

# HOLDING PATTERN:

Call Wait Times for Income  
and Disability Assistance



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The Ombudsperson has a broad mandate to investigate complaints involving provincial ministries; provincial boards and commissions; Crown corporations; local governments; health authorities; colleges and universities; schools and school boards; and self-regulating professions and occupations. A full list of authorities can be found in the *Ombudsperson Act*. The Office of the Ombudsperson responds to approximately 8,000 inquiries and complaints annually.

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April 2018

The Honourable Darryl Plecas  
Speaker of the Legislative Assembly  
Parliament Buildings  
Victoria BC V8V 1X4

Dear Mr. Speaker,

It is my pleasure to present the Ombudsperson's Special Report No. 40, *Holding Pattern: Call Wait Times for Income and Disability Assistance*.

The report is presented pursuant to section 31(3) of the *Ombudsperson Act*.

Yours sincerely,



Jay Chalke  
Ombudsperson  
Province of British Columbia



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# FROM THE OMBUDSPERSON

The Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction is responsible for income assistance and disability assistance in the province. It has been struggling for the past several years to provide timely and effective service to the public. The ministry has been shifting its service from a focus on in-person delivery to one that emphasizes telephone and online methods of service delivery or, in the ministry vernacular, “service channels.”

The transition has not been smooth. For the past number of years, people served by the ministry have faced significant delays when making inquiries or attempting to obtain assistance by telephone. The issues, had they been resolved in a reasonable time, might have been attributed to transition problems as the ministry moved to a new service model. However, problems of delay, dropped calls, long wait times and poor communication have persisted.



Compounding many of these service issues is the reality that income and disability assistance recipients face challenges arising from their life circumstances, including poverty, homelessness, health issues and disability. These issues have prompted questions to be asked as to whether the ministry’s service shift to the emphasis on online and telephone service channels is appropriate. At an absolute minimum these issues demand that government accommodates the variety of service needs presented by the ministry’s clientele – some of the most vulnerable individuals in British Columbia.

It is also apparent that the ministry has been under resource pressures that have restricted its options as it sought to manage the service crisis it found itself in over the past few years. As we detail in this report, the ministry has been creative in the measures it has taken in an attempt to squeeze a bit more service from its resource envelope. But we also found that those responsible for delivering the service have lowered their service commitments, now believing the original program goals to be unrealistic given the resource pressures.

In this report we call for new service standards for telephone and in-person ministry services. The service standards we have recommended for telephone service delivery represent reasonably timely service. In addition we recommend the gradual elimination of two strategies that the ministry had adopted in order to reduce call wait times – but did so at the expense of quality of service. Our report recommends nearly 40 new staff positions for the contact centre to deliver this more timely and improved level of service.

In total we have made nine recommendations. I am pleased that the ministry has fully accepted six of the recommendations and has agreed to make improvements that partially address the other three recommendations.

Significantly the ministry will, on a monthly basis, be providing transparent performance information for each day of the previous month. The public, stakeholders and service recipients will be able to readily see how the ministry has been performing in meeting its commitments. Until the ministry is able to phase out its “call sweeping” strategy by March 31, 2019 it will

make real time announcements on its telephone system and website that the contact centre is using its “call sweeping” strategy. Service recipients can then decide whether to wait on the line for the reduced service inherent during “call sweeping” or to call back when wait times are shorter.

We have recommended that the ministry achieve a daily average speed of answer of 10 minutes or less for 95 percent of the days each month. The ministry has declined to follow our timeliness recommendation, instead committing to a more modest improvement, albeit while making the other service quality improvements we recommended.

This more modest service improvement is a consequence of the ministry substituting a smaller resource enhancement than we recommended. We recommended that staff be increased to 220 contact centre staff – an increase of 37 staff – while the ministry has at this time, decided to increase staffing to only 203 positions – an increase of 20. Ten new positions will also be added to the provincial queue to serve ministry clients.

We determined in this investigation that the ministry was utilizing staff in local ministry offices to also answer calls to the centralized telephone line when wait times were high and extra resources required. We asked about the resulting impact on wait times in local offices from that diversion of staff resources and were surprised to learn that there were no provincial service standards for the timeliness of in-person service. We have recommended that these be put in place and the ministry has agreed to do so and to monitor those wait times. While they have, at this time, declined to make in-person service wait times public, their commitment to establish and internally monitor service standards is a start.

Taken as a whole, the ministry’s response is generally positive. The ministry’s commitment to making the changes recommended in this report is indicative not only of their recognition that the status quo isn’t good enough but also their desire to make improvements. We will monitor and publicly report on the ministry’s implementation of these recommendations.

Over the past few years, the people receiving services from the ministry have been asked to make many changes in how they interact with the ministry. It is time for the ministry to do the same.



Jay Chalke  
Ombudsperson  
Province of British Columbia



# INTRODUCTION

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Our office regularly investigates individual complaints about the ministry related to the provision of income assistance services. From 2014 to today, we have consistently received complaints from individuals who say they have encountered long call wait times when they contacted the ministry's centralized toll-free line and are having difficulty accessing services as a result. While we investigated many of these complaints, our focus during those individual investigations was generally on the reasonableness of the process the ministry followed in responding to the individual's specific concerns. These individual investigations did not consider the adequacy of the ministry's delivery of telephone services as a whole.

In May 2015, the BC Public Interest Advocacy Centre wrote to our office on behalf of nine non-profit and social services organizations about the ministry's service delivery model. They raised a number of concerns about the impact of the centralized telephone line on the accessibility of ministry services, including long wait times, disconnected calls, call time limits, a lack of decision-making authority among workers receiving the calls,

and other challenges some callers face in communicating via the phone line.

We monitored the issue and continued to address inaccessibility issues at the individual complaint level. In 2017, we decided to conduct a systemic investigation of the accessibility and adequacy of the service.

Accordingly, in July 2017, the Ombudsperson notified the deputy minister that we had commenced an investigation into the ministry's centralized telephone line and its impact on the accessibility of ministry services. We decided to focus on the centralized line and the contact centres because the complaints received by our office indicated that the problem of long call wait times was persistent and affected a wide range of people receiving ministry services. Although the ministry's delivery of telephone services is the focus of this report, we have considered how access to other modes of service delivery that the ministry offers has been affected by issues with the centralized call centre. As a result, to the extent that other service delivery modes are impacted by the centralized telephone service, this report also touches on issues related to the ministry's delivery of online and in-person services.





# INVESTIGATION

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Our investigation focused on the Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction's centralized telephone line and its impact on the accessibility of ministry services. The ministry is obligated to provide services in a fair and accessible manner. It is essential that the ministry provide access in a manner that takes into account the nature of the services it provides. Income assistance and disability assistance are programs of last resort; by the time people are accessing these services, they have generally exhausted all other resources and have nowhere else to turn. Those who receive ministry services are among the most impoverished, vulnerable and disadvantaged people in the province. Most of the people who access ministry services have physical or mental disabilities. Some are homeless, and many lack resources

such as telephones, access to the Internet, and computer literacy skills. Accordingly, our assessment of whether ministry services are sufficiently accessible is necessarily informed by the nature of the services provided and the characteristics of the population that is accessing them.

During our investigation, we examined ministry data for the contact centres for 2017, in relation to the average speed of answer of calls, longest call hold times, and volume of calls. We also reviewed historical data on the average call answer time from 2012 onward. We reviewed briefing notes and presentations related to changes to the service delivery model, as well as caseload statistics, policies relating to the operation of the contact centres, service delivery standards and email correspondence.

We obtained a significant amount of information from reports to the ministry's Oversight Committee for the Service Delivery Division. The committee is composed of the assistant deputy minister of the Service Delivery Division and five executive directors responsible for the various service delivery streams and other ministry services. It is responsible for establishing and overseeing the strategic direction of the division. The committee meets monthly and receives reports from, and provides direction to, contact centre management regarding the operation of the contact centres, including challenges, trends, strategies, technology and staffing. Information is generally provided to the committee through presentations. These annotated presentations provide insight into how the ministry has responded to the long delays that ministry clients face when calling the centralized line. We have included that information in this report.



Throughout the course of our investigation, we interviewed a number of ministry representatives, including management for the contact centres and staff responsible for ministry data and business analytics. We also interviewed a number of anti-poverty community advocates who assist and/or represent people in obtaining ministry services.

In this report, we describe how the ministry has transformed its service delivery model from one that emphasized in-person services provided through case workers to one that emphasizes centralized services provided

online or through the telephone. We describe the challenges that the ministry and the people who receive its services have faced in dealing with long wait times on the centralized telephone line. We review the ways in which the ministry has tried to mitigate the long wait times, as well as the impact of the delays on callers. We conclude that the ministry's centralized telephone service is unreasonable because of the long call wait times and because the ministry sometimes provides an inadequate level of service through the strategies it uses to reduce the call wait times.

# THE EMPLOYMENT AND ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

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The Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction administers the BC Employment and Assistance (BCEA) program. The BCEA program encompasses income assistance, disability assistance, hardship assistance and various supplements, as well as employment supports to assist low-income British Columbians. The majority of people receiving assistance from the ministry are low-income people living with disabilities.

The overall objective of income assistance is to provide people with support and assist them in transitioning from unemployment to sustainable employment. The ministry's intention is for people to rely on income assistance as a temporary measure, and it expects recipients of income assistance to seek employment and participate in employment programs.

The ministry provides disability assistance to people with disabilities who are unable to or are restricted in their ability to participate in the workforce or require specialized employment programs. In order to be eligible for disability assistance, applicants must first obtain the Person with Disabilities (PWD) designation from the ministry. To obtain the PWD designation, the applicant must have a severe mental or physical impairment that meets the following criteria:

- in the opinion of a medical practitioner or nurse practitioner, the impairment is likely to continue for at least two years;
- in the opinion of a prescribed professional, the impairment directly and significantly restricts the person's ability to perform daily living activities either continuously or periodically for extended periods; and
- as a result of those restrictions, the person requires an assistive device, the significant help or supervision of another person or the services of an assistance animal to perform daily living activities.<sup>1</sup>

The ministry's legislative authority for the administration of income and disability assistance is established by the *Employment and Assistance Act* and the *Employment and Assistance for Persons with Disabilities Act* and their companion regulations. The Acts and regulations govern the BCEA and establish program eligibility, requirements and appeal procedures.

BC Employment and Assistance is a program of last resort. This means that people who are receiving income or disability assistance are required to have exhausted all other options prior to the ministry determining that they are eligible for assistance. Therefore, people who seek support from the ministry generally do not have any other sources of income or support that they can rely on.

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<sup>1</sup> *Employment and Assistance for Persons with Disabilities Act*, S.B.C. 2002, c.42, s.2.

## Who Receives BCEA Financial Assistance?

As of December 2017, over 191,000 British Columbians received financial assistance through the BCEA program.

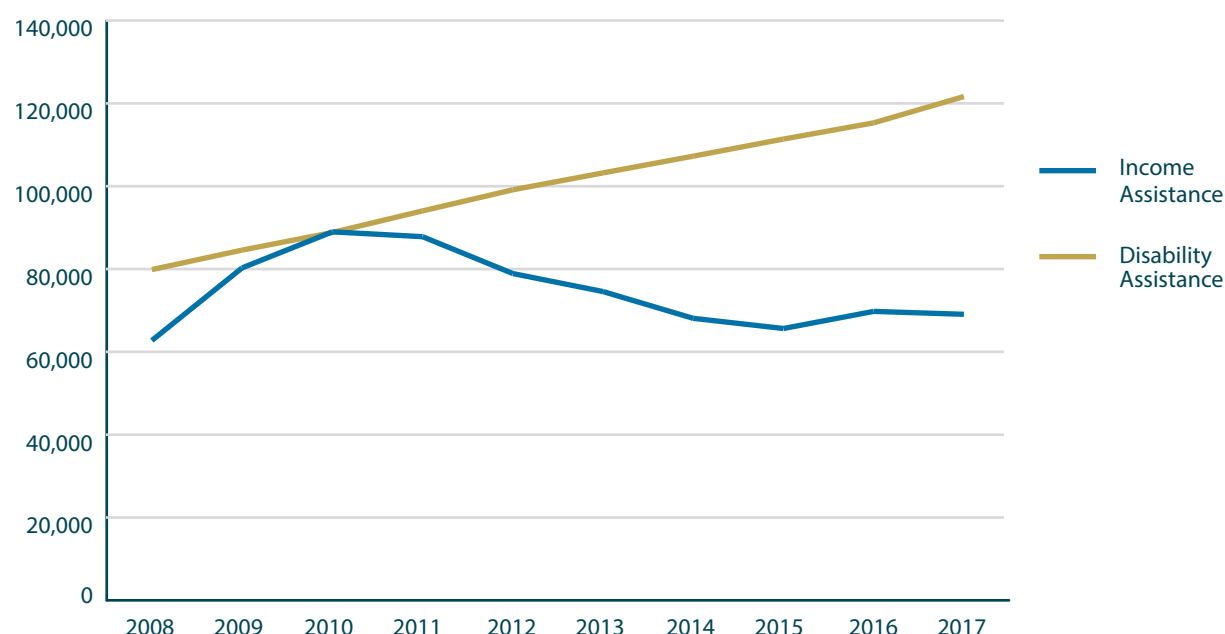
The number of people receiving disability assistance is significantly higher than the number of people on income assistance.

