

Holding Pattern: Call Wait Times for Income and Disability Assistance

Introduction

Holding Pattern: Call Wait Times for Income and Disability Assistance is the report of the Ombudsperson's investigation into the Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction's centralized telephone system and its impact on the applicants and recipients of income and disability assistance.

"The ministry's telephone-based service has been chronically slow for a number of years," said B.C. Ombudsperson Jay Chalke. "Income and disability assistance applicants and recipients include some of the most vulnerable people in the province. The ministry needs to ensure its services are timely and meet the needs of the people it serves."

The Ombudsperson initiated the systemic investigation in July 2017 in response to a range of complaints about long wait times, disconnected calls, call time limits, and other challenges recipients of income and disability assistance face in communicating with the ministry by telephone.

Findings

1. The average call wait times at the ministry's provincial contact centre are chronically and consistently unreasonably long.
2. The ministry does not provide a reasonable level of service via its centralized telephone line because it does not employ a sufficient number of employment and assistance workers in the provincial contact centre.
3. The ministry's regular use of its Tier 1* strategy is unreasonable because it results in an inadequate level of service and creates a delay in the resolution of service requests.
4. The ministry does not inform callers when the provincial contact centre is operating in Tier 1 mode. This approach lacks transparency and is unreasonable because callers lack information about why the ministry is not resolving their service requests.
5. The ministry's failure to monitor, and set service delivery standards for in-person wait times at local offices is unreasonable.

**The Tier 1 strategy is when ministry staff only action phone inquiries that can be addressed in under five minutes. For inquiries anticipated to take longer, staff take enough information to build a service request, which goes into the ministry's provincial queue for later action.*

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Recommendations

The investigation resulted in nine recommendations for the Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction. The ministry has fully accepted six of the Ombudsperson's nine recommendations (R1, R4, R5, R6, R7, R9) and partially accepted the other three (R2, R3, R8).

1. By May 31, 2018, the ministry report the daily average speed of answer and the daily longest call wait time statistics on its website for each day in the previous month.
2. By October 31, 2018, the ministry hire sufficient additional employment and assistance workers to ensure that it has a minimum of 220 full-time staff dedicated to answering calls to the centralized telephone line. The incremental staffing is not to be offset from elsewhere in the ministry's income and disability assistance programs.
3. By March 31, 2019, for 95 percent of the days of each month, the ministry answer calls to the centralized telephone line at a daily average speed of answer of 10 minutes or less and attain a longest call wait time for each day of 30 minutes or less.
4. Beginning May 31, 2018, the ministry report when the provincial contact centre is operating in Tier 1 mode by including an announcement on its centralized telephone line and posting on its website.
5. By March 31, 2019, the ministry phase out and cease to use its Tier 1 call-sweeping strategy, and any other strategies for reducing call wait times that result in reduced service levels, except in unforeseen and extraordinary circumstances such as provincial emergencies.
6. By March 31, 2020, the ministry phase out its practice of resolving only one request per call when people contact the centralized telephone line with multiple requests, so that it is able to resolve multiple issues while continuing to achieve the timeliness standards in Recommendation 3.
7. By September 30, 2018, the ministry establish and make public service standards for the timeliness of service delivery and monitor wait times for in-person services at all local offices.
8. By October 31, 2018, the ministry report on its website the average daily individual wait times for in-person service at every local office for the previous month.
9. By June 30, 2019, June 30, 2020 and June 30, 2021, the ministry make public the report of an independent performance audit of the ministry's public reporting of the performance information in Recommendation 1 and Recommendation 3 for the prior fiscal year.

"I am pleased that the ministry has accepted our recommendations about publicly posting its wait times, which means that ministry clients and stakeholders will be able to follow the ministry's progress in addressing this problem. I am also pleased the ministry is phasing out some of the limited service techniques it applied to shorten call answer wait times, but that resulted in reduced service quality," added Chalke. "However, I am disappointed the ministry has not agreed to the timeliness service standards I recommended, preferring to substitute a different standard. Overall, their commitments are a good start, but more will need to be done."

The Office of the Ombudsperson will monitor the progress of the ministry's implementation of the recommendations and report publicly.

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