



Maricopa County

Internal Audit Department

301 W Jefferson St
Suite 660, Phx, AZ
85003-2148
602-506-1585
maricopa.gov/
internalaudit/

To: Maricopa County Board of Supervisors

From: Mike McGee, County Auditor

Subject: FY21 Interim Update for STAR Call Center – Election Readiness

Date: October 26, 2020

The Maricopa County Internal Audit Department (Internal Audit) is assessing the STAR Call Center's (STAR) preparations for Arizona's November 3, 2020, general election. The purpose of this interim update is to summarize the work conducted since the primary election and to share key observations. Our work will continue past the general election to consider whether improvements are needed for future elections.

This interim update is based primarily on employee interviews, data analysis, and document review. Our work includes election support activities in the following areas:

- Recruiting and training temporary call agents
- Automated phone messaging system and scripts
- Interagency communications (STAR & Elections Department)

We continually discuss recommendations with STAR management and they proactively address key challenges for the November general election.

Key Observations

Call Volume and Wait Times – STAR has experienced unprecedented call volume this election season. Since September 1, the call volume for this general election is averaging 206% higher than 2016. Call wait times were also longer than in past elections, sometimes exceeding a daily average of 30 minutes. On October 12, STAR intermittently had more calls than capacity, causing some incoming callers to receive a busy tone until another line became available. STAR worked quickly with other departments to implement the following solutions:

- Added 100 lines and implemented system throttling. "Throttling" caps the system at an adjustable range of 200 to 250 simultaneous calls; callers in excess of this limit receive an automated message to try again later, or to visit the online options.
- Expanded STAR's operating hours on weekdays and added weekends to accommodate the higher call volume until after the general election.
- Expanded recruiting efforts and are currently increasing the number of temporary call agents to try and staff the additional phone lines.

A week after the October 12 incident, average wait times began steadily decreasing. By October 23, average wait times were less than 12 minutes and call throttling was no longer necessary.

Recruiting and Training – Staffing consists primarily of temporary call agents, hired and trained leading up to the election. The Elections Department recruits official County temporary employees and refers them to STAR. Due to a shortage of desired call agents, STAR began hiring additional call agents from staffing agencies.

While challenges exist, STAR management is optimistic they will have enough temporary call agents to manage the anticipated high call volume for the November general election.

- As of the date of this memo, STAR had 60 temporary call agents out of the 75 desired for the November general election. The number of desired call agents was increased from 56 to 75 as a result of the higher call volume and additional training room capacity.
- Challenges with recruiting and retention are primarily due to the short-term nature of the position. Other factors include (1) concerns about working in an office environment during the pandemic, (2) complexity in answering election-related questions, and (3) burn out from high call volume.
- STAR worked with other departments to add a second training room in a neighboring department space. This increased training capacity by 19 trainees per class.
- After the primary election, STAR retained some temporary call agents for the November general election. This helped reduce the challenging recruiting and training process by retaining competent, trained workers.

Automated Phone Messaging System – We reviewed the options and communications that callers receive through the system and found them to be adequate.

Interagency Communications – STAR has procedures for notifying the Elections Department of reported issues and any urgent matters. The Elections Department updates STAR with any changes to the election plan or information contained in the automated messaging system.

Additional Information

Our work was performed as a consulting engagement as defined by the International Standards for the Professional Practice of Internal Auditing, set forth by the Institute of Internal Auditors. This is not an audit and may not detect all deficiencies, errors, and irregularities that may exist. This memo is intended primarily for the County Board of Supervisors, County leadership, and other County stakeholders. However, this memo is a public record and its distribution is not limited. If you have any questions about this report, please contact me at 602-506-1585.