**Table 1: Number of People Relying on Financial Assistance in B.C., not including dependent children (2008–2017)<sup>2</sup>**

	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
<b>Income Assistance</b>	62,744	80,275	88,980	87,816	78,916	74,562	68,097	65,641	69,774	69,071
<b>Disability Assistance</b>	79,873	84,569	88,822	94,037	99,132	103,215	107,255	111,390	115,300	121,655

The number of people on disability assistance continues to rise, while the number of people who rely on income assistance has remained level, as shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1: Increase of People Relying on Income Assistance vs Disability Assistance in B.C. (2008–2017)<sup>3</sup>**



As of December 2017, the ministry reports that 21,924 of the 67,513 people on income assistance were excused from the requirement to work for various reasons, such as caring for children under three years of age, temporary medical conditions or medical conditions resulting in persistent multiple barriers to employment.

<sup>2</sup> Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction, *BC Employment and Assistance Summary Report*, November 2017, 2. <<https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/british-columbians-our-governments/organizational-structure/ministries-organizations/social-development-poverty-reduction/bcea-caseload-6page.pdf>>.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

# THE MINISTRY'S SERVICE DELIVERY MODEL

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The ministry's mode of service delivery has evolved over time, moving from a regional case worker model toward a centralized, caseless model that increasingly relies on virtual service delivery. Prior to 2013, the ministry delivered its income assistance services regionally, through client drop-in and in-person appointments with employment and assistance workers and through nine telephone contact centres located around the province. The ministry's toll-free telephone line led callers to an automated telephone inquiry system that directed them to specific ministry contact centres or to the nearest local office.

In November 2010, the ministry contracted Deloitte LLP for advice about its telephone service delivery system. At the time, callers were experiencing long wait times, dropped calls, busy signals and inconsistent service delivery among the regions.<sup>4</sup>

Deloitte issued its report and recommendations in March 2011. The report concluded that severe service delivery challenges existed "across all client touch points" within the ministry.<sup>5</sup> Deloitte recommended that the ministry move toward a standardized, centralized service delivery model and suggested that the ministry consider implementing service delivery standards such as the following:

- Telephone channel inbound: 80 percent of calls answered in 60 seconds
- Telephone channel outbound: All outbound calls attempted at a minimum once per day
- Face-to-face channel: All clients greeted and triaged within two minutes, and specific services then require individual service levels<sup>6</sup>

In 2013, the ministry launched its "channel strategy." The ministry envisioned the channel strategy as allowing clients to access ministry services through the channel of their choice, whether by phone, online or in person. The strategy was intended to fulfil four main goals:

1. Broaden client access to services (through multi-channel service delivery)
2. Maximize efficiency
3. Integrate government priorities between channels
4. Ensure continuing effectiveness<sup>7</sup>

The ministry's rationale for the channel strategy included a belief that advances in technology would enable the ministry to effectively deliver online and telephone services. Correspondingly, the ministry concluded that people receiving its services were increasingly interested in and willing to access services online and by phone. The ministry had also acknowledged that its current service delivery model was not efficient. A presentation prepared to advise the minister in July 2013 described the ministry's service challenges:

Our services need improvement:

- clients can face long waits in offices or on the phone, depending on the location;
- some clients are "over-served", some are "under-served"; and
- we have limited tools to understand interdependencies in workflows, resulting in unintended or unanticipated bottlenecks in processes.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Deloitte LLP, *Telephone Service Channel Leading Practice & Model Review Executive Summary*, March 9, 2011, 4.

<sup>5</sup> Deloitte LLP, *Telephone Service Channel Leading Practice & Model Review Executive Summary*, March 9, 2011, 7.

<sup>6</sup> Deloitte LLP, *Telephone Service Channel Leading Practice & Model Review Executive Summary*, March 9, 2011, 15.

<sup>7</sup> Policy and Project Analyst, Ministry of Social Development and Social Innovation, information note for Minister Don McRae, 28 February 2014, 2.

<sup>8</sup> Ministry of Social Development and Social Innovation, "Transforming our Service Delivery: The Channel Strategy," advice to Minister, July 2013, 1.



## The Ministry's Service Delivery Model

The ministry undertook a number of channel strategy projects from its launch in 2013 through to December 2014, including:

- Telephone – Transforming its telephone service delivery system by creating a single, centralized phone line, operating out of five contact centres (the provincial contact centre) and purchasing and upgrading ICE, its contact centre software.
- Online – Upgrading its online portal and My Self-Service program.
- Face-to-face – Reducing face-to-face interactions through a “traffic reduction strategy” and encouraging client use of telephone and online services, reducing the size of its “facilities footprint,” including consolidating the three Lower Mainland contact centres (Vancouver, Surrey and Burnaby) into one location.<sup>9</sup>

The ministry sought to achieve a number of goals through its telephone services channel strategy project and the creation of the provincial contact centre, including the following:

- reduce citizen wait times and repeat calls
- increase self-serve options over the phone
- reduce contact numbers for citizens to one central number
- improve consistency in citizen service regardless of location<sup>10</sup>

In 2013, the ministry had the highest call volumes in the entire provincial government (1.3 million calls in the 2012/13 fiscal year). The nine contact centres operated using three different telephone software programs.<sup>11</sup> In 2013, the ministry concluded that in order to transform its telephone service delivery model, it needed to procure a single telephone software program that would integrate with its Integrated Case Management system. In June 2013, the ministry sought approval to purchase the ICE telephone software for use in its provincial contact centre. At the time, the ministry's budget costs for telephony were about \$300,000 per year. In its 2013 proposal, the ministry estimated that the cost of the ICE software system would be \$1,306,000 for the 2013/14 fiscal year, \$1,208,000 for 2014/15, and \$1,201,200 for 2015/16.<sup>12</sup> The ministry obtained approval to purchase the software, which it deployed in 2014 and continues to use.

From January to June 2014, the ministry undertook a pilot project in the Fraser and North regions, delivering its services using the ICE program and a single telephone queue. In June, the project was expanded province-wide. In September 2014, the three contact centres in the Lower Mainland were consolidated into one location.

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<sup>9</sup> Ministry of Social Development and Social Innovation, “Transforming our Service Delivery: The Channel Strategy,” advice to Minister, July 2013, 7; Policy and Project Analyst, Ministry of Social Development and Social Innovation, information note for Minister Don McRae, 28 February 2014, 1.

<sup>10</sup> Ministry of Social Development and Social Innovation, “Channel Strategy Proposal,” presentation to the Ministry of Social Development and Social Innovation's Oversight Committee for the Service Delivery Division, June 2013, 18.

<sup>11</sup> Manager, Telephony Project, Ministry of Social Development and Social Innovation, decision note prepared for Deputy Minister Sheila Taylor, 17 June 2013, 1.

<sup>12</sup> Manager, Telephony Project, Ministry of Social Development and Social Innovation, decision note prepared for Deputy Minister Sheila Taylor, 17 June 2013, 2.



At the same time, in-person service hours were reduced to three hours per day in the ministry's West Kelowna, 100 Mile House, Oliver, Grand Forks, Merritt, Trail, Nelson, Prince Rupert, Smithers, Fort St. John and Dawson Creek offices. The ministry reduced the in-person service hours of these offices so that local office staff could support the provincial work of virtual services for the remainder of the day. Service requests created by provincial contact centre employment and assistance workers (EAWs) that are awaiting completion go into a provincial queue. Staff in these reduced-hours local offices would spend the balance of the day working on service requests in the queue rather than providing in-person assistance to people in their community.<sup>13</sup> The ministry told us that all of these offices resumed full-time hours by March 2016.

A service request is any request for service which is still outstanding. Service requests can originate from phone calls where an issue was not resolved, as will be illustrated later, or from a fax, mail or any other point of contact. Service requests are placed in the ministry's provincial queue and fulfilled based on the ministry's assessment of their priority.

In late 2013 and 2014, the following ministry offices were closed on Vancouver Island and in the Lower Mainland as the ministry sought to operate fewer facilities:

- Vancouver, 2484 Renfrew Street (November 2013)
- Nanaimo, 60 Needham Street (November 2013)

- Vancouver, 201–475 East Broadway (May 2014)
- Vancouver, 2280 Kingsway (September 2014)
- Burnaby, 101–3705 Willingdon Avenue (contact centre; September 2014)
- Surrey, 101–10095 Whalley Boulevard (September 2014)

The ministry told us that there were no reductions in staff numbers as a result of these closures.

The ministry anticipated that over time its community presence would increasingly be through partnerships, particularly with Service BC.<sup>14</sup> Service BC provides front-line support for provincial government programs and services and operates under the umbrella of the Ministry of Citizens' Services. Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction staff told us that the ministry has a verbal contract with Service BC relating to Service BC's role in supporting the centralized telephone line, but that there is no written agreement in place. Ministry staff also told us that the verbal agreement with Service BC regarding telephone services is in the process of being incorporated into a broader written contract that will govern the provision of all services provided to the ministry by Service BC.<sup>15</sup>

By October 2014, the ministry had completed its shift to a centralized telephone system.

<sup>13</sup> Senior Manager, Stakeholder Relations & Engagement, Ministry of Social Development and Social Innovation, email to Staff Lawyer, BC Public Interest Advocacy Centre (PIAC), 31 March 2015.

<sup>14</sup> Ministry of Social Development and Social Innovation, "Channel Strategy Proposal," presentation to the Ministry of Social Development and Social Innovation's Oversight Committee for the Service Delivery Division, June 2013, 3.

<sup>15</sup> Director, Analytics, Business Intelligence & Contracts, Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction, email to Officer, Ombudsperson Office, 9 January 2018, 1.

There are now five ministry contact centres across the province, located in Victoria, Surrey, Chilliwack, Kamloops and Prince George. Unlike previously, when the centres received calls from clients within their region, contact centres now answer calls from a single centralized queue made up of callers from across the province. The centres effectively operate as a single provincial contact centre receiving calls from the same centralized telephone line. Calls are accepted from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Ministry staff told us that the centralized approach provides for greater consistency in service and offers a greater degree of flexibility. The ministry also acknowledged that people often encounter long wait times when they call the provincial contact centre, and that delays in answering calls results in people abandoning calls and in reduced service levels.

***A service request is any request for service which is still outstanding. Service requests can originate from phone calls where an issue was not resolved, as will be illustrated later, or from a fax, mail or any other point of contact. Service requests are placed in the ministry's provincial queue and fulfilled based on the ministry's assessment of their priority.***

## Problems with the Centralized Line

In May 2014, when the ministry's telephone pilot project was underway, the Auditor General of British Columbia issued the report *Disability Assistance: An Audit of the Program Access, Integrity and Results*. The report considered the provision of services through the ministry's toll-free telephone service. Among its findings were the following:

The ministry's toll-free telephone service is inconsistent and sometimes results in excessive wait times and dropped calls for clients. Because many clients do not own phones (or they use phones with limited minutes), long wait times can be particularly difficult. We were told that clients sometimes receive incorrect information regarding what they may be eligible for when calling the toll-free service.

We recommend that the Ministry of Social Development and Social Innovation develop and implement additional strategies to ensure that timely, accurate and consistent services are provided through the toll-free telephone service.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Office of the Auditor General of British Columbia, *Disability Assistance: An Audit of Program Access, Integrity and Results*, May 2014, The Accessibility of the Program, 23.

Despite the Auditor General's findings, when the centralized telephone line began operating province-wide, the time callers spent waiting to speak to an EAW (referred to as "average speed of answer" or "call wait time") continued to increase. The call wait time reached its peak in January 2016, where on average a caller would wait about an hour and a half to speak to an EAW.<sup>17</sup>

The ministry has concluded that there is a direct correlation between call wait times and call abandonment rate. The abandonment rate represents the percentage of calls that callers abandon before connecting with a ministry representative. The ministry has concluded that when wait times go down, the call abandonment rate goes down too. For example, in 2015 the annual average speed of answer was about one hour, and the average call abandonment rate was 25 percent, meaning one in four callers eventually hung up rather than waiting for an EAW to answer the call. In 2016, the annual average speed of answer was about 43 minutes, and the average call abandonment rate was 20 percent or one in every five callers.<sup>18</sup> The ministry has concluded that the lower call abandonment rate in 2016 was attributable, at least in part, to the fact that, following the peak in January, overall call wait times were shorter in 2016 than in 2015.

We also heard from the ministry that long call wait times can result in increased walk-in traffic at local offices, resulting in longer wait times for receiving in-person services. Although the ministry acknowledges that long call wait times increase traffic to local offices, it does not track wait times for in-person services. Moreover, for many people receiving ministry services, attending a local office is not an option. In some cases, the nearest ministry office is too far away to attend. Other people may not have

the financial resources to attend an office or may have barriers that restrict their access, such as a physical or mental disability.

Both people who receive ministry services and advocacy agencies have been complaining to the ministry and to our office about the long call wait times. We heard from ministry staff that they too are concerned about the wait times. Below, we review contact centre and wait time statistical data provided by the ministry. Later, we review the steps that the ministry has taken to reduce call wait times, and the challenges that remain.

