

Highlights of [GAO-05-526](#), a report to congressional requesters

IMMIGRATION SERVICES

Better Contracting Practices Needed at Call Centers

Why GAO Did This Study

The U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) bureau within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) provides toll-free telephone assistance through call centers to immigrants, their attorneys, and others seeking information about U.S. immigration services and benefits. As the volume of calls increased—from about 13 million calls in fiscal year 2002 to about 21 million calls in fiscal year 2004—questions were raised about USCIS’s ability to ensure the reliability and accuracy of the information provided at call centers run by an independent contractor.

This report analyzes: (1) the performance measures established by USCIS to monitor and evaluate the performance of contractor-operated call centers; (2) how performance measures were used to evaluate the contractor’s performance; and (3) any actions USCIS has taken, or plans to take, to strengthen call center operations.

What GAO Recommends

To improve USCIS’s evaluation of contractor performance, GAO recommends that USCIS take steps to ensure that performance measurement provisions are finalized before awarding new contracts and that performance evaluation records are properly maintained. DHS generally agreed with GAO’s recommendations and indicated USCIS was taking steps to implement them.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-05-526.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Paul Jones at (202) 512-8777 or jonespl@gao.gov.

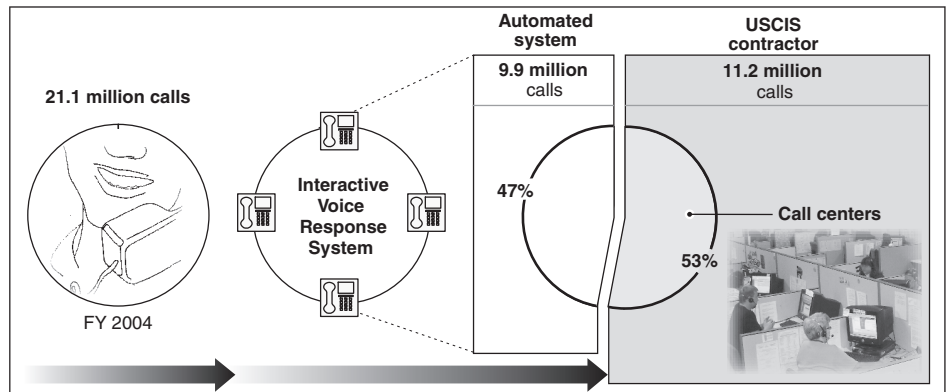
What GAO Found

USCIS developed seven performance measures intended to assess the performance and overall quality of responses provided by customer service representatives at contractor-operated call centers. These measures include how quickly calls were answered and the accuracy of information provided. The contract between USCIS and its contractor stipulated that the contractor could earn financial incentive awards if the average monthly performance met or exceeded the standards on a quarterly basis at each of four call centers. Conversely, financial deductions could be made if the standards were not met.

USCIS did not finalize the terms regarding how the contractor’s actual performance would be calculated, or scored, before awarding the contract. This limited USCIS’s ability to exercise performance incentives (positive or negative) because the parties could not reach agreement on performance terms. USCIS suspended the use of financial incentives while the parties negotiated the issue. Agreement was not reached after 16 months, however, USCIS determined that the contractor had failed to meet standards for 4 of the 7 performance measures in the fourth quarter of 2004 and took action to reduce its payments for services. The contractor objected, citing the lack of agreement on the performance measurements and the impact of workload increases, but USCIS disagreed and stated it would reduce payment. In a separate but related matter, USCIS failed to meet contractual, regulatory, and GAO standards pertaining to how the contractor’s performance would be documented—especially with respect to any deficiencies. Finally, USCIS exercised its option to extend the call center contract through May 2006, to allow time to solicit and award new call center contracts. USCIS said it intends to finalize performance measurement terms in the new contracts.

USCIS used contractor performance data it collected over the course of the contract to identify opportunities to improve customer service and call flow, among other things. Several initiatives were launched as a result.

USCIS Call Flow and Call Volume for Fiscal Year 2004



Source: Developed by GAO from USCIS data.