

## **Improving Customer Service at 311 Toronto**

<b>Date:</b>	October 2, 2012
<b>To:</b>	Employee and Labour Relations Committee
<b>From:</b>	Director, 311 Toronto Executive Director of Human Resources
<b>Wards:</b>	All
<b>Reference Number:</b>	

### **SUMMARY**

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This report provides information, as requested by the City Council on February 6 and 7 2012, regarding steps to be taken to improve customer service at the 311 Toronto Division in regards to the division's employees and provisions of the City's collective agreements.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The Director of 311 Toronto and the Executive Director of Human Resources recommend that:

1. Employee and Labour Relations Committee receive this report for information.

### **Financial Impact**

There are no financial implications as a result of approval of this report. The Deputy City Manager and Chief Financial Officer has reviewed this report and agrees with the financial impact statement.

## **DECISION HISTORY**

Audit Committee at its meeting of November 23, 2011, when considering item AU5.2 “311 Toronto – Full Potential For Improving Customer Service Has Yet To Be Realized,” approved the following recommendations:

13. City Council request the Director, 311 Toronto Division, and the Executive Director, Human Resources, in consultation with any other relevant officials, to:
  - a. report to the next meeting of the Employee and Labour Relations Committee on what might contribute to improved customer service at 311 Toronto as it pertains to the City's Collective Agreements; and
  - b. be in attendance at the Employee and Labour Relations Committee meeting when this matter is considered.

<http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2011.AU5.2>

City Council approved recommendation AU5.2 (13) at its meeting of February 6 and 7, 2012.

## **BACKGROUND**

The Auditor General's report identified a number of opportunities for improved efficiency in the 311 Contact Centre; the primary focus of the report was on the overall performance levels of the 311 Contact Centre operation. The report highlighted a number of key statistics related to contact centre performance such as call wait times, number of calls per staff member, employee absenteeism figures, call hang-ups (abandonment rate) and more.

The 311 Toronto Division had initiated and is in the process of making a number of administrative and management process changes and controls towards addressing the identified issues and recommendations in the Auditor General's report. A progress report on all of the AG's recommendations will be submitted to the Audit Committee in July 2013.

However, in discussing the Auditor General's report at committee, there were several questions and discussion points regarding specific staffing and human resources management practices in the 311 Contact Centre that related to labour relations and the administration of the CUPE Local 79 collective agreement. The Audit Committee recommended that such a discussion would best occur at the Employee and Labour Relations Committee, with the Director, 311 Toronto and the Executive Director of Human Resources, regarding improving customer service and any issues regarding the specifics of the administration of the Local 79 collective agreement.

## COMMENTS

The City's 311 Contact Centre is a relatively new operation with a newly transferred and/or hired staffing complement which, as the Auditor General identified in his report, has plenty of opportunities and improvements yet to be realized; 311 Toronto's management have and do concur.

The Auditor General's Office conducted its review of the 311 Toronto Division in the early to middle part of 2011; the Centre went live on September 24, 2009. Any new business operational organization of its size and complexity, with new staffing, technology and facilities, undergoes initial operational challenges and experiences - 311 Toronto has been no exception. Some of these growing pains include operational challenges regarding the "human capital" side of 311 Toronto and many of these issues include challenges regarding the effective new operation of a shift operation with employees covered by an established collective agreement. The Contact Centre Customer Service Representatives' (CSR) terms and conditions of employment are covered by the CUPE Local 79 collective agreement and their effectiveness and performance does have a direct impact on the service level provided by the Contact Centre to the public.

One staffing operational challenge was caused by the formation of a new management team with a support staff complement coming from different and diverse operational units from across the City of Toronto. The staff had worked in different workplace cultures and under diverse management and operational policies and practices. They were now all being integrated into a new organization (311 Toronto) with new operational requirements, policies, practices and technology. The staff also had a diverse set of skills, knowledge and levels of work experience with different expectations. The full and part-time CSRs were either:

- a) "Mapped" to 311 Toronto from former City call centres (for example, those handling calls for Access Toronto, Solid Waste Management, Transportation Services and Toronto Water);
- b) Hired from other City divisions; or
- c) Hired from outside the City.

The 311 Contact Centre offered a great career opportunity for CSRs, a brand new, centrally located modern facility, new technology and a variety of work schedules. However, many staff who transferred to the Contact Centre from other City divisions found it also came with a great change in the type of work they were used to, a reduction in the variety of work tasks and in flexibility of their work, and an enhanced level of staff monitoring which was new to them. Essentially, the change was more real and apparent for employees who transferred than for those who were more familiar with contract centre operations type work and were accustomed to the importance of tight schedule adherence, call monitoring and shift work. That said, each type of employee had knowledge and experience that when shared provided a valuable perspective and knowledge needed for the Contact Centre to best serve the public.

