

*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 New York City
Domestic Violence Hotline**

MJ02-100A

May 10, 2002

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

Domestic violence is defined as the use or threat of physical, emotional, sexual, or financial abuse to gain control over a partner in a primary relationship, whether either active or past, or over another family member. In 1994, New York City established a 24-hour, seven-day-a-week toll-free hotline for domestic violence victims.

The City entered into a contract with Victim Services, subsequently renamed Safe Horizon, to operate the Domestic Violence Hotline (Hotline). Safe Horizon, a not-for-profit organization, acts as a domestic violence liaison for a number of City agencies that are responsible for providing certain services related to domestic violence. The Mayor's Office, through its Office of the Criminal Justice Coordinator, oversees the contract. The Hotline is staffed by advocates who provide callers with information, crisis counseling, safety planning, and referrals to the City's emergency shelter system and to non-residential services in the callers' neighborhoods.

In 1996, the Mayor's Office of Operations established the Citywide Customer Service Initiative that sets a telephone service standard. In its contract with the City, Safe Horizon advocates are required to answer Hotline calls within 20 seconds (equivalent to four rings) on average and are not allowed to put callers on hold (unless approved by a Hotline supervisor).

Objectives

This audit was initiated to evaluate whether the Domestic Violence Hotline operates in compliance with its related contract with the City that requires

calls to be answered within 20 seconds and that no calls be placed on hold without explicit supervisory approval. This audit also determined whether the Hotline is achieving its mission to provide accurate and useful telephone information to callers. The review period was July 2001 through February 2002.

Scope and Methodology

To obtain a general understanding of the procedures that govern Hotline activities, we reviewed those provisions of Safe Horizon's contract with the City that relate to the Hotline. We interviewed Safe Horizon officials, a Hotline supervisor and several advocates.

To determine whether phone calls are answered within 20 seconds on average and that they are not put on hold, we made a series of calls to the Hotline. We made 50 calls to the Hotline during the period July 24, 2001, through August 3, 2001, and another 15 calls to the Hotline during the period February 10–20, 2002.

To verify the accuracy of the referral information provided by advocates, we contacted the parties referred to us by advocates during our calls to the Hotline to determine whether those parties provided the services for which we were referred.

To determine the Hotline's workload, we asked Safe Horizon to provide us with monitoring reports, such as the monthly system activity reports, for the period July 2001 through January 2002.

We reviewed the Hotline's automated call distribution (ACD) system to understand how calls are received by the Hotline, how they are forwarded to advocates, and how they are tabulated for reporting purposes. To review Safe Horizon's allocation of advocates to provide Hotline coverage, we obtained a list of the advocates along with their scheduled working hours. To determine whether there was adequate coverage on the Hotline to ensure that all calls were answered within the contract-mandated time frame, we reviewed the ACD system monitoring reports.

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 New York City Comptroller's audit responsibilities as set forth in Chapter 5, § 93, of the New York City Charter.

Results in Brief

Our calls to the Hotline were answered within 20 seconds as required by Safe Horizon's contract with the City. Furthermore, our calls were answered in

15 seconds (three rings) or less, which also meets the more stringent Citywide Customer Service Standard that calls be answered in no more than three rings. None of our test calls was placed on hold, in accordance with the contract. For the period July 2001 through January 2002, the reported average time to answer calls was 16 seconds.

In fiscal year 1996, the Hotline received 62,608 calls. In fiscal year 2001, the Hotline received 131,412 calls, a 110 percent increase. Safe Horizon officials attributed the dramatic increase to public education campaigns designed to increase awareness of domestic violence.

When callers obtain information from Hotline advocates, it is generally accurate, according to our test results. Also, all 46 referrals we received from advocates were appropriate: the agencies existed at the locations given by advocates and provided the services for which we were referred. The advocates were responsive to our needs. In addition, they had received training to carry out their responsibilities.

Overall, the Hotline appears to be doing a good job in answering calls promptly and in providing accurate information to callers. Since we found no material weaknesses in Safe Horizon's administration of the Domestic Violence Hotline, we make no recommendations in this report.

