



*The City of New York
Office of the Comptroller
Bureau of Management Audit*

WILLIAM C. THOMPSON, JR.
Comptroller

**Audit Report on the
Effectiveness of the Department of
Environmental Protection's Help Center Hotline**

MD02-130A

June 13, 2002

*The City of New York
Office of the Comptroller
Bureau of Management Audit*

**Audit Report on the Effectiveness of the
Department of Environmental Protection's
Help Center Hotline**

MD02-130A

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

In 1968, the New York City Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) established a 24-hour Help Center Hotline to enable the public and other government agencies to submit complaints and requests for service regarding environmental matters.

To provide adequate service to persons who call City agencies, the Mayor's Office of Operations established the following Citywide Phone Standards for Customer Service (Citywide Standards):

- All calls to City agencies made by the public to request services or obtain information must be answered within three rings.
- Each agency must use a standard telephone greeting when answering calls from the public. At a minimum, the greeting should state the name of the agency, the person answering, and the service provided or the division.
- If an automated system is used to answer telephone calls, agencies should attempt to meet the Citywide standard, which requires callers not be kept "on hold" for more than two minutes.
- Callers must have an opportunity to speak to a supervisor if they are not satisfied with a response from the person answering the telephone.
- Agencies must respond to all caller inquiries within 10 working days with an acknowledgment, a status report, or a resolution notification regarding the issue.

According to the DEP Annual Call and Queue Statistic reports, during calendar year 2001 the Help Center received 289,754 phone calls, of which 274,365 (95%) were answered. Of those answered, 230,840 (84%) were picked up within three rings.

Objectives

The objectives of this audit were to:

1. Determine whether the DEP Help Center is in compliance with the Citywide Standards for Customer Service.
2. Determine whether the DEP Help Center is forwarding useful and accurate information to the DEP field divisions so that they can quickly and efficiently resolve customer complaints.

Scope and Methodology

The scope of our audit was Fiscal Years 2001 and 2002. To obtain an understanding of the DEP Help Center's operations, we interviewed the Director and Deputy Director of the Help Center. We also reviewed the Help Center's policies and procedures and the Citywide Standards for Customer Service. In addition, we reviewed the Weekly 24-Hour Help Center Call Statistics reports, the daily reports compiled by the shift supervisors, incident reports, and Service Request Inspection Detail Reports (inspection detail reports).

To determine whether the DEP Help Center complies with the Citywide Standards, we made 50 random telephone calls to the DEP Help Center Hotline. We noted the number of rings before each call was answered. If an agent answered the telephone, we determined whether the agent used an appropriate greeting, as specified in the Citywide Standards. If the telephone was answered by the automated answering system, we measured the number of minutes we were placed on hold.

We also verified compliance with the Citywide Standards by observing Help Center Customer Service Agents as they answered customer telephone calls. On March 21, 2002, we observed 11 Customer Service Agents at work. We sat with each agent for an average of three calls each and observed a total of 38 calls. We noted: the number of rings before each call was answered; the agent's greeting; whether agents referred callers to a supervisor; and whether callers to the Help Center were issued a service number so that they could call the Help Center back to obtain updates on the status of DEP's response to their complaints.

We reviewed a randomly selected sample of 104 inspection detail reports for the 10,356 telephone calls received by the Help Center during November 2001. We determined whether the Help Center provides accurate and useful information to the field divisions and whether the appropriate field divisions responded to customer inquiries within 10 working days. In addition, we interviewed a randomly chosen sample of 12 of the 27 supervisors of DEP field divisions to which complaints or requests were referred to determine whether the divisions received accurate and useful information from the Help Center.

This audit was conducted in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards (GAGAS) and included tests of the records and other auditing procedures considered necessary. This audit was performed in accordance with the City Comptroller's audit responsibilities as set forth in Chapter 5, § 93, of the New York City Charter.

Results in Brief

The DEP Help Center generally complies with the Citywide Phone Standards for Customer Service set by the Mayor's Office of Operations. For the majority of telephone calls we observed being answered, or that we made:

- Telephone calls were answered within three rings.
- Telephone calls were answered with a standard greeting.
- Telephone calls that were answered by the automated answering system were not put on hold for longer than two minutes.
- Telephone inquiries were investigated and resolved within 10 working days.
- The Help Center provided useful and accurate information to callers and DEP field divisions.

Furthermore, the agents were courteous and friendly, and handled calls in a professional and efficient manner. However, there was not 100 percent compliance with the Citywide Phone Standards for Customer Service in some cases.

Answering Calls Within Three Rings

Agents generally answer calls within three rings, as required by the Citywide Standards.

For 50 of the calls we tested, 44 (88%) were answered within three rings; and 48 (96%) of the calls were answered within four rings. Thus, DEP is close to meeting the standard. The Help Center itself monitors adherence to the standard by reviewing statistical reports and by observing agents' performance.

Answering Calls With a Standard Greeting

During our observations of Customer Service Agents answering 38 telephone calls, one agent did not identify herself for all three of the telephone calls that she answered while we watched her. However, the agent processed the calls quickly and appeared knowledgeable about where to refer the complaints. Out of the 50 telephone calls we made to the Help Center, agents did not identify themselves when answering eight (16%) of the calls.

Since observing Customer Service Agents' performance may not detect instances in which telephone calls are not answered with the standard greeting, DEP should periodically test for adherence to this standard by making telephone calls to the Help Center.

Limiting Automated Answering System Hold Time To No More Than Two Minutes

For four (36%) of our 11 telephone calls that were answered by the automated answering system, we were placed on hold in excess of the two-minute maximum hold time recommended by the Citywide Standards. The total time spent on hold for these four telephone calls ranged from three minutes and 20 seconds to 13 minutes.

DEP statistical reports do not track caller hold time. DEP should include this performance indicator in its statistical reports or periodically test the automated answering system by making telephone calls to the Help Center to determine if the hold time is more than two minutes.

Providing Accurate Information for Resolution of Problems by Field Divisions

Customer Service agents generally provide useful and accurate information for the efficient resolution of reported complaints and requests.

Of the 12 field division supervisors we interviewed, 11 were satisfied with information received from the Help Center. However, one of the supervisors was not completely satisfied with information provided by the Help Center. He stated that he had encountered several problems in information provided by the Help Center agents, such as incorrect codes and missing telephone numbers. DEP does not currently survey division supervisors to determine whether they are satisfied with the information provided to them by the Help Center.

Responding to Caller Inquiries Within 10 Working Days

The Help Center's responsibility for complaints or requests ends once a call is transferred to a field division. Field divisions are responsible for investigating and resolving problems. However, individuals can call the Help Center to learn the status of their complaint or request.

Although Help Center agents do not call customers to inform them of status or resolution, they do issue service numbers to callers so that they can call back to obtain status updates. Our review of a sample of 104 inspection detail reports found that service numbers were issued for all caller inquiries. In addition, 98 (94%) of the 104 inquiries were investigated and resolved within 10 working days. The remaining six complaints were not investigated within 10 working days.

Callers Given Opportunity to Speak to a Supervisor If Not Satisfied with Agent's Response

When we made our telephone calls to the Help Center, there was no instance in which we needed to speak to a supervisor. During our observations of Customer Service Agents, we noted no instances when agents referred callers to a supervisor, although it is possible that callers may not have asked to speak with a supervisor. We did observe several instances when an agent put a caller on hold to ask a supervisor a question regarding the call.

Conclusion

Given the volume of calls it receives, DEP's Help Center Hotline is doing a good job in answering complaints and requests. However, for the areas in which 100 percent compliance was not achieved, DEP needs to periodically test performance to make sure it does not deteriorate.

Recommendations

This audit makes six recommendations to DEP officials, the most significant of which are:

1. DEP should periodically test whether telephone calls are answered with the standard greeting by making telephone calls to the Help Center.
2. DEP should either track the amount of time callers are kept on hold, or periodically test the automated answering system by making telephone calls to the Help Center to determine whether the hold time is more than two minutes.
3. DEP should periodically survey all division supervisors to determine whether they are satisfied with the information provided to them by the Help Center.

DEP Response

The matters covered in this report were discussed with DEP officials during and at the conclusion of this audit. A preliminary draft report was sent to DEP officials and discussed at an exit conference held on May 2, 2002. On May 8, 2002, we submitted a draft report to DEP officials with a request for comments. We received a written response from DEP officials on May 22, 2002. DEP officials generally agreed with the audit's findings and recommendations.

The full text of DEP's comments is included as an addendum to this report.

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**Audit Report on the
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INTRODUCTION

Background

The New York City Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) is responsible for providing a variety of environmental services such as: maintaining the City's water supply and wastewater treatment systems; reducing air and noise pollution; overseeing the handling of hazardous materials; operating programs to control asbestos and lead hazards; and promoting use of alternative fuel vehicles.

In 1968 DEP established a 24-hour Help Center Hotline to enable the public and other government agencies to submit complaints and requests for service regarding environmental matters. When calls are received by the Help Center, a Customer Service Agent records the caller's name, address, telephone number, and complaint or request in a computer database. To ensure that the information entered in the computer is accurate, before it is processed the agent repeats the information to the caller. Help Center telephone calls are classified in the following categories: Water, Sewer, Air, Noise, Hazardous Materials (Hazmat), Industrial Waste, Asbestos, Water Meter, and Odors from Sewage Treatment Plants. Each category has codes to identify the nature of the complaint or the request and the DEP field division to which it will be transferred. The Customer Service Agent assigns the appropriate code to the complaint or request and enters it in the computer. If the complaint is not related to any DEP division, the Customer Service Agent gives the caller the telephone number of the appropriate City agency to call.

Help Center Hotline complaints and requests are transmitted through DEP's HANSEN database. The database is programmed to recognize a category code and to automatically transmit it to the appropriate DEP field division. When HANSEN is inoperable, there is a back-up system, DEPACS, for data entry. The Help Center's responsibility for the complaint or request ends once it is transferred. The field division to which the complaint or request is referred then becomes responsible for investigating and resolving the problem, including setting schedules for follow-up work if it is required. Field division personnel enter the start date, inspection date, comments, action taken, and resolution date in the HANSEN database, thereby

making all current information about the complaint or service request accessible to Help Center agents.

To provide adequate service to persons who call City agencies, the Mayor's Office of Operations established the following Citywide Phone Standards for Customer Service (Citywide Standards):

- All calls to City agencies made by the public to request services or obtain information must be answered within three rings.
- Each agency must use a standard telephone greeting when answering calls from the public. At a minimum, the greeting should state the name of the agency, the person answering, and the service provided or the division.
- If an automated system is used to answer telephone calls, agencies should attempt to meet the Citywide standard which requires callers not be kept "on hold" for more than two minutes.
- Callers must have an opportunity to speak to a supervisor if they are not satisfied with a response from the person answering the telephone.
- Agencies must respond to all caller inquiries within 10 working days with an acknowledgment, a status report, or a resolution notification regarding the issue.

The Help Center receives approximately 1,000 calls daily Monday through Friday, and approximately 300-400 calls per day on weekends. There are three eight-hour shifts. The number of agents per shift varies as follows: the 8:00 a.m.–4:00 p.m. shift has 10-18 agents and two supervisors; the 4:00 p.m.–12:00 midnight shift has 10-18 agents and two supervisors; the 12:00 midnight–8:00 a.m. shift has two or three agents and one supervisor. When all agents are busy handling calls, the telephone system queues incoming calls by placing them on hold, with a recording telling callers that the next available agent will answer the call.

According to the DEP Annual Call and Queue Statistic reports, during calendar year 2001 the Help Center received 289,754 phone calls, of which 274,365 (95%) were answered. Of those answered, 230,840 (84%) were picked up within three rings. The difference between calls answered and calls received (15,389 calls) represents abandoned calls (i.e., the caller hangs up before the call is answered by either an agent or the automated answering system).

Objectives

The objectives of this audit were to:

1. Determine whether the DEP Help Center is in compliance with the Citywide Standards for Customer Service.
2. Determine whether the DEP Help Center is forwarding useful and accurate information to the DEP field divisions so that they can quickly and efficiently resolve customer complaints.

Scope and Methodology

The scope of our audit was Fiscal Years 2001 and 2002. To obtain an understanding of the DEP Help Center's operations, we interviewed the Director and Deputy Director of the Help Center. We also reviewed the Help Center's policies and procedures and the Citywide Standards for Customer Service. In addition, we reviewed the Weekly 24-Hour Help Center Call Statistics reports, the daily reports compiled by the shift supervisors, incident reports, and Service Request Inspection Detail Reports (inspection detail reports).

To determine whether the DEP Help Center complies with the Citywide Standards, we made 50 random telephone calls to the DEP Help Center Hotline. We noted the number of rings before each call was answered. If an agent answered the telephone, we determined whether the agent used an appropriate greeting, as specified in the Citywide Standards. If the telephone was answered by the automated answering system, we measured the number of minutes we were placed on hold.

We also verified compliance with the Citywide Standards by observing Help Center Customer Service Agents as they answered customer telephone calls. On March 21, 2002, we observed 11 Customer Service Agents at work. We sat with each agent for an average of three calls each and observed a total of 38 calls. We noted: the number of rings before each call was answered; the agent's greeting; whether agents referred callers to a supervisor; and whether callers to the Help Center were issued a service number so that they could call the Help Center back to obtain updates on the status of DEP's response to their complaints.

We also reviewed a randomly selected sample of 104 inspection detail reports for the 10,356 telephone calls received by the Help Center during November 2001. We determined whether the Help Center provides accurate and useful information to the field divisions and whether the appropriate field divisions responded to customer inquiries within 10 working days. We analyzed the information entered in the computer system by agents and by field division personnel to determine whether the correct referral codes were used, whether all callers were provided a service number so they could obtain status updates, and whether the inquiries were addressed within 10 working days. In addition, we interviewed a randomly chosen sample of 12

of the 27 supervisors of DEP field divisions to which complaints or requests were referred to determine whether the divisions received accurate and useful information from the Help Center.

This audit was conducted in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards (GAGAS) and included tests of the records and other auditing procedures considered necessary. This audit was performed in accordance with the City Comptroller's audit responsibilities as set forth in Chapter 5, § 93, of the New York City Charter.

DEP Response

The matters covered in this report were discussed with DEP officials during and at the conclusion of this audit. A preliminary draft report was sent to DEP officials and discussed at an exit conference held on May 2, 2002. On May 8, 2002, we submitted a draft report to DEP officials with a request for comments. We received a written response from DEP officials on May 22, 2002. DEP officials generally agreed with the audit's findings and recommendations.

The full text of DEP's comments is included as an addendum to this report.

**OFFICE OF THE COMPTROLLER
NEW YORK CITY**

DATE FILED: June 13, 2002

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The DEP Help Center generally complies with the Citywide Phone Standards for Customer Service set by the Mayor's Office of Operations. For the majority of telephone calls we observed being answered, or that we made:

- Telephone calls were answered within three rings.
- Telephone calls were answered with a standard greeting.
- Telephone calls that were answered by the automated answering system were not put on hold for longer than two minutes.
- Telephone inquiries were investigated and resolved within 10 working days.
- The Help Center provided useful and accurate information to callers and DEP field divisions.

Furthermore, the agents were courteous and friendly, and handled calls in a professional and efficient manner. However, there was not 100 percent compliance with the Citywide Phone Standards for Customer Service in some cases, as discussed in the following sections of this report.

Answering Calls Within Three Rings

Agents generally answer calls within three rings, as required by the Citywide Standards.

During our observations, Customer Service Agents answered each of the 38 calls within the required three rings. For the 50 telephone calls we made to the Help Center, 39 were answered by Customer Service Agents, and 11 were picked up by the automated answering system. Of the 39 calls answered by agents, 36 (92%) were answered within three rings. Of the 11 calls picked up by the automated answering system, eight (73%) were answered within three rings. The breakdown of this information is shown in Table I, below.

Table I

Breakdown of Auditors' Calls to the DEP Help Center

	Total No. of Calls Made to Help Center	No. of Calls Answered Within 3 Rings	No. of Calls Answered After 3 Rings
Calls Answered By Agent	39	36	3*
Calls Answered By Automated System	11	8	3**
Totals:	50 (100%)	44 (88%)	6 (12%)

* Two calls were answered in four rings; one call was answered in five rings.

** Two calls were answered in four rings; one call was answered in five rings.

In summary, 44 (88%) of the calls were answered within three rings; and 48 (96%) of the calls were answered within four rings. Thus, DEP is close to meeting the standard. The Help Center itself monitors adherence to the standard by reviewing statistical reports and by observing agents' performance.

At the exit conference, DEP officials stated that the customer's second ring is the first ring the operators hear because of the way the computer system functions.

Recommendation

1. DEP should continue to monitor its Help Center to ensure that all telephone calls are answered within three rings.

DEP Response: “. . . the first ring of any call made to the ACD system of our Help Center, is not an audible ring heard by our Customer Service Staff. We suggest that future audit procedures should be modified to four rings. Help Center staff meetings were held recently to focus on improvements in this area. DEP Help Center Management and Supervisory personnel will continue to monitor our performance in this category.”

Auditor Comment: According to the Citywide Standards, agents are required to answer phone calls within three rings. DEP should correct their ACD system so that agents can hear and respond to calls within the required three rings.

Answering Calls With a Standard Greeting

In accordance with the Citywide Standards, Customer Service Agents generally answer calls using DEP's standard greeting by identifying the agency and the agent's name, then asking, "How may I help you?" The Help Center monitors adherence to this standard by observing agents' performance.

During our observations of Customer Service Agents answering 38 telephone calls, one agent did not identify herself for all three of the telephone calls that she answered while we watched her. However, the agent processed the calls quickly and appeared knowledgeable about where to refer the complaints. Out of the 50 telephone calls we made to the Help Center, agents did not identify themselves when answering eight (16%) of the calls.

Since observing Customer Service Agents' performance may not detect instances in which telephone calls are not answered with the standard greeting, DEP should periodically test for adherence to this standard by making telephone calls to the Help Center.

Recommendations

2. DEP should remind all of its Help Center Customer Service Agents that they must answer all telephone calls with the standard greeting.
3. DEP should periodically test whether telephone calls are answered with the standard greeting by making telephone calls to the Help Center.

DEP Response: "Our monitoring process will assist in our efforts to reduce the number of occurrences where staff members deviate from scripting procedures. We have also developed a three-step procedure to discipline agents who show a trend of poor performance in this area."

Limiting Automated Answering System Hold Time To No More Than Two Minutes

For four (36%) of our 11 telephone calls that were answered by the automated answering system, we were placed on hold in excess of the two-minute maximum hold time recommended by the Citywide Standards. The total time spent on hold for these four telephone calls ranged from three minutes and 20 seconds to 13 minutes, as shown in Table II, below.

Table II

Details of Auditors' Four Calls Placed on Hold in Excess of Two Minutes

Date of Call	Total Hold Time (in minutes and seconds)	Amount of Time on Hold in Excess of Two Minutes (in minutes and seconds)
8/15/01	3:20	1:20
8/15/01	3:30	1:30
8/27/01	13:00	11:00
3/20/01	4:20	2:20

DEP statistical reports do not track caller hold time. DEP should include this performance indicator in its statistical reports or periodically test the automated answering system by making telephone calls to the Help Center to determine whether the hold time is more than two minutes.

Recommendation:

4. DEP should either track the amount of time callers are kept on hold, or periodically test the automated answering system by making telephone calls to the Help Center to determine whether the hold time is more than two minutes.

DEP Response: “Severe emergencies . . . will create unavoidable periods of hold time in excess of the standards set by this audit. We currently track the longest waiting call as our barometer to reduce waiting periods during non-emergency situations. . . . We will periodically check our system’s automated answering operation to ensure its performance in serving the public.”

**Providing Accurate Information for
Resolution of Problems by Field Divisions**

Based on our telephone interviews with a sample of 12 of the 27 DEP field division supervisors and our review of the information Customer Service Agents entered in the HANSEN database, we concluded that agents generally provide useful and accurate information for the efficient resolution of reported complaints and requests.

Of the 12 supervisors we interviewed, 11 were satisfied with information received from the Help Center. They stated that the Help Center personnel are helpful and pleasant, and had no problems or complaints with the Help Center’s work. In addition, the supervisors stated that there is good communication between the Help Center and the field divisions. However, one of

the field division supervisors was not completely satisfied with information provided by the Help Center. He stated that he had encountered several problems in information provided by the Help Center agents, such as incorrect codes and missing telephone numbers. DEP does not currently survey division supervisors to determine whether they are satisfied with the information provided to them by the Help Center.

Recommendation

5. DEP should periodically survey all division supervisors to determine whether they are satisfied with the information provided to them by the Help Center.

DEP Response: “In view of a field division supervisor’s comments, we will develop a survey form in the near future to be distributed to all Bureau Supervisors for suggestions and comments to provide a forum to address any breakdown in communication between the Help Center staff and field supervisors.”

Responding to Caller Inquiries Within 10 Working Days

Citywide Standards require that agencies respond to all caller inquiries within 10 working days with an acknowledgment, a status report, or a resolution notification regarding the issue. The Help Center’s responsibility for the complaint or request ends once the information is transferred to a field division. Field divisions are responsible for investigating and resolving problems. However, individuals can call the Help Center to learn the status of their complaint or request.

Although Help Center agents do not call customers to inform them of status or resolution, they do issue service numbers to callers so that they can call back to obtain status updates. Our review of a sample of 104 inspection detail reports found that service numbers were issued for all caller inquiries. In addition, 98 (94%) of the 104 inquiries were investigated and resolved within 10 working days. The remaining six complaints were not investigated within 10 working days.

Recommendation

6. DEP should periodically review its inspection detail reports to ensure that all telephone inquiries are investigated within 10 working days.

DEP Response: “. . . the responsibility to review or contact the public is not within the scope of the DEP Help Center’s jurisdiction. We rely on the caller to record the assigned customer service number and return a call to us for feedback at a later date.”

Auditor Comment: Although the Help Center does not call customers to inform them of the status or resolution of their call, DEP should ensure that inquiries are investigated within 10 working days, as required by the Citywide Standards.

Callers Given Opportunity to Speak to a Supervisor If Not Satisfied with Agent's Response

According to the established Citywide Standards, callers must have an opportunity to speak to a supervisor if they are not satisfied with a response from an agent. When we made our telephone calls to the Help Center, there was no instance in which we needed to speak to a supervisor. During our observations of Customer Service Agents, we noted no instances when agents referred callers to a supervisor, although it is possible that callers may not have asked to speak with a supervisor. We did observe several instances when an agent put a caller on hold to ask a supervisor a question regarding the call.

Conclusion

Given the volume of calls it receives, DEP's Help Center Hotline is doing a good job in answering complaints and requests. However, for the areas in which 100 percent compliance was not achieved, as discussed in the report, DEP needs to periodically test performance to make sure it does not deteriorate.



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ADDENDUM
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May 22, 2002

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1 Centre Street Room 1100
New York, NY 10007-2341

**Re: Audit Number MD02-130A - Audit Report on the Effectiveness of the
Department of Environmental Protection's Help Center Hotline**

Dear Mr. Liwer:

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the above referenced audit recently conducted at the DEP Help Center. We appreciate the opportunity to respond to the draft report and our comments on each recommendation are attached.

Sincerely,

Louis J. Tazzi

cc: Christopher O. Ward Anne McCarthy
Diana Chapin Joseph Green
Charles Sturcken Geoffrey Ryan
Louis Tazzi Pumell Lancaster (Operations)

Audit Number MD02-130A - Audit Report on the Effectiveness of the Department of Environmental Protection's Help Center Hotline

Recommendation 1 - DEP should continue to monitor its Help Center to ensure that all telephone calls are answered within three rings.

DEP Response: As discussed at the audit exit conference, the first ring of any call made to the ACD system of our Help Center, is not an audible ring heard by our Customer Service Staff. We suggest that future audit procedures should be modified to four rings. Help Center staff meetings were held recently to focus on improvements in this area. DEP Help Center Management and Supervisory personnel will continue to monitor our performance in this category.

Recommendation 2 - DEP should remind all of its Help Center Customer Service Agents that they must answer all telephone calls with the standard greeting.

Recommendation 3 - DEP should periodically test whether telephone calls are answered with the standard greeting by making telephone calls to the Help Center.

DEP Response: Our monitoring process will assist in our efforts to reduce the number of occurrences where staff members deviate from our scripting procedures. We have also developed a three-step procedure to discipline agents who show a trend of poor performance in this area. We have added a closing script to our format instructing our staff to politely end their conversations with "Thank you for calling the DEP Help Center, please have a nice day."

Recommendation 4 - DEP should either track the amount of time callers are kept on hold, or periodically test the automated answering system by making telephone calls to the Help Center to determine whether the hold time is more than two minutes.

DEP Response: It is the DEP Help Center responsibility to notify, coordinate response to and monitor situations such as water main breaks, asbestos releases, chemical and other hazardous material releases, etc. Severe emergencies such as these will create unavoidable periods of hold times in excess of the standards set by this audit. We currently track the longest waiting call as our barometer to reduce waiting periods during non-emergency situations. The DEP Help Center's protocol is to facilitate emergency response first, then service the public via our ACD Answering System. We will periodically check our system's automated answering operation to ensure its performance in serving the public.

Audit Number MD02-130A - Audit Report on the Effectiveness of the Department of Environmental Protection's Help Center Hotline

Recommendation 5 - DEP should periodically survey all division supervisors to determine whether they are satisfied with the information provided to them by the Help Center.

DEP Response: Eleven of twelve field division supervisors were satisfied with the information provided by the DEP Help Center. These eleven supervisors stated they had no problems or complaints with the Help Center's work, they also stated that there is good communication between field division supervisors and the Help Center. In view of a field division supervisor's comments, we will develop a survey form in the near future to be distributed to all Bureau Supervisors for suggestions and comments to provide a forum to address any breakdown in communication between the Help Center staff and field supervisors.

Recommendation 6 - DEP should periodically review its inspection detail reports to ensure that all telephone inquiries are investigated within 10 working days.

DEP Response: As per our discussion at the exit conference with DEP Executive Staff and the audit team of the Comptroller's office, the responsibility to review or contact the public is not within the scope of the DEP Help Center's jurisdiction. We rely on the caller to record the assigned customer service number and return a call to us for feedback at a later date.