## Wait Time Statistics

As of February 2017, the ministry reported receiving approximately 125,000 calls each month, or approximately 1.5 million calls every year. An average of 77,000 callers per month chose to speak to a ministry employee.

In a presentation to the Oversight Committee in February 2017, ministry staff indicated that the goal was an average speed of answer of 30 minutes, but that the annual average for 2016 was 43 minutes and 33 seconds and the goal was met only 4 percent of the time. Ministry staff noted that this represented "great progress" but that there was still a need to pay attention to the impacts of the strategies deployed to reduce wait times.<sup>19</sup>

Although the ministry's data provided an important source of information for understanding how long people are waiting on hold, the data alone does not tell the whole story. The ministry has implemented a number of strategies to try to reduce call wait times, some of which come at a cost to the quality of service that the ministry provides in order to expedite calls. These strategies are discussed at length later in this report.

<sup>17</sup> See Figure 5, Average Speed of Answer, Monthly, April 2012-December 2017.

<sup>18</sup> Service Delivery Division, "Contact Centre Optimization", presentation to the Ministry of Social Development and Social Innovation's Oversight Committee for the Service Delivery Division, 16 February 2017, 3.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

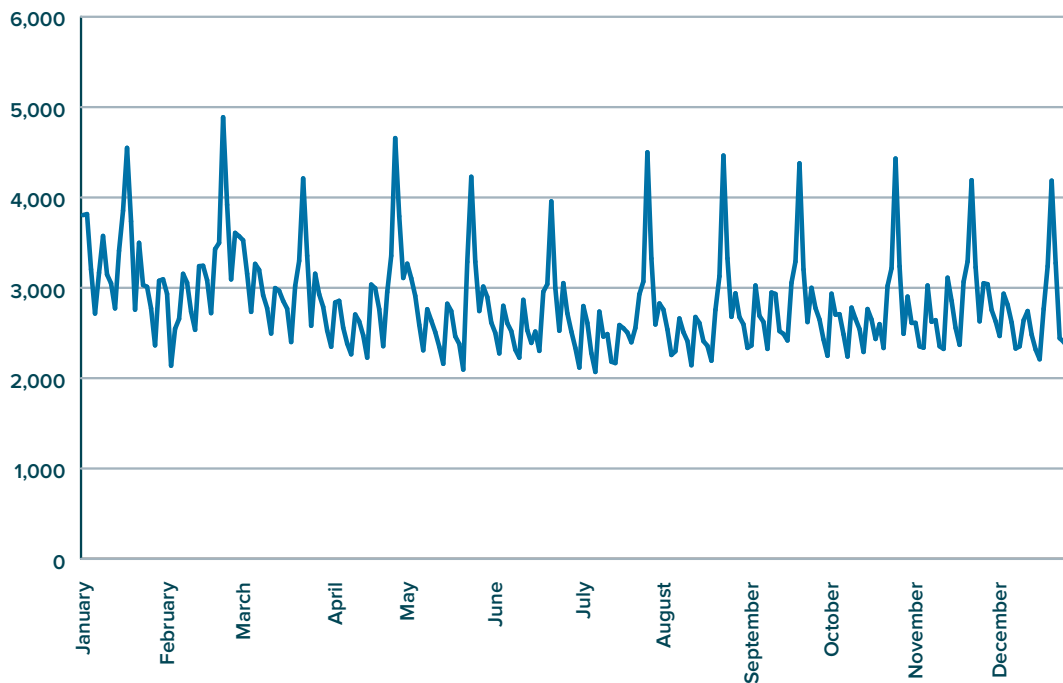
## The Ministry's Service Delivery Model

The ministry provided us with executive daily reports from December 30, 2016, to November 21, 2017. These reports are intended to assist the ministry executive in understanding the status and length of the call wait times. Each report contains basic information about the previous day, including:

- number of calls handled
- number of agents working
- average call wait times
- shortest wait time
- longest wait time

We reviewed the data provided by the ministry and plotted it on graphs. We confirmed a number of trends that the ministry, advocates and complainants described. The ministry issues payment of income and disability assistance once a month. The day assistance is issued is commonly referred to as “cheque-issue day.” It is apparent that cheque-issue days are the ministry’s highest call-volume days. The statistics showed a consistent trend with respect to call volume throughout the course of the year, as shown in Figure 2.

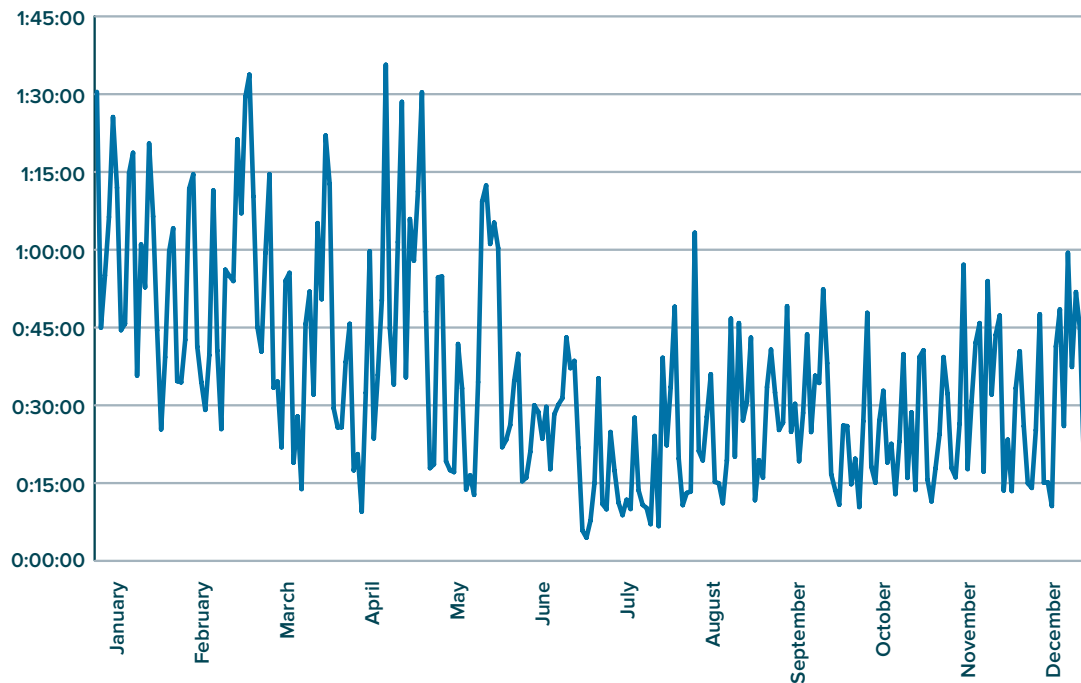
**Figure 2: Call Volume, 2017**



While the volume of calls showed a consistent pattern, the average daily wait time showed a different trend. Generally speaking, wait times went down over the course of 2017, although call wait times remained volatile depending on the day.

As shown in Figure 3, at the beginning 2017 callers waited up to an average of nearly an hour and a half on some days, and around half an hour on others. In the second half of the year, the ministry implemented a new mitigation strategy and a reduction in call wait times followed.

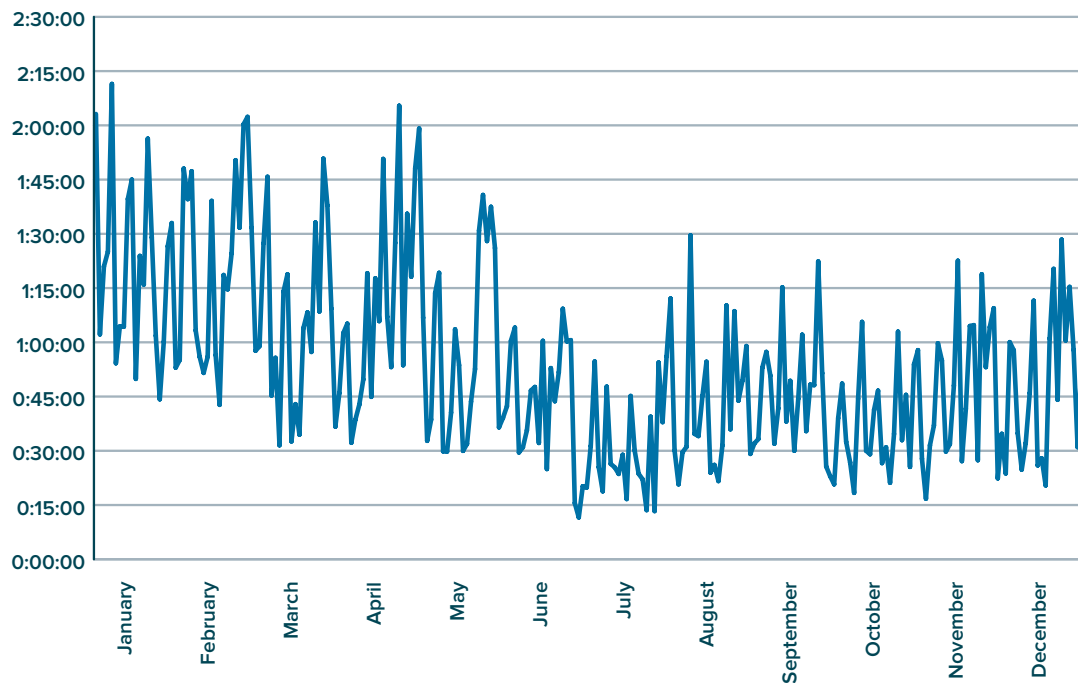
**Figure 3: Average Speed of Answer, Daily, 2017**



Throughout the year, though, call wait times fluctuated widely. Depending on the day, the average speed of answer could be less than fifteen minutes to speak with a ministry representative, while on other days, the average speed of answer was close to an hour.

However, wait times for individual calls were sometimes considerably longer. Figure 4 shows the longest call wait times for each day.

**Figure 4: Longest Wait Time, Daily, 2017**

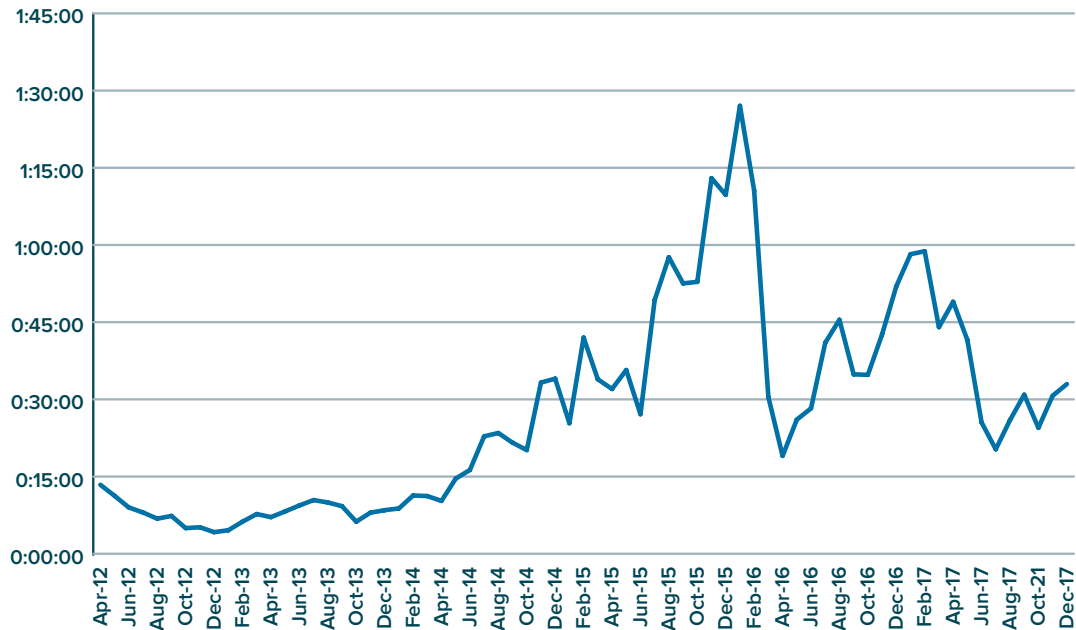


As Figure 4 shows, the longest individual wait times at the beginning of 2017 were well over two hours. By November 2017, the longest waits hovered around the one-hour mark, but could be as low as fifteen minutes, depending on the day of the call.

We sought to determine average wait times on a monthly basis in order to better determine the overall trend. The ministry was able to confirm average monthly wait times dating back to April 2012. The data included statistics from before the creation of the centralized telephone line.

Before the creation of the centralized model, the average speed of answer was regularly under 10 minutes. Figure 5 shows that average speed of answer increased when the ministry moved to the centralized model. At its peak, in January 2016, the average speed of answer was 1:27:02.

**Figure 5: Average Speed of Answer, Monthly, April 2012–December 2017**



### Staffing

Ministry staff told us that as of September 2017, about 170 EAWs were working in the contact centres. A full complement of EAWs in the contact centres is about 180 full-time employees. We heard from the ministry that staff retention in the contact centres is a challenge, as a position in a contact centre is generally understood to be an entry-level position in the BC Public Service. The attrition rate for contact centre EAWs is about two to three EAWs per month.

