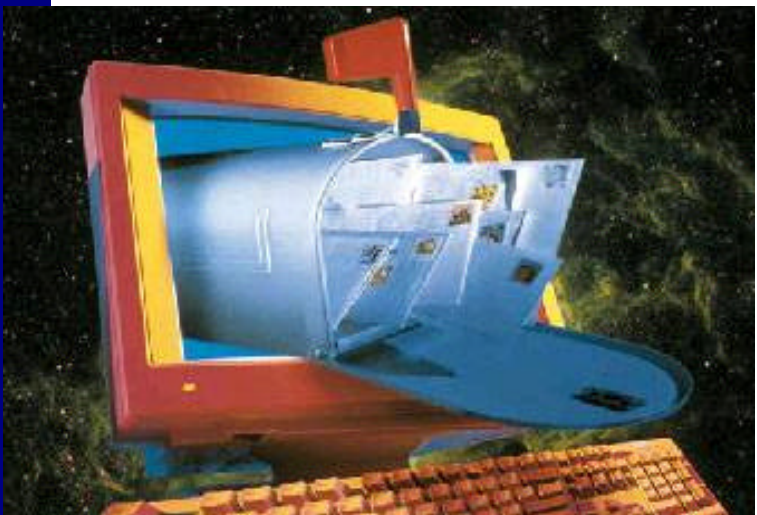




# The National Regulatory Research Institute

**The Organization of  
the Public Utility  
Commission Call  
Center**



**THE ORGANIZATION OF THE PUBLIC UTILITY  
COMMISSION CALL CENTER**

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Few would argue that deregulation of the telecommunications, natural gas and electric industries has had a profound impact on both consumers and state public utility commissions. As a result of both the increase and complexity of consumer interactions, the role and function of the state public utility commission call center has evolved as well. The role of the call center has evolved from primarily a complaint-resolution center to an integral component of commission policymaking and enforcement functions.

This report describes the results of a recent NRRI series of focused interviews that examined the impact of competition on call centers within 10 state public utility commissions. During the year 2002, a series of focused interviews were conducted with call center managers regarding the impact of competition on the call center. Management level representatives from California, Colorado, Florida, Michigan, New Hampshire, New York, Ohio, South Carolina, Washington State and Wisconsin participated in the interviews.

Interview questions focused on trends observed by call center staff and the impact of the trends on the function of the call center, as well as challenges facing call center staff. Special attention was paid to the use of automated systems, monitoring of trends and changes in staffing patterns.

Conclusions indicated that competition has had a tremendous impact on the consumer's interactions with the call center. Specific trends reported by participating states can be grouped into the following categories:

- Increased consumer interactions
- More complex complaints and contacts
- Increased market abuses

This in turn has had a significant impact on the organization of the call center. Observations gleaned from the NRRI interviews can be divided into two categories: impact on staffing and impact on workflow processes. With regard to staffing, the new competitive environment has impacted staff size and staff composition. For example, the backgrounds of the staff are much more varied and the average education level has also increased. With regard to workflow processes, the new competitive environment has called for a need for increased efficiency and increased use of automated systems.

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## **FOREWORD**

Call centers are a vital component of the consumer affair's function of state public utility commissions. The information presented in this report provides valuable insights regarding the impact of competition on call centers and the challenges facing call center staff.

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Director, NRRRI  
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## **INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>**

A state public utility commission's call center is the heart of the commission's interaction with the public. In fact, for many consumers contact with the call center is often their only direct contact with the commission. With the advent of deregulation, and the subsequent competition that has emerged in the utility industries, market conditions have changed. As a result, the role and function of the call center has evolved as well. The role of the call center has evolved from primarily a complaint-resolution center to an integral component of commission policymaking and enforcement functions. Today, call centers are vital centers of activity and staff responsibilities are far more complex than before.

The purposes of this report are to raise understanding regarding the impact of competition on the call center and the challenges facing call center staff. This report describes the results of a recent NRRI series of focused-interviews that examined the impact of competition on call centers within ten state public utility commissions. During the year 2002, a series of focused interviews were conducted with call center managers regarding the impact of competition on the call center. Management level representatives from California, Colorado, Florida, Michigan, New Hampshire, New York, Ohio, South Carolina, Washington state and Wisconsin participated in the interviews.<sup>2</sup> The states are diverse with reference to geography, size, ethnicity and the status of residential competition (as indicated by Table 1).

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this report, the term call center is used to describe the intake functions of the Consumer Affairs Department. Consumer Affairs Departments receive information from the public via a variety of communications vehicles: telephone calls, letters, faxes and emails. Moreover, some states, such as New Hampshire and South Carolina, also accept walk-in visitors to the commission. States use a variety of language to describe the intake function. Examples include "the intake center," "the public interest center," and the "dispute resolution center." Although in most commissions the activities of the consumer affairs departments are not limited to the intake function, this section focuses on the intake function. Other functions of the consumer affairs department usually include a mix of the following: service quality, policy, investigating, enforcement, consumer education/outreach and in some cases media relations.

<sup>2</sup> Due to the small sample size, the results of the interviews are presented as a descriptive profile of the impact of competition on call centers of the 10 participating states. This it is not to imply that the results are necessarily representative of states not interviewed.



**TABLE 1  
RESIDENTIAL COMPETITION BY INDUSTRY AND STATE**

State	Commission Name	Residential Competition for		
		Electric	Gas	Telecom
California	California Public Utilities Commission	Suspended	X	X
Colorado	Colorado Public Utilities Commission, Department of Regulatory Agencies			X
Florida	Florida Public Service Commission			X
Michigan	Michigan Public Service Commission	X	X	X
New Hampshire	New Hampshire Public Utilities Commission	X		X
New York	New York State Public Service Commission	X	X	X
Ohio	Public Utilities Commission of Ohio	X	X	X
South Carolina	South Carolina Public Service Commission			X
Washington	Washington Utilities and Transportation Commission			X
Wisconsin	Wisconsin Public Service Commission			X

Source: Author’s construct

Interview questions were designed to solicit information regarding the following:

- Trends observed by call center staff
- Impact of trends on the function of the call center
- Call center growth
- Use of automated systems
- Monitoring of trends
- Call center staffing patterns
- Challenges facing call center staff

Interview questions included the following:

- How many people are employed in the call center?

- What are their backgrounds?
- How has the call center grown, if at all, with regard to staff positions?
- How has competition impacted intake trends?
- How is data from the call center used to monitor trends?
- What challenges face the call center?

The subsequent pages of this report will highlight the observations that we garnered during our focused interviews. Observations are divided into the following categories:

- Call center trends
- Impact of trends on the call center
- Call center challenges

### **Call Center Trends**

When discussing the role and function of the call center, it is important to make distinctions between the terms contacts, complaints and inquiries. However, it is important to remember that different states may utilize different definitions of contacts, inquiries and complaints. Also, many states require consumers to first attempt to resolve a problem with a company before contacting the commission. Thus, problems that are resolved with the company are not coded as complaints in these states. In August of 1998, the NARUC Staff Subcommittee on Consumer Affairs developed the following generic definitions:

- Contacts
  - Includes any way that you are contacted (phone call, email, walk-ins, letter, fax, referrals from other agencies or from the legislature)
  - Includes complaints and inquiries
  - Counted by issues, not by people (if one person calls with four issues that would count as four contacts)
- Inquiries
  - Seeking information/education

- Comments regarding a case
- Objections to a case
- Are one-stop, do not go to the company
- Complaints
  - Involve work with the company
  - Incidents are recorded
  - Customers may have already worked with the company

With the deregulation of the utility industry, public utility commissions have witnessed a change in their consumer protection roles. Utility industry deregulation and the advent of competition have had a tremendous impact on the organization and function of both the commission and the call center. The impact of competition has also had a tremendous impact on the consumer's interactions with the call center. Specific trends reported by participating states can be grouped into the following categories:

- Increased consumer interactions
- More complex complaints and contacts
- Increased market abuses

As indicated by Table 2, the volume of consumer interaction with commissions is high. However, due to each state using different definitions and criteria for contacts and complaints, Table 2 does not provide an "apples-to-apples" comparison between the number of contacts and complaints each state receives. Rather, Table 2 provides insight into the volume of consumer interaction in states participating in this study.

As indicated by Table 2, some states have significantly larger volumes of public interaction than do others. When viewing the numbers of contact and complaints per state, it is useful to keep in mind that some states have larger populations than others and some states are in different phases of deregulation.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Although one state may receive significantly more public interactions than another, this does not imply that the staff of one call center is necessarily busier than that of another call center. It is also important to remember that in some states call center staff may work exclusively in the intake function; in other states call center staff may also have other consumer affairs responsibilities such as investigative, service quality or consumer education/outreach.

**TABLE 2  
NUMBER OF CONTACTS AND COMPLAINTS  
FOR PARTICIPATING STATES**

<b>State</b>	<b>Number of Complaints and/or Contacts Received per Year by Commission</b>
California	For 2001, over 100,000 contacts
Colorado	In FY01-02, 18,683 calls; 8,387 closed contacts <sup>a</sup>
Florida	In FY00-01, 75,996 calls
Michigan	Approximately 22,000 complaints <sup>b</sup>
New Hampshire	In 2001, approximately 10,000 to 12,000 contacts <sup>a</sup>
New York	250,000 contacts a year including 35,000 complaints <sup>c</sup>
Ohio	In 2000, 530,366 contacts <sup>d</sup>
South Carolina	In FY00-01, approximately 6,022 contacts <sup>e</sup>
Washington	In 2001, approximately 33,200 calls and 6,500 complaints <sup>f</sup>
Wisconsin	In 2001, approximately 12,000 contacts including approximately 10,000 complaints <sup>g</sup>

Source: Author's construct

Another trend that has emerged as a result of competition is an increase in market abuses. Market abuses appear in many forms, including chronic service quality problems, slamming, billing disputes, cramming and jamming.<sup>4</sup> There are also increased opportunities for market abuses in that more services and more service providers are available than in the past. For instance, prepaid phone cards, prepaid

<sup>a</sup> Contacts include complaints and information requests received via email, letters, telephone calls and walk-in visits.

<sup>b</sup> The complaint figure includes telephone calls only.

<sup>c</sup> Contacts and complaints include telephone calls, emails, letters, faxes and office visits.

<sup>d</sup> Call volume includes complaints and contacts such as information requests and general inquiries.

<sup>e</sup> Contacts are received through telephone calls, emails, faxes, letters or office visits.

<sup>f</sup> The 33,200 figure is only for telephone calls.

<sup>g</sup> Contacts (inquiries and opinions) and complaints are received via telephone calls, letters or electronically.

<sup>4</sup> Slamming is the unauthorized switching of a customer's utility service provider. Slamming is most prevalent in the area of long distance telephone service. Cramming refers to charges appearing on a customer's bill for services that the customer did not authorize, receive or use. Jamming occurs when a consumer voluntarily switches a long distance utility service provider but the incumbent carrier does not release the consumer from the account. Jamming complaints are also most prevalent in the area of long distance telephone service.

phone service and 900-numbers that charge service fees per minute are relatively recent developments. Another example of a relatively new market abuse is recurring monthly fees or clubs. As an example, consumers may call a 900-number for their horoscope and unwittingly join a “club” and receive monthly club fees on their telephone bill. Calls to 800-numbers that mysteriously transform into 900-number charges on the consumer’s telephone bill are yet another example of new market abuses. The increase in market abuses is of course partially due to the fact that there are now more players in the marketplace. When it was a monopoly environment, no one worried about slamming or jamming. Moreover, before the advent of 900-number calls, no one had to worry about deceptive or misleading business practices of 900-number service providers.

## **IMPACT OF TRENDS**

The impact of increased call volume and complexity of consumer issues and problems has had many profound impacts on the call center. Observations gleaned from our interviews can be divided into two categories impact on staffing and impact on workflow processes. With regard to staffing, the new competitive environment has impacted staff size and staff composition. With regard to workflow processes, the new competitive environment has called for a need for increased efficiency and increased use of automated systems. In subsequent pages of this report, we will discuss how call centers have met these challenges.

## **STAFFING**

### **Staff Size**

As mentioned previously, the new competitive environment has created a need for more staff due to complaint and contact escalations, as well as the increased complexity of consumer issues. Table 3 shows the size of the call center staff of the 10 participating states.

**TABLE 3  
NUMBER OF STAFF MEMBERS  
PER CALL CENTER BY STATE**

<b>State</b>	<b>Number of Call Center Staff</b>
California	30
Colorado	7
Florida	35
Michigan	7 full-time and 6 part-time
New Hampshire	5
New York	34
Ohio	31
South Carolina	6
Washington	15 full-time and 2 part-time <sup>5</sup>
Wisconsin	10

Source: Author's construct

As with Table 2, this table does not provide apples-to-apples comparisons. This is because in many consumer affairs departments, staff do not work exclusively in the call center. For example, many states count enforcement personnel as part of the call center staff. In some states full-time investigators also work on the telephones a few hours a week. In still other states, where the consumer affairs department is very small, the call center staff will not only respond to consumer concerns, and investigate complaints, but will also have a mix of responsibilities including some of the following: service quality, investigation, enforcement, and consumer education/outreach responsibilities.

Some states have been fortunate in that they have been able to add staff members over time. Table 4 displays staffing information from the seven participating states who were able to add staff members. Wisconsin, for example, more than doubled staff size within a relatively short period of time by increasing from four

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<sup>5</sup> In response to this question, Washington said that staff have duties in addition to call center staffing.

**TABLE 4  
CALL CENTER STAFF GROWTH BY STATE**

State	Size of Staff Growth
California	Call center was outsourced in past. Returned to in-house. Uses 30 staff members.
Colorado	Increased staff from 3 to 7 in 10 years.
Michigan	Uses students as part-time staff.
New Hampshire	Has grown significantly.
Ohio	Grown from 18 to 31.
South Carolina	Increased staff from 4 to 6 in 1 year.
Washington	Added 2 full-time positions within last 5 years.
Wisconsin	Grown over the years from 4 to 10.

Source: Author's construct

employees to 10. Ohio nearly tripled the call center staff size. In addition to creating seven new intake positions in the call center, Ohio was able to upgrade existing job classifications as well. The reason for the change was to create a career path for staff so the call center would be able to attract and keep qualified staff. Michigan was not able to hire full-time staff members, but instead, was able to hire a few college students to use as part-time staff. The students perform simple but essential and time-consuming tasks, such as data in-take and opening the mail; this leaves the senior staff more time to handle more complex issues.

**Staff Composition**

The composition of the call center staff has also evolved over the years. The backgrounds of the staff are much more varied and the average education level has also increased. Once perceived as a low-skilled, receptionist-level position, call center positions now require more sophisticated skills. Many call center staff members have previous customer service experience in a variety of fields. In addition to customer service experience, many of the staff have investigative experience. Often this

investigative experience includes experience in monitoring companies regarding both complaint trends and compliance.

Other valuable skills that call centers seek in staff are good communication skills, including good writing, listening and interviewing skills. Good writing skills are increasingly important as electronic mail is becoming a more common way of communicating with consumers and companies. Sound listening and interviewing skills are also important when working with consumers. Having a good disposition and a sense of empathy are important qualities in a call center employee because many callers are already angry or frustrated with the response that they received from the company. Solid dispute resolution, arbitration and mediation skills are highly desirable as well. Other desirable skills include computer skills and database management. Analytical skills are valuable when it comes to monitoring of trends and development of policy recommendations.

Prior utility industry experience is yet another desirable employee attribute. Of course, many call centers recruit staff who are former employees of utility companies or have moved from elsewhere within the commission. It is also not uncommon for call center staff to have worked in similar positions with other state agencies.

Although it is not a requirement, in many states, call center staff have college degrees. In fact, 80% of the states interviewed reported that most of the staff have completed some college or have earned college degrees. Staff earn their degrees in a variety of subjects including, but not limited to, accounting, communications, education, engineering, history and psychology. Clearly, the variety of academic backgrounds enhances the work culture.

## **WORKFLOW PROCESSES**

While some states are fortunate enough to be able to add staff members, many states are not as fortunate for a variety of reasons, such as hiring freezes, budget cuts and slowing economic conditions. In response to a limited number of staff and an increasing workload, call centers have had to implement measures to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the centers. By reorganizing the call center workflow processes many call centers have been able to successfully maximize available



resources. As an example, Michigan addressed the issue by reorganizing its call center into three sections, by industry, with each section reporting to the Director of Consumer Affairs. By dividing the call center into three industry-specific sections, calls can be routed to appropriate staff. Staff are able to concentrate on gaining expertise within one industry, as opposed to having to be knowledgeable of all industries.

The Consumer Affairs Department of the State of Washington reorganized the workflow by devising a three-tier system of phone coverage. Depending on the staff member's level, staff answer calls between four hours and 16 hours per week with the remainder of the time being spent on other responsibilities, such as analysis of tariff filings, drafting proposed rules, research and compliance. One reason for the tier-system was to reorganize the workflow into a more efficient process. Another reason was to provide a career path within the call center in hopes of decreasing staff turnover.

New York addressed the issue by developing an Expediting Complaint Resolution Team. Members of the Expediting Team use "instant mediation." Here, the Team member mediates between the consumer and the company via a three-party telephone call in an attempt to bring the two parties to a mutual agreement.

### **Use of Automated Systems**

Call centers across most industries streamline workflow through use of state-of-the-art technology, such as automated telephone systems. Automated telephone systems assist in managing the flow of calls coming into the call center. The automated system distributes calls in the queue to staff. Automated systems are also capable of collecting data on the calls that come into the call center. Although most commissions have used automated systems for several years, many are now using more advanced systems such as Interactive Voice Response (IRV) systems. A widespread use of IVRs is to manage the flow of queued calls by distributing queued calls to staff as the lines free up and by allowing callers to find their own destination through the use of recorded prompts. IVR systems use a series of recorded voice message prompts that allow callers to navigate their way through a telephone system to reach the caller's intended destination. IVRs alleviate some of the staff call volume by providing basic information, such as the organization's hours, mailing address or website information. IVRs are also

able to provide recorded answers to commonly asked questions. Typically, IVRs will provide callers with an option to press zero, which then queues callers for the next available staff member. As an example, Washington takes advantage of the IVR's capability to allow the recorded prompts to reroute misdirected calls to the appropriate department; this eliminates the need for staff to make live transfers. As another example, Wisconsin's IVR provides a prompt for callers to be connected with a language translator if the caller is more comfortable speaking in a language other than English. New York regularly reviews its IVR messages and has the ability to add hot topic messages instantly.

In addition to managing the flow of calls, IVRs collect data, such as the number of calls answered, the duration of each call, the abandon rate and the number of callers receiving busy signals. Through the use of a reporting system, this data may be extracted for monitoring sufficiency of staffing levels based on call volume and whether staff is meeting the commission's call completion standards.<sup>6</sup>

### **Monitoring of Trends**

With the advent of competition, the data garnered by the call center has taken on increased importance for the monitoring of market abuses and company performance. Use of sophisticated databases to monitor trends is yet another aspect of the evolution of the call center. As most readers are aware, data collected within the call center database is extremely useful for monitoring trends regarding company performance and market abuses. At most commissions, the collection of data begins with the call center. Much of the data is collected both electronically via the automated systems and through manual input by the call center staff. There are various ways of reporting the data, such as by company, industry and complaint type, as well as by geographic factors such as zip codes within a state. The data can be used to detect emerging trends and monitor status. As an example, the data can be used to monitor whether certain ethnic neighborhoods are targets of market abuses or questionable business practices.