Safe Horizon and OCJC Responses

The matters covered in this report were discussed with Safe Horizon and Office of the Criminal Justice Coordinator (OCJC) officials during and at the conclusion of this audit. A preliminary draft report was sent to Safe Horizon and OCJC officials and was discussed at an exit conference on April 10, 2002. On April 12, 2002, we submitted a draft report to Safe Horizon and OCJC officials with a request for comments. We received written responses from OCJC and Safe Horizon on April 25, 2002, and April 29, 2002, respectively.

Both Safe Horizon and OCJC agreed with the report's findings. Safe Horizon stated:

“We appreciate the role of the Comptroller's Office in ensuring that our hotline maintains the standards of the Citywide Customer Service Initiative as well as compliance with our contract through the Office of the Criminal Justice Coordinator. We value the support of the Comptroller's Office during the auditing process, and the findings of the report which identified no material weaknesses and no recommendations for change in our program.”

The OCJC Associate Coordinator stated:

“I am in receipt of the above-referenced draft audit report and am pleased that you found no material weaknesses in the administration of the Domestic Violence Hotline and that the performance of the hotline is in accordance with the City’s contract with Safe Horizon.”

The full texts of the Safe Horizon and OCJC comments are included as addenda to this final report.

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INTRODUCTION

Background

Domestic violence is defined as the use or threat of physical, emotional, sexual, or financial abuse to gain control over a partner in a primary relationship, whether either active or past, or over another family member.

In 1994, New York City established a 24-hour, seven-day-a-week toll-free hotline for domestic violence victims. The hotline was created in response to the needs of victims seeking immediate assistance who had to navigate a variety of fragmented, uncoordinated systems to obtain services.

When it established the hotline in 1994, the City entered into a contract with Victim Services, subsequently renamed Safe Horizon, to operate the Domestic Violence Hotline (Hotline). Safe Horizon, a not-for-profit organization, acts as a domestic violence liaison for a number of City agencies that are responsible for providing certain services related to domestic violence. These agencies include the Human Resources Administration and the Department of Homeless Services. The Mayor's Office, through its Office of the Criminal Justice Coordinator, oversees the contract.

The Hotline is staffed by advocates trained to assist victims of domestic violence or those with problems related to domestic violence. Advocates provide callers with information, crisis counseling, safety planning, and referrals to the City's emergency shelter system and to non-residential services in the callers' neighborhoods. They assist callers in obtaining immediate police assistance or orders of protection. Advocates also provide information and community-based referrals to friends and relatives of persons who may be in abusive relationships. The Hotline has advocates who can assist non-English-speaking callers in Spanish, Russian, Chinese, French, and other languages. Safe Horizon has approximately 94 advocates assigned to the Hotline.

In 1996, the Mayor's Office of Operations established the Citywide Customer Service Initiative that sets a telephone service standard. The standard requires calls to be answered in three rings or less, with a hold time of not more than two minutes after calls have been answered. In its contract with the City, Safe Horizon advocates are required to answer Hotline calls within 20 seconds (equivalent to four rings) on average and are not allowed to put callers on hold (unless approved by a Hotline supervisor).

Objectives

This audit was initiated to evaluate whether the Domestic Violence Hotline operates in compliance with its related contract with the City that requires calls to be answered within 20 seconds and that no calls be placed on hold without explicit supervisory approval. This audit also determined whether the Hotline is achieving its mission to provide accurate and useful telephone information to callers. The review period was July 2001 through February 2002.

Scope and Methodology

To obtain a general understanding of the procedures that govern Hotline activities, we reviewed those provisions of Safe Horizon's contract with the City that relate to the Hotline. (The contract also covers other services Safe Horizon provides for the City, e.g., teen programs and special training for police officers.) We interviewed Safe Horizon officials, including the Vice-President and the Senior Director of the Call Center, where the Hotline is based. We also interviewed a Hotline supervisor and several advocates.

To determine whether phone calls are answered within 20 seconds on average and that they are not put on hold, we made a series of calls to the Hotline. We made 50 calls to the Hotline during the period July 24, 2001, through August 3, 2001. To determine whether the time in which calls were answered continued to fall within contract-mandated time frames after the September 11th World Trade Center attack, we made another 15 calls to the Hotline during the period February 10–20, 2002.

To verify the accuracy of the referral information provided by advocates, we contacted the parties referred to us by advocates during our calls to the Hotline to determine whether those parties provided the services for which we were referred. We also obtained a list of the referral agencies used by the Hotline and contacted a number of them to verify that they existed and that they provided the services which they were identified as providing.

To determine the Hotline's workload, we asked Safe Horizon to provide us with monitoring reports, such as the monthly system activity reports, for the period July 2001 through January 2002. These reports include the following information: number of calls received by the Hotline, the average length of time per call, the number of calls answered by advocates, and the number of referrals.

We reviewed the Hotline's automated call distribution (ACD) system to understand how calls are received by the Hotline, how they are forwarded to advocates, and how they are

tabulated for reporting purposes. We also observed calls as they were being accepted and handled by advocates.

To review Safe Horizon's allocation of advocates to provide Hotline coverage, we obtained a list of the advocates along with their scheduled working hours. We interviewed Safe Horizon officials who told us how the work hours and staffing of advocate stations were established. To determine whether there was adequate coverage on the Hotline to ensure that all calls were answered within the contract-mandated time frame, we reviewed the ACD system monitoring reports.

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 New York City Comptroller's audit responsibilities as set forth in Chapter 5, § 93, of the New York City Charter.

Safe Horizon and OCJC Responses

The matters covered in this report were discussed with Safe Horizon and Office of the Criminal Justice Coordinator (OCJC) officials during and at the conclusion of this audit. A preliminary draft was sent to Safe Horizon and OCJC officials and was discussed at an exit conference on April 10, 2002. On April 12, 2002, we submitted a draft report to Safe Horizon and OCJC officials with a request for comments. We received written responses from OCJC and Safe Horizon on April 25, 2002, and April 29, 2002, respectively.

Both Safe Horizon and OCJC agreed with the report's findings. Safe Horizon stated:

“We appreciate the role of the Comptroller's Office in ensuring that our hotline maintains the standards of the Citywide Customer Service Initiative as well as compliance with our contract through the Office of the Criminal Justice Coordinator. We value the support of the Comptroller's Office during the auditing process, and the findings of the report which identified no material weaknesses and no recommendations for change in our program.”

The OCJC Associate Coordinator stated:

“I am in receipt of the above-referenced draft audit report and am pleased that you found no material weaknesses in the administration of the Domestic Violence Hotline and that the performance of the hotline is in accordance with the City's contract with Safe Horizon.”

The full texts of the Safe Horizon and OCJC comments are included as addenda to this final report.

**OFFICE OF THE COMPTROLLER
NEW YORK CITY**

DATE FILED: May 10, 2002

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Hotline advocates answered our calls in 15 seconds (i.e., three rings) or less, which is within the 20-second limit mandated in Safe Horizon's contract with the City. None of our test calls was placed on hold, in accordance with the contract. Once connected with a caller, advocates provided accurate referral information, were responsive to callers' needs, and were willing to take the time to provide the information requested.

During the period July 2001 through January 2002, the Hotline's ACD system reported that advocates answered Hotline calls in 16 seconds on average. Overall, the Hotline appears to be doing a good job in answering calls promptly and in providing accurate information to callers.

Auditors' Calls were Answered in 15 Seconds or Less, Well within the 20-Second Contract-Mandated Standard

Our calls to the Hotline were answered within 20 seconds as required by Safe Horizon's contract with the City. Furthermore, our calls were answered in 15 seconds (three rings) or less, which also meets the more stringent Citywide Customer Service Standard that calls be answered in no more than three rings. For the period July 2001 through January 2002, the reported average time to answer calls was 16 seconds.

Safe Horizon's contract with the City states that the average answer time for calls to the Hotline should not exceed 20 seconds in any given month. As stated previously, the Hotline operates 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Moreover, the Hotline does not have an automated operator feature as many other helplines do; the Hotline is staffed solely by advocates. During periods of heavy call volume, staff from Safe Horizon's Crime Victim Services hotline are re-assigned to assist in answering Hotline calls.

Each Hotline advocate is allocated four phone lines—one for incoming calls, the other three for outgoing calls, as needed (e.g., to contact referral services). In order for an advocate to accept a call, the advocate must be logged in to the Hotline's ACD system and the line status must be in the "available" mode. ACD directs incoming calls to available advocate lines; if none is available, ACD places the incoming calls into the system's hold queue, where calls are stored until an advocate (or advocate supervisor) becomes available.

As a rule, Hotline advocates do not place calls on hold. Even when placing an outgoing call to complete a referral, an advocate will keep the caller on the line so that the caller can participate in a three-way conversation. Advocates must obtain approval from a supervisor before placing a call on hold.

To determine whether the Hotline met the contract requirement that calls be answered within 20 seconds on average, we made two series of phone calls to the Hotline. During the first series, covering the period July 23, 2001, through August 3, 2001, we placed 50 calls to the

Hotline. We made 27 calls between the hours of 12:00 p.m. and 11:00 p.m.; we made the remaining 23 calls between the hours of 12:00 a.m. and 11:00 a.m. We made no more than one call to the Hotline in any given hour. In making these calls, we assumed the role of either a domestic violence victim or an abuser and requested assistance. All 50 calls were answered within the 20-second contract-mandated standard. In fact, all 50 calls were answered within 15 seconds (three rings), which also meets the more stringent Citywide Customer Service standard that calls be answered in three rings or less. None of our calls was placed on hold after being answered by advocates.

To determine whether the World Trade Center attack on September 11, 2001, affected Safe Horizon’s ability to comply with the 20-second standard, we placed another 15 calls to the Hotline during the period February 10–20, 2001. We made 20 calls between the hours of 12:00 p.m. and 11:00 p.m.; we made the remaining five calls between the hours of 12:00 a.m. and 11:00 a.m. Again, we made no more than one call in any given hour. For this second series of calls, Hotline advocates answered all calls within 15 seconds, meeting both the contract and the Citywide Customer Service standards.

To ascertain how closely our test results matched Safe Horizon’s own indicators of effectiveness in answering calls within contract-mandated time frames, we reviewed the ACD system’s monthly system activity reports for the period July 2001 through January 2002. According to the reports, 91,973 calls were made to the Hotline for that period. Of these, 86,026 (94%) were handled by advocates. The remaining 5,947 calls were abandoned by callers after having been answered by advocates. The 86,026 calls were answered by advocates in 16 seconds on average (a little over three rings). The number of calls received and the average answer time, per month, is shown in Table I, below.

TABLE I

Hotline Calls Answered and Average Answer Time
ACD Monthly Activity Reports, July 2001 through January 2002

Month	Number of Calls Answered	Average Time Needed to Answer Call (seconds)
July 2001	11,618	8
August 2001	12,766	10
September 2001	10,039	19
October 2001	14,203	14
November 2001	11,863	14
December 2001	11,466	30
January 2002	14,071	15
Average	12,289	16

As shown in Table I, Safe Horizon met the 20-second answer time standard in all but one month (December). In December 2001, the average answer time was 30 seconds, almost twice the average for the seven-month period. Safe Horizon attributed the dramatic increase in

average answer time to two factors: the agency expanded its operations, and it hired a number of new employees to work on the Hotline who were undergoing training. After December, the average answer times were close to those before December and within the 20-second requirement: the average answer time was 15 seconds for January 2002 and nine seconds for February 1–13, 2002.

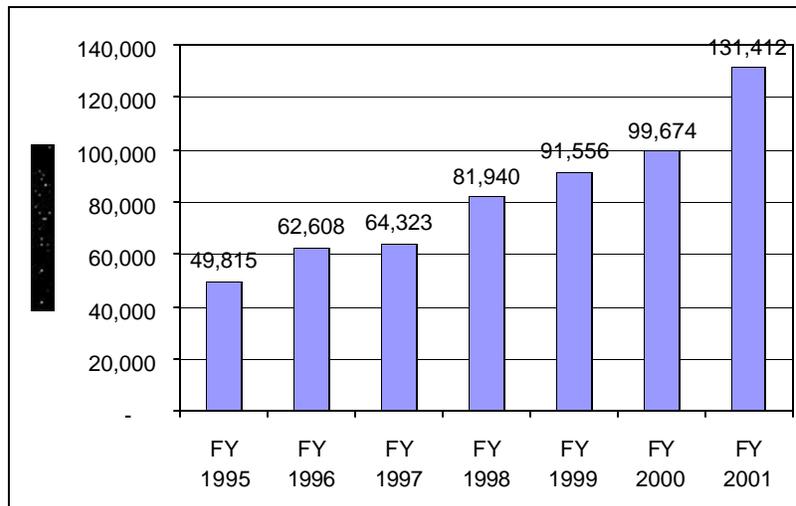
**Volume of Calls Received by the Hotline
has Increased Significantly since 1996**

In fiscal year 1996, the Hotline received 62,608 calls. In fiscal year 2001, the Hotline received 131,412 calls, a 110 percent increase. Safe Horizon officials attributed the dramatic increase to public education campaigns designed to increase awareness of domestic violence.

Table II, below, shows the number of calls received by the Hotline each year since fiscal year 1995.

TABLE II

**Number of Calls Received by the Hotline
Fiscal Years 1995 through 2001**



The City has conducted a number of campaigns regarding domestic violence. The first campaign, initiated in 1995, focused on the impact of domestic violence on adults. The second campaign, in 1996, focused on its impact on children. A 1997 campaign focused on teen relationships. The City also conducted campaigns in 1999 and 2000. As part of the campaigns, the City mounts posters on subways and buses and in meeting places throughout the City, including schools, hospitals, religious institutions, and theaters. The Hotline number is included

on the posters, which encourage victims to seek assistance. Safe Horizon officials believe that these campaigns have helped to increase public awareness of domestic violence and have encouraged more victims to seek help.

Hotline Advocates Provide Accurate Information to Callers

When callers obtain information from Hotline advocates, it is generally accurate, according to our test results. Also, all 46 referrals we received from advocates were appropriate: the agencies existed at the locations given by advocates and provided the services for which we were referred. The advocates were responsive to our needs. In addition, they had received training to carry out their responsibilities.

To determine whether callers to the Hotline received accurate information from advocates, we requested information and referrals from advocates as part of our first series of calls, using a number of different scenarios related to domestic violence. The scenarios we used fell into six general categories, designed to encompass different types of domestic violence. The categories were: (1) elder abuse, (2) psychological or verbal abuse, (3) financial abuse, (4) physical abuse, (5) physical abuse by a parent, and (6) a combination of different types of abuse.

In our 50 calls to the Hotline, advocates provided us with 46 referrals (not including referrals to 911) to community-based agencies. We contacted the agencies and verified that they provided the services for which we were referred. In addition, these agencies are listed in a citywide directory containing referral agencies for domestic violence victims. This directory is used by Safe Horizon and various City agencies (e.g., Administration for Children Services) and is included on the website of the Mayor's Office to Combat Domestic Violence.

To verify that the directory contains current information, we randomly selected 35 of the 500 agencies listed in the directory and contacted them. All 35 agencies were at the locations identified in the directory, and all of them provided the services that the directory identified them as providing.

During our calls to the Hotline, advocates were responsive to callers; advocates gave us a number of options to address the scenarios. To better understand the role of an advocate, we reviewed Safe Horizon's training procedures. Safe Horizon has a number of training programs covering topics such as crisis response and trauma. All client advocates are required to undergo a nine-day training session, and full-time advocates are required to attend an agency-sponsored training session every three months.

Recommendation

Since we found no material weaknesses in Safe Horizon's administration of the Domestic Violence Hotline, we make no recommendations in this report.



THE CITY OF NEW YORK
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JOHN FEINBLATT
Criminal Justice Coordinator

April 25, 2002

Roger D. Liwer
Assistant Comptroller for Audits
Office of the Comptroller
Municipal Building, Room 1100 North
New York, NY 10007

RE: Draft Audit Report on the
Effectiveness of the New York City
Domestic Violence Hotline MJO2-100A

Dear Mr. Liwer:

I am in receipt of the above-referenced draft audit report and am pleased that you found no material weaknesses in the administration of the Domestic Violence Hotline and that the performance of the hotline is in accordance with the City's contract with Safe Horizon.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Martin H. Becker".

Martin H. Becker
Associate Coordinator

cc: Elizabeth McCarthy
Migdalia Veloz