Department of Health and Human Services

OFFICE OF
INSPECTOR GENERAL

STATEWIDE CHILD SUPPORT AUTOMATED TELEPHONE SYSTEMS

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Memorandum

Date   SEP 3 0 2002

From   Debra Robinson
Director, Regional Operations
Office of Evaluation and Inspections

Subject

To   OIG Memorandum Report: "Statewide Child Support Enforcement Automated Telephone Systems," OEI-06-00-00460

Wade F. Horn, Ph.D.
Assistant Secretary for
    Children and Families

Attached for your information is a memorandum report that evaluates the quality of parent access to child support enforcement information and customer service through State-level automated telephone systems and identifies opportunities for improving these systems. As you are aware, this report is part of our ongoing examination of the child support enforcement program.

Recent legislation and child support enforcement agency initiatives have increased the overall awareness of the need to provide quality customer service to child support enforcement clients. Automated telephone systems play an integral role in how State child support enforcement agencies communicate with clients and provide customer service. We directly accessed and reviewed all 69 State-operated automated child support enforcement telephone systems operating in August 2001. We used a standardized protocol that focused on system content, accessibility and usability. The basis for much of our analysis is our development of a list of model system traits. We evaluate the potential usefulness of systems to callers, and outline a number of model traits exhibited by the best systems. We describe State use of the systems, identify model system traits, and highlight recurring limitations that inhibit system usefulness.

We found that 49 State child support enforcement agencies operate automated telephone systems, and that 14 of these States operate model systems that provide callers with superior access to useful information. Model system traits include the provision of case-specific payment information and comprehensive program information available 24/7 through toll-free lines. Model systems also instruct callers on system use, have helpful navigational tools, such as repeat menu functions, provide direct links to live representatives, and avoid problematic technical language in their recorded messages. We suggest that ACF could provide technical assistance to help States enhance their systems. Specifically, ACF could help States focus on key topic areas, make systems more user-friendly, target first-time callers, automate functions when possible, and update information frequently. ACF concurred with our findings and suggestions for improvement in this report.

You are welcome to provide comments but are not required to do so, since the report contains no recommendations. If you have any questions about this report or would like a meeting to discuss more detailed information, please call me at (202) 619-0480, or have your staff contact Elise Stein, Director, Public Health and Human Services at (202) 619-2686.

Attachment

E X E C U T I V E   S U M M A R Y

OBJECTIVE

To evaluate the quality of parent access to child support enforcement information and customer service through State-level automated telephone systems and identify opportunities for improving these systems.

BACKGROUND

Recent legislation and child support enforcement agency initiatives have increased the overall awareness of the need to provide quality customer service to child support enforcement clients. Automated telephone systems play an integral role in how State child support enforcement agencies communicate with clients and provide customer service. We reviewed all State-operated automated child support enforcement telephone systems, using a standardized protocol which focused on system content, accessibility and usability. The basis for much of our analysis is our development of a list of model system traits. We evaluate the potential usefulness of systems to callers, and outline a number of model traits exhibited by the best systems. We describe State use of the systems, identify model system traits, and highlight recurring limitations that inhibit system usefulness.

FINDINGS

Forty-nine child support enforcement agencies use automated systems, and 14 operate model systems that provide callers superior access to useful information

Forty-nine States, including the District of Columbia, operate at least one State-wide automated telephone system. Thirteen of these States operate more than one State-wide system, for a total of 69 systems nationwide. Fourteen State systems exhibit model traits which set them apart from other systems, including comprehensive system content, ready accessibility, and high usability. Twenty-six other States have systems which meet most, but not all, of our model system traits and were rated highly by reviewers for overall usefulness. The nine remaining States operate automated systems that are missing more than two model system traits and were also rated poorly for overall usefulness.

Callers receive case-specific payment information through 61 of the 69 systems; payment instructions and program descriptions are also common

Automated systems typically consist of a series of menus from which callers can choose to access information and services, the most common of which is case-specific payment

information. Recorded descriptions of child support services offered by automated systems are typically brief, but give useful program overviews on a broad array of topics such as paternity establishment and wage withholding. The more highly rated systems allow for quick automated access to the most important topic areas, bypassing topics less likely to be of interest to the caller.

Caller access to information is generally good, with 57 automated systems available 24/7, 49 offering toll-free service, and 57 answering calls on first attempt

Initial system access does not appear to be a substantial barrier to use. Among the 12 systems that required more than one attempt to reach, six were accessed on the second or third attempt and six required upwards of 10 attempts before our calls were answered. The automated portion of 57 systems is available to callers all day, every day, and 49 systems provide service toll-free nationwide. Of those systems without toll-free service, many are available free if calling within the State. To further broaden access to service, 19 systems provide recorded messages in both English and Spanish.

Navigational tools improve caller ease of use, and 48 systems use optional live representatives to supplement automated service

Systems typically include navigational tools to ease use. For example, 55 systems allow callers to repeat menus, and 61 allow callers to make a menu selection without listening to the entire list of options. However, these features are not always clearly identified for inexperienced callers. Fourteen of the 55 systems offering repeat functions do not inform callers of the option, and only 49 systems offer general instructions for using their menus. Forty-eight systems also offer callers the option to speak with a live representative in addition to automated information, typically to provide details specific to a client's case.

