regardless of whether the HOC budget includes counseling as an objective. Similarly, while the center may have supported or constituted HOC's intake service for certain programs in the past, we do not interpret this to be a requirement of the law. The crux of Section 29-52 is to provide a referral service, which by definition directs users to appropriate resources without having to be the end resource itself. The "validation of tenant's needs" and "determination of eligibility" required by the law are crucial steps in the referral process; collection of this information is important in order to be able to direct users to appropriate programs, and need not be in the nature of an actual intake interview for a specific program. In summary, our interpretation of the requirements of Sections 29-52(b)(2) and (3) is that they do not impose a requirement that the referral service provide actual intake services to HOC or any other programs.

General Conclusion #2 in the report misstates the requirements of Section 29-52 in two aspects. First, of the five services listed in subsection (b), the fifth service, listing of available financial assistance programs, has been omitted and replaced with the text of subsection (c). Additionally, the rental vacancy listing required by subsection (c) is discrete from the primary referral service because it has been addressed in a separate subsection. Furthermore, subsection (c) provides specifically that the director of DHCD is to maintain the listing, whereas the referral service identified in subsection (a) is to be developed by the county executive and its operation may be contracted to HOC. Our conclusion is that subsection (c) requires DHCD to maintain the listing, and we note your finding that DHCD is not maintaining the listing.


Finally, we note that your investigation found that generally, DHCD's input to the center is limited to providing funding through the County's contract for services with HOC. Given that Section 29-52 requires that the County develop a central referral service, which could be operated contractually by HOC, the County's compliance with the statute would be strengthened by the development of a written referral service program plan, if none exists.

0148.CEH/bsh

M E M O R A N D U M

July 14, 1992

TO: Karen Orlansky, Program Evaluator
Office of Legislative Oversight

FROM: Dorothy Cockrell  Deputy Staff Director
County Council

SUBJECT: DRAFT OLO Report 92-2, An Evaluation of the Housing Information Center

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the subject report. After reading it, I now consider you my personal Housing Information Center!

I have no substantive comments on the content of the report, other than to say it is your usual thorough, informative work and the recommendations should provide the Council with precisely what they were looking for when including the subject matter in the OLO workprogram.

The following are some recommended technical changes:

- 1) There are in this report certain uses of colons and semi-colons which I found distracting. Permit me to bring them to your attention -
 - page 12, 3rd paragraph, end of 4th line - this colon could be eliminated.
 - page 24, 4th paragraph, lines 5-6 - the colon could be eliminated and the semi-colons changed to commas.
 - page 25, 1st paragraph, 2nd line - change semi-colons to commas.
 - page 38, 3rd paragraph, lines 5-7 - the colon could be eliminated and the semi-colons changed to commas.
 - page 42, 2nd paragraph under Recommendation 5, lines 6-7 - remove both the colon and the semi-colon.
 - page 43, 2nd paragraph, 3rd line - remove the semi-colon.
 - page 44, Recommendation 8 - remove semi-colon, and
last paragraph, 5th line - remove the semi-colon.
 - Appendix B, 4th paragraph ("The output generated ...") - remove colon and replace semi-colons with commas.
- 2) Page 6, "Section A" paragraph - eliminate the apostrophe from "customer's".
- 3) Page 13, 1st line - Change "between" to "among". "Between" is used for 2 items only and "among" is used for more than 2 items.
- 4) Page 15, 1st sentence of last paragraph - remove one of the 2 commas to clarify the intent of the sentence.

- 5) Page 16, 4th paragraph - Change "i.g." to either "e.g." or "i.e." to clarify the intent of the sentence.
- 6) Page 18, last sentence - You may wish to remove the word "only" at the beginning of the sentence in order to maintain objectivity, because 10% may or may not be statistically significant.
- 7) Page 22, 1st sentence of last paragraph - Operation Match is a program administered by HOC to assist individuals to (or "in finding") find shared ...".
- 8) Page 27, 4th paragraph, 4th line - Change "between" to "among".
- 9) Page 34, 3rd paragraph, 3rd line - Remove 1st comma.
- 10) Page 39, 2nd paragraph, line 5 - Make "Recommendation" plural.
4th paragraph, line 5 - Make "/department" plural.
- 11) Page 40, 1st paragraph, 2nd line - Remove quotation marks.
7th line - Change comma to a period.
- 12) Appendix B, 2nd sentence should read, "This particular set of assumptions suggests that two ...".

Now do I get that job as your proof reader?!

BUD287/8

Excerpt from Montgomery County Code (1984), as amended

Sec. 29-52. Referral services.

(a) A central referral service shall be developed and operated for the use of tenants, landlords, and government agencies by the county executive. The operation of the referral service to be offered may be contracted to the housing opportunities commission.

(b) Housing information and referral services to be offered shall include, but not be limited to:

- (1) Counseling services to tenants in need of alternative housing or financial assistance;
- (2) Validation of tenants' need for alternative housing;
- (3) Determination of eligibility for available financial assistance for housing programs based upon income;
- (4) Listing of agencies which can assist in locating housing;
- (5) Listing of available financial assistance programs.

(c) In coordination with other public and private agencies, the director of the department of housing and community development shall maintain a listing of available data concerning the location and characteristics of vacant dwelling units, and their rent rates. (1978 L.M.C., ch. 12, § 1; 1984 L.M.C., ch. 30, § 2.)

Center Staffing Model

In order to examine the question of how many staff are needed to handle a specified volume of telephone calls, OLO developed a simple staffing model. By varying certain key staffing and workload assumptions, the volume of telephone calls that can be reasonably answered by one, two, or three staff also varies.

The variables selected for the workload model were:

- The average length of a telephone call (minutes per phone call);
- The number of minutes spent answering the phones per hour (minutes worked per hour);
- The length of a work day (hours worked per day);
- The number of weeks worked after allowing for County holidays, vacation, sick and personal leave days (weeks worked per year).

OLO recognizes that a model such as this oversimplifies the staffing situation, and is based upon a gross assumption that the rate of telephone calls received by the Center is even throughout the workday. Nonetheless, it can be a useful tool to help determine staffing levels.

The following table outlines four plausible staffing scenarios. All four examples assumed a constant eight hour work day. The average amount of time spent with a caller ranged between three and four and one-half minutes. (These numbers were based on length of call estimates contained in the Center's monthly reports.) The minutes worked per hour were alternated between 50 and 55 minutes; and the weeks worked per year ranged between 44 and 47 weeks, which takes into account paid holidays plus 3-6 weeks of leave per year in a combination of sick, personal, and annual leave.

The output generated from these variables show: calls per hour; calls per day; calls per week; and calls per work year. These particular assumptions suggest that two workyears assigned to phone duty should be able to handle the Center's current volume of 40-45,000 phone calls per year.

Number of Callers Assisted for Various Staffing Assumptions

	<u>Option A</u>	<u>Option B</u>	<u>Option C</u>	<u>Option D</u>
Variables				
Minutes/call	3	3.5	4	4.5
Minutes worked/hour	55	50	50	55
Hours worked/day	8	8	8	8
Weeks worked/year	46	44	45	47
Output				
Calls/hour	18	14	13	12
Calls/day	147	114	100	98
Calls/week	733	571	500	489
Calls per workyear	33,733	25,143	22,500	22,978
Calls/two workyears	67,466	50,286	45,000	45,956
Calls/three workyears	101,199	75,429	67,500	68,934

HOUSING OPPORTUNITIES ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