Accordingly, there was a significant adjustment and training period for many staff, which was reflected in individual staff performance levels, absenteeism and the overall service level of the Contact Centre. The Auditor General's report outlined issues that required improvement such as high absenteeism and variances among staff productivity such as number of calls per staff and call handle times.

Since the Auditor General's 2011 review there has been a number of strategies and steps taken resulting in significantly improved productivity and performance at Toronto 311. Absenteeism has declined dramatically and service levels have improved significantly.

### Steps taken to Reduce Absenteeism

311 Toronto has seen a decline in the absenteeism rates as a result of Toronto 311 management's active efforts to address this issue. A number of interventions have been taken to address the high level of absenteeism among unionized staff. The interventions have been incentive-based and corrective focussed. The best practices literature supports a two pronged approach noting that single approaches have a lower success rate in large, complex environments.

#### 1. Incentive-based Interventions:

- Awareness: The Toronto 311 Director met with all staff to discuss the impact of high absenteeism on the Division and effective service delivery to the public. In addition, the President of CUPE Local 79 came in to speak with the Contact Centre staff to address the significant increase in absenteeism rates. The message was direct and highlighted the potential impact of absenteeism on Toronto 311's future.
- Listening to Staff: Toronto 311 conducted an internal employee satisfaction survey to identify possible areas for enhancements within the 311 software system and potential improvements or increased support that CSRs could receive from the Information & Business Development Team. More than 50% of employee surveys were returned, the responses were reviewed and Toronto 311 has already begun to implement suggested improvements.
- Employee Satisfaction and Engagement: Toronto 311 implemented a Customer Service Improvement Team (CSIT). The focus was to make the working environment effective and efficient, thereby, increasing morale and employee satisfaction that then leads to improved customer service. The research demonstrates that there is a direct correlation between improved employee satisfaction that leads to improved employee engagement resulting in improved customer service.

One immediate action was the introduction of an electronic newsletter "311 on 311". Management also solicited suggestions to increase morale. Many suggestions were received and a number have been implemented, for example, the

introduction of a staff bulletin board that is maintained by different staff teams. A Social Committee was also created to develop off-work social events and activities.

- Special Other Tasks/Projects: occasional opportunities to do assignments other than regular call handling or emails are offered to CSRs with good attendance only.
- Issues Management: Toronto 311 established a Joint Divisional Labour-Management Committee to discuss and resolve issues that may affect performance and morale.

## 2. Corrective-based Initiatives:

311 Toronto has vigorously ensured that all documentation to support unplanned absences (primarily medical, but occasionally bereavement and ill dependent leaves) are submitted in accordance with divisional policy and the Local 79 collective agreement. Such actions have included:

- Developing a new monitoring tool to help facilitate adherence to the City's Attendance Management Program.
- Ensuring management is actively monitoring daily attendance with corrective measures being taken immediately, when appropriate, with staff that has higher absences than the divisional standard.
- Ensuring due diligence in reviewing and making referrals, when appropriate, to Employee Health for review and assistance.
- Ensuring that employees with high absenteeism that have been determined inappropriate or excessive are dealt with pro-actively and are not being promoted. Such action has also included denial of step progression through the salary range for staff that have significant absences from the workplace.
- The 311 Attendance line is now answered personally by a supervisor. All staff calling in sick are required to speak with a supervisor. They are requested to advise the supervisor regarding how long the expected absence is and if they are calling in regarding an ill dependent, the supervisor is required to verify the relationship of the dependent to be consistent with the collective agreement provision.

## RESULTS

As a result of the initiatives put into place, by 311 Toronto Division, significant improvements in all areas identified in the Auditor General's report have been realized.