Problems commonly inhibiting usefulness for callers include systems that are overly complex, are not user-friendly, and include outdated information

Further analysis of systems that were not rated highly or not identified as model systems revealed a number of limits to usefulness. Systems limitations include overly complex menus that bury key topics, cumbersome navigation, and use of a negative tone in communicating with clients. Some systems also appeared less suited for first-time users, lacking clear information on topics of interest to the new client, such as the application process. Other limitations include an over reliance on live representatives to provide information that could be automated and inclusion of inaccurate or outdated information.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

Conclusion. Our analysis of model child support enforcement automated telephone systems identifies key content and features employed by the most useful systems. These

traits, including comprehensive content, ready accessibility, and usability features, combine to create systems which are helpful to both new and experienced callers. In terms of system content and information, we found that it is critical for systems to provide clear and quick access to the most important topic areas, such as case-specific payment information. Among features of accessibility and usability, we found that automating key topic areas and providing basic navigational tools is highly important to improving caller experiences. In reviewing systems not identified as models, we found a number of limitations to usefulness and make suggestions for improving child support enforcement automated telephone systems and enhance service to callers.

Suggestions for Improvement. To improve the content, accessibility, and usability of State child support enforcement automated telephone systems, we suggest that the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) help States enhance their systems. Particular emphasis could be placed on improving operations in the nine States identified as using poor automated systems. The model system traits listed in the primer on page 5 could serve as a model for basic system features, and could be promoted to States by listing these traits on the ACF website. We suggest ACF could provide technical assistance to help States:

▸ **Focus on key topic areas.** Assist States in simplifying their automated telephone systems, both in content and function, to help them emulate the model States. The most useful systems provide substantive information but allow callers to access key, critical issues, such as payment information and case initiation, quickly and easily, without requiring callers to listen to unnecessary menus or information.

▸ **Make systems more user-friendly.** Assist States in building systems that center on services to parents, offering 24-hour access and features that ease use. Technical assistance to States could target creating systems that include useful mechanical features, using the traits listed in the primer on page 5 as a model for basic system features. These model traits could be promoted through the ACF website.

▸ **Target first-time callers.** Foster State efforts to include messages, features, and content specifically targeted to first-time callers unfamiliar with procedures. These callers might benefit from the provision of a separate menu built for new or prospective clients.

▸ **Automate functions when possible.** Encourage States to automate key information, such as payment details, rather than relying primarily on live representatives. Systems could attempt to answer basic caller questions through recorded messages and automated interaction, reserving live representatives for unique inquiries.

▸ **Update information frequently.** Encourage States to keep information available on automated systems accurate and current. Most critical is the accuracy of further contact information, such as county office addresses and telephone numbers.

AGENCY COMMENTS

ACF concurs with the findings and suggestions for improvement included in our report. Additionally, ACF plans to publicize the traits of model automated telephone systems on their agency website. ACF also indicates that it will target the nine States rated poorly in our report for further review and technical assistance. In commenting on our report, ACF outlines details of web-based training it is currently offering to State child support enforcement agencies. These efforts appear to address many of the limitations to effective customer service that we identify for automated telephone systems. As our report indicates, similar technical assistance could be of value in improving automated telephone systems.

T A B L E   O F   C O N T E N T S

PAGE

INTRODUCTION

OBJECTIVE

To evaluate the quality of parent access to child support enforcement information and customer service through State-level automated telephone systems and identify opportunities for improving these systems.

BACKGROUND

Recent legislation and initiatives increased the overall awareness of the need to provide quality customer service to child support enforcement clients. The Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA)[1] of 1993 focuses on improving Federal program effectiveness and public accountability by promoting results, service quality, and public satisfaction. Under a GPRA pilot project, the Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) lists improving customer service delivery and quality among its chief goals.[2]

Automated telephone systems play an integral role in how State child support enforcement agencies communicate with clients and provide customer service. They can efficiently and economically provide useful information and client services from virtually any location, at any time. A 1995 report by the Federal Performance Review estimates that government agencies spend three times more money to respond to inquiries by letter than by telephone.[3] Automated recordings can relay general information about child support enforcement services and give clients access to case-specific information, such as dates and amounts of support payments. These systems can also often link clients to child support enforcement staff, to handle further inquiries and case management tasks.

The most effective automated telephone systems are both accessible and user-friendly. A recent Federal Consortium Benchmark study identified several desirable traits among telephone systems that it reviewed.[4] It suggests systems that offer 24-hour access, short wait times between selections, live representatives, accurate information, and clear recordings in plain language. It also indicates systems that should allow callers to navigate within menus for easy location of information. Additionally, systems should offer options in the languages most often used by clients.

State policy stemming from welfare reform has also recently altered the way the child support community thinks about the customer base for which automated systems are designed. While OCSE and its State partners traditionally view custodial parents as their primary customers, many now also see noncustodial parents as clients. Consequently, States may augment systems to provide information and services to both parent groups.

METHODOLOGY

Study Focus

Automated telephone systems typically consist of a series of menus, of varying complexity, from which callers access information and services. In reviewing system content, we focused on the topics addressed, and the depth and accuracy of the information provided. Studying the mechanical features, we focused on how easy the system is for callers to use. Mechanical issues include the ability to reach the system, the clarity of recorded messages, the extent of instructions provided, and the use of functions designed to provide greater maneuverability within each system.