The ministry bulk-hires EAWs for the contact centres several times per year, hiring up to 25 full-time employees each round, and new EAWs complete a 12-week training process.

The ministry told us that the training period is intensive, and that it continues to support the development of its EAWs through call coaching and other resources. Management for the contact centre noted in a February 2017 presentation to the oversight committee that the learning curve for an EAW in the contact centres is roughly two years.<sup>20</sup>

At the time of this report, over 75 percent of the EAWs working in the contact centres have less than two years' experience and thus are relatively new to the role. The ministry previously stated that to provide an "ideal" level of service, no more than 30 percent of EAWs should be new staff.<sup>21</sup>

In February 2017, the director of the provincial contact centre reported to the Oversight Committee that the contact centres required a baseline of 213 full-time EAWs to achieve an average call wait time of 30 minutes. These numbers were arrived at through the use of the ministry's workforce management software. At the time, the ministry had 173 active EAWs; reducing the average call wait time to 30 minutes would require 40 more EAWs.

The director of the provincial contact centre told us that the actual goal is a 10-minute call wait time, but that, given the current staffing capacity and call volume at the contact centres, 10 minutes has never been, in her opinion, a realistic objective.

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<sup>20</sup> Service Delivery Division, "Contact Centre Optimization," presentation to the Ministry of Social Development and Social Innovation's Oversight Committee for the Service Delivery Division, 16 February 2017, 7.

<sup>21</sup> Director, Virtual Services, Service Delivery Division, Ministry of Social Development and Social Innovation, email to Executive Director, Virtual Services, Service Delivery Division, Ministry of Social Development and Social Innovation, 10 June 2016.



# MITIGATION STRATEGIES

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The ministry representatives that we spoke with during our investigation acknowledged that call wait times at the contact centres were often too long, and that the ministry has adopted a number of mitigation strategies to try to reduce call wait times. These strategies have evolved over time, as some proved more effective than others. Below, we describe the strategies that the ministry has used to shorten call wait times.

## Expansion of Call Centre Hours

As described above, call wait times peaked in early 2016, with wait time averages of well over an hour. In response, in March 2016, the ministry expanded the staffed hours at the contact centres by adding a 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. shift for EAWs, in addition to the core shift of 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. The hours of operation of the contact centres for receiving incoming calls remained unchanged (9 a.m. to 4 p.m.).

Ministry staff told us that the later shift was introduced in response to the wait time callers were experiencing. The later shift enabled the ministry to respond to all callers in the phone queue each day, so that no callers were left waiting overnight. Ministry staff told us that before this shift was introduced, there could be hundreds of people on hold or awaiting a return call (people who contact the centralized telephone line can opt to receive a return call rather than waiting on hold) at the end of the day. Because all of the EAWs finished their shifts at 4:30 p.m., the ministry could not respond to all of the callers on the day they called. As a result, there would be a number of people awaiting return calls already in the queue at the start of each day, meaning that each day began with a long call wait time. Ministry staff told us that the introduction of the 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. shift solved this problem, because it allowed EAWs to respond to all of the day's callers by the end of the day.

## Tier 1 (Call Sweeping)

The ministry classifies the services delivered by contact centres in three tiers:

- Tier 1 – inquiries that have no complexity and can be completed on the call, usually in less than five minutes.
- Tier 2 – matters of low to medium complexity, generally related to requests for service that can be completed on the call, usually in less than 15 minutes. Tier 2 matters generally require the EAW to make a determination about the caller's eligibility for the service sought.
- Tier 3 – matters that are complex or highly complex, and generally require more than 15 minutes to complete. These matters may go to a specialized work team or require multiple layers of approval. They may also raise rare or unique issues requiring subject matter expertise or relating to multiple program areas. Generally, this work is not completed on the first call.

EAWs who work in the contact centres, and all other point-of-contact staff, rely on a tool that the ministry calls "the matrix." The matrix dictates whether any given service request is classified as Tier 1, 2 or 3.

The matrix also guides EAWs to the information, resources and steps that are necessary to complete a service request. It details the information an EAW needs to create the service request, the priority level (including whether the request is to be completed on the call) and the due date. If a service request is not completed on the first call, it is moved to the provincial queue for service requests awaiting completion. The provincial queue is discussed in more detail later.

One of the strategies that the ministry uses to reduce call wait times is what is referred to as a “call sweeping” or “Tier 1 strategy.” The ministry uses the Tier 1 strategy when call wait times hover around 50 minutes for a period of time. The decision to implement Tier 1 mode is made by ministry management at the contact centres. When the contact centres are operating in Tier 1 mode, the EAWs answering the calls are instructed not to complete service requests for callers. EAWs will continue to assist callers with simple, Tier 1 inquiries that can generally be addressed in under five minutes. If a person is calling regarding a Tier 2 or Tier 3 matter, EAWs take enough information to build a service request, which goes into the ministry’s provincial queue to be completed later. The exception, ministry staff told us, is for crisis situations. Ministry staff told us that, except for requests for service from individuals who are fleeing abuse, determining what constitutes a crisis is within the discretion of the EAW.

When the ministry is operating in Tier 1 mode, callers may wait on the phone for a long time for assistance with a matter of low complexity and then not receive service when their call is answered. Instead, their information is recorded and a different worker completes the request at a later time. As a matter of practice, the ministry does not inform callers that it is operating in Tier 1, so callers do not know why

the worker they are speaking with will not complete their request.

The Tier 1 strategy reduces call wait times primarily by reducing the average amount of time that EAWs spend speaking with callers. It takes EAWs less time to simply record information to create service requests than it does for them to complete the request and, if appropriate, deliver the service.

In early 2016, contact centre wait times peaked. At that time, the ministry began using its Tier 1 strategy more frequently in an effort to reduce the wait times. Initially, this strategy proved effective in reducing call wait times. The director of the provincial contact centre described the ministry’s success in an email to staff dated March 4, 2016:

Across our contact centres your efforts to bring down wait times have been highly successful. Thank you for your flexibility transitioning temporarily to Tier 1 calls and for your quick adjustment back to our “normal” processes. Over the course of the last month wait times have been **reduced by more than half**. Where we were once up to almost a 2 hour wait, we are currently down to approximately a 45 minute wait. You accomplished that while continuing to manage a consistent call volume that averages approximately 35,000 calls per week!<sup>22</sup>

An example of the ministry’s practice with respect to call handling time can be found in an email from a Manager of Service Delivery to the Provincial Contact Centre Leadership Team on January 3, 2017:

Hi all, please remind staff that when we are in Tier 1 it is in response to pressures of call volumes and wait times. Currently the AHT [Average Handling Time] is 9.5 minutes, which is higher than we would anticipate in Tier 1. We recognize sufficient information has to be gathered to create an SR [Service Request] that is ready for action, however, to ensure clients calls are answered same day, i.e. before 6 pm, the handle time needs to be monitored.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Director, Virtual Services, Service Delivery Division, Ministry of Social Development and Social Innovation, email to all contact centre staff, 4 March 2016.

<sup>23</sup> Manager, Service Delivery Division, Ministry of Social Development and Social Innovation, email to Provincial Contact Centre staff, 3 January 2017.

The ministry was still relying on its Tier 1 strategy in the spring and summer of 2016. The assistant deputy minister reflected on the success of the Tier 1 strategy in an email to staff on May 29, 2017:

In early 2016 our monthly average phone wait time was over one hour. By March 2016 we reduced our monthly average phone wait times to below one hour and held steady at under an hour since then. On non-EDO [earned day off] days we average a 30 minute wait time except for cheque issue week. We continue to make slow but steady progress improving our contact centre wait times.<sup>24</sup>

In July 2016, the ministry adopted a strategy of moving to Tier 1 at 4 p.m. if there were more calls in the queue than could be answered by 6 p.m. The goal of this strategy was to ensure that no callers were left waiting overnight or over the weekend for a response to their call.<sup>25</sup> However, it also meant that people who contacted the ministry later in the day did not receive full service when they connected with an EAW.

Although the ministry's implementation of the Tier 1 strategy initially appeared to reduce contact centre wait times, it caused a number of problems. First, the use of the Tier 1 strategy naturally resulted in contact centre staff closing fewer service requests. That meant that service requests were sent to the provincial queue to await completion. In turn, this increased the number of overdue service requests. Callers became more frustrated, resulting in increased complaints

and duplicate calls to the contact centres. Duplicate calls translated to increased call volume and a corresponding increase in call wait times. Staff engagement decreased as contact centre EAWs stopped making eligibility decisions about service requests and instead only provided or recorded information.

The director of the provincial contact centre identified and described these issues in a February 2017 presentation to the Oversight Committee, in which she stated the following:

Although reducing wait times is important, Tier 1 Services should be implemented in exceptional circumstances (10-20% max)

Since Dec 1st we've been in Tier 1  
46 out of 50 work days available =  
averaging 7 hours a day when in Tier 1  
Prov queue impacts =

- CC [contact centre] staff close 25% less SR's [service requests] when in Tier 1
- Approx 500 fewer SR's closed when in Tier 1 = 11 weeks x 500 per week average = 5500 SR's growth in prov queue over 11 weeks

Frustration = increased complaints reported among LOS [local office staff] and CC supervisors and staff –

Engagement = 61% new staff not applying EAW skill set - 111 New EAW hires since Dec 2015 (approx 105 remaining)<sup>26</sup>

The February 2017 report to the Oversight Committee included a graphic, shown in Figure 6, to illustrate the problems that the Tier 1 strategy causes.<sup>27</sup> (See next page.)

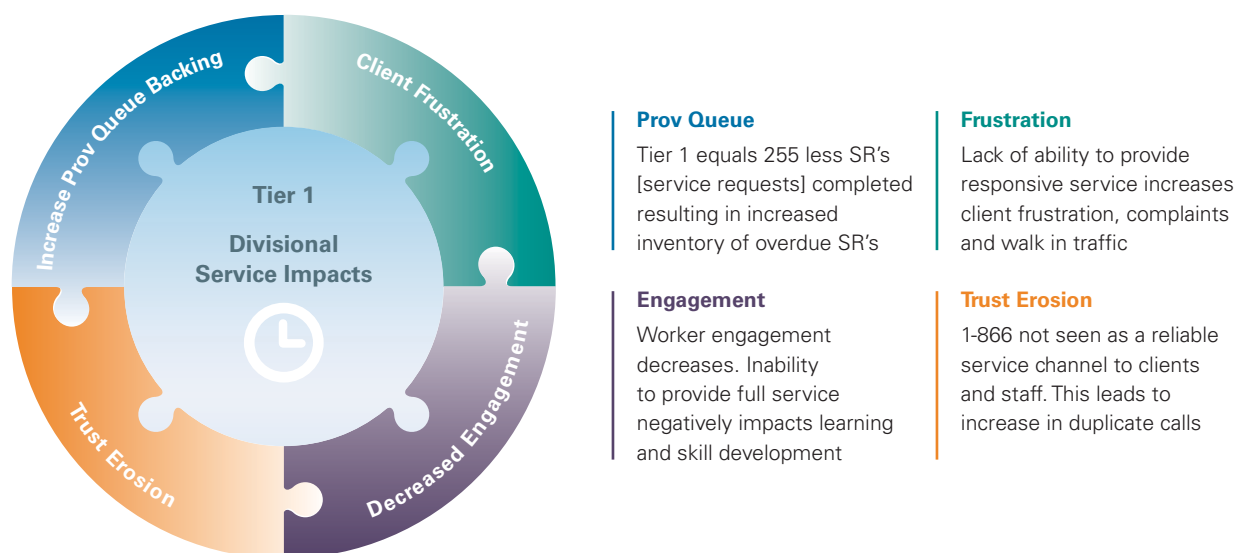
<sup>24</sup> Assistant Deputy Minister, Service Delivery Division, Ministry of Social Development and Social Innovation, email to all Service Delivery Division staff, 29 May 2017.

<sup>25</sup> Telephony Management Team, Ministry of Social Development and Social Innovation, email to SDSI Contact Centre Supervisors Community of Practice, Ministry of Social Development and Social Innovation, 12 July 2016.

<sup>26</sup> Service Delivery Division, "Contact Centre Optimization," presentation to the Ministry of Social Development and Social Innovation's Oversight Committee for the Service Delivery Division, 16 February 2017, 5.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

**Figure 6: Tier 1 Service Impacts**



As noted above, in early 2017 the ministry was relying heavily on the Tier 1 strategy to bring down call wait times. Beginning December 1, 2016, it had used the Tier 1 strategy in 46 of 50 days, averaging about seven hours per day in Tier 1.

Given the drawbacks of the Tier 1 strategy, the ministry developed other strategies to try to reduce call wait times and avoid using the Tier 1 strategy. However, at the time of writing this report, the ministry continues to regularly rely on the Tier 1 strategy on Mondays, some Fridays, and cheque-issue days. It may also move to the Tier 1 strategy during, for example, peak staff vacation times, or when call volumes rise as a result of changes to legislation or during the bus pass renewal period.

## Provincial Queue and Overdue Service Requests

Prior to the ministry centralizing telephone services, EAWs generally worked on service requests for the particular community that they served. Now, consistent with the ministry's standardized, centralized approach to service delivery, EAWs work on service requests from people across the province. Work is assigned based on service request type, meaning that

EAWs work on service requests belonging to a particular category, rather than from people from their own region. Depending on complexity and urgency, service requests are either completed when they are first made or assigned to the provincial queue for resolution in order of priority:<sup>28</sup>

**Table 2: Priority of Service Requests**

Order of Priority	Completion of Service Requests
Urgent	Same day/within 24 business hours
High	Two business days
Standard	Five business days

As described above, contact centre EAWs are directed to stop completing service requests when call wait times hover around 50 minutes. This results in contact centre EAWs sending more service requests to the provincial queue for completion. Generally, a service request that is sent to the provincial queue is not completed by the EAW who created the request.

One of the consequences of the Tier 1 approach is an increase in service requests waiting in the provincial queue to be actioned. Depending on

<sup>28</sup> Ministry of Social Development and Social Innovation, "Provincial Matrix," presentation, June 2015, 18.

volume, this can result in an increase in service requests that are not completed in accordance with the ministry's service timelines. In order to address these issues, in July 2016 the ministry implemented a "first call resolution" strategy for overdue service requests. Under this approach, people calling to inquire about overdue Tier 1 or 2 service requests have their request completed on the call.

Before this strategy was implemented, contact centre EAWs were not permitted to complete overdue service requests when people called. Instead, EAWs were directed to inform callers that their request was in the queue and would be dealt with as soon as possible. The ministry's rationale for declining to complete overdue service requests when people called was based on concerns that completing those requests would increase call handle time, resulting in longer call wait times. The ministry acknowledged that this approach "... led to increased frustration among clients and workers alike as they were not able to provide fulsome service."<sup>29</sup> The ministry also noticed



that as the backlog of overdue service requests increased, so did the number of duplicate calls to the contact centres. For example, in August 2016, around 60 percent of the calls to the contact centres were duplicate callers.<sup>30</sup>

Accordingly, the ministry used the "first call resolution" strategy of completing overdue service requests when a person calls, in an effort to reduce the volume of overdue service requests and the number of frustrated callers making repeat calls and attending local offices about their request. The ministry determined that this strategy was resulting in increased job satisfaction for EAWs and improved service. The ministry continues to use this strategy at the time of writing this report.

## Service Delivery Optimization Project

In March 2017, the ministry initiated the Service Delivery Optimization project, aimed at moving away from the Tier 1 strategy and focusing on first call resolution. This meant a return to the ministry's model of attempting to resolve a caller's most immediate need on the call through completion of a service request. For callers with multiple issues, the most urgent need is addressed and individual service requests are created for the balance of the issues and moved to the provincial queue to await completion.<sup>31</sup>

By focusing on "first call resolution," the ministry is trying to reduce repeat calls to the contact centres and reduce walk-in traffic to offices.

In order to achieve the ministry's goal of completing service requests when people first call, the contact centres required more EAWs to answer calls to the centralized telephone line. To address this issue, the ministry

<sup>29</sup> Ministry of Social Development and Social Innovation, *Analysis of PCC Service Delivery Refinement Ministry of Social Development and Social Innovation Fiscal 2016/2017*, 15 November 2016, 3.

<sup>30</sup> Ministry of Social Development and Social Innovation, *Analysis of PCC Service Delivery Refinement Ministry of Social Development and Social Innovation Fiscal 2016/2017*, 15 November 2016, 9.

<sup>31</sup> Ministry of Social Development and Social Innovation, "CC Multiple Requests," procedure, 18 March 2015, 1.



decided to route some of the calls from the centralized telephone line to local ministry offices around the province.

In the summer of 2017, the ministry began training local office EAWs to answer calls to the centralized telephone line. Initially, around 38 EAWs were trained to answer calls. The ministry has since trained over 100 local office EAWs to tie in to the contact centres and provide additional staffing for its telephone service delivery. Ministry staff told us that on average, the ministry uses the equivalent of about seven full-time local office EAWs to support the contact centres. It uses software to predict when the contact centres will require the additional staffing, and to what extent. The ministry is also monitoring the impact of this approach on the provincial queue for service requests.

The Service Delivery Optimization project has created an additional demand on local offices by allocating EAWs to assist the contact centres. We asked the ministry about the impact of using local office EAWs to answer calls to the centralized line on in-person service delivery and wait times. We were told that there is no impact on in-person wait times because EAWs who are working the front counter are not reassigned to answer calls. Rather, the ministry said that it relies on EAWs who are doing back office work, such as working on service requests, to staff the centralized telephone line. The director of local office services explained that the tasks that EAWs fulfill in a local office are fluid; there are no policies or guidelines regarding staff allocation. It is within the discretion of the supervisor of each office to determine how EAWs are best allocated, and some EAWs move fluidly between the front and back office depending on need.

The ministry does not have service standards for in-person wait times, does not have a provincial system to monitor in-person wait times, and does not measure whether

tying local office EAWs into the centralized telephone line impacts in-person wait times. Due to the dearth of information, the ministry's claim that there is no impact on in-person wait times at local offices is unsupported by any evidence. Given the nature and fluidity of the EAWs' roles it is certainly possible that there is an impact, even when it is only back office staff that are asked to assist the contact centres. When they are taking calls, they necessarily cannot fulfil local office service requests, or move to the front counter in times of need. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that the contact centre duties are an additional task for local offices. Unless the offices were working well below capacity, this additional function must impact local service delivery and likely adversely affects in-person wait times.

## Advocate Line

In March 2015, the ministry introduced a pilot project for handling calls from disability and anti-poverty advocacy agencies who represent people in relation to the provision of ministry services. The project also included social workers, medical clinics, health authorities, and outreach workers at shelters. It was implemented in response to feedback from advocacy agencies regarding their need to address issues from multiple people when they call the contact centres.

Under the pilot project, advocates who had multiple cases to discuss called the centralized telephone line, identified themselves as advocates, and requested a return call from the Advocate Client Enquiries (ACE) team. In January 2016, the project was expanded to include calls from advocates with single cases. The team also manages inquiries from the Public Guardian and Trustee of British Columbia.

In November 2016, the ministry implemented the option for advocates to email the ACE team to request a return call.

## Telephone System Improvements

In 2016, the ministry introduced a number of features to its telephone system in an effort to improve its performance and service. These features:

- informed callers of the real wait time they can expect if they opt to speak to a ministry worker (previously, only approximate wait times were announced);
- allowed callers to enter a call-back number, including call-back numbers with an extension;
- reduced duplicate requests from callers awaiting a return call; and
- accepted calls from outside of British Columbia, and from most Voice Over Internet Protocols, such as Skype.

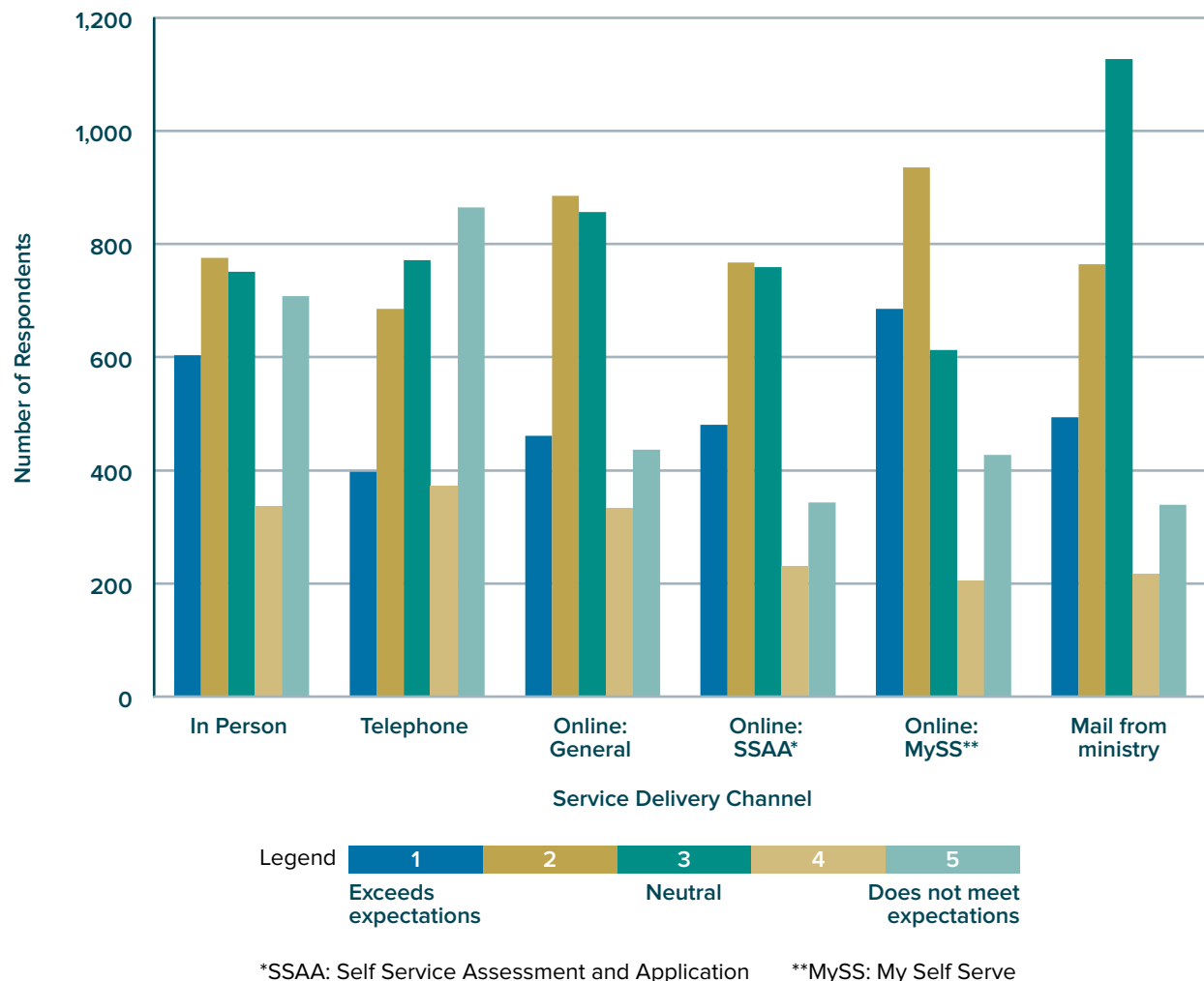
The ministry also uses workforce management software to assist it in predicting and responding to contact centre and workload demands. The software enables the ministry to forecast high-volume call periods and adjust staffing schedules and staff allocation accordingly. It provides information regarding how, for example, a high number of a certain kind of service requests awaiting completion in the provincial queue can result in increased call volume; in those cases, the ministry will direct staff to complete the service requests as a way of keeping call volume down.

# IMPACTS OF THE CONTACT CENTRE SERVICE DELIVERY MODEL

The ministry conducted a service satisfaction survey between February 22, 2016, and April 8, 2016. The purpose of the survey was to measure service-recipient satisfaction by service channel. The ministry received 3,342 responses from its client base of roughly

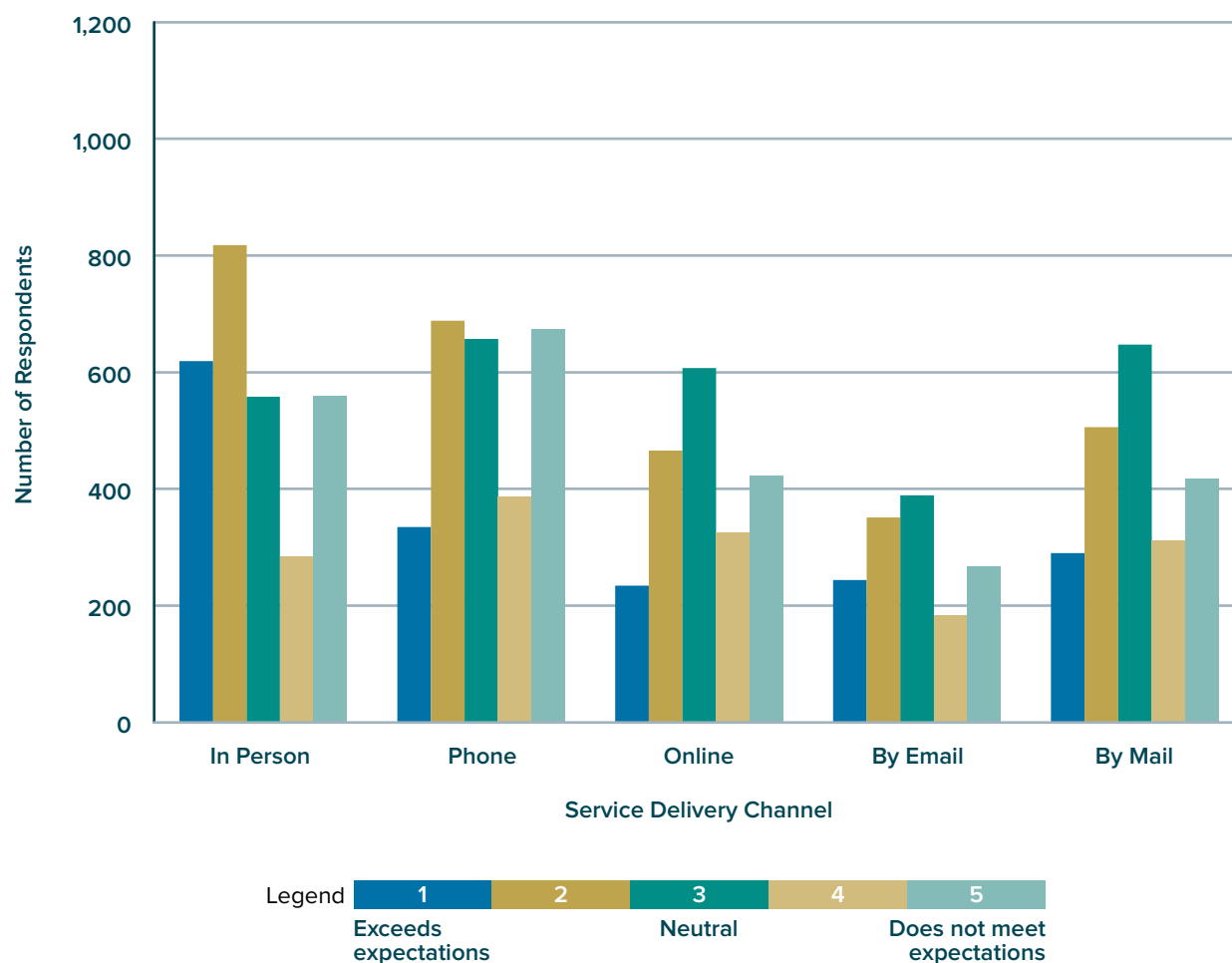
140,000, asking respondents to rate their level of satisfaction from 1 (exceeds expectations) to 5 (did not meet expectations). As shown in Figure 7, the service channel with the most respondents with a satisfaction rating of 4 or 5 is telephone followed by in person.

**Figure 7: Satisfaction Scores by Channel, 2016<sup>32</sup>**



<sup>32</sup> Ministry of Social Development and Social Innovation, *2016 Service Satisfaction Survey Summary Report*, October 2016, 12. <<https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/british-columbians-our-governments/organizational-structure/ministries-organizations/social-development-poverty-reduction/2016-servicesatisfaction-summaryreport.pdf>>



**Figure 8: Satisfaction Scores by Channel, 2014**<sup>33</sup>

Compared with 2014 survey results, the average satisfaction for online and mail services had increased in 2016, while satisfaction with telephone and in-person service delivery had decreased (the lower the number, the higher the level of satisfaction).

**Table 3: Average Satisfaction Scores by Channel 2014 vs 2016**<sup>34</sup>

Years	2014	2.77	3.14	3.11	-	-	2.92	3.03
	2016	2.93	3.2	2.8	2.69	2.56	-	2.71
		In person	Phone	Online	SSAA	MySS	By email	By mail
	Channel							

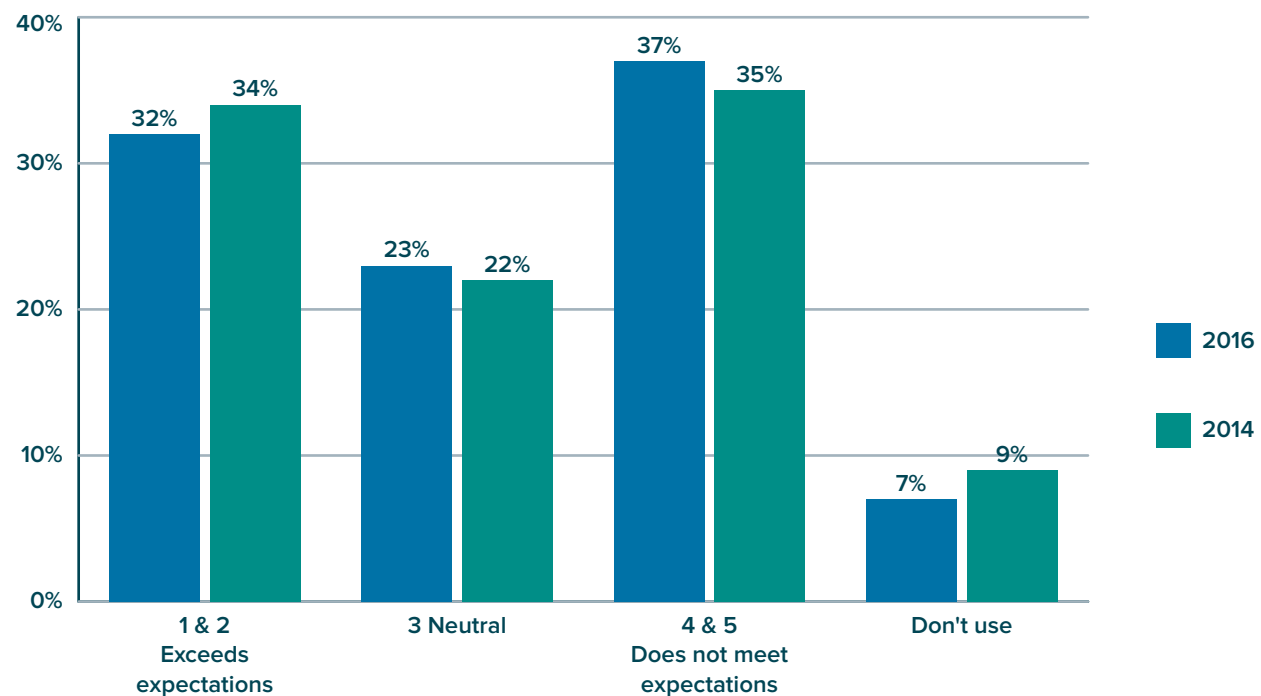
<sup>33</sup> Ministry of Social Development and Social Innovation, *2014 Service Satisfaction Survey Summary Report*, October 2014, 7. <<https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/british-columbians-our-governments/organizational-structure/ministries-organizations/social-development-poverty-reduction/2014-service-satisfaction-summary.pdf>>

<sup>34</sup> Ministry of Social Development and Social Innovation, *2014 Service Satisfaction Survey Summary Report*, October 2014, 7 and Ministry of Social Development and Social Innovation, *2016 Service Satisfaction Survey Summary Report*, October 2016, 12.

## Impacts of the Contact Centre Service Delivery Model

The ministry also published a graph illustrating the feedback received regarding telephone service (see Figure 9).

**Figure 9: Satisfaction with Telephone Services, 2016<sup>35</sup>**



<sup>35</sup> Ministry of Social Development and Social Innovation, *2016 Service Satisfaction Survey Summary Report*, October 2016, 18. <<https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/british-columbians-our-governments/organizational-structure/ministries-organizations/social-development-poverty-reduction/2016-servicesatisfaction-summaryreport.pdf>>

With respect to its telephone services, the ministry reported the following survey results:

Clients expressed that they have experienced long wait times for ministry services using the telephone service channel. They emphasized the ministry should consider increasing the number of staff answering the phone to help reduce the wait times. Clients reported:

- being cut off at times, receive varying responses,
- feeling rushed, and
- some indicated they have difficulty articulating their needs over the phone.

Along with improving wait times, clients would like a quicker return call when using the call back feature . . .<sup>36</sup>

With respect to in-person service delivery, the ministry reported the following survey results:

Clients expressed that they have experienced long wait times for ministry services when using our face-to-face channel. Further, a common concern expressed was around office accessibility (office closures, hours of service and physical layout) and the need for privacy while accessing ministry services. . . . Feedback emphasized the current service delivery model should be improved for our PWD clients in particular; suggestions included separating PWD from IA clients and delivering service through either a caseload model or a designated worker for those who need it and also simplifying the application process.<sup>37</sup>



<sup>36</sup> Ministry of Social Development and Social Innovation, *2016 Service Satisfaction Survey Summary Report*, July 2016, 20.

<sup>37</sup> Ministry of Social Development and Social Innovation, *2016 Service Satisfaction Survey Summary Report*, July 2016.

# PUBLIC COMPLAINTS

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Our office received numerous complaints about access to ministry services following its move to a centralized service delivery model in 2014. The complaints varied in nature and included issues such as:

- waiting on hold for long periods of time when calling the centralized telephone line
- disconnected and dropped calls
- selecting the call-back option but not receiving a return call
- waiting on hold for a long time and then not receiving service once the call is answered
- feeling rushed to complete calls

For some income assistance recipients, and especially for those living in rural areas, the telephone is the only option for accessing ministry services. Some people do not own or have access to a computer or are not computer literate. Those in rural areas may not have access to a local office. Accordingly, when the ministry does not deliver services effectively via the telephone, the result may be some people being unable to receive any service at all.

The complaints to our office illustrate the struggles and challenges that people can face in accessing basic services. When people contact our office, we are often able to connect them with ministry supervisors or managers to resolve their concerns. We also conduct investigations into urgent complaints about lack of access to or denial of ministry services when people are out of food, are homeless or are facing eviction. We are often able to resolve these issues quickly, in part because of our direct access to ministry staff.

However, not everyone is aware that our office can assist them. Given the volume of calls the ministry receives, there are undoubtedly many individuals in crisis with problems that are not

addressed in a timely manner. The high rate of individuals who abandon their calls to the ministry instead of remaining on hold suggests that this may be so.

Below, we describe some of the complaints that our office has received about the ministry's centralized telephone system; we also describe problems faced by the clients of advocates in accessing ministry services.

## Waiting on Hold

Many people who receive income assistance or disability assistance complain to us about waiting on hold for long periods of time. Further, the advocates we spoke with all identified long call wait times as a significant barrier to their clients' ability to access ministry services.

The advocates acknowledged that call wait times have generally grown shorter, but said there are still certain times when the wait to speak with ministry staff is unreasonably long. Complainants to our office and advocates alike indicated that call wait times are particularly long during the week when the ministry issues monthly assistance payments, generally known as "cheque-issue week." The advocates told us that call wait times also remain problematic on Mondays and Fridays. As the ministry is not open on weekends, wait times on Friday afternoons are particularly challenging for people who may have urgent matters that cannot wait until the next business day. Advocates told us that, although the need for accessible ministry services is likely the greatest during cheque-issue week and Fridays, these are the times when ministry services are the least accessible. Advocates told us they avoided contacting the ministry during these times whenever possible because of the long wait times.

The Office of the Ombudsperson has received a number of individual complaints from people who receive service from the ministry about the impacts of long call wait times. Here are some recent examples:

A woman who lived with her two children in a rural area in a camper contacted us in crisis. It was February and her camper's heater had broken down. She made a barrel wood stove to heat her home but she did not have enough wood for fuel. She turned to the ministry seeking a crisis grant to purchase the wood. She did not have a phone, so she made the 45-minute trip into town to the ministry office. When she got to the ministry office, she applied for the crisis grant in person and was given a \$60 crisis grant for food. She was told to call the contact centre about the status of the crisis grant to heat her trailer. She said she called and waited two and a half hours before she spoke with a ministry worker, only to be told the ministry was still processing her application. The next day, she drove back into town to use a pay phone to contact the ministry. She said she waited on the phone for two and a half hours again, only to learn that the ministry had denied her request. The following day she drove back to town and waited on hold for over an hour to try to seek a reconsideration of the decision. When her call was answered, she was told to go to the ministry office to get the reconsideration papers. She then contacted our office. A ministry supervisor told us that the ministry had made an error in its assessment of the woman's eligibility for the grant; as a result, the ministry provided the woman with the grant to purchase firewood.

A woman who did not receive her income assistance for the month complained that she waited for two and a half hours on the phone to try to find out why, before she finally abandoned the call. She said that she called the ministry again the next day and waited an hour and a half before abandoning the call. She said she was worried that she would not have enough food to make it through the weekend.

A man with mental health challenges was receiving disability assistance from the ministry. The ministry was paying his rent directly to his landlord. The man told us that the ministry was overpaying his landlord, and, as a result, the amount of money he received from the ministry for support was incorrectly reduced. Because of the shortfall, he ran out of food and resorted to panhandling. He said he repeatedly called the ministry but was unable to get through. The day he came to us he said he had waited four hours on the phone and could not resolve the issue. The man did not have a phone of his own.

## No Phone

The ministry offers a "call-back" feature for people who contact its centralized line. Callers can select this option and receive a return call from the ministry in the order in which their call was received, rather than waiting on hold to speak with a worker. When this option is



selected, the ministry makes a single attempt to return an individual's call.

The advocates we spoke with indicated that some callers found the call-back feature useful, particularly as a method of avoiding using minutes on a prepaid phone or one with limited monthly minutes. However, the advocates were of the view that the call-back feature alone was not adequate to ensure accessible telephone service. If people miss the ministry's return call, they do not receive another, and they must make another call to try to connect. This is particularly challenging for people who do not have their own phone and must attempt to contact the ministry by using a pay phone, borrowing a phone or using a phone at a community resource.

For many people receiving income or disability assistance, the cost of owning a phone is prohibitive. As noted above, not having a phone makes it more difficult for people to access ministry services, particularly when people live far away from the nearest ministry office. Challenges with accessing ministry services are particularly acute for the most marginalized people, including those who are homeless and who have mental health issues.

People without phones often have to go to significant lengths to try to connect with the contact centres. As mentioned above, we have heard from people using pay phones, borrowing phones from friends, or using phones at ministry offices. In these circumstances, long wait times and disconnections can exacerbate the difficulties that they face in accessing services. If their issue is not resolved with the first phone call, the entire cycle begins again. Advocates echo these concerns and tell us that people who borrow a phone to make a call face a further

barrier because they are unlikely to be able to use the call-back feature.

The Office of the Ombudsperson has received a number of individual complaints concerning access to ministry services from people who do not own a phone. Here are some recent examples:

A man called our office using a stranger's phone because he had lost his disability benefits. He said that he had become homeless as a result, and had no money for food or shelter. He had called the ministry and was told he needed to reapply, but when he asked why his benefits had been stopped he was disconnected. We were able to determine that there had been a cheque waiting for the man at a ministry office, but because he did not have a phone, ministry staff were not able to notify him to pick up his cheque.

A man told us he had been trying to apply for income assistance for months, with no success. He was living in his car and had no phone. He had only sporadic access to a phone and could never get in touch with the worker in charge of his file. He resorted to begging for food and money. As a result of all of the missed connections, his application file was closed, and he had to start the application process again.

A man without a home phone, food, or money was told he could not receive assistance from the ministry until he provided a social insurance number and identification. He had tried to access service through a ministry office, but said he was turned away and told to call the contact centre. He called but was told that because he could not receive a return call, he needed to receive services through the ministry office. He told us he returned to the office but had to wait two weeks for an appointment.

A man complained to our office that he had been having problems with his request for financial assistance from the ministry for medical travel for some time. He lived in a remote area, and his only telephone access was at a nearby hotel. When the hotel burned down, he had no way of contacting the ministry and therefore could not access services.

## Disconnections, Abrupt Endings and Unreturned Calls

A common problem reported to us by people receiving services from the ministry is that after they have been waiting on hold for long periods of time, their calls are disconnected.

Callers are left with a stark choice: abandon their request or begin the long call waiting time over again. One advocate told us that she and her client each waited on hold for 90 minutes on separate occasions, and both were disconnected before they could speak with anyone. The ministry acknowledged that it has received complaints about disconnections, particularly in 2014/2015. Staff told us that the ministry has since acquired technology that allows it to trace calls (except anonymous calls) and determine why they were disconnected. Ministry staff said that generally the disconnections are not the result of its telephone service, but are usually attributable to either a poor cellular connection or human error, sometimes on the ministry's part in transferring calls.

Complainants also told us about ministry staff abruptly ending calls before their concerns were addressed, or promising a return call to address a concern but not following through. The ministry has assured us that it does not set limits on the length of time spent handling a call, or use call handling time as a performance measure for staff; however, the statistic is tracked. Also, the purpose of the Tier 1 strategy is to reduce the length of time that EAWs spend on each call, in order to reduce the overall call wait times. When the contact centres are not operating in Tier 1 mode, EAWs are still instructed to complete only a caller's most urgent service request and to send the balance to the queue. Accordingly, measures are in place at the contact centres to minimize the time that EAWs spend on handling individual calls.



## Public Complaints

Here are some examples of people's experiences:

One man told our office that he called the ministry for help in finding specific details of his previous residential addresses. The man was on disability assistance because of mental health issues and experienced confusion and upset when things did not go well for him. He waited an hour and a half on hold when he called the ministry. When he finally spoke with a worker, she told him she did not know how to look up the information he was requesting. He asked to speak to a supervisor but was then abruptly disconnected.

A man was laid off from his job and turned to the ministry for help. He called the ministry and was told he would get a return call within five days regarding his application for income assistance. No one called him back. He found part-time work but still could not pay his rent. He continued to call the ministry and used up all the minutes on his cell phone waiting on hold. He did not get through. He made a two-hour bus trip to the office, only to learn his file had been closed. He had little money for food and had received an eviction notice.

A woman came to us after she broke her tooth. She was in severe pain and believed the tooth was infected. She turned to the ministry for a supplement to have her tooth extracted, a benefit she was entitled to. She said she called the ministry and waited on hold for an hour and a half and then was disconnected.



## Service Quality Concerns

Beyond the issue of long wait times and disconnections, we have also received complaints about the quality of services provided once a person was able to speak with a ministry employee on the telephone.

For example, a woman told us that she called the ministry for information on disability benefits. She said the ministry employee she spoke with told her to go online for the form. When the woman explained that not everyone had online access, she said the ministry employee told her “that’s the way the world is going” and that she should educate herself. She said the ministry employee told her not to waste her time and hung up. The woman told us she was reduced to tears. She called back later that day and connected with someone else, with whom she had a better experience, and was able to obtain the information she required.

The advocates we spoke with told us that ministry staff sometimes provide them with inaccurate information. They explained that in speaking with two different workers, they may receive different or inconsistent information. Advocates told us that information received from workers about services and criteria used to determine eligibility is often inconsistent with the ministry’s own policies and legislation. The advocates spoke about the complexity of the legislation and the administrative framework, and speculated about whether high staff turnover may be the source of these service quality issues. One advocate estimated that it took about two years for an advocate working with the ministry to have a thorough understanding of income assistance legislation and administration, and thought this is also likely true for ministry staff.

The following is a recent example of an individual complaint to our office about the ministry providing inaccurate information:

A woman came to our office after she had not received her monthly benefits, because she had been on the same file as her partner, who no longer lived with her. She called the ministry and was told it would be faster for her to complete a new intake application than to change her current status as a dependant. Further, she was told that she would have to provide additional information regarding her designation as a person with persistent multiple barriers (PPMB). We investigated and spoke with a manager at the ministry who explained that the woman had been misinformed: she did not need to complete a new intake application, nor did she need to provide information on her PPMB designation. This misinformation delayed her access to benefits.

We heard from advocates about the limitations on what workers were able to accomplish when they called to follow up on an open service request. They explained that instead of resolving an issue, workers frequently told them all they could do was create a service request to have someone else contact the advocate or the person that requested the service at a later time, or increase the priority of a service request to urgent if it had not been looked at and it was a crisis. Advocates expressed concern that even when they call about an urgent matter, such as a crisis supplement or moving supplement, and ask the worker to look at it, they are often told that someone else will address it in the future. For this reason, some advocates indicated that they resort to calling a supervisor directly.

Each advocate we talked to recounted situations in which people had become disentitled to a benefit or experienced delays in receiving assistance as a result of their reliance on inaccurate information that they had received from ministry workers, which echoed complaints our office has received. One advocate indicated that it would be better to hear that a worker did not know the answer in a given situation than to be given inaccurate information. Another advocate remarked that the impact of inaccurate or inconsistent information can be devastating for people and often impacts a person's ability to receive the benefits they are entitled to.

### Indirect Service Channels Present Particular Challenges for Some People

Advocates explained that many clients have inconsistent access to reliable and affordable telephone services. These barriers may be in addition to communication challenges due to the nature of their personal circumstances.

One advocate said,

... many of the folks that we work with have mental and physical disabilities, often many of them have been impacted by abuse and trauma, lots of them live in unstable housing situations, some are homeless, many don't have a phone or a computer. The clients that do have phones will often have pay-as-you-go cellphones, so sometimes for these folks, for various reasons, using the phone line can be challenging.

The advocates we spoke with described the impacts on their clients when they are unable to access ministry services in a timely manner. They explained how the individuals they represent, in light of the ministry's role as an assistance provider of last resort, are disproportionately impacted when services are not easily accessible. They noted that wait times to speak with a worker, and being unable to resolve urgent issues quickly and effectively, can result in people experiencing prolonged and worsening crisis situations. One advocate told us that the ministry's service delivery model falls short of being responsive to people's vulnerability and desperation. The advocate described the challenges of the service delivery model in this way:

It's the delays, it's the impersonal, automated, bureaucracy system that has become more and more inaccessible, and then the removal of decision-making discretion from people who are actually talking on the frontline to clients, that's been withdrawn behind the walls of the bureaucracy, and it's less and less accessible. It just becomes more impersonal and automated. If I had to summarize the change, that's how I've experienced it.

# ANALYSIS

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An analysis of the adequacy of the Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction's delivery of services through its centralized telephone line must be informed by a consideration of the nature of the services provided and the characteristics of the population receiving services.

The ministry is a service provider of last resort, and requires people to exhaust all other sources of income before they will qualify for assistance. Accordingly, people who rely on the BCEA program often have nowhere else to turn for support.

People rely on the BCEA program to assist them in meeting their most basic needs, like housing and food security. People may also access crisis supplements for utilities, clothing and food. For some people, the ministry provides a range of supplements to meet basic health care needs, such as medical equipment and transportation, baby formula and prenatal supplements. Given that the services provided through the BCEA program are generally fundamental to the basic survival, well-being and dignity of those receiving them, the obligation on the ministry to ensure that these services are accessible is heightened.

A high percentage of people who rely on the BCEA program are people with disabilities who are receiving disability assistance. People on disability assistance have a mental or physical disability that impedes their ability to work and require assistance with daily living activities. Other people who rely on the BCEA program are homeless or have insecure housing, and some have experienced

trauma in their lives. Some people will lack the resources – such as a phone, computer or mailing address – to easily access services, while others will face disability-related barriers. The people who rely on income and disability assistance are often among the most vulnerable members of our society. Accordingly, the burden on the ministry to provide accessible services is high.

As described above, the wait times at the ministry's contact centres are often very long. The director of the provincial contact centre told us that the ministry should aim for an average speed of answer of 10 minutes. Deloitte had recommended that 80 percent of calls be answered in one minute. Currently, the ministry has an informal goal of 30 minutes. Its 2017 average, as of July 2017, was 35 minutes and 37 seconds. At times, people can wait well over an hour to speak to an employment and assistance worker. The call abandonment rate is around 20 percent. As we observed earlier, the ministry has acknowledged a direct correlation between call wait times and the call abandonment rate; when wait times go up, so does the number of abandoned calls.<sup>38</sup>

The long call wait times at the provincial contact centre are directly related to the number of EAWs answering calls. As noted above, according to the ministry, a full complement of EAWs in the contact centres is about 180 full-time employees. Ministry staff reported that, in September 2017, about 170 EAWs were working in the contact centres. In February 2017, using its workforce management software, the ministry concluded

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<sup>38</sup> Service Delivery Division, "Contact Centre Optimization," presentation to the Ministry of Social Development and Social Innovation's Oversight Committee for the Service Delivery Division, 27 February 2017, 3.

that it would require 213 EAWs to achieve an average call wait time of 30 minutes. Given that call volume has decreased since then, the ministry now predicts that the number may be closer to 200 EAWs.

The increase in call volume at the ministry is entirely predictable. However, as we

have seen, the wait times at the ministry fluctuate considerably. The ministry's inability to flatten the peaks and valleys associated with wait times is a result of understaffing in the contact centres, as opposed to the unpredictability of call volume.

**Finding 1:** The average call wait times at the ministry's provincial contact centre are chronically and consistently unreasonably long.

**Finding 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.

**Recommendation 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.

**Recommendation 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.

**Recommendation 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.

Deloitte previously recommended that the ministry aim to answer 80 percent of calls in one minute. It is clear that given the demand on the contact centres, and the ministry's existing resources, this is not a realistic objective. In recommending that the ministry achieve an average daily call wait time of 10 minutes, we have considered the ministry's own view of what an appropriate average call answer time would be. We have also considered the service delivery standard

set by other government agencies providing similar services. We note that at the federal level, in 2016 a service quality review panel reviewed the service delivery model for employment insurance (EI), and came to similar conclusions regarding the timeliness of service. The call centre for EI was much larger than the ministry's and handled a considerably greater volume. Its goal was to answer 80 percent of calls within 10 minutes.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Employment and Social Development Canada, *Employment Insurance Service Quality Review Report: Making Citizens Central*, February 2017. <<https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/programs/ei/consultation-service-quality-review.html>>



The ministry is under significant service delivery pressures, which impact all service streams. Although our investigation did not encompass in-person service delivery, and the ministry does not monitor wait times at its local offices, we know that the ministry has recently closed offices and for a period up until March 2016 reduced office hours. We also know that long call wait times result in increased walk-in traffic at local offices.

Given that the number of people relying on the BCEA program remains the same, it would be unsurprising if these changes have strained the delivery of in-person services at ministry offices. In making these recommendations regarding increased staffing and reducing call wait times at the contact centres, it is our expectation that these staffing changes will allow the ministry to achieve the recommended call wait times, and that other methods of service delivery will not be reduced or degraded during the implementation period.

Our recommendations relating to reporting wait times are intended to foster transparency and accountability in the ministry's delivery of services under the BCEA program.

Although call wait times remain long, the ministry has had some success in reducing call wait times in the past year. However, although wait times have improved, the current level of service remains inadequate. In particular, some of the strategies that the ministry has implemented to reduce wait times are problematic.

Most troubling is the ministry's use of the Tier 1 strategy when wait times start to hover around 50 minutes. As described above, when the contact centres are operating in Tier 1, EAWs are not completing service requests (except for crisis situations). Instead, the requests are sent to the provincial queue to

be completed later. Under this model, call wait times are reduced because the time taken to handle calls is purposefully reduced. However, the reduced wait time comes at the expense of providing regular service.

The ministry does not inform callers when it is operating in Tier 1 mode. As a result, callers may wait for a long time to speak with an EAW, only to have their requests go unaddressed. No explanation is offered as to why simple service requests cannot be completed on the call. In Tier 1 mode, call wait times are shortened but the time to complete service requests is lengthened. This does not solve the delay issue; instead, the delay is shifted from the call answer time to the actual delivery of the service. It also means that EAWs who are creating the request are not completing it. That means that callers are not speaking with the ultimate decision maker, and, as a result, there is no immediate opportunity for them to clarify information or provide further details that the decision maker may need regarding their eligibility for the service. This can further slow the service delivery process and potentially lead to poorer decision making. The result is a level of service that fails to meet the goals of the ministry and the needs of people receiving its services.

The ministry has identified the problems associated with the Tier 1 strategy and tries to avoid using it. The director of the provincial contact centre told us she would prefer to never use it. The ministry has found that time spent in Tier 1 mode results in a reduction of service requests completed and an increased inventory of overdue service requests. Overdue service requests can lead to duplicate calls, as callers who expected a decision from the ministry may make follow-up calls to inquire about the status of their request. When this happens, call volume goes

up and call wait times begin to rise again. Further, we were told that EAWs become less engaged in their work and their skill development is impeded. Callers become increasingly frustrated and make more complaints. The ministry has also identified an erosion of people's trust in the contact centres as they become viewed as an unreliable source of service delivery.

While we acknowledge and support the ministry's efforts to reduce its use of the Tier 1 strategy, we note that the ministry still disproportionately relies on its Tier 1 strategy on Mondays, Fridays, and cheque-issue days. The ministry knows that it is going to have either less staff or increased call volume,

or both, on those days. The ministry is well equipped to predict that call wait times will be longer on those days. However, callers do not know that they are less likely to receive complete service from the ministry on those days. Fridays, and particularly cheque-issue days, are days when people may be most in need of receiving ministry services, but they are days when the contact centres are least likely to provide those services.

The ministry's approach to reducing call wait times by reducing the level of service it provides on calls is not reasonable. The contact centres should use the Tier 1 strategy, if it is ever appropriate, only in highly exceptional circumstances.

**Finding 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.

**Finding 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.

**Recommendation 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.

**Recommendation 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.

**Recommendation 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.

One of the aims of the ministry's channel strategy was to reduce the number of in-person offices it operated and to reduce traffic to those offices. To further this goal, a number of ministry offices were closed and others

had their hours of operation reduced. We have heard from advocates and people receiving services from the ministry that going to a ministry office for service is increasingly not feasible because, as a result of the office



closures, the remaining offices are located too far away. This is especially so in rural areas. Fewer ministry offices, long wait times for the contact centre, and overdue service requests can cause additional demands on local offices and drive up the wait time at those offices.

The ministry is also increasingly relying on its partnership with Service BC to maintain a presence in communities around the province. Service BC offices are generally not staffed with EAWs, so they cannot make eligibility decisions or complete service requests. The staff, however, are trained by the ministry to provide information, and create service requests. The staff in some locations can print cheques, and have access to EAWs, supervisors and other ministry staff. The ministry currently has 48 Employment and Assistance offices located throughout the province and 35 local office partnerships with Service BC.<sup>40</sup>

The ministry's Service Delivery Optimization strategy relies on local office EAWs to respond to calls to the contact centre, thereby supplementing the contact centre staff. The ministry has software that can predict when contact centre wait times will rise, and uses it to determine when to add local office staff to the lines. The ministry told us that it has trained over 100 local office EAWs to work on the phones and that, on average, it uses the equivalent of seven local office EAWs each day to staff the phones.

The ministry told us that using local office EAWs to staff the centralized telephone line does not impact in-person wait times because it does not assign front counter EAWs to answer calls. However, EAW roles are fluid, and back office staff may be moved to the front counter in times of high in-person demand. The ministry does not measure whether the additional demand on

local offices of carrying out contact centre work is impacting in-person wait times. In fact, wait times at local offices generally are not monitored through any kind of queue monitoring system and there are no provincial service delivery standards for in-person wait times at local offices. The responsibility for monitoring wait times rests with the supervisor of any given local office, and ministry staff told us that if the wait grows so long that there may be people waiting who will not be served by the end of the day, the supervisor can pull EAWs from the back office. Further, the ministry has phones in its local office that people can use to call the contact centre.

The ministry told us that because this project is relatively new, it is still working on how to best manage staff scheduling and ensure that local offices are able to meet demand.

The steps that the ministry has taken through the implementation of the channel strategy reduced the number of EAWs providing in-person services. In using local office non-front counter EAWs to staff the phone line, the ministry has further reduced the availability of staff to provide in-person services. There may be occasions where this strategy is an appropriate use of ministry resources (when the local office is not busy, for example), but it can strain a mode of service delivery that is already under-resourced.

The erosion of in-person service delivery can have a particularly harmful impact on people because of their circumstances. As we have noted throughout this report, some people do not have phones, or have pay-as-you-go cell phone minutes or plans with limited minutes. Some have unstable housing, while others are homeless. Some do not have computers or Internet access. Most of the people receiving ministry services have physical and/or mental

<sup>40</sup> Ministry of Social Development and Social Innovation, *Service Plan 2017/18 – 2019/20*, February 2017. <<http://bcbudget.gov.bc.ca/2017/sp/pdf/ministry/sdsi.pdf>>

disabilities. All of these circumstances can impede or impair people's ability to seek services over the phone or to access services online. The impact arising from this reduction of in-person interpersonal contact is significant.

About 70 percent of people receiving ministry services are receiving disability assistance. The

ministry has heard feedback from some people that they would like to receive services through a case worker or designated worker, and that some have difficulty articulating their needs over the phone. The strategy of using local office staff for the contact centre rather than in-person service compounds this problem.

**Finding 5:** The ministry's failure to monitor, and set service delivery standards for in-person wait times at local offices is unreasonable.

**Recommendation 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.

**Recommendation 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.

**Recommendation 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.



# CONCLUSION

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The ability of people to meet their basic needs and those of their families is fundamental to human dignity and security. The services that the ministry is responsible for administering are often the last resort for people who need assistance with housing or access to food, clothing or medical supplies. When a service delivery model is so burdensome that it effectively becomes inaccessible, the ministry ceases to adequately fulfill its responsibility to individuals and the public to help provide for the welfare of British Columbians in need.

This investigation focused on the ministry's delivery of telephone services and identified significant and chronic problems with call wait times and corresponding impacts on service quality. The ministry has acknowledged that call wait times are too long and have been so for many years. Although the ministry implemented strategies to try to manage its high call volume and lengthy wait times, the steps it took fell short, and as a result people continue to face significant barriers accessing supports. In some cases, the call wait time mitigation strategies caused other service problems. The inability of people in need to access basic but critical services is an unfair and unacceptable consequence of service delivery delay.

Most of the recommendations in this report are intended to alleviate the pressure on the ministry's telephone service, decrease response time, and increase service quality.

We recognize that improving access to telephone services will not help everyone who relies on income and disability assistance, many of whom must access services in person or online. We are aware, through the course of this investigation and our investigations of individual complaints, that people are concerned that impediments to service accessibility have arisen in these other channels. To that end, we have also recommended that the ministry monitor the wait times for in-person service at local offices. If the ministry identifies barriers to access exist in other service delivery channels, the ministry has a duty to take adequate steps to remove them without delay.

*The inability of people in need to access basic but critical services is an unfair and unacceptable consequence of service delivery delay.*

People who rely on ministry services but who have faced significant barriers to accessing those services for the past several years have waited too long. They have waited too long each day to receive services and they have waited too long for the ministry to fix the problem. It is important they not be asked to wait too long for the ministry to implement the changes in this report.



# APPENDICES

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## A. Findings

**Finding 1:** The average call wait times at the ministry's provincial contact centre are chronically and consistently unreasonably long.

**Finding 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.

**Finding 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.

**Finding 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.

**Finding 5:** The ministry's failure to monitor, and set service delivery standards for in-person wait times at local offices is unreasonable.



## B. Recommendations

**Recommendation 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.

**Recommendation 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.

**Recommendation 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.

**Recommendation 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.

**Recommendation 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.

**Recommendation 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.

**Recommendation 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.

**Recommendation 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.

**Recommendation 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.

Ombudsperson recommendations are aimed at improving administrative processes and ensuring that people are treated fairly. The Office of the Ombudsperson monitors the implementation status of recommendations for a period of five years. Monitoring reports are available at [www.bcombudsperson.ca](http://www.bcombudsperson.ca).





## C. Authority Response



Ref: 194924

March 19, 2018

Jay Chalke  
Ombudsperson  
Province of British Columbia  
947 Fort Street  
Victoria BC V8W 9A5

Dear Mr. Chalke:

Thank you for your letter dated March 12, 2018 regarding the report your office has prepared on the ministry's centralized telephone system. I appreciate the opportunity to review and respond to the recommendations in the report.

The ministry agrees that phone wait times need to be improved; much of the work the ministry already has underway is focused on bringing wait times down as part of our ongoing efforts to improve services. To accomplish this, we recognize that continuous process improvement is both necessary and desirable to ensure the effectiveness and public accessibility of the income assistance programs we provide.

The ministry, therefore, values the significant efforts put forth by the Office of the Ombudsperson in preparing a report and proposing recommendations that are intended to improve access to British Columbia's income assistance programs.

Having duly considered your recommendations, the ministry accepts the following six recommendations:

***Recommendation 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.

***Recommendation 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.

***Recommendation 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.

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**Recommendation 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.*

**Recommendation 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.*

**Recommendation 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 recommendations #1 and #3 for the prior fiscal year.*

The ministry is committed to continuous improvement and must focus its efforts on changes that provide the greatest benefit to clients. The ministry is able to respond to Recommendation 2, 3, and 9, and provide the additional clarification you have requested, as follows:

**Recommendation 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.*

As of March 2018, the ministry has 183 Employment and Assistance Workers (EAWs) dedicated to the provincial contact centre. As you know, Budget 2018 included the addition of 30 new EAW positions. The ministry agrees that increasing contact centre staff levels is important, and that is why 20 of these positions are being allocated to the phones; for a total of 203 EAWs assigned to the provincial contact centre. The remaining 10 will be assigned to the provincial queue.

As noted in your report, the ministry must strive to meet service demands across all channels. With the ever changing demands on our services, the ministry believes it is essential to maintain operational flexibility when assigning staff. This is particularly important during peak call periods, such as cheque issue week, where assigning non Front Counter Local Office staff to answers calls can reduce the need for these clients to travel to a local office.

These additional staff, along with ongoing improvements in our service delivery model and a commitment to public service standards, will help ensure that clients are served as quickly and efficiently as possible, through all of our service channels in-person, online or through the provincial contact centre.

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**Recommendation 3:** *By March 31, 2019, for 95% 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.*

The ministry aims to set service standards that reflect the ministry's commitment to responsive service, while aligning with industry standards. It is also important that these goals are achievable given staff schedules, including flex days, and peak times, such as cheque issue.

Contact centre standard reporting methodology involves setting a reasonable wait time based on the complexity of the work and reporting on an 80 percent of calls answered. Comparable government programs, including Old Age Security, Employment Insurance, Canada Pension Plan, all aim to answer calls 80% in 10 minutes or less.<sup>1</sup>

As such, the ministry can commit to answering 80% of calls in 10 minutes or less. The ministry believes that this commitment is a good measure of timely service on the phones and that adding an additional measure related to longest call wait time is therefore unnecessary. We will commit to report out on this service standard, as well as report out the Average Speed of Answer and longest call wait as per Recommendation 1.

We are committed to reliable service and will monitor this over time to ensure this service standard is helping us achieve this commitment.

**Recommendation 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.*

Capturing specific daily wait times is a complex task that requires tracking each individual as they come and go from an office, including identifying how many individuals are requesting in-person service (rather than using public computers or the phone) and whether an individual requires service themselves, or is a spouse/advocate attending with another individual. There are additional challenges involved in providing accurate reporting for in person services, along with the wide range of reasons a client attends an office, and the varying complexities of their circumstances; which impacts the ability to estimate length of time to serve each individual.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/corporate/transparency/service-standards-2016-2017.html>

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Gathering specific wait times throughout the day can be done in one of two ways. The first would involve a substantial systems/technology investment, requiring new software and technology in each of the 84 locations around the province. The second requires a dedicated resource, in each of our offices, to manually track client flow, calculate wait times throughout the day and report out the results. The ministry does have supervisors monitoring client flows throughout the day in order to effectively staff the front counters and minimize wait times, any further actions to track specific wait times would take staff time away from clients.

The ministry agrees in the importance of providing responsive service, and local office supervisors will continue to monitor in-person wait times. The ministry currently does not have the technology or resources to do any further additional monitoring of in-person service wait times.

I trust the information above addresses all of your specific questions, and provides some context to the ministry response on the recommendation. I would welcome an opportunity to meet with you and discuss these items or respond to any further questions you may have about the additional information provided in this response.

Sincerely,



David Galbraith  
Deputy Minister  
Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction