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<sup>6</sup> Call completion is the amount of time taken to complete a call. The call begins when it enters the queue and continues until either party terminates the call.

Human input is also used in monitoring trends and collection of data. Call center staff typically have department meetings, as well as meetings with other departments within the commission, to share trend information and observations. Information gleaned from input from consumer advocacy groups and media sources also helps to round out the conversations.

Generally, when the number of complaints per company and/or market abuse exceed a threshold, the commission will open an investigation. In other instances, the call center data is used to gauge whether or not specific commission rules or fines are effective deterrents of bad actors and market abuses. As an example, at one time a state assessed slamming fines of \$1,000 per incident. However, analysis of the commission complaint data did not reflect a significant decrease in slamming complaints. This suggested a need for stiffer slamming fines. After reviewing the slamming fines of other states, this state significantly increased its slamming fines.

Data from the call center can also be used to increase public awareness regarding market abuses and company performance. As an example, Connecticut and Colorado place consumer complaint tracking information on the commission's website.<sup>7</sup> The complaint tracking information lists up-to-date complaint data received by year, by industry, by company and by type of complaint. The information is available for the public to view at any time and may be used as an aid in helping consumers to make decisions about choosing a service provider.

## **CHALLENGES FACING CALL CENTERS**

Despite the best efforts by call centers to streamline workflow processes and be as efficient and effective as possible, challenges still arise, as they do in all divisions of the commission. Participating states were asked to identify the challenges facing their call centers. Although call centers face a myriad of challenges, three distinct categories emerged:

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<sup>7</sup> The Colorado Complaint database is available at: [www.dora.state.co.us/puspublicataions/consumer\\_reports.htm](http://www.dora.state.co.us/puspublicataions/consumer_reports.htm); and the Connecticut Complaint database is available at: <http://www.dpuc.state.ct.us/caiui.nsf/Customer+Complaint+Information>

- Information flow
- Jurisdictional issues and
- Human resources.

### **Information Flow**

Effective information flow is a critical component of any organization. Without effective information flow, the work processes are hindered, often resulting in inefficiency, miscommunications and duplication of effort. Clearly, increased call volumes and the increased complexity of calls impact the information flow within both commissions and call centers. Also affecting the information flow of call centers is the large volume of knowledge needed by staff. Since staff are responding to inquiries and concerns across the electric, gas, telecommunications and water industries, they must have up-to-date knowledge of the regulations in all of these industries.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, they must keep abreast of market abuses and trends indicating potential abuse patterns. Staff also need to be aware of the different companies providing services throughout the state, as well as the range of services provided by each company. Examples of vertical services offered by local telecommunications companies might include DSL and cable service, as well as more traditional vertical services, such as Caller ID, call-forwarding and call blocking.

Call centers have found that staff training is a valuable way to meet some of the challenges associated with information flow. Having good communications processes in place is yet another method of mitigating problems associated with information flow. In most commissions, call center staff meet regularly to discuss observed trends and have close communications with other departments to make sure that all parties involved are aware of emerging trends. As mentioned previously, trends are also monitored through the use of sophisticated databases.

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<sup>8</sup> As mentioned previously, Michigan addressed this problem by dividing the call center into three sections by industry.

## **Jurisdictional Issues**

Call centers face two salient jurisdictional challenges. The first challenge resides within the fact that staff does not have the direct authority to impose penalties on bad actors. The second issue lies in the fact most commissions for the most part have limited authority over new technologies such as wireless.