This report examines six aspects of State-level automated telephone systems:

▸ use of systems by States and identification of model traits
▸ comprehensiveness of system content
▸ system accessibility to callers
▸ system usability by callers
▸ limitations to system usefulness

State-level Automated Systems

To compile our list of telephone systems, we requested child support enforcement agencies in all States and the District of Columbia to provide us with a list of all State-level and local-level automated telephone numbers that were available for clients in August 2001. Because some States had more than one system, or multiple lines to a single system, States submitted 101 State-level telephone numbers (Table 1). We called all of the telephone numbers to verify that they were automated systems, rather than live service, and currently in operation. We eliminated non-working numbers and those which duplicated other systems. Our final list consisted of 69 State-level numbers from 49 States, and we base our report statistics on this set. The remaining two States did not have automated systems. We further reviewed a sample of local-level systems to provide additional insight regarding the possible experiences of child support enforcement clients seeking information and services in States which operate local systems.

Table 1: State-level automated telephone systems

Classification	Systems
Automated systems	69
Live representatives	14
In-State-only access	9
Duplicates	4
Other	3
Disconnected	2
Total	**101**

Source: Verification of State-reported telephone numbers, Office of Inspector General

Because we found no significant differences between these local-level systems and the State-level systems reviewed, we do not include data regarding local-level systems in our report.

Data Collection

Two OIG analysts separately reviewed each State-level system between August and October 2001. Using a standardized protocol, reviewers systematically recorded and assessed multiple factors regarding content, accessibility, and usability. We developed the protocol through a review of literature describing customer service efforts in child support enforcement and other fields, and pre-inspection data collection and analysis using a sample of State systems. We attempted contact of each State-level system during three time slots, to verify access at different times of the day and different days of the week. The primer on page 5 of this report outlines the items we reviewed by category.

Once contact with a system was successful, reviewers accessed all menus, noting mechanical features and creating a 'tree' of all available selections. Reviewers also rated the comprehensiveness of the information given. A system was considered to have provided 'substantive' information about a topic if the level of detail and practicality of the information contained in the recorded messages appeared sufficient to inform callers without referral to a live representative or other source. If such substantive information covered an array of topic areas, we considered the system as a whole to provide 'comprehensive' information. We also determined whether any referral numbers given by systems were accessible and what information they provided.

When selections culminated in transfer to a live representative, we recorded at what point in the menus this option was offered, whether staff were available, and how quickly they answered. Because case-specific information often requires a client access code, our access was limited, but we reviewed as much of this service component as possible. Although most criteria could be reviewed objectively, ratings of a few factors, such as voice clarity and pace, were based on the judgment of the two reviewers. When the judgment of reviewers differed, we combined ratings for average measures of items.

Data Analysis

We conducted our data analysis at two levels: State-centered (using the 49 States with at least one operating system); and system-centered (using the total of 69 State-level systems). For the State-centered analysis, we identified the most expansive system with the most service options in each State. This State-centered analysis is presented first in the report, to characterize the level of national coverage of automated telephone systems, as well as to identify the number of States with exemplary systems. The remainder of the report uses all 69 State-level systems to focus on describing overall system characteristics. This system-centered analysis enumerates the types of information and services offered, and rates their accessibility and usability on a number of factors. The combination of State-centered and system-centered analysis provides

both a complete national view of State use of systems and an operational view of how they work.

The basis of much of our analysis is our development of a list of model system traits. After dissecting all system traits captured by the standardized data collection protocol, we developed a guideline, which describes traits of the best systems. In addition to identifying these model characteristics, our subsequent analysis uses the model as a guideline for comparing and describing various specific system traits regarding content, accessibility, and usability. Last, reviewers gave all systems an overall rating, to provide a collective view of the quality of each system, serving as a confirmation of our systematic evaluation of specific items within systems. We used positive ratings to confirm our selection of 'model' systems and negative ratings to help identify limitations to system usefulness. We describe these recurring limitations, and highlight features and modifications that could improve system quality.

Data Limitations

We note a few limitations to our data collection process. The first is that our calls to State automated systems occurred during a three-month period in 2001, and we recognize that States may have subsequently modified their systems. Also, the use of OIG analysts to complete the standardized protocols may introduce a bias toward callers who are more adept at using automated systems. On this point, analysts were instructed to view system traits from the perspective of a less-experienced caller to the extent possible. Callers to automated systems are assumed to typically be parents, but may include other interested parties, such as employers. Thus, we will use the term "callers" for those who used these automated systems. Last, our focus on State-level automated systems should not be taken to mean that clients might not also receive telephone service from local-level automated systems or strictly through live representatives.

This study was conducted in accordance with the *Quality Standards for Inspections* issued by the President's Council on Integrity and Efficiency.

Primer On State Child Support Enforcement Automated Telephone Systems: Items Reviewed and Model Traits

Our evaluation focused on the content, accessibility, and usability of all State-level automated systems. We developed a standardized protocol to record and rate their characteristics. Consideration was given to customer service literature in child support enforcement and related fields, and pre-inspection data collection using a sample of State systems. After dissecting all system characteristics, captured by the standardized data collection protocol, we created a guideline for model traits, which describes characteristics of the best systems. We selected these traits because we found them to be indispensable to providing effective service to the broadest number of callers. The following table lists items reviewed, within the three evaluative categories, and denotes the resulting model traits we determined to be most critical to system usefulness.

