SPECIAL ADVISORY REPORT

Review of Animal Care & Control Customer Service

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Auditor

SUMMARY

Special Advisory Reports (SAR) provide information on limited reviews or time-critical assessments, investigations or evaluations as requested by City management. While not always in full compliance with audit reporting standards, SARs are non-audit services that further the accountability of the City by providing a reporting vehicle that is flexible, quickly issued, and focused on a singular issue.

KEY ISSUE

The Animal Care & Control Division (ACC) within the Department of Environmental Health requested this review. The purpose of this non-audit service was to conduct objective research and analysis related to the customer service provided by ACC. Specifically, ACC asked us to identify performance measures and an overall system for establishing performance expectations and holding staff accountable for high quality customer service.

BACKGROUND

The Animal Care & Control Division emphasizes public and animal safety and health through two core functions:

1) Field Services investigates animal bites, cruelty and neglect claims, and barking dog disturbances. It also enforces Denver's leash law and pit bull ordinance. 2) Animal Care and Public Health operates the Denver Municipal Animal Shelter, provides veterinary care for animals at the shelter, adopts and redeems animals, issues pet licenses, offers vaccinations and pet tracking microchips, responds to customer inquiries and provides vector control services .

The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) offers an Animal Shelter Consultation program. Under this program, HSUS sends teams of sheltering professionals into organizations involved with animal care and control to examine and assess operations. In 2008, HSUS conducted an evaluation of ACC's operations, services, and programs. According to the HSUS, more than any other complaint, citizens remember and report poor customer service.

METHODOLOGY

To conduct this review, we researched best practices and the customer service policies and practices of several jurisdictions identified as providing high quality customer service.[1] We reviewed job descriptions and performance evaluation information for selected ACC personnel. We also interviewed a sample of 11 ACC staff to obtain their perception of customer service-related issues.

In addition, we performed benchmark research related to the organizational structure of animal care and control functions in 19 jurisdictions.[2] Specifically,

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[1] Jurisdictions researched included: King County, WA; City of Los Angeles, CA; City of Minneapolis, MN; Sonoma County, CA; and City of Toronto, Ontario, Canada.
[2] Jurisdictions researched included: King County, WA; City of Seattle, WA; City of Los Angeles, CA; Los Angeles County, CA; City of Minneapolis, MN; Sonoma County, CA;

we determined where the equivalent of the City's Animal Care & Control Division is located within these organizations.

Interestingly, only two of the 19 (11%) jurisdictions we reviewed are housed within a public health agency equivalent to the City's Department of Environmental Health. Our review found wide variation in the organizational location of this function. Examples include the Department of Administration which reports to the Mayor (City of Seattle, WA), the Department of Regulatory Services and Emergency Preparedness which reports to the Mayor (City of Minneapolis, MN), the Department of Community Services and Protective Services which reports to the City Manager who in turn reports to the Mayor (City of Calgary, Alberta, Canada), and the Patrol Division of the Sheriff's Office under an Elected Official (Jefferson County, CO).

REVIEW RESULTS

ACC is interested in implementing a system of controls that will help it ensure exceptional customer service on a consistent basis. Our best practice research revealed several tools that ACC could utilize to facilitate the accomplishment of this goal.

Many of the characteristics of good customer service identified through research are relatively self-evident, including greeting the customer, making eye contact, arranging staff desks to face the customer, requiring proper etiquette when using radios, assisting customers when other staff members are busy, and creating a team environment.

However, in order to help ACC develop a system of controls, we grouped the best

practices we identified into the following categories:

Establish Clear Customer Service Goals

Audit work found that ACC has not established clear and documented goals or standards related to customer service. Examples of where such goals can be documented include staff Performance Enhancement Plans (PEPs) and performance measures outlined in the City's Budget Book. Establishing clear and specific goals is the first step in developing a framework to ensure quality customer service.

Establish and Document Policies and Procedures (P&Ps)

P&Ps help to clarify job responsibilities for staff and enable management to hold staff accountable for adhering to such responsibilities. In our interviews with ACC staff, they reported a lack of adequate P&Ps related to customer service protocols and goals.