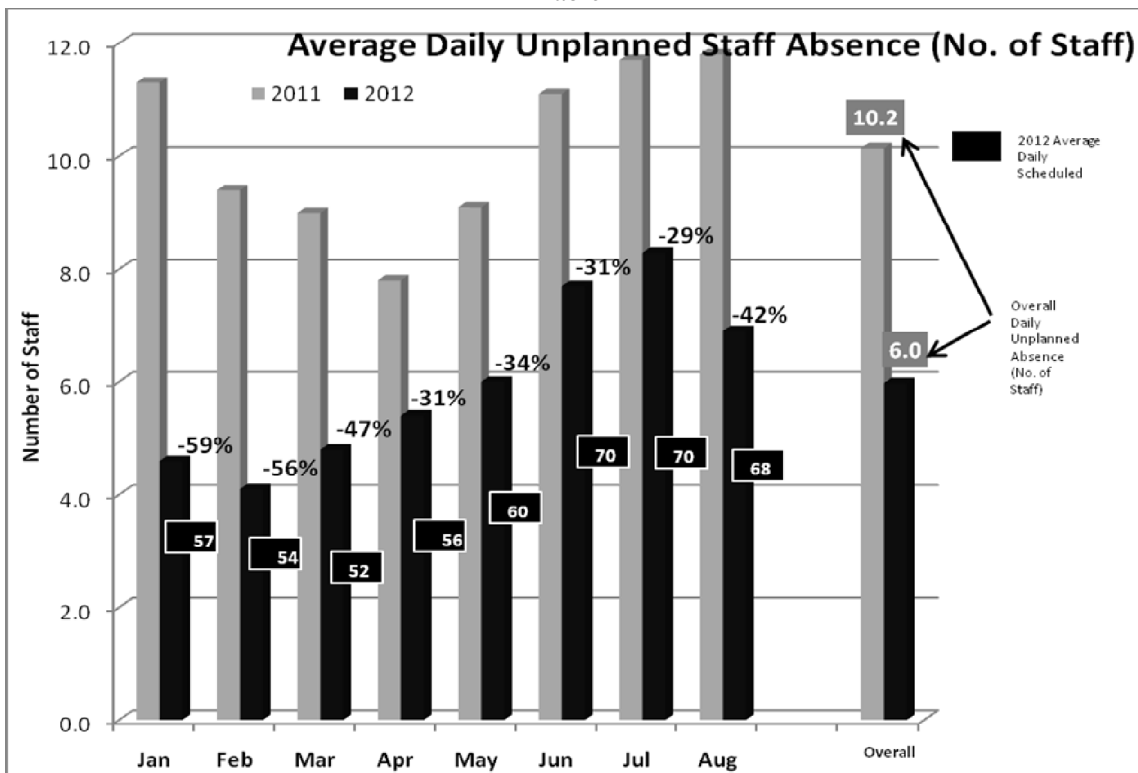
Prior to the initiations of enhanced management activities as previously referenced and the review conducted by the AG, the level of sick days absent in 2010 for full-time employees, represented by CUPE Local 79, was 22.6 days and 8.8 days for part-time employees. The level of sick days absent in 2011 was 22.9 days and 9.7 days for part-time employees. However, for the first six month period January 1, 2012, to June 30, 2012, the number of sick days absent for full-time employees is 5.8 days and 3.2 days for part-time employees projecting a 50% reduction year-over-year.

### Absenteeism:

Since January 2012, the call taker (CSR) absenteeism (due to sickness or ill dependent) has *decreased* an average of 41% per month compared to the same period in 2011. 311 Toronto has reduced staff unplanned absenteeism per day from 10.2 in 2011 to less than 6.0 in 2012 over the same six month period.

During 2012 the average daily number of staff scheduled ranges between 52 and 70 with an average of 61 staff scheduled daily. Table 1 below shows the monthly comparison breakdown of scheduled absent staff.

Table 1



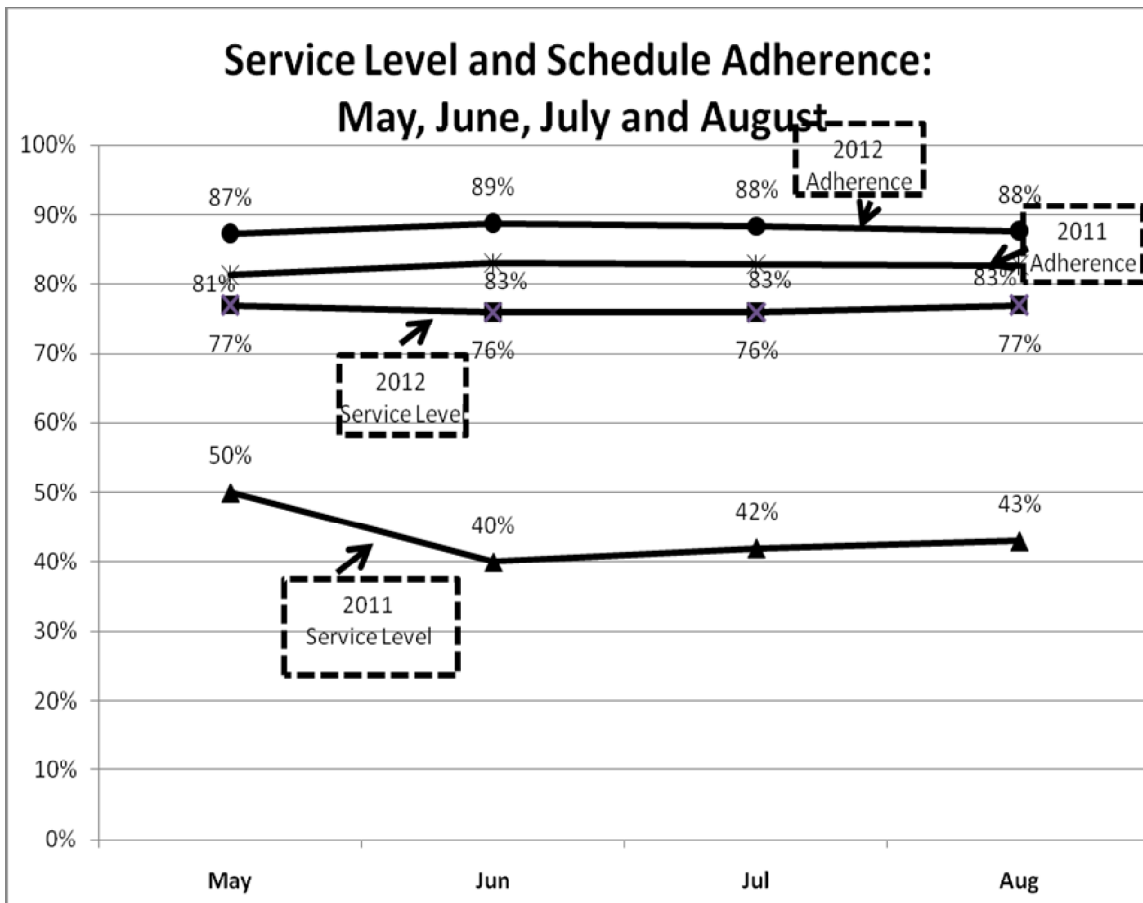
Schedule Adherence:

Improvements have been made in the area of service level (percentage of calls answered within 75 seconds) and schedule adherence. Schedule adherence is the percentage of time that a CSR is adhering to the activities as scheduled. These activities include when a CSR is to be on the phone and when there are to be on break or lunch. 311 Toronto is currently achieving 89% schedule adherence; where as the industry standard is 90%. A higher schedule adherence is one of the indicators of a well disciplined and efficient contact centre.

Both absenteeism and schedule adherence are factors that are controllable by the interventions and initiatives that the Toronto 311 put into place. Whereas, service level is little more dependent of outside factors like storm events that increase call volumes. However, this does not lessen the importance of staff being at work and performing their duties as required on the service level provided to the customer.

Table 2 shows the impact that increased attendance and schedule adherence have made on the service levels during the summer month (May to August) when the call volumes are the highest and the Toronto 311 Division has experienced a decrease in service level.

Table 2



## OTHER ACTION AND NEXT STEPS

Collective Agreement Changes: One significant recently negotiated change to the CUPE Local 79 Collective Agreement (2012-2015) will assist Toronto 311 (and all other divisions) in addressing absenteeism.

The new clause reads as follows:

*"For the first (1st), second (2nd) and third (3rd) occurrence of absence due to illness or injury in a calendar year, an employee will be eligible to receive IIP Days commencing on the first day of absence. For the fourth (4th) and any subsequent occurrence of absence due to illness or injury in a calendar year, an employee will be eligible to receive IIP Days on the second (2nd) day of absence."*

The same above provision similarly applies to employees who are grandfathered in the sick bank plan.

The significant change is in the last sentence of the clause as employees will not receive pay on their first day absent from their fourth (4<sup>th</sup>) occurrence and any subsequent occurrence in a calendar year. As previously reported to City Council, this new clause is expected to lead to a reduction in absenteeism, save money and increase productivity. This provision takes effect on January 1, 2013.

### Examples of Additional Supports

Hiring Practices - Attendance: When hiring employees from within the Toronto Public Service, past/current attendance records although always part of the hiring process review and determination by a division, Toronto 311 management is now ensuring its due diligence when considering such candidates.

Increments: Toronto 311 will continue to make a determination on step increments advancement when an employee has a poor attendance.

### Collective Agreement Restrictions/Future Negotiations

Other Contact Centre employers have greater flexibility in certain operational aspects due to the nature of their specific organization. Toronto 311 and the Human Resources Division will conduct a review for the next round of negotiations to identify potential changes and improvements to the collective agreement to enhance productivity and service delivery to the public. At that point in time, such findings and discussions should be held in-camera with the Employee & Labour Relations Committee.



## **CONCLUSION**

Like any new organization, the 311 Contact Centre experienced growing pains in its initial two years of operation. For many staff, working in a highly structured contact centre required a period of adjustment, and this affected the overall service levels of the Contact Centre. To a certain extent, the Collective Agreement does limit 311 Toronto management's ability to undertake management practices that are standard in many private sector contact centres. Despite this, progress has been made in the last 10 months: performance and attendance has improved while service levels have increased. The 311 Toronto Division will continue to work with the Human Resources Division to explore options to best address staff issues in the Contact Centre.

## **CONTACT**

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## **SIGNATURE**

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