Automated Telephone Systems: Items Reviewed and Model Traits

	Items Reviewed	**Model System Traits**
CONTENT	Case-specific information (payment and other) →	Provide payment information
	Program information (paternity, enforcement, etc.) →	Provide comprehensive program information
	Introductory recorded message	
	Instructions for making payments	
	Instructions for application process	
	Local office contact information	
	Other social service program information	
	Primary system function	
ACCESSIBILITY	Attempts to access →	Accessible on first attempt
	Hours of operation →	Operate 24 hours, 7 days a week
	Toll-free status	Provide toll-free access
	Live representatives and hours available	
	Rotary caller access	
	Spanish language access	
	Access variability (by time and day)	
USABILITY	Overall usefulness →	Rated high in overall usefulness
	Ease in reaching a live representative →	Direct transfer to live representatives
	Shortcuts to advance through menus →	Allow repeat callers to skip ahead
	Option to repeat menus →	Allow system to repeat menus
	Use of technical jargon →	Avoid problematic jargon
	System instructions	Instruct callers on their use
	Clarity and pace of narration	
	Narrative consistency	
	Wait time between selections	
	Navigation errors	
	Menu sequence	

FINDINGS

Automated telephone systems play an integral role in how State child support enforcement agencies provide customer service. To assess the provision of information and services, we directly accessed and reviewed all 69 Statewide automated telephone system that States reported operating in August 2001. Based on our guideline of model system traits, we found that 14 States have systems that could be considered models of operation. These systems provide substantial information, are readily accessible, and easy to use. The 69 systems generally provide information about a variety of child support enforcement issues, and 61 systems allow clients to access case-specific information. Although we found that all systems provide useful information, we identify a number of limitations to usefulness, such as recorded messages that are too complex and over reliance on live representatives to provide key information and services.

OVERVIEW OF STATE SYSTEMS

Forty-nine State child support enforcement agencies use automated telephone systems to provide customer service

Forty-nine States, including the District of Columbia, operate at least one State-wide automated telephone system, as a means of communicating with clients.
Of these 49 States:

▸ 37 provide substantive information and service through their automated system;
▸ 6 use their systems to direct callers to obtain information elsewhere; and
▸ 6 use their systems to provide assistance only to existing clients, by requiring a case number or personal identification number to access their systems.

Of the two remaining States, one reports to operate an automated system, but we could not access it after repeated attempts over several months, and therefore, assume it is not available to callers. The other State reports that it provides all telephone service through live representatives. Thirteen States operate more than one State-wide automated system.

In 14 model States, callers have superior access to comprehensive and useful child support enforcement information

These 14 States exhibit a number of traits that set them apart (see primer on page 5). The combination of comprehensive system content, ready accessibility, and high usability, allow them to provide customer service effectively and efficiently. In addition to thorough assessment of each item in our protocol, reviewers gave a rating of overall usefulness, after pursuing all menu options for each. All 14 model States have all of the

traits we considered critical to identifying automated systems as models, and were also rated highly on this broader measure. The 14 States with model child support enforcement automated telephone systems are Hawaii, Indiana, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Minnesota, North Carolina, North Dakota, New Hampshire, New Jersey, Texas, Utah, Virginia, Vermont, and Wisconsin.

Twenty-six other States have systems which meet most, but not all, of these model system traits and were rated highly by reviewers in overall usefulness. The nine remaining States operate automated systems that are missing more than two model traits. Reviewers experienced difficulty in accessing these systems, found them frustrating to navigate, and reported that they typically contained less substantive information than their model counterparts.

The remainder of the report uses all 69 State-level systems to outline overall system characteristics.

SYSTEM CONTENT - Model system content provides both case-specific payment information and comprehensive program information.

Callers receive case-specific payment information through 61 of the 69 systems; payment instructions and program overviews are also common

<u>Case-specific information.</u> Information about individual cases, primarily related to tracking child support payments, is available through 61 of the 69 State-wide systems (Table 2).

Payment information is usually provided in an automated fashion, following client entry of a personal identifier.[5] Common items offered in payment menus are the dates of payment receipt and disbursement, as well as the total amount of any arrearage due. Introductions to case-specific menus often clarify how current the payment information is and when the system will next be updated.[6] Eighteen of the 61 systems which give case-specific information rely exclusively on live representatives to provide these details, having no automated information about cases.[7]

Table 2: Information provided by automated telephone systems	
Topic:	**Of 69 Systems:**
Case-specific information	61
Payment instructions	52
Program overviews	47
Instructions for application process	43
County contact information (telephone, address, etc.)	33
Paternity establishment procedures	27
Enforcement information (tax intercept)	25
Referrals to related programs	22
Source: Analysis of 69 systems, Office of Inspector General	

<u>Payment instructions.</u> Fifty-two systems offer information about how to make payments and how the child support enforcement agency processes payments. Wage

withholding is the most prominent payment-related topic, with 10 systems giving instructions for establishing, adjusting, and canceling wage withholding orders. Other instructions outline paying by mail or through Electronic Funds Transfer. Menu options may also provide information about payment of arrearages and interest policies. Although all 69 systems reviewed are primarily intended for child support enforcement clients, 28 systems also target payment-related information to employers. For example, employers can provide information about new hires and changes in employment through live representatives or voicemail.

Program overviews. Forty-seven systems provide recorded descriptions of child support enforcement services, which are typically brief, but give useful program overviews. These automated systems describe child support enforcement agency policies and procedures, and outline the stages of the enforcement process: paternity and order establishment, location, enforcement, and disbursement. The portion of the enforcement process that is most often covered thoroughly (27 systems) is paternity establishment, including information about voluntary paternity acknowledgment, and locations for submitting to genetic testing. Potential clients can receive varying degrees of information about the application process from 43 systems, and 33 systems also provide contact information for local child support enforcement offices. Other topics appear geared toward management of existing cases, including review and adjustment, case closure, and suggestions for pursuing interstate cases or adding medical support to an order.

