

**MEMORANDUM**

June 12, 2020

**TO:** Government Operations and Fiscal Policy Committee  
Health and Human Services Committee

**FROM:** Dr. Costis Toregas, Council IT Adviser  
Victoria (Tori) H. Hall, Legislative Analyst, Office of Legislative Oversight  
Linda McMillan, Senior Legislative Analyst

**SUBJECT:** Follow-up with OHR, OP, HHS and PIO regarding Handling of Surge Calls from Residents during COVID-19 and Recovery

**PURPOSE:** Review progress on surge calls for Covid-19 related assistance

The following are expected to attend:

Barry Hudson, Director, Public Information Office (PIO)  
Ash Shetty, Director, Office of Procurement (PRO)  
Berke Attila, Director, Office of Human Resources (OHR)  
Dr. Raymond Crowel, Director, Health and Human Services (HHS)  
Gail Roper, Director, Department of Technology Services (DTS)

On May 28, 2020, Government Operations and Fiscal Policy (GO) Committee Chair Navarro and Health and Human Services (HHS) Committee Chair Albornoz discussed with relevant Executive Branch staff the emerging issue of surge calls to the MC311 Center related to COVID-19 assistance programs. At the end of the discussion, several questions emerged that frame the issue at hand; the Committee chairs asked for a follow-up joint committee session to review progress against these questions. The questions and Executive staff's preliminary written answers are included below, with Legislative Branch comment where appropriate.

The major focus of the discussion will be on ensuring an "end-to-end" approach to requests received from County residents. The Council wants to ensure that no call goes unanswered and that no caller is forgotten or lost in the system; each request for help should be identified, tracked, and closed in a satisfactory manner.

1. ***How quickly can the MC311 Call Center increase the number of customer service representatives (CSRs) to answer phones in response to a surge in resident calls? Please address the time and resources required for each possible source of additional CSRs.***

*RESPONSE:*

*In concert with OHR and Procurement, MC311 began investigating options to increase the number of CSRs soon after the we began to see a consistent increase in calls in early May. Our options ranged from contractors to redeploying county employees on administrative leave. Ultimately, we concluded that the best route was to bring in contractors. We have received resumes from the temporary agency and will be select individuals that will go through offsite training. We also worked with DTS to determine the equipment needed by these individuals to work remotely. Because there were limitations to in our temporary contract to how MC311 could use temporary staff to fill CSR position, OHR was able to work with MCGEO, which enable us to bring in short-term CSRs.*

*Clearly, there was significant work that needed to be done to get to this point, but now we have a model that should enable us to more rapidly bring in people to assist MC311 if we have future surges during COVID-19 or other situations in the future.*

*Below are the options we evaluated for MC311 and other department surge staffing needs. Below, please find the options prioritized by quickest to longer-term.*

- ***Contractors: – quickest plan***
  - *Resource Need: English and bi-lingual Spanish CSRs.*
  - *Time: estimate 3-5 weeks or less to have an individual ready to take calls (pending interviews, training, and technology resources)*
    - *Athena has provided around 17 (5 who are bi-lingual) contract staff candidates to MC311 for review.*
    - *MC311 has begun interviewing and will hold an information session for applicants.*
    - *There have been some setbacks related to technology needed for teleworking. PIO is working out the details with DTS*
  - *We are also looking at collaborating with MCPS Language Unit to see if we can use any of their 200 plus language contractors.*
- ***MCG employee new hires – more effort/time/funding required***
  - *Resource: currently there is only 1 merit CSR vacancy. OHR/PIO are looking at the option to (a) split the position into 2 Permanent part-time vacancies or (b) use it to create a pooled Temporary position, or (c) create a one-year Term position.*
  - *Time – estimate 6-8 weeks*
  - *If we were able to get funding for new positions, this would take a few months to set up depending on OMB, Classification and Recruitment.*
- ***MCG current employees reassigned – not sustainable option***
  - *LIB/REC staff are either reassigned OR are getting ready to return to work.*
    - *Currently, the staff who are bi-lingual and on LWOP/ADMIN Leave COVID are either deployed already or waiting to return to work shortly with reconstitution of services plan.*
    - *Based on the training requirements, it is in efficient at this point, to train these employees, only to have them return to their current job.*