Regarding the first issue, in many instances, staff properly do not have the authority to directly impose penalties on bad actors. Instead staff must follow due process to assure that companies are treated fairly. For example, regardless of whether a formal or informal process is used, in most states a recommendation is made following an investigation. Staff or an Administrative Law Judge issues a recommendation, which must then be approved by a majority of the Commissioners.<sup>9</sup> Completing the due process often takes a great deal of time, even in the most simplest of cases.

The second jurisdictional challenge lies in the limited or unclear jurisdiction. Unfortunately, many consumers perceive the state public utility commission as having jurisdiction over all utility-type industries, which creates a very frustrating situation for both the consumer service representative who must refer the consumer to another agency, as well as the consumer, who must retell their tale of woe to yet another agency.

## Human Resource Issues

Hiring, attracting and retaining qualified staff is a salient challenge facing many call centers. As mentioned previously, many call centers have not been able to add staff due to budget constraints. While some call centers have been able to add staff

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<sup>9</sup> Although each state's process varies slightly, a general template of the Enforcement process begins with monitoring of trends. After identifying an issue such as a series of complaints regarding a particular company, an investigation may be opened. Staff may work with companies to correct poor business practices. Other times, staff or an Administrative Law Judge may recommend that a corrective action such as a fine or forfeiture should be assessed. Commissioners then approve or reject the recommendation. All states have an appeal process for companies who feel the outcome of the process is unjust. For more information, see Francine Sevel and Sári Klepacz, *The Organization of the State Public Utility Commission Enforcement Function* (Columbus: The National Regulatory Research Institute, 2003).

positions, they do not necessarily have an optimal number of staff. Without full staffing, staff members are often required to perform many tasks in addition to their primary job responsibilities or do the job of two full-time employees. While a staffing shortage is not an uncommon problem in public agencies or the private sector, within a call center a staffing shortage translates into increased stress levels within an atmosphere where the nature of the work is already stressful. Other call center staffing shortages occur due to attrition. Attrition may occur because staff perceive that there are no positions to which to progress and seek alternative positions outside of the call center for professional growth.

As previously mentioned, one avenue taken by the state of Washington was to create a career path for call center staff by creating tiers in the call center. Each tier represents a different level of experience and knowledge within the call center and has different responsibilities. For instance, one tier works on the call center's hotline for more hours than another tier while that tier has other duties such as analysis of tariff filings, drafting proposed rules, research and compliance activities. A program such as this provides an upward path for the staff to follow.

Providing opportunities for professional growth is yet another method of attracting and retaining quality staff within the call center. Many call centers provide training workshops to keep staff up-to-date on automated systems and industry information. New York, for instance, takes advantage of its dual call centers to allow all staff from one office to attend training together, while staff from the other office cover the phones for both offices.

In addition to training sessions, call centers have revamped job responsibilities as a way to provide a career path within the call center that helps attract and retain qualified staff. Ohio, for instance, was able to reclassify several positions within the call center to allow for growth of staff. As staff members gain experience, they are able to move to different levels within the call center. As staff progress through the different position levels their job responsibilities evolve. This approach creates a career path within the organization and reduces attrition due to lack of promotional opportunities.

High stress levels also contribute to call center attrition. One way in which call centers attempt to retain qualified staff is through the reduction of stress in the

workplace. For example, one state was able to provide ergonomically correct office furniture for the call center when it relocated to new office space a few years ago. A spokesperson for this call center feels that providing a pleasant atmosphere, with ergonomically correct furniture and state-of-the-art-technology, will improve the atmosphere of the call center, and as a result staff will be less stressed.

While budget constraints do not allow all call centers to provide new furniture or state-of-the-art technology, many call centers have found other creative ways to reduce workplace stress. For instance, one call center encourages staff to adorn workstations with personal items, such as family and vacation photos, or other items of personal comfort. Staff are also permitted to have personal radios playing music at low volumes.

### **CONCLUSION**

The advent of competition has brought many changes and challenges to the call center. Through the application of innovative workflow processes and advanced technology, call centers have successfully responded to the challenges of the new competitive environment.