Referrals to related programs. Twenty-two systems give callers guidance regarding other social service programs or court-related services. Social service programs covered by automated systems include TANF public assistance programs, family counseling, and healthcare services. These systems typically provide contact information for the relevant agency, with a few giving more substantive details, such as program descriptions and qualifications. Nine systems provide information about issues related to, but outside, the realm of the child support enforcement agency, such as referrals for court-related services or job training.

Enforcement information. Systems also provide information about specific enforcement tactics, such as tax and insurance intercept initiatives, interstate enforcement procedures, passport denial, and reports to credit bureaus. Systems may also be able to provide individual information about their use in specific cases. Tax intercept information, covered by 25 States, is particularly detailed and includes explanations of related tax code and how intercept is handled for joint returns. Systems appear to anticipate calls from noncustodial parents, who may only make contact with the child support enforcement agency after these measures have been used in their case. For example, some recorded messages explain the legal basis for the enforcement measure and provide information for appealing an enforcement action. Other topics appear targeted for custodial parents, such as instructions for reporting overpayment, delayed payments or lost checks, as well as messages describing how clients might take better

advantage of enforcement strategies, such as providing additional information about the noncustodial parent.

SYSTEM ACCESSIBILITY -

Model systems are accessible on the first attempt, operate 24/7, and provide toll-free service.

Caller access to information is generally good, with 57 systems available 24/7, 49 offering toll-free service, and 57 answering calls on the first attempt

Hours of operation. We found that 57 of the 69 systems operate 24 hours a day, seven days a week (Table 3). Those not operating around-the-clock are typically limited to business hours, approximately 8:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m. Systems with limited hours often have after-hours recorded messages which tell callers when they should call back for full service. One system offers more extensive automated information after business hours, because live representatives provide most of the information during regular hours.

Table 3: System accessibility features	
Features:	**Of 69 Systems:**
24-Hour access	57
Access on first attempt	57
Toll-free access	49
Rotary caller access	28
Spanish language access	19
Source: Analysis of 69 systems, Office of Inspector General	

Attempts to access. Fifty-seven of the 69 automated systems answered reviewers' calls on the first attempt. Among the 12 systems that required more than one attempt to reach, six were accessed on the second or third attempt, and six required upwards of 10 attempts before our calls were answered. When they were not answered, systems typically either return a busy signal or continue ringing indefinitely with no response. Two systems play recorded messages indicating that because all lines are busy, callers should try again later.

Toll-free status. Forty-nine systems are accessible toll-free from anywhere in the continental United States. Among the 20 systems that are not toll-free, eight have calling areas that cover the entire State in which they operate. Twelve systems require a toll call, but one of these offers to accept collect calls in its introductory message.

Rotary caller access. Twenty-eight telephone systems specifically notify callers using a rotary telephone that they can choose either a speech-activated menu or a live representative for information. However, at least some of the systems that do not mention services for rotary callers, nevertheless, appear to route such calls to a live representative, if no menu selection is made after several seconds.

Callers to 19 systems can access menus and recorded messages in Spanish; no other alternative languages are offered

Spanish is the only language alternative to English offered by automated systems, with 19 systems providing recorded messages in both languages. Callers to these systems are typically offered a choice between Spanish or English, prior to the first menu. The U.S. Census Bureau identifies California, New Mexico, New York, and Texas as having the largest proportion of adults who speak Spanish but do not speak English well.[8] All four of these States offer a Spanish language option within their child support enforcement automated telephone system. Among the 50 systems that offer information only in English, four indicate in their recordings that staff are available to communicate in other languages. However, this service may require calling another number or leaving a voicemail message requesting a return call.

SYSTEM USABILITY -

Model systems allow callers to make selections and repeat menus before menus end, feature system instructions, avoid problematic jargon, and directly transfer callers to live representatives.

To ease navigation, callers may select items before menus end and repeat menus, but systems may not give instructions or alert callers to use these features

Navigational tools and instructions. To ease navigation, systems let callers make selections and repeat menus before menus end, but these systems may not give instructions or alert callers to these features. Sixty-one systems allow callers to make a menu selection without listening to the entire list of

Table 4: System usability features	
Features:	**Of 69 Systems:**
Shortcuts to advance through menus	61
Option to repeat menus	55
Instructions for system use	49
Source: Analysis of 69 Systems, Office of Inspector General	

menu options (Table 4). By using the early selection function, callers can more quickly access desired information. However, this option is not always explicitly indicated, so that reviewers only discovered the function by attempting to make selections before messages ended.

Fifty-five of the 69 systems allow callers to repeat menus, and five of these automatically repeat menus when callers delay making a selection. The option to repeat menus helps callers avoid making multiple calls to get all the information needed. We found the easiest to use systems include information on repeat functions in the introductory message. They also briefly remind callers how to use the repeat function at the end of each recorded message, and automatically repeat the menu if no selection is made. However, 14 of the 55 systems that have the repeat function do not inform callers of the option, and seven other systems only mention their repeat function well into menus.

Forty-nine automated systems offer callers specific instructions for use, as either a part of the introductory message or a separate menu item. These instructions are particularly valuable for callers unfamiliar with the system, as were our reviewers. They typically inform callers how to repeat menus, make selections before the end of a list of options, and return to the main menu. However, we found no need for instructions when a system was well-designed and straightforward.