In addition to operational P&Ps, we also found that some shelters post and/or hand out written versions of certain policies, such as those related to relinquishment, reclaiming, code enforcement, and adoptions while others do not provide such information. The lack of P&Ps may hinder ACC personnel from explaining and justifying decisions that may be upsetting to customers because it is difficult to demonstrate that the decision is not arbitrary, but rather is based on actual organizational policy.

City of Toronto, Ontario, Canada; City of Calgary, Alberta, Canada; City of Chicago, IL; Maricopa County, AZ; City of Phoenix, AZ; Jefferson County, CO; Arapahoe County, CO; Adams County, CO; Douglas County, CO; El Paso County, CO; Pueblo County, CO; Mesa County, CO; and City of Colorado Springs, CO.

Establish Clear Customer Service Expectations and Measures in Staff PEPs

Auditors reviewed PEPs for three ACC positions.[3] These positions represent 26 of the 39 (67%) positions within ACC and are the positions with the most customer contact. Our review found that customer service language was only briefly addressed in PEPs for these positions and the language was very broad and lacked specific performance measures.

Ensure PEPRs are Completed and Timely

Audit work determined that only eight out of 21 (38%) ACC employees sampled received their last annual performance evaluation on time. Further, only one out of seven (14%) supervisors with employee(s) in the sample completed all performance evaluations in a timely manner, indicating that this is most likely a widespread issue within ACC.

Performance evaluations are important tools for providing feedback to employees regarding their work performance. They also provide a formal mechanism for management to hold employees accountable for job expectations outlined in PEPs.

To be most effective, performance evaluation should be a continuous process. In addition to annual PEPRs, ACC should review employee performance through ongoing coaching and feedback. Feedback should be provided in a timely and balanced manner by explaining what an employee did well and what they might have done better. The feedback should focus on the performance rather than the individual and

should provide specific and accurate information that will enable the employee to better perform their job duties. In addition, CSA offers PEPR-related courses that may provide useful tips and techniques for ACC managers.

For feedback to be useful, it is helpful to maintain an ongoing record of each employee's performance. Keeping thorough, detailed records is critical to offering specific, constructive feedback.

Provide Effective Customer Service Training

ACC staff reported receiving very little overall training and no specific customer service training. We acknowledge that training can be expensive and even more challenging in the current budget environment. Nevertheless, management must determine where developmental needs are most critical, and direct limited resources to these areas. ACC management reported they are pursuing free training from the Denver Dumb Friends League. We applaud the pursuit of training that will require few resources, but training specifically geared towards customer service may be necessary. Toward that end, we offer the following possibilities.

- Humane Society University (HSU) is a private, nonprofit institution offering a variety of professional development programs in human-animal studies. HSU also offers a variety of on-site workshops that may have a customer service component, including Animal Sheltering Operations Boot Camp, Coping with Compassion Fatigue, Dealing with Difficult People, and Bridging the Communication Gap: Spanish for Shelters.

- The Colorado Association of Animal Control Officers offers both training and certification. ACC may not be in a

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[3] Animal Control Investigator (also called Animal Control Officer), Animal Care Attendant, and Administrative Support Assistant III (the job class applicable to most office staff).

position to help pay for certifications but could still encourage and recognize them as a way to boost the professionalism and morale of Animal Control Officers.

Collect and Analyze Customer Service Performance Data

Interviews with staff indicated that ACC does not collect or analyze customer service performance data. In order to assess overall effectiveness, goal achievement and to identify areas for improvement, organizations must monitor and track performance data. Data provides quantifiable evidence of performance, (time to answer phones, number and type of complaints, workload data, etc.) and can be used for staff performance evaluation.

Surveys can be a tool for performance data collection and analysis. For example, if management believes staff needs additional training in customer service, a survey is a great tool to help pinpoint where the agency excels and where it could use some improvement. We used a simple internet search to identify customer service surveys specific to animal care and control services. Appendices A and B contain sample customer service surveys from the cities of Wichita, KS and Fort Worth, TX, respectively. ACC could use ideas from these and other jurisdictions to develop its own tool for collecting customer feedback to identify areas for improvement.

Additionally, the utilization of a formal complaint process can provide useful performance data. The number or type of complaints could be a factor in evaluating personnel related to customer service performance. For example, management could establish metrics for the maximum number of complaints that would automatically result in a "Needs Improvement" PEPR rating.

Formal and prompt follow up with customers who file complaints can also enhance customers' perception of an organization's responsiveness and commitment to customer service. Additionally, ACC can enhance its customer service to other City entities that may field complaints related to ACC operations, such as the Mayor's Office or City Council, by making sure these entities are promptly notified about ACC's follow-up activities related to such complaints.

Develop Personnel "Soft" Skills

Soft skills are qualities, personality traits and social skills that everyone possesses in varying degrees. Soft skills are sometimes broken down into personal attributes (e.g., optimism, common sense, responsibility, and motivation) and interpersonal abilities (e.g., empathy, leadership, communication, good manners, and sociability).

Good "soft skills" can be as simple as identifying yourself and your organization every time you answer the phone, and if you need to put your caller on hold, first asking if you may do so and then waiting for an answer before placing the caller on hold. In an environment like a shelter, where a few minutes can mean the difference between the life and death of stray animals or pets in distress, callers cannot wait on hold for an extended time for the next available representative. However, ACC staff reported that at times callers are placed on hold for an extended period of time.

Similarly, the use of voicemail can negatively affect customer service as it may appear that the shelter is unresponsive and uncaring. If at all possible, ACC should ensure callers are able to reach a live person during operating hours. Additionally, ACC should provide "soft skill" assessment and training to personnel who deal with the public.

Further, ACC staff indicated that a large percentage of their clients speak English as a Second Language (ESL). Although staff reported that one person working in the office speaks fluent Spanish and can assist with Spanish-speaking customers, this is not this person's primary job responsibility, so she is not always available to assist. Focusing on customer service for the City's ESL community by having bilingual staff available can greatly improve client relations and allow customers to converse easily with ACC staff.

Hire the Right People for the Right Job

If providing exceptional customer service is important, then it goes without saying that the priority must be hiring and retaining top quality, customer service-oriented employees. Hiring staff can be relatively simple, but hiring the "right" staff for the job is a lot harder.

ACC should clearly identify all job responsibilities, including customer service skills for various positions, and then hire people with the appropriate skill sets for each position. Our review revealed ACC personnel have similar job descriptions and PEPs, but there are some job duties specific to each position. ACC staff reported that personnel have historically been hired to perform specific jobs that do not necessarily include customer service attributes, but are subsequently expected to work with the public. Because some people are better suited for customer service related work, ACC should make this responsibility a "real" job duty, and include it in job announcements and when interviewing applicants so they can be sure they hire people who are willing and able to provide high quality customer service.

Ensure a Positive First Impression

Customers form first impressions the very first time they come in for help. Therefore, it is important to create a positive, lasting first impression. ACC staff work with many customers in the course of a day, but ACC should emphasize that every customer deserves the same courteous treatment and should be assisted in a professional manner.

Name tags are a helpful way for those who do business with people on a face-to-face basis to allow customers to know who they are working with, and to enhance the organization's business appearance. Furthermore, name tags help customers perceive ACC staff as being more approachable.

In addition, appearance is the first thing the customer notices and uses to form an impression. Staff working with the public must look good, feel good, and act accordingly.

CONCLUSION

We have provided some straightforward suggestions that should help ACC identify and implement an overall system for setting performance expectations and holding staff accountable for providing exceptional customer service. Our research revealed very consistent, fundamental underlying management concepts that can help ACC build and maintain a customer service-oriented culture. Essentially, ACC should think strategically to identify the customer service goals or standards important to the organization, identify practices or procedures to help them achieve those standards, measure performance, evaluate results, and provide feedback to hold staff accountable to the standards.

SAR TEAM

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Appendix A

City of Wichita

Environmental Services Department
1900 E. 9th St.
Wichita, KS 67214

Customer Service Survey

The City of Wichita Department of Environmental Services is committed to maintaining the highest levels of service and values your feedback. Please take a moment to complete this Customer Service Survey. We look forward to hearing from you.

The employee was helpful and willing to assist you.
☐ Strongly Agree
☐ Agree
☐ Disagree
☐ Strongly Disagree

The employee was courteous, professional and greeted you by stating his/her name.
☐ Strongly Agree
☐ Agree
☐ Disagree
☐ Strongly Disagree
☐ Name (optional) _____

Were you initially assisted by a customer service clerk or by technical staff?
☐ Customer service clerk
   Name (optional)_____
☐ Technical staff
   Name (optional) _____

The employee instructed you on why/who your call was being transferred to for further assistance.
☐ Strongly Agree
☐ Agree
☐ Disagree
☐ Strongly Disagree
☐ Not applicable

Where was the employee who assisted you located?
☐ Environmental Services main office – 1900 E. 9th, ph 268-8351
☐ W.A.T.E.R Center – 101 E. Pawnee, ph 337-9263
☐ Animal Services – 3303 N. Hillside, ph 268-8378
☐ Field
☐ Don't know

Where were you when you received assistance from an Environmental Services employee?
☐ On the phone
☐ At the counter
☐ In the field

If you were greeted at the office (walk-in) did you have to ask for assistance?
☐ Yes
☐ No
☐ Not applicable

Overall you were satisfied with the customer service you received.
☐ Strongly Agree
☐ Agree
☐ Disagree
☐ Strongly Disagree

As a result of your experience with us, what service related improvements can you recommend?
_____
_____
_____

About You (optional)

Name _____   E-mail _____

Address   Phone

City, State, ZIP

May we contact you for further evaluation of our services if needed?   ☐ Yes   ☐ No

Thank you for your participation!

Appendix B

FORT WORTH

PUBLIC HEALTH

Date_____

CUSTOMER SERVICE SURVEY: FIELD SERVICES

Thank you for calling the Fort Worth Animal Services Division for assistance with your animal-related problem. Please take a moment to comment on your request for service. Your comments will help us serve you better during any future requests for service. If you need additional space, please use reverse side.

1. Was the person who took your telephone call courteous and helpful when you called to request our services? ☐ yes ☐ no

2. If not, what happened? _____

3. Did the person who took your telephone call answer all of your questions? ☐ yes ☐ no

4. How long did it take for an officer to respond to your call?
   ☐ 0-2 hours ☐ 2-4 hours ☐ 4-6 hours ☐ more than 6 hours ☐ overnight

5. Were you satisfied with our response time? ☐ yes ☐ no

6. Was the responding officer courteous and helpful to you? ☐ yes ☐ no

7. Did the responding officer answer all of your questions? ☐ yes ☐ no

8. Did the responding officer provide you with information on:

The animal control ordinance?	☐ yes	☐ no	☐ not required
Rabies vaccination and licensing?	☐ yes	☐ no	☐ not required
Spaying and neutering your pet?	☐ yes	☐ no	☐ not required
Pet adoptions?	☐ yes	☐ no	☐ not required
Humane trapping of animal?	☐ yes	☐ no	☐ not required
Affidavits?	☐ yes	☐ no	☐ not required

9. Was the responding officer able to resolve your complaint? ☐ yes ☐ no

10. If not, did the responding officer explain why? ☐ yes ☐ no

11. Was your experience with Animal Services pleasant and positive? ☐ yes ☐ no

12. If not, why? _____

13. What new services would you like to see provided by Animal Services?
_____

14. Do you own any pets? ☐ yes ☐ no
    How many? _____ dogs _____ cats _____ others (specify) _____

15. Are these pets vaccinated and licensed? ☐ yes ☐ no

16. If yes, do these pets wear their tags at all times? ☐ yes ☐ no

17. Would you like to represent the Animal Services Division in your neighborhood and contact us when there are animal problems in the neighborhood? ☐ yes ☐ no

18. What comments or suggestions would you like to offer to improve our services?
_____
_____

Optional: Name _____
Address _____
Phone _____