- *Currently Lib/Rec staff are remotely supporting callers seeking Food Access resources. Recruitment of additional staff who can provide coverage (several hours of per week) continues. The identification of bilingual personnel is a priority. Training and usage of the Language Line is provided to ensure access to all callers seeking resources/information. Additionally, staff are also asking residents if additional services are needed AND providing information on how to connect with those programs/services.*
- *Resources – staff resources to determine requirements, qualifications, training*

**Staff Comments and Follow-up Questions (6/12/2020)**

- 1) **The MCPS Language Unit potential was reported during the May 28, 2020 discussion. Has there been progress in the intervening two weeks?**
  - 2) **To what extent are CSRs and others using the County’s existing telephone interpretation service?**
  - 3) **The Committee may want to focus on specific issues behind the technology setbacks referenced in the telework section, especially with the Short-Term Telework Working Group established and operational. These problems should not be an issue.**
  - 4) **Can there be ways to offload some non-COVID-19 related calls to web-based fulfillment strategies? In the high-demand case of Ride On arrival times, can a better automated solution be deployed quickly to reduce the call queue size?**
  - 5) **The idea of splitting one full-time CSR permanent position into two part-time CSR positions is interesting; Committee members may want to ask for additional details and also request a decision process that will culminate in the final go-forward surge strategy.**
2. ***In addition, have you done a regional study on pay for staff with bilingual language skills and have you found that pay and benefits are a barrier to hiring and retaining staff? Are resources needed in FY21 for classification or other HR studies for CSRs?***

*RESPONSE:*

*OHR has not conducted a regional study relating to bi-lingual language. In order to conduct a regional study, we would need additional resources and time to conduct the study and analyze the data. However, our April 2020 Personnel Management Review (PMR) data, indicates that the CSR job class compensation is competitive. Also, this information is for base salary, separate from multilingual pay differential.*

- *APRIL 2020 PMR – Call Center Representative:*
  - *Min Base Salary: County \$37,830 vs. HRA-NCA \$36,000*
  - *Max Base Salary: County \$61,113 vs HRA-NCA \$59,000*
  - *Multilingual Pay Differentials are in addition to the base salary.*
  - *HRA-NCA - 2019 Human Resources Association of the National Capital Area Compensation Survey Report includes data on 541 job titles from 227 participating private and public sector employers in the Washington-Baltimore consolidated Metropolitan Statistical Area.*
- *The turnover rate for the County, based on the PMR is 7.05% (FY19), with 40% due to retirement.*
- *The turnover rate for Administrative Support is 6.51%.*
- *Based on industry standards, this is a healthy turnover rate.*

## **Staff Comments and Follow-up Questions (6/12/2020)**

- 1) **The competitive nature of our base salary scales is welcome news; are Multilingual Pay Differentials also competitive with other jurisdictions?**
  - 2) **Are there plans to conduct regional pay scale surveys in the future, and is there budget support in FY21?**
3. ***In light of the surge in calls to the Spanish language queue related to HHS programs during the COVID-19 pandemic and associated economic downturn, how has MCG responded?***

### **RESPONSE:**

*During the crisis, the County has introduced several programs that have required a new level of collaboration between departments. MC311, HHS and others have been working in partnership to ensure that residents who have questions about or applying for services receive what they need. In addition to working to increase our staffing levels, the departments are mitigating concerns, working to improve processes. Below are some of the activities that the collaborating departments are been involved in to address the surge in Spanish language calls. Although these are short-term remedies, there is no doubt that we must continue to look towards the future and focus on continually improve our service delivery systems from end-to-end.*

### **MC311:**

- *MC311 has focused on managing ensuring that the CSRs are well-versed on the programs and the process for passing the caller over to HHS or other agencies is done as designed. This has been somewhat of a challenge, because all briefings and trainings have to be done remotely and the CSRs don't have the benefit of communicating with each other the way they did when they were in the call center. This work is necessary to ensure that customer service representatives (CSRs) have accurate information to provide to customers.*
- *MC311 has been working proactively with the OEMHS and many other departments to ensure that changes to County operations were reflected not only on the COVID-19 web site, but on the web sites of the individual offices and departments so CSRs could direct customers to the latest information, and adding links to the most relevant knowledgebase articles. In order to handle the increase in Spanish language calls in this time period MC311 focused our bi-lingual CSRs on Spanish language calls; CSRs also use the language line.*

### **HHS:**

*Internally, HHS has established internal teams who connect and assist residents medically and/or economically impacted by COVID-19.*

- **Connection to Social Supports/Resources**
  - *A team of HHS personnel are currently connecting residents to social supports/resources from multiple entry points within Montgomery County. The assistance provided varies; accessing tele-medicine, accessing COVID-19 testing, securing lodging to safely isolate/quarantine, accessing baby food/supplies; accessing food (pick-up or delivery), as well as accessing household & personal care supplies. Represented on this group are staff from across HHS who can assist in navigating residents to the needed resources. Several members are bilingual (English/Spanish). Use of Language Line is relied upon as needed. Recruitment of additional HHS employees (with an emphasis on bilingual capacity) continues within this effort as well.*

- **Connection to Benefits**
  - *The Office of Eligibility and Support Services (OESS) continues to enroll residents in an array of programs/services. In response to COVID-19, telephonic assistance is highly utilized. Online enrollment is an additional option via the state's MyDHRBenefits website. Lastly, two locations in the county also provide the option to retrieve paper applications. If selected, residents have the option to place their completed forms within secure drop boxes or mail their completed applications in a provided postage-paid envelope.*
- **OESS**
  - *Total Employees = 265*
  - *Bilingual Spanish - 51*
  - *Bilingual (All Languages) - 73*
  - *Language Line is used as needed to assist applicants*
- **Emergency Assistance Relief Payment**
  - *The Emergency Assistance Response Program (EARP) provides financial assistance to County residents economically impacted by COVID-19. In support of this effort, HHS staff are actively engaged in EARP's application, verification and disbursement processes. As with the previous efforts, timely bilingual support is critical to the success of the initiative. Staff with specific language capacities have been temporarily re-assigned to support the processing of EARP applications. At present, fluency in Spanish is a key recruitment element. The majority of HHS personnel processing the EARP applications possess this skillset.*
  - *16 HHS employees have been reassigned to respond to calls Of this total, 13 individuals are bilingual Spanish speakers*
  - *Language Line is used as needed to assist applicants*
- **COVID-19 Rental Relief Program**
  - *HHS' COVID-19 Rent Relief Program is another effort initiated to address economic loss due to the pandemic. Via this program, short term rental assistance is provided to households who may have fallen behind on their rent. Additionally, the funds can be used to pay overdue rent, as well as provide additional rental support for up to three months. The assistance may also be used to cover the costs of security deposits, first month's rent, and limited monthly assistance for households exiting homelessness. HHS staff have been temporarily re-assigned to support this effort as well.*
- **Services to End and Prevent Homelessness**
  - *Total Employees = 80*
  - *Bilingual Spanish - 10*
  - *Bilingual (All Languages) - 13*
  - *15 HHS employees have been reassigned to respond to calls*
  - *Of this total, five staffers are bilingual Spanish speakers*
  - *Language Line is used as needed to assist applicants*

**OHR:**

- *Working closely with HHS to advertise and fill all their vacancies. In addition to the 3 HR Specialist normally assigned to HHS, we have recently assigned 2 additional specialists. HHS has the most (65) recruitments going on right now, and we are working with them to expedite job announcements, eligible list creation, job offers, etc. We also partnered with DFRS to process fingerprinting for HHS, as CJIS and other fingerprinting vendors were closed due to COVID.*
- *Working closely with PIO/departments on surge staffing needs*
- *Utilizing noncompetitive hiring processes to expedite hiring.*
- *Working with departments to re-deploy staff who are on LWOP or Admin Leave due to COVID.*

- *Leveraging technology for process improvements*
- *Coordinating outreach efforts*
- *Leveraging procurement options for Linked In sourcing platform*

**Staff Comments and Follow-up Questions (6/12/2020)**

- 1) **In the new Food Access strategy within HHS, do resident calls come through MC311 first, and is each call logged so that satisfactory resolution can be monitored?**
  - 2) **How does the use of contractual interpreters balance the potential of hiring multilingual call takers? And how is the current language line expense handled? What is the current contracted level of language line/interpreter support?**
  - 3) **With the increased requests to the County related to COVID-19 support, the question of overall information management has to be addressed. Coordination between web announcements, social media, and other County information generation and listening points is important; Councilmembers may want to address the method of overall information flow management and strategy to ensure coherent and coordinated timing and flows to residents; for example, when new phases of EARP support are announced, are the release dates coordinated with the MC311 center so adequate training for CSRs can be ensured?**
  - 4) **How should the information gained from the experience working with residents calling the Food Access call line, Public Health Helpline, and Housing Stabilization Services be built into the response a resident receives from MC311? Can better information be provided on the time it will take to receive a callback from program staff? Staff responding to people needing food assistance are finding it can take 20 to 45 minutes to assist someone with help that is responsive to their individual location and situation. How can this experience help structure a system that both answers the initial call quickly and connects residents to staff with the in-depth knowledge to assist them?**
4. *The Council is concerned that the issues arising during the COVID-19 pandemic (insufficient CSRs to answer calls quickly, insufficient use of recordings in both Spanish and English, insufficient CSRs with Spanish language skills, perceived poor customer service by residents) are long-standing issues that have been made only more prominent because of the pandemic. Please discuss.*

*RESPONSE:*

**a) How OHR recruits and retains bilingual and diverse MCG staff.**

- *Depending on the position, requirements, etc., either a job posting is placed only on the employment website or departments may post on multiple diversity sites. There is currently no central advertising budget. OHR has requested multiple new positions in Recruitment as well as funding for central diversity advertising, but the request was denied.*
- *OHR recently is in cooperation with LinkedIn for a proof of concept limited engagement. We will use this to source candidates, identify diversity outreach tools, and increase our social media presence.*
  - Find the right candidates faster:** expand our searches beyond hiring managers' personal connections and have access to over 675 million LinkedIn members. Search faster with 20+ smart and simple-to-use search filters and recommendations.*
  - Contact any candidate via InMail:** Use customized templates to reach out to candidates quickly through InMail – LinkedIn's trusted messaging environment.*

- iii. **Talent Pipeline Management:** Build, track and manage the candidates we want to hire now or in the future with folders, reminders and smart to-do lists.
- Diversity related job fair attendance, where possible.
- Hiring Process Improvements -, elimination of preferred criteria assessments (where possible), in order to expand the interview pool, utilizing fillable forms in lieu of memos in order to expedite hiring, virtual interviews
- Training - LEP, EEO, computer skills, communication skills, is our process culturally competent
- It is important to have easy and accessible application processes. OHR requested a budget enhancement for a new Applicant Tracking System. Unfortunately, our request has been denied due to COVID-19.
- Non-competitive hiring options:
  - i. Non-competitive hiring for individuals with disabilities
  - ii. 6-7. Noncompetitive rating process. The OHR Director may establish an eligible list for employment or promotion on a noncompetitive basis for positions involving unskilled manual labor and for other classes of work if a competitive process is impractical.
  - iii. There are short-term temporary employees we can hire, but MCPR restricts our ability to hire noncompetitively for these positions only at the Grade 5 or below and have time limit restrictions.

**b) How OHR and the Office of Procurement respond to surge staffing needs at HHS and MC311 Call Center during COVID-19 recovery using bilingual contractors and voluntarily reassigned MCG staff.**

- Assisting departments to determine which source would be most efficient – use of an existing contract, emergency contract, public entity, or bridge contract.
- Linked In proof of concept
- Expediting resource needs such as computer enhancements, SeamlessDocs, MCPS Language Unit collaboration
  - While we explore a more permanent 3-6-month solution or standing up our own Language unit/department, our immediate plan is to have contract in place by next week.
- There are currently no budget allocations for surge hiring. While there is Federal funding under COVID, we do not have allocating funds for staffing. We are working with EMHS and OMB to determine what flexibilities there may be related to Federal COVID funding.

**5. How might the Executive Branch improve the customer service experience for residents interacting with County government across all departments, starting with a resident’s “first touch” through their entire experience? Amplify on an “end-to-end” experience referenced in prior conversations, focusing on needed hand-offs to other departments handling calls. How can MCG more systematically incorporate and acknowledge cultural sensitivity, multilingualism of residents, and complex needs of customers that span departments and demand follow-up?**

**RESPONSE:**

Prior to the outbreak of COVID-19, the Executive Branch was looking beginning to develop a broader strategy for how we could improve our service approach. Our vision is to redefine customer service in the county by creating a more comprehensive service strategy that is more customer or resident

centric. This crisis has exposed some of the areas where the county needs to improve its support systems and better factor in cultural sensitivity and multilingual residents.

As we reimagine customer service, we will need to look at all our customer service touchpoints and determine how to seamlessly move callers through the service cycle. Develop procedures for what information needs to be documented at each point along the way and how county staff will interact with the caller. This will also require an evaluation/feedback mechanism and improved tracking capabilities so that we can provide for consistent, measured, accountability to our community. We will have to look at elements such as technology, training, staffing and budget, as we develop our strategy. Below is a graphic of our strategic approach for MC311, which focuses on the three primary areas that we need to address throughout the enterprise: People, Process and Technology. provides:

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## MC311 Strategy & Plan

Building the foundation for a resident-centric end-to-end service orientation

### People

- Create a morale-boosting work environment
- Career paths/development/growth
- Incentive and recognition programs

### Process

- Improve/Simplify/Strengthen core processes
  - Fully deploy comprehensive Quality Assurance program
  - Reorganize, simplify KBAs
  - Expand Internal and External Education
  - Work toward Universal Agents (eliminate/reduce Tier2)
- Optimize department operations (OHR, DPS)
- Launch Council Liaison Program
- Look for/build on specific opportunities to deliver end-to-end service

### Technology

- Assess current platform
- Build roadmap for 'Next Gen' Technology
  - Gather/listen/respond to customer feedback
  - Create robust business requirements
  - Focus on capabilities for call efficiency and quality
  - Increase customer contact channels

### ***The Evolution of Service***

As we develop our new more comprehensive service approach and factor on building it with the right People, Processes and Technology, we must do that with the resident/customer as our focal point. This will mean expanding access channels and culture and language differences must be an important aspect our of strategy. We have learned for COVID-19 that we must create a structure that considers methods and channels that not only deliver information in an equitable manner, but also serve them equitably. This means that we will also need to factor in the following:

- Create additional positions that REQUIRE bi-lingual skills
- Consider deploying bi-lingual employees to departments/units where bi-lingual skills are needed
- Communicate available resources to the community in multiple languages
- Partner with MCPS – Language Unit to leverage their contract services
- Create central Department/Division solely responsible for language access and services.
- Implement new technology



- *Enhance customer service training*
- *Partner with Racial Equity/Social Justice, Regional Services Centers, CEC*
- *Expand Navigator positions in more departments*
- *Implement process improvements measures to improve service*
- *Conduct surveys and create more resident/customer feedback mechanisms*
- *Ensure that ALL resident receive a consistency level of quality service*

**Staff Comments and Follow-up Questions (6/12/2020)**

- 1) **Currently, do individual departments advertise vacancies, or is it left solely to OHR to recruit?**
- 2) **Provide more detail on the LinkedIn discussions, timing, and expected costs.**
- 3) **What is the current system of managing transfers of calls from MC311 to departments, especially as it relates to satisfactory response to need?**
- 4) **Elaborate on plans to add another contract for temporary employees; how does it relate to the existing Athena contract and detail any current gaps in service.**
- 5) **Elaborate on the suggested OHR option of “standing up new language unit/department.” Would this be in lieu of the existing contracted Language Line service?**
- 6) **The “end-to-end” service management span is unclear. Is there an “end-to-end” structure currently? And who is in command?**
- 7) **Can EMHS and OMB provide clarity on whether surge staffing can be covered under federal COVID-19 support grants?**