Callers encounter clear and well-paced recorded messages in 57 systems, and only 4 systems use difficult technical language or jargon

System narration. Recorded voices used by the systems are usually clear and well-paced. Using three factors (voice clarity, voice consistency, and pacing), reviewers rated 57 of the 69 systems easy to understand. When recordings were difficult to decipher, it was typically due to inconsistency in narration, computer-generated voices, or rushed delivery. Narrative inconsistency, such as voice changes with each menu option, appears to be the result of systems incorporating messages recorded at various times. While such inconsistency is not necessarily disruptive, it sometimes distracts from the message and appears less professional. Messages spoken too quickly also make it difficult for callers to write down information. Pacing is particularly important when systems provide contact information, such as local office addresses and telephone numbers. To alleviate problems caused by message pacing, a few systems automatically repeat referral information.

Use of technical language. While 47 automated systems use at least some technical terms, only four use such language or jargon to a degree that reviewers found problematic, using technical terms or jargon frequently without explaining the terms. Examples of more difficult terms we encountered include arrearage, obligor, skip trace, and adjudicate, and acronyms not in wide use such as EFT (Electronic Funds Transfer). Although usually defined by the narration, we also found that systems overall tend to rely heavily on acronyms or abbreviated agency titles, such as IV-D, DCSE or 'Kids First.' Forty-seven systems use technical terms in some capacity, but most terms are defined or further explained.

Forty-eight systems provide callers with the option to talk with a live representative, and other systems provide voicemail service

Use of live representatives. Forty-eight systems supplement their automated services with the option to speak with a live representative. Of these 48 systems:

- ► 38 offer live service during weekday business hours;
- ► 9 offer extended weekday hours; and
- ► 1 offers weekday hours plus Saturday service.

When selecting this option, callers are typically connected with customer service specialists or child support enforcement caseworkers who either provide callers with information or direct them to where they can obtain information. Some systems route calls to representatives by topic. Representatives can typically inform callers about recent payments or perform general administrative tasks, such as updating a client's mailing address. Beyond these basic functions, the level of personal service varies. Examples of other services include fielding questions regarding policies and procedures, case-specific services unrelated to payment, such as scheduling an appointment, or adding new information to the case file.

Reviewers found live representatives fairly easy to reach. Representatives answered immediately for 19 of the 48 systems, within three minutes for 25, and exceeded three minutes for only four systems. When callers had to wait for a live representative, they were typically on hold rather than listening to a continuous telephone ring. Despite generally short wait times, reviewers found the live representative option 'difficult' to use for seven systems. Problems include difficulty finding the option within the menus, persistent busy signals, lost connections, and connection to a voice mailbox rather than a live representative.

Voicemail alternative. Nineteen of the 21 systems that do not offer a live representative allow callers to interact with the system by leaving voicemail messages. A common use of voicemail is to allow callers to request a change of address or documents, such as case payment histories. Another use is to encourage callers to leave voicemail with 'tip-offs' about the whereabouts or income of a non-paying parent.

LIMITATIONS TO SYSTEM USEFULNESS

Upon completion of their comprehensive review of each system's content, accessibility, and usability, reviewers gave each an overall rating. They rated 44 systems as 'easy' or 'very easy' to use, 18 as 'neither easy nor difficult' to use, and seven systems as 'difficult' or 'very difficult' to use. Further analysis of the 25 systems that received a neutral or negative overall rating revealed limitations to their usefulness for callers. In this section, we identify these limitations and contrast less useful systems with model systems.

Problems commonly inhibiting usefulness for callers are systems that are too complex, are not caller-oriented, and include outdated information

Overly complex. When systems provide a wide array of options, they may become very detailed without enhancing usefulness or properly directing callers to key topics. Reviewers found navigating systems frustrating when they are highly detailed but do not provide the thorough content and full service expected from such exhaustive systems. These systems tend to include vast menu options within which the most critical topics can easily be lost. For example, arcane tax code descriptions might be listed within the initial menu, while the payment address is provided deep into a second or third tier menu. In

other cases, numerous menu options seem to promise substantive information, but are really just elaborate routing systems for voice mailboxes. This was particularly frustrating when callers had screened through several menu layers to get to their topic of interest. Even when the options provide substantive information, the recorded messages are often wordy and complicated, such as the system which provides citations from State law for each policy issue discussed.

Model systems provide a large number of recorded messages without added complexity and with features which assist caller use. Reviewers identified three strategies that allowed them to better absorb and handle the multiple options. One strategy involves systems using screener questions in the main menu which lead to menus with more specific options. Another strategy involves placing topics likely to be of greatest interest, such as county contact and payment information, among the first offered in initial menus. A third strategy provides separate menus for custodial and noncustodial parents. These menus often include some of the same information, but allow parents to avoid wading through many options that did not apply to them. Equally important to all strategies was the use of brief messages in simple, clear language.

Not user-friendly. When systems were rated difficult to use overall, it was often because their features, content, and tone are not conducive to assisting or serving callers. Model systems present content from the perspective of offering service to customers, predicting caller needs and easing experience with respectful tones and user-friendly features. One ineffective system instructs callers to contact their county first, and then sternly admonishes them to "call us only if you have a problem." Sometimes systems include adequate information and features, but reviewers felt that using the systems would not be comfortable or reassuring to clients. This was caused by a combination of the voices and language used, such as very formal program descriptions recorded with a fast-paced and monotone delivery.

We found other examples of inattentive service. One system requires callers to submit questions in writing rather than offering live representative or voicemail options. Another directs callers to the telephone book to find contact information for local offices instead of providing the information. This lack of direction is especially confusing when recordings refer to the office by its acronym, such as DCSE. Another system, referring callers to local offices, disconnects those who do not know how to spell their county name, rather than providing a list of counties or a zip code directory as other systems do. Sometimes indifference to callers concerned mechanical features, such as the complex system that has a time limit of five minutes for the duration of telephone calls, or several that disconnect callers for exceeding the number of options a caller is allowed. Full voicemail boxes were another service issue, with reviewers finding some full for days.

Ill-suited to new callers. New clients may not find automated systems to be as useful as veteran callers, particularly when a telephone call is the first attempt to gain access to services. As shown in Table 2, only 43 of 69 automated systems offer specific instructions

about how to apply for child support enforcement services. Systems lacking information about applications sometimes offer messages explaining the various stages of enforcement, but do not include simple, clear instructions for the novice client to begin pursuing enforcement. Additionally, system mechanics sometimes do not appear to consider new callers. As shown in Table 4, only 49 systems offer instructions for navigating menus, and only 55 offer callers the option to repeat menus. First-time users in particular might require information to be repeated in order to write down telephone numbers, addresses, or additional information.

So as not to burden repeat callers, one system uses a screening option that separates new from existing clients. New callers receive menu options outlining program services and how they might apply, while existing clients reach options that focus on case management, such as payment and order modification. This allows both types of callers to access useful information more quickly, and might also make the system less overwhelming to novices.

Over-reliance on live representatives. Generally speaking, live representatives contribute to system usefulness by allowing clients to gain additional information not provided through recordings and automated features. However, reviewers found that too much reliance on live representatives to provide information and services limits the overall usefulness of systems. As noted, live representatives are available only during certain hours and days, and reviewers experienced some wait time on a majority of systems with live service. Additionally, some live representatives are tasked only with directing callers to where they can obtain information rather than providing the information. Because of these limitations, callers cannot access information except during live service hours and must make additional calls to gain any information and services that are not automated.

Model systems tend to respond to all of the most commonly anticipated client inquiries through automated functions, making live representatives available primarily for unusual client needs. In particular, all model systems make automated access to payment information available around the clock. Additionally, model systems provide recorded messages about many child support enforcement topics. It makes them not only more available than live information, and it also helps to insure that all callers hear the same information on any given topic. In addition to being more useful to clients, the Federal Performance Review suggests that automated information is a cost-effective means of providing customer service.

Inaccurate or outdated information. Reviewers encountered information that was inaccurate or had not been updated recently. For example, five systems provided telephone numbers for local child support enforcement offices that we found to be either wrong or disconnected. Callers seeking these local office telephone numbers would have to obtain them elsewhere. One system referred to the long-defunct Assistance for Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program which had been replaced by the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program at least four years prior to our data collection. While such outdated information is not inaccurate, reviewers found it tended to

slow the flow of recorded messages and created questions about whether more critical information, such as payment data, would be current. Model systems update frequently, notifying clients of recent events or policy changes that might affect their cases or payment processing. Model systems also appear to update at least their introductory messages almost daily and inform callers about the timing of the last automated update.

SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

CONCLUSION

Our analysis of model child support enforcement automated telephone systems identifies key content and features employed by the most useful systems. These traits, including comprehensive content, ready accessibility, and usability features, combine to create systems which are helpful to both novice and experienced callers. In terms of system content and information, we found that it is critical for systems to provide clear and quick access to the most important topic areas, such as case-specific payment information. Among features of accessibility and usability, we found that automating key topic areas and providing basic navigational tools are highly important to improving caller experiences. While all systems provide valuable information, we found limitations to their usefulness. Following review of both model and less effective systems, we developed a number of suggestions for improving automated telephone systems and enhancing service to callers.

SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

To improve the content, accessibility, and usability of State child support enforcement automated telephone systems, we suggest that the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) provide technical assistance to help States enhance their systems. The traits listed in the primer on page 5 could serve as a model for basic system features, and could be promoted to States by listing them on the ACF website. In carrying out these suggestions, particular emphasis should be placed on improving operations in the nine States identified as using poor automated systems.

- ► **Focus on key topic areas.** Assist States in simplifying their automated telephone systems, both in content and function, to help them emulate the model States. Without sacrificing comprehensive content on a variety of program components, service should focus primarily on key areas, such as payment and case initiation. The most useful systems contain substantive information, but in a streamlined fashion. The information provided focuses on key, critical issues by making select information on such things as payment immediately accessible and allotting space deeper in the menus for information that is less likely to be of value to all callers.

- ► **Make systems more user-friendly.** Assist States in developing automated telephone systems that focus on service to parents, are available around the clock, and provide features to improve caller experiences. This would likely involve technical assistance to States targeted at creating systems that include useful navigational tools and mechanical features. Consideration should also be given to conveying information to parents in a respectful and courteous tone.

- ▸ **Target first-time callers.** Foster State efforts to include messages, features and content specifically targeted to first-time callers and those not familiar with child support enforcement procedures. These might include instructions to apply for enforcement services, more comprehensive descriptions of program services, and detailed county office contact information. Callers might benefit further from the provision of a separate menu built specifically for new or prospective clients.

- ▸ **Automate functions when possible.** Encourage States to automate all key information and services, particularly case-specific payment information. Although the provision of live representatives gives clients a choice about how to interact, these representatives are not always available. Systems should attempt to answer basic caller questions through recorded messages and automated interaction, reserving live representatives for unique inquiries.

- ▸ **Update information frequently.** Encourage States to develop ways to keep information available on automated systems accurate and current. Most critical is the accuracy of further contact information, such as county office addresses and telephone numbers. Attention should also be paid to temporary, time-sensitive messages included within the introduction and subsequent menus, as well as policy and program information relevant to clients.

AGENCY COMMENTS

ACF concurs with the findings and suggestions for improvement included in our report. Additionally, ACF plans to publicize the traits of model automated telephone systems on their agency website. ACF also indicates that it will target the nine States rated poorly in our report for further review and technical assistance. In commenting on our report, ACF outlines details of web-based training that it is currently offering to State child support enforcement agencies. These efforts appear to address many of the limitations to achieve effective customer service that we identify for automated telephone systems. As our report indicates, similar technical assistance could be of value in improving automated telephone systems.

ENDNOTES

1. Government Performance and Results Act, Pub. L. 103-62, August, 1993.

2. Office of Child Support Enforcement, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *Child Support Enforcement Strategic Plan.* Washington, D.C., February 1996.

3. *Ibid*, page 4.

4. Federal Benchmarking Consortium. *Putting Customers First Serving the American Public: Best Practices In Telephone Service,* Washington, D.C., National Performance Review, February 1995.

5. Typically, these unique identifiers were any one or a combination of a client's Social Security number, case number, or personal identification number (PIN). A few systems require multiple identifiers, using numbers, such as the dependent's date of birth.

6. In all cases that designated how current the payment information is, the date was the last business day prior to our call.

7. These staff, as well as live representatives available through more fully-automated systems, can typically also provide case-specific information not related to payments, such as court hearing dates.

8. The Census 2000 Supplementary Survey, Table 3035: *Age by Language Spoken at Home by Ability to Speak English,* U.S. Census Bureau, Washington, D.C., 2001.

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES

ADMINISTRATION FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES
Office of the Assistant Secretary, Suite 600
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7/18/02

TO: Janet Rehnquist
           Inspector General

FROM:

           Wade F. Horn, Ph.D.
           Assistant Secretary
             for Children and Families

SUBJECT:

Comments on the Office of Inspector General (OIG) Draft Report: "Statewide Child Support Enforcement Automated Telephone Systems" (OEI-06-00-00460)

Attached are the Administration for Children and Families' comments on the OIG Draft Report.

If you have any questions regarding our comments, please contact Dr. Sherri Z. Heller, Commissioner, Office of Child Support Enforcement, at (202) 401-9370.

Attachment

COMMENTS OF THE ADMINISTRATION FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES ON THE OFFICE OF THE INSPECTOR GENERAL (OIG) DRAFT REPORT: "STATEWIDE CHILD SUPPORT ENFORCEMENT AUTOMATED TELEPHONE SYSTEMS: (OEI-06-00-00460)

General Comments

The Administration for Children and Families appreciates the opportunity to comment on this draft report, which addresses the use of technology to support exemplary customer service. The Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) has been working closely with the OIG on this effort. OCSE and OIG were panelists at the National Child Support Enforcement Association annual meeting in New Orleans in August 2002 discussing the need for improving customer service and increasing the use of automation to serve child support clients.

ACF Response

OIG presents five (5) opportunities for improvement. Our response addresses the opportunities as a group rather than individually. The reason for taking this approach is that the OIG's report focuses on the use of voice response units to provide 24/7 access to child support clients and OCSE is currently focusing efforts on encouraging states to provide 24/7 access to child support customers via the internet. The technologies differ while the goals are shared. OCSE proposes to support these goals by providing a web-based customer service training course which will address several of the OIG recommendations including making systems more user-friendly, automating functions when possible and updating information frequently.

While OCSE's focus is on a customer service web initiative, OCSE is also planning to conduct level of automation reviews for states. The nine states identified in the OIG report could be targeted for assistance by the OCSE staff during our automation summits and level of automation reviews. OCSE also has a best practices compendium and searchable web site, where we can publicize the best practices identified in this OIG report.

Here are the details of our web-based training curriculum. In FY 2002, OCSE contracted with State Information Technology Consortium (SITC) to develop training and provide 2-day training sessions on customer service web development. This course will showcase best practices and lessons learned from states and provide information for participants in defining, building, and operating a child support enforcement (CSE) web-based customer service system in states or territories. The training will be delivered five (5) times over the course of September 2002 – March 2003. At the end of this course, participants will be able to create a high-level system description, tailored for each participant's state or territory, including information on some or all of the following system life cycle areas, as appropriate:

- Analysis implications, including functions and features, and locations for use of a CSE customer service website;

- Design implications, such as existing technical architecture, portals, other agency websites, data confidentiality and access controls, security and privacy, and system reliability considerations;

- Development implications, such as development platforms, testing procedures, multiple languages, and the degree of automation of interactive information;

- Implementation implications, such as training, piloting, promotion and publicity, and client awareness;

- Operations implications, such as ongoing maintenance and enhancement; and

- Management implications, such as tangible benefits, cost estimates, risk management, and lessons learned.

Participants will receive relevant information and documentation collected from other states and a contact list of Federal and state personnel who can assist after the course ends. Participants will also leave the course with a "to

do" list of three to five specific actions they can take after training to facilitate progress in their agencies toward initiating or enhancing a web-based CSE customer service system.

The courses were announced in Dear Colleague Letter-02-16, dated July 8, 2002. Here is the delivery schedule:

- September 23-25, 2002 in Arlington, VA
- November 14-15, 2002 in New York City;
- January 13-14, 2003 in Dallas;
- February 25-26, 2003 in Atlanta; and
- March 25-26, in Seattle.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS