2022

AUDIT OF THE ULSTER COUNTY SERVICE CENTER

Office of the
Ulster County Comptroller
March S. Gallagher

Objectives

The objectives of this audit are to:

- Confirm if the Constituent Navigator Service, also known as the Ulster County Service Center, has met the original mission and objective as provided to the Legislature during the 2022 budget (Appendix A) which were to:
  - Provide Ulster County residents with an optimized connection to the services of the County;
  - Provide multiple paths for constituents to reach county government services;
  - Allow County managers the ability to track the type and frequency of services requested;
  - Be a single system of record for routing county services fostering cross-department collaboration; and
  - Provide an enhanced web presence
- Determine if the Service Center is an effective use of taxpayer resources.

Executive Summary: Why this audit is important

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in upheaval to the economy and government services. Ulster County needed to address the questions of people and organizations during the pandemic as it related to public health concerns and the continuously changing state and local guidance. To address public questions and concerns, Ulster County established a COVID hotline. In response to the dramatic increase in calls at the height of the pandemic the County Executive introduced a division "to provide Ulster County's residents with an optimized connection to the services the County provides" with the introduction of the Ulster County Service Center (otherwise known as the Constituent Services Navigator). In the 2022 budget, the Service Center was funded at an amended cost of $310K using funds from the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA). ARPA gave local governments discretion to spend the funds in the best way for their local needs. Treasury regulations require these taxpayer resources to be spent in cost effective ways that will most benefit the community.

What the Comptroller's Office found

Despite allocating significant resources to promotion and widening the scope of the Service Center, it still receives few calls. The Service Center receives the most calls when public health issues arise, such as the Omicron variant spike or monkeypox spread, but in between those the call volume does not seem to align with the staffing and additional resources being allocated to operate a separate unit of government. Due to extremely low call volume and overall utilization rates, cost per call statistics have sky-rocketed and call center idle time has increased. This downtime could be better utilized to serve the County and constituent needs. Furthermore, the Service Center may wind up being an extra step to reach the appropriate service or may result in calls that require specialized skill not present in the call center, such as mental health evaluation or concerns about opioid addiction programs.

What We Recommend

The 2023 Executive proposed budget has been released with the Ulster County Service Center remaining with a recommended budget of $341K which does not include ancillary expenses such as the cost to enhance the County's web services. The Legislature may want to consider alternative methods to assist constituents that come with a lower cost to the taxpayer while recognizing the need to have in place a way to deal with an increase based on events that are affecting the community in a moment in time. Additionally, County government should work towards revamping the Ulster County website driving consumers through a user-friendly portal for most frequently asked questions. Alternatively, consider utilizing staff for other clerical tasks during their downtime and perhaps even move the unit to a department that has an overflow of administrative tasks. Finally, if the County utilized the "Single Phone Number" model they had initially proposed, it would improve the quality and quantity of the data collected regarding incoming calls and the need for services.

Findings & Recommendations

Finding 1 - The Ulster County Service Center is not a cost-effective use of resources.

Condition: The Service Center receives few calls and has a high operating cost while not collecting valuable data that could improve analysis and foster cooperation between departments.

According to the document provided to the Legislature detailing the Service Center division for the 2022 Budget the "Relevant Data" presented a much higher call volume with the assumption that the future call volume would remain at these higher levels. While the Service Center experienced a very high volume of calls during the Omicron wave of the pandemic in January of 2022, since then, call volume has diminished and for the last three months has averaged 24 calls per day. Currently, the call center is reaching a very small number of constituents. The primary benefit would be to identify available services for which they might apply. The benefit is minimal, costly, and does not have a wide constituent reach.

Service Center 2022 Call Volume
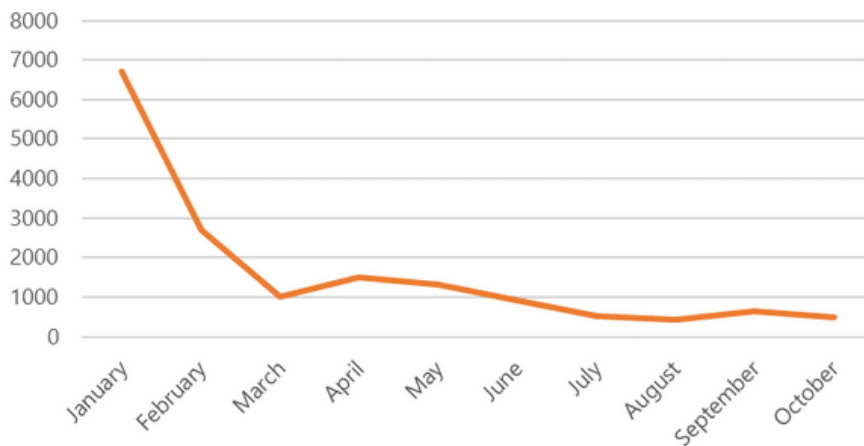
The Service Center is staffed with four positions. The capacity of the Service Center is not designed to expand and contract, but instead to handle a constant level of calls. The Center must have enough staff to meet demand, even in high demand periods, otherwise caller satisfaction will decline, and users will avoid the system. On the other hand, overstaffing results in long idle times and staff inefficiency. The center is not structured in a way that allows it to address temporary bubbles in call volume, hindering the ability in achieving its stated goals and objectives.
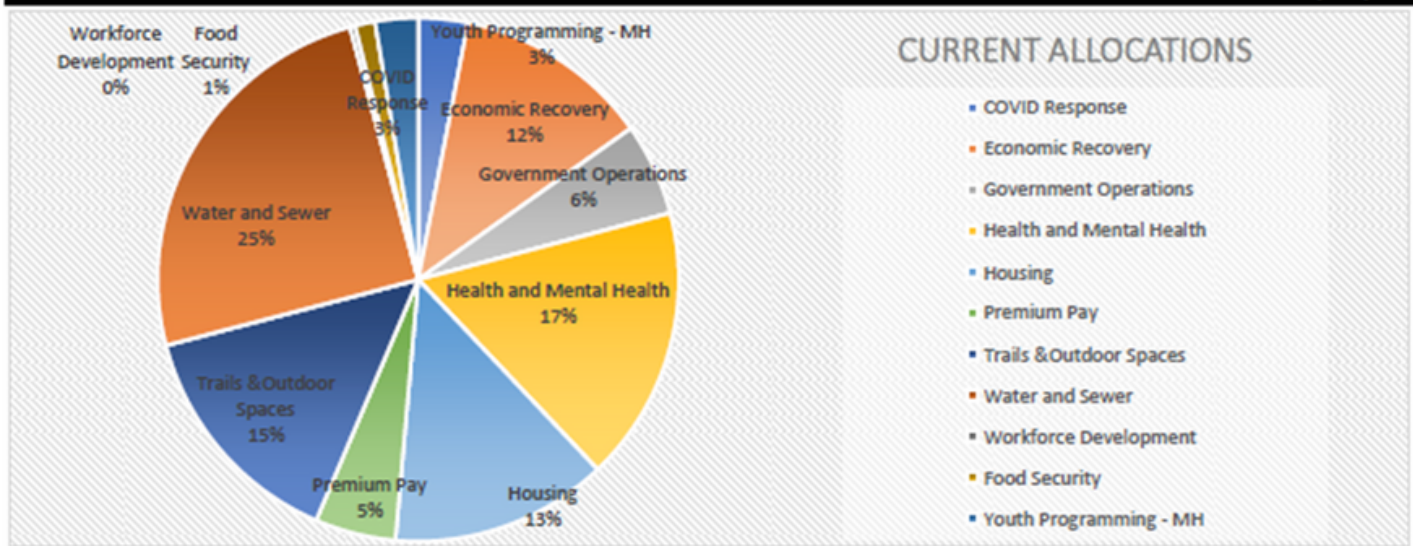
The total costs listed in the Constituent Service Navigator division through October 31, 2022, were $197,957, which is roughly $952 per active workday. Using the average cost per workday and the average call volume, we conducted a cost per call analysis, which displays the growing amount of the cost per call as the number of service calls have decreased in volume over time. The year-to-date call volume through October 31, 2022, was 86 calls per day, with the volume decreasing to 34 calls per day over the last six months and further decreasing to only 24 calls per day over the last three months (August, September, October). The calculated cost per call has jumped from $11.01 per call over a twelve-month period to $39.15 per call as volume has continuously declined.

Effect: These resources could be used to meet other goals of ARPA and needs in Ulster County.

Resource allocation decisions are best made with complete information. Ulster County has pressing needs that should be addressed including a housing crisis, opioid epidemic, and emergency services crisis that has led to 11% of 911 ambulance/EMS service requests going unanswered. Expenditures of taxpayer funds should be constantly weighed by the County Legislature and balanced against a variety of other needs. Ulster County has allocated ARPA funds to a variety of programs and services based on the needs of the community. The funds and the personnel used for the Service Center could be more effectively allocated to other purposes.

Actual Cost Per Call Through 10.31.2022

CURRENT ALLOCATIONS

- COVID Response
- Economic Recovery
- Government Operations
- Health and Mental Health
- Housing
- Premium Pay
- Trails & Outdoor Spaces
- Water and Sewer
- Workforce Development
- Food Security
- Youth Programming - MH

Cause: Low call volume and an inflexible staffing structure has resulted in inefficient and ineffective uses of County resources.

The Call Center has four employees: a director, an assistant director, and two service center representatives. There are two management positions overseeing two non-management positions resulting in 57% of the 2022 personnel budget allocated to management. When call volume is high, management might be used to answer phones but when call volume is low, the personnel budget cannot contract to accommodate low volume. Furthermore, the County currently outsources interdepartmental calls to Information Services for IT assistance to an outside answering service. These calls could be answered by in house Service Center staff potentially cutting some of the operators' idle time.

Criteria: U.S. Treasury reporting guidance for ARPA identifies recipients as the first line of defense for ensuring that there is no waste, fraud and abuse associated with the award. [1]

It is the Comptroller's Charter-mandated responsibility to review the efficiency and effectiveness of County programs per the Ulster County Charter § C-57(I). The Division is not meeting the criteria outlined in the original proposal the Administration presented in support for the investment of ARPA funds in the 2022 budget for the Service Center (Appendix A). Those objectives were to:

- Provide multiple paths for constituents to reach county government services;
- Allow County managers the ability to track the type and frequency of services requested;
- Be a single system of record for routing county services fostering cross-department collaboration; and
- Provide an enhanced web presence

The program should strive to meet both the broad federal goals of ARPA as well as the specific metrics outlined locally in support of the division.

Recommendation 1: Increase call volume

The Administration has undertaken a series of efforts to increase utilization including adding a website component that could bring in additional service requests and advertising the Service Center availability in social media. However, the original proposal presented that there would be a "Single Phone Number" for the County and it does not appear that there have been efforts made to streamline the calls to the Service Center number. If they did this, it would increase call volume and usage and provide more complete call data for further consideration and analysis. Further efforts to boost utilization could be made including the routing of all or some of the public facing phone numbers for a variety of County departments including those with high call volumes like the Department of Social Services or Department of Health, considering staff training to address the types of calls being received (for example, mental health or social services questions). Looking at the data for all County incoming calls over the past 10 months shows many employees in other departments of the County still directly handling large call volumes. (Appendix B).

---

[1] U.S. Treasury Department, Compliance Reporting and Guidance: State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds, Part 1(A), page 7 (Sept. 20, 2022, Version 5.0).

Based on our review of County media, websites, and public communications, the County is still advertising individual departmental phone numbers. Some of the more public phone numbers include the Office of the Aging, the Department of Social Services, and the Department of Motor Vehicles.

Ulster County's main website's Home Page lists the County contact number as (845) 340-3000.

If you need to speak to someone or if you have questions, please call:

- Temporary Assistance: (845) 334-5440
- Emergency Housing (845) 334-5360
- SNAP: (845) 334-5200
- HEAP: (845) 334-5436
- Medicaid: (845) 334-5175
- Employment: (845) 334-5317
- Child Care Subsidy Program: (845) 334-5489
- Child Support Customer Service Helpline: 1-888-208-4485
- Child Support Customer Service Information Line: 1-800-846-0773
- Early Intervention & Preschool Special Education Programs: (845) 334-5251
- Adult Protective Services: (845) 334-5125
- Child & Family Services: (845) 334-5400
- Anti-fraud, Waste and Abuse Hotline: (855) SIU-TIPS or (855) 748-8477

Without embracing the "Single Phone Number" methodology included in the original proposal, the Center's call volume has not reached anticipated levels and calls are still flowing directly to departmental staff. Ulster County received 284,267 calls in 2022 from January 1 through October 31, not including employees calls to voicemail. The Service Center answered 6% of those calls. We suggest that if the goal is to connect people with services, that the data collection provide more detail about what services we were able to help with and the outcomes for constituents transferred to other departments. It does not appear the Center tracks the results of connecting constituents with new services. We suggest that if the goal is to connect people with services that the data collection provide more detail about the services that were ultimately provided.

Recommendation 2: Consider modified staffing arrangements or outsourcing call services.

The Service Center should be staffed in a way that allows expansion and contraction of call operators based on the current demand on the system. Building in a structure that allows staff to complete other work during down-time would allow this type of flexibility without sacrificing efficiency. This may require the unit to be relocated to a larger department that could better utilize the down time with administrative overflow. If call volume remains low, management should consider elimination of the service altogether with a greater reliance on third-party contracts with call center support, as has been our past practice. The County should consider the current service that is maintained by United Way of Westchester and Putnam's 211 call center that is described in greater detail in background below.

Scope

The Comptroller's Office reviewed call data from the recovery service center for the first ten months of 2022, January through October. We also reviewed preliminary call data provided as backup for Legislative budget approval in the fall of 2021.

Background

When the pandemic began in March of 2020, Ulster County began receiving a voluminous number of phone calls from constituents with questions related to, and for the reporting of infections and exposures to COVID-19. Public health guidance was changing daily. People and organizations were constantly trying to understand the latest restrictions and requirements.

To meet this unprecedented call demand, Ulster County initiated an in person COVID-19 hotline which was shortly converted to a remote call system to limit the potential exposure of individuals working at the call center. The center was staffed by County employees and volunteers.

The COVID-19 hotline continued to have robust call traffic throughout 2020 and into 2021, particularly as new information or resources became available, such as testing and vaccinations.

BUDGET

The Ulster County adopted budget for 2022 created a new Service Center division within the Information Services department. The new division was originally budgeted at $298,935 but was amended to add funds for periodicals, interpreter services, and other services bringing the 2022 budgeted total to $310,325. Revenues of $405,792 in federal aid were budgeted to offset these costs.

Ulster County Service Center	2022	2023
Regular Pay	$ 270,725	$ 296,133
Supplies Office	$ -	$ 2,000
Professional Services Advertising	$ 7,500	$ 5,000
Professional Services Education/Training	$ -	$ 1,500
Professional Services Interpreter	$ 2,000	$ 4,000
Professional Services Other Fees	$ 2,350	$ 1,000
Misc Contractual Expense Periodicals	$ 6,950	$ 8,000
Misc Contractual Expense Printing Service	$ -	$ 1,000
Social Security/FICA SS/FICA	$ 20,710	$ 22,694
Total	$ 310,235	$ 341,327

STAFF

The Service Center division is staffed with four employees, two representatives and two management positions.

Service Center Personnel	2022 budgeted	2023 proposed
Project Director	$ 81,973	$ 84,029
Assistant Project Director	$ 73,874	$ 75,803
Consituent Services Representative	$ 57,439	$ 66,941
Consituent Services Representative	$ 57,439	$ 69,360
Total	$ 270,725	$ 296,133

The mission of the Ulster County Service Center was broadened to encompass potential calls from the public on all matters and questions that Ulster County residents might bring. This change accompanied a change in the name of the division to the Ulster County Service Center.

CALLS ANSWERED

The Service Center tracks requests by department.

The requests documented in the chart to the right are not strictly calls received by the call center representatives as over 55% of requests originate via the webform. The Health Department accounts for over 85% of the requests being made, while the Executive's Office ranks third with just under 300 calls answered.

In October 2022, Acting County Executive Contreras announced a further expansion of the Service Center to be able to accommodate inquiries vie the web at https://ulstercountyserves.com/. In addition, the County has begun advertising the Service Center on social media to boost usage.

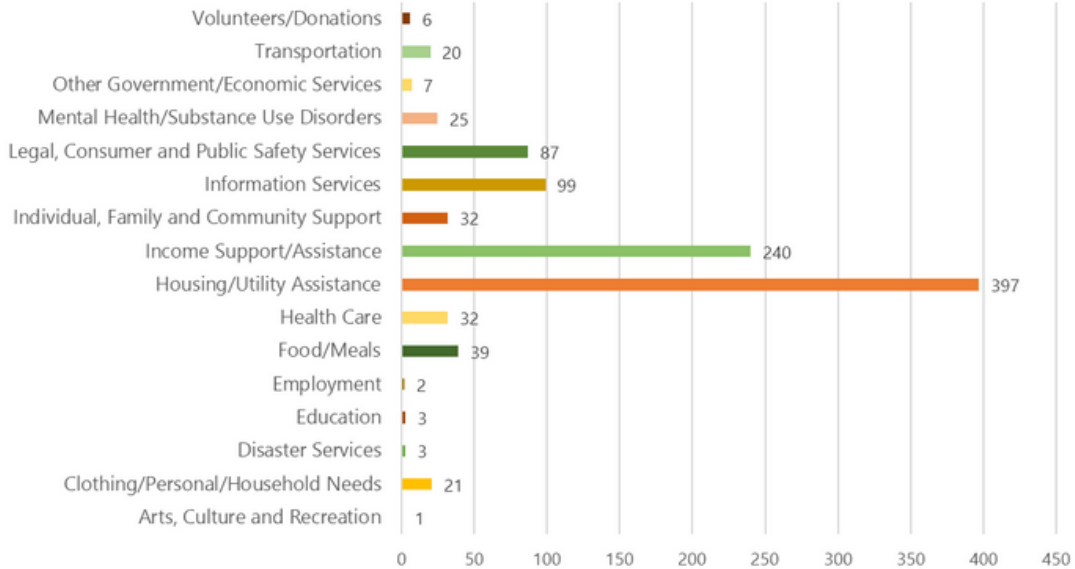| Service Center Requests by Department	
January - September 2022	
Department	Total Requests
Health Department	7,904
Ulster County Service Center	317
Executive Office	299
EOC	187
Department of Social Services	109
Other - Question	109
Emergency Services (E911)	28
Office of the Aging	13
Veterans	6
Other - Volunteer	6
Public Works Department	4
Employment & Training	3
Personnel Department	1

ANOTHER ALTERNATIVE CALL CENTER OPTION: 211

There are other alternative call answering services. One to consider that already answers calls for Ulster County residents is that of 211. The 211 service is administered by United Way nationwide and by United Way of Westchester and Putnam on behalf of the entire Hudson Valley. Ulster County has previously contracted with United Way of Ulster County for the provision of the 211 Hotline from at least as early as 2014 through 2019 to answer phone calls through their 211 system. During those years Ulster County had a $30,000 contract with United Way of Ulster County.

Despite there being no current contract between Ulster County and United Way, United Way has answered 1,104 calls from Ulster County residents between January and September of 2022. They receive these calls with no marketing or advertising and no contract or compensation from Ulster County.

United Way 2022 Service Requests Data for Ulster County

Category	Value
Volunteers/Donations	6
Transportation	20
Other Government/Economic Services	7
Mental Health/Substance Use Disorders	25
Legal, Consumer and Public Safety Services	87
Information Services	99
Individual, Family and Community Support	32
Income Support/Assistance	240
Housing/Utility Assistance	397
Health Care	32
Food/Meals	39
Employment	2
Education	3
Disaster Services	3
Clothing/Personal/Household Needs	21
Arts, Culture and Recreation	1

CALL CENTER METRICS AND EVALUATION

Call centers are typically evaluated on call quality and call volume. It is well known in the industry that managing small call centers is very challenging. Idle time is the time that operators are not busy and occupancy levels are the percentage of time operators are handling inbound calls. Balancing one against another is challenging because if you reduce the number of operators, then wait times can go up. With such a small number of operators in the County Service Center already, a reduction may not be feasible while continuing the service.

Our calculations show that over the course of an 8-hour call day, the average call duration is 4 minutes and 30 seconds. This is taken from call log data based on the call logs of the Telzio system January through June 15 and the NEC system June 15 through October. Using the average call duration of 4 minutes and 30 seconds, and 24 calls per day on average, results in 89% of operators' time being idle and only an 11% occupancy time.

**Management's Response

Management's response to our recommendations are included at the end of our report, as is our reply.

Ulster County Constituent Service Navigator Program

Executive Summary

Ulster County created the Recovery Service Center (RSC) to assist our residents in navigating the multitude of ever-changing guidance surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic. This service has enabled the County to assist residents with getting tested and vaccinated, contact tracing, rental assistance, access to food, and other critical information and services the County provides. Learning from this experience, we are proposing to transition some of the functionality of the RSC to have a permanent place within Information Services.

Similar to a 3-1-1 system which concentrates on requests related to the physical world, or a 2-1-1 system which focus on connecting to services, the Constituent Service Navigator Program is an innovative, hybrid approach, designed to provide service enhancements and a personal connection to a care navigator, who can help them get through the myriad of health and human services, as well as all of the other services the County provides.

Key Programmatic Highlights

Mission Statement

To provide Ulster County's residents with an optimized connection to the services the County provides. This project will seek to make navigating and connecting with County services a more user-friendly experience with multiple paths to request services and connect with their government. Additionally, this system will allow County managers to track the type and frequency of service requests while more efficiently communicating the resolution of these requests. Beyond the tech enhancements, the program would provide constituents with a warm hand-off to services they're eligible for but may not know to ask about.

Program Management

Information Services will be responsible for overall program management of the Recovery Service Center, with assistance from the Department of Budget and Innovation who currently manages the center. Budget and Innovation will be integral in developing the new program and handing it off to four full-time staff, who will provide staffing and operational oversight. The core staff in Information Services will support software, website, and phone system enhancements. The primary inputs to the system will come from a centralized phone and email, from the County's website and social media accounts, and from communications from our departments.

Single System of Record for Routing Service Requests/Complaints

The program will provide for the management and administration of constituent requests and complaints from various sources and input them into a single system of record, allowing for the efficient routing of service requests to departments for resolution. This also allows for better insight into any problem areas identified by data gathered. Data will feed the decision-making process, so we can ensure a proper allocation of resources towards different issues, such as housing, opioid abuse, financial assistance, etc.

The single system of record also allows us to categorize requests by legislative districts, so we can assist legislators in responding to constituent concerns.

Single Phone Number

A single phone number of records will be used for reaching County services. The County would, during this phase, rely upon an enhanced phone tree to connect constituents to the services they are seeking. The phone tree would be service based with the ability to connect directly to extensions and/or departments.

Cross Functional Navigator Team

The enhanced phone tree will include the option to reach a service navigator, who could assist constituents who may have little experience in reaching out to County government and/or who have tech or connectivity obstacles in accessing County services. These employees would have the ability to transfer calls and create service requests and provide enhanced constituent service through a warm hand-off to County departments.

This newly created peer network will build a positive culture of cross-departmental collaboration, opportunities for upskilling staff, and ultimately provide a better constituent experience, especially for those seeking services for the first time.

Enhanced Web Presence

Two programs (the RSC's Q-Scend and DPW's PubWorks) currently in use at the County can be shifted to accept service requests via website with limited technical overhead. The development of a navigable telephone tree and website organized by County services and constituent populations and needs, rather than by department, will allow constituents to access programs and services without needing to learn the intricacies of County government first. Additionally, this phase of the program will allow constituents to connect with the County via email, phone, and social media.

Relevant Data

The Ulster County COVID-19 Hotline/Recovery Service Center (RSC) has been activated for over 600 days, receiving over 93,000 inbound calls, resulting in over 29,000 service requests. Call volume since October 2021 has averaged between 500-750 calls per week, with 25-60% of these being handled by 3-4 live agents. For comparison, the current County phone line has inbound call volume of approximately 450 calls per month. We can extrapolate that less than 2% of the calls coming into the COVID-19 Hotline/RSC over past 20 months were outside the realm of COVID - baseline estimates are 550 calls per month were non-COVID-related. However, until a program is advertised, it is difficult to provide data on the enhanced services that will be utilized by constituents.

The nature of calls we've gotten are nothing we could have expected. The COVID hotline/RSC has handled calls on ERAP (the Emergency Rental Assistance Program), Project Resilience (the County's emergency food assistance program), emergency food and housing responses and other coordination with Emergency Services, as well as requests requiring coordination with the Office for the Aging, Department of Social Services, Mental Health, and the Public Defender. The RSC has become a catch-all for service requests from County Departments. We've created a category to begin to capture that universe, so we can further analyze themes, trends, and service requests and respond appropriately.

Appendix B. Inbound monthly volume for Ulster County phone extensions with more than 400 calls

Department	Phone Line	Extension	January	February	March	April	May	June	July	August	September	October	Total
Aging	Main Number	3456	958	702	1,103	1,054	1,049	1,080	914	1,050	1,196	1,183	**10,289**
County Clerk	County Clerk	3040	1,235	849	1,390	1,224	750	886	926	758	849	627	**9,494**
County Clerk	Index Clerk	3276	445	167	559	554	744	503	397	678	531	699	**5,277**
County Clerk	Motor Vehicle	3700	3,598	3,004	4,491	3,695	3,392	3,615	3,074	3,755	3,302	2,857	**34,783**
Finance	Tax General Information	3431	699	522	341	540	527	595	820	657	708	545	**5,954**
Sheriff	Main Number Communications/Dispatchers	2243	1,244	1,555	1,486	1,368	1,825	1,857	1,881	1,722	1,793	1,804	**16,535**
Sheriff	Main Number Communications/Dispatchers	5571	844	693	861	919	775	803	740	756	1,195	1,048	**8,634**
Sheriff	Reception	5775	610	620	722	580	577	615	518	559	655	699	**6,155**
Social Services	SNAP Database Clerk	5001	528	669	817	690	715	705	455	416	716	911	**6,622**
Social Services	Medicaid Main Number	5175	631	466	551	448	483	462	518	570	549	555	**5,233**
Social Services	SNAP Main Number	5200	3,032	2,330	2,346	1,862	1,346	1,632	1,706	2,029	2,114	2,516	**20,913**
Social Services	Social Services Main Number	5400	2,196	1,808	2,275	1,734	2,120	2,055	1,896	2,081	1,475	2,323	**19,963**
Social Services	HEAP Main Number	5436	1,480	1,241	1,374	1,108	1,014	232	174	191	262	323	**7,399**
Social Services	Temporary Assistance Clerk	5437	688	538	565	463	317	546	554	731	606	372	**5,380**
Social Services	HEAP Account Clerk	5438	574	367	479	223	328	455	447	684	647	777	**4,981**
Social Services	Temporary Assistance Main Number	5440	1,908	1,595	1,735	1,368	1,327	1,216	1,310	1,543	1,475	1,370	**14,847**
Social Services	Temporary Assistance Account Clerk	8784	602	404	502	123	266	502	569	443	586	700	**4,697**
UCAT	UCAT Dispatch	2246	1,085	1,226	1,206	1,159	1,057	996	895	1,039	978	1,956	**11,597**
UCAT	UCAT Dispatch	8458	1,236	1,119	1,433	1,608	1,510	1,509	1,805	2,275	2,182	3,982	**18,659**
UCAT	UCAT Dispatch	8967	482	418	618	870	801	476	168	1,006	741	1,855	**7,435**
UCAT	UCAT Dispatch	8990	914	763	1,049	934	1,048	1,459	1,594	1,505	1,164	2,005	**12,435**
Veterans	Main Number	3190	63	44	60	28	36	58	462	715	609	531	**2,606**

Johanna Contreras
Acting County Executive

Alan Macaluso
Director

Dan Proctor
Deputy Director

Christopher Fiore
Asst. Director / Technical Support

Karla Wainwright
Asst. Director / Application Development

Richard Tasciotti
Project Director

MEMORANDUM

To: March Gallagher, Comptroller
From: Alan Macaluso, Director of Information Services
Date: November 21, 2022
Re: Draft Audit Report, Ulster County Service Center

I am in receipt of the Draft Audit report concerning the Ulster County Service Center (UCSC). Thank you for the courtesy extended in your audit to provide a written response to your office. It is my firm belief that, after reviewing the clarifications contained within this response, your office and the taxpayers of Ulster County will better understand the mission of the Ulster County Service Center and the profound and lasting positive impact the Center will have on this community.

I should point out that the framework of the Ulster County Service Center your office uses on which to base the audit findings is based on its initial conception and has since evolved in significant ways that are in use today. It is my opinion that the findings in this Draft Audit are inaccurate or incomplete. The Ulster County Service Center presentation was provided to your office and should serve as the concept of operations on which to base any observations of the program.

As with most new programs, start-up operations may evolve as opportunities to use new technology emerge or synergize with existing strategic technology plans which causes the program to adapt accordingly. The Ulster County Service Center is no longer just a call center. By adapting an eGovernment approach for multi-channel service delivery including a website for residents to read FAQs and Knowledge Base articles, a ticketing portal where residents can create their own user accounts, and submit a request for service, an IOS mobile app (awaiting approved Apple Developer Agreement) and live chat and SMS services (currently in-development), UCSC has made significant steps to accomplish this strategic goal. All service requests are reviewed by Ulster County Service Center management and are either routed to a department for further action or to a Customer Service Representative to perform outreach and offer information or guidance. We've designed the technology solution to be mobile-first: anyone with a mobile phone will be able to access the full benefits of this program.

In contrast to the portrait of the Ulster County Service Center represented in the Draft Audit as inefficient and unnecessary, this program offers a tremendous benefit to the residents of Ulster County by offering a central hub for residents using multiple channels of access to request information and services from their government. This progressive eGovernment initiative is in use in other cities and counties throughout the country. Ulster County would be the first in the Hudson Valley to provide this to its residents. The information gleaned from both the residents' demographic information and the nature of their requests inform both County leadership of the need for different resources based on those requests for service and the Legislature's awareness of the needs of their constituents to better advocate for them.

The Draft Audit erroneously indicates that heavy call volume occurs only during a health crisis, such as the ***"omicron variant spike or monkey pox (sic) spread"***. For example, two non-health crisis related events occurred that drove increased volume to the UCSC – during both the Ice Storm earlier this year (2022) and the Central Hudson billing issues (and subsequent public hearings) the UCSC was the focal point for residents to call in for information and guidance, generating higher call volumes as well. The Ulster County Service Center number is the point of contact the County Executive's Office provides as a primary contact number for residents.

The Draft Audit focuses solely on the incoming calls to the Ulster County Service Center. It does not take into consideration the outgoing calls made by staff to perform outreach on behalf of other departments, such as the Department of Health for newly available vaccines, the Executive's Office for Central Hudson billing outreach and public hearing information, Emergency Management for storm information, or Office for the Aging "warm calls" for outreach to seniors who don't have anyone local to

perform a gentle well check. The Ulster County Service Center can perform this function for any department that has the need for this service.

Several times throughout the Draft Audit, lack of a "single phone number" is provided as a failure of the program to streamline calls into Ulster County government. Again, this notion was based on the conceptual framework used as the basis for this Draft Audit. Incoming phone calls to all County Departments cannot be answered by 4 individuals, nor is it practical to do so. While it is the intent of the Ulster County Service Center to assume the main number for most County Departments, change of this scale and scope needs to happen incrementally to minimize disruption and operationally streamline. The County's website does list the main number as (845) 340-3000. However, the phone tree for this number has been radically altered from its original 20 phone tree options to 7 to, in fact, streamline the process:

- Option 1: County Clerk/Motor Vehicles
- Option 2: District Attorney/Public Defender
- Option 3: Sheriff's Office
- Option 4: Comptroller
- Option 5: Board of Elections
- Option 6: Legislature
- All Others press "7" and are routed to the Ulster County Service Center

Other County Departments will offer certain extensions to get residents to specific programs, manned by County employees occupying civil service positions that deal with specific programs: Motor Vehicle Cashiers, Social Welfare Examiners (HEAP, Temporary Assistance, Housing Assistance), and Aging Services Aides, to name a few. While the Ulster County Service Center can answer basic questions, provide information and resources, and route callers to the correct individuals, they will not usurp any Departmental processes, especially those dictated by state or federal mandates, by circumventing specific phone extensions.

Also mentioned in the Draft Audit is the inability of the staff to expand and contract as the Comptroller deemed necessary. From combined personnel, procedural and technology perspective, the Ulster County Service Center is designed to scale. All four Ulster County Service Center staff members will answer calls as they come in. The first in line are the Customer Service Representatives, followed by the Assistant Project Director, then Project Director, as call volume dictates. In times of surge capacity can be scaled up and down. Consider the case of the Ice Storm earlier this year - 5 National Guardsmen were onboarded to man phone lines to handle the marked increase in calls. As in many County Departments, there will be times of higher call volume and lower call volume, depending on circumstances. However, unlike the UCSC, other County Departments (with the exception of 911) do not have the capacity or capability expand and contract staff based on call volume.

There are some other items I'd like to offer clarification to provide better understanding to yourself and the taxpayers of Ulster County:

1. In the Executive Summary, the draft states, ***"Furthermore, the Service Center may wind up being an extra step to reach the appropriate service or may result in calls that require specialized skill not present in the call center, such as mental health evaluation or concerns about opioid addiction programs."*** All staff have received training from Lisa Conklin in 911 to handle callers in mental health crisis, including asking if the caller is intending to kill themselves. Those callers are "warm transferred" to the internal 911 Dispatch system to avoid having to repeat themselves. Since September, we've handled 3 of these calls. Jillian Nadiak-Bruck in Mental Health trained our staff on disposing of opioids and other prescription medicines. We have been in contact with Jillian to receive training on referrals to opioid addiction counseling and programs. We are also in outreach to ORACLE for the same training.

2. Also in the Executive Summary, ***"Ulster County has pressing needs that should be addressed including a housing crisis, opioid epidemic an emergency services crisis that has led to 11% of 911 ambulance/EMS service requests going unanswered."*** Ulster County Service Center was created, in part, to take the burden of responding to standard questions off the shoulders of each department we represent (14 as of today). This frees up departmental staff to focus on complex questions or concerns from our residents. One of the main functions of the Ulster County Service Center, like most 311 programs throughout the country, is to alleviate the burden of non-emergent calls into 911/EMS. Expanded awareness of the Ulster County Service Center will only help our 911 system by enabling first responders to focus on critical emergency incidents.

3. ***"Furthermore, the County currently outsources to an answering service interdepartmental calls to Information Services for IT assistance. These calls could be answered by inhouse Service Center staff potentially cutting some of the operators' idle time."*** The intent has been to develop a help desk capability by leveraging the UCSC Call Center Solution (NEC Blue) and routing 'help desk' calls to Ulster County Service Center staff (Monday – Friday 9am – 5pm) to

take on inbound UCIS work requests (ie: Clementine calls) using Cherwell IT ticketing in a 'swivel-desk' scenario between QScend/QAlert and Cherwell. In fact, UCSC CSRs have already answered calls into that system from the public. During their downtime, the Customer Service Representatives have participated in over 50 hours of training, from Udemy courses and other videos to improve their skills, to the above-mentioned 911/Mental Health and prescription-disposal trainings, to utilizing the real-time language translation service and 711/TTY system for hearing and speech-impaired callers.

4. In the Executive Summary, Recommendation 1: "*...including those with high call volumes like the Departments of Social Services or Department of Health considering staff training to address the types of calls being received (for example, mental health or social services questions).*" Currently, the Ulster County Service Center handles many calls for the Department of Health, including COVID Guidance, referral to isolation documents, and testing information. They also handle calls to DH Environmental involving permits, food safety, water testing, and septic plans. Staff has received mental health training and refers calls/service requests to that department for handling.

5. *"Additionally, it does not appear the Center tracks the results of connecting constituents with new services."* Information about each call into the Ulster County Service Center is placed into a service request ticket (SRT) that details: the caller's demographic information (including legislative district), the reason for the call, and the information/services provided to that caller. Department representatives have been given user accounts in the QScend/QAlert (SRT) system and can add their notes to the ticket, when applicable. Each resident contacting the Ulster County Service Center who provides their email address (and soon to be mobile number) is sent a survey to gauge customer satisfaction. The results of these surveys allow the County Leadership to determine whether County services provided have been "responsive and responsible."

6. In Executive Summary, Recommendation 2: *"management should consider elimination of the service altogether with a greater reliance on third-party contracts"* The Ulster County Service Center is staffed with veteran County employees: 2 CSEA members, 1 UCSA member and 1 Management staff with a combined 55 and 1/2 years of Ulster County government experience. These employees' County government experience includes the Departments of Emergency Services (with the ability to triage between emergent and non-emergent calls, as well as first-hand training in mental health crisis calls and emergency preparedness), Social Services, Personnel, COVID Operations (including organizational structure, contingency planning, and staffing), Purchasing, and Veterans Services. Outsourcing this service would require third-party call takers to have a depth of knowledge of County operations that is not feasible. Third-party vendors are not always helpful: case-in-point the Clementine system. For IT issues during normal business hours, calls to Clementine lead to frustration to many County employees unable to reach IT department staff directly. Clementine also gets calls from the public and the Ulster County Service Center has begun answering those calls.

7. In the "Budget 2023" section: The numbers in the figure below are inaccurate. The cost is $339, 824

Constituent Services Navigator Division	2022	2023
Regular Pay	$ 270,725	$ 296,133
Supplies Office	$ -	$ 2,000
Professional Services Advertising	$ 7,500	$ 5,000
Professional Services Education/Training	$ -	$ 1,500
Professional Services Interpretor	$ 2,000	$ 4,000
Professional Services Other Fees	$ 2,350	$ 1,000
Misc Contractual Expense Periodicals	$ 6,950	$ 8,000
Misc Contratual Expense Printing Service	$ -	$ 1,000
Social Security/FICA SS/FICA	$ 20,710	$ 22,694
Total	$ 310,235	$ 341,327

8. In "Calls Answered:" While the calls into the Ulster County Service Center for the Health Department were mostly COVID-related, there are also quite a few calls that involve the Health Department with respect to DOH Environmental (permits, food safety, complaints about landlord/apartments, and septic plans). The number indicated below lists all DOH calls. Going forwards, we can separate into DOH-COVID and DOH-Environmental

CALLS ANSWERED

Call Center Service Requests by Department January - September 2022	
Department	Total Requests
Health Department	7904
Ulster County Service Center	317
Executive Office	299
EOC	187
Department of Social Services	109
Other - Question	109

9. *"The requests documented above are not strictly calls received by the call center representatives as over 55% of request originate via the webform."* All webform submissions are reviewed by Ulster County Service Center management for accuracy. The Customer Service Representatives are given any tickets that have missing, or invalid information and will directly call those individuals for additional information or clarification. This helps County departments streamline operations. For example, DOH cannot perform case investigation for COVID test results without all the information required. UCSC front-loading this work saves limited DOH staff from having to place many phone calls to resolve these discrepancies.

10. In "Another Alternative Call Center Option: 211" *There other alternative call answering services. One alternative to consider that already answers calls for Ulster County residents is that of 211. The 211 service is administered by United Way nationwide and by United Way of Westchester and Putnam on behalf of the entire Hudson Valley.* As far as is known, there is no formal reporting given to County leadership regarding calls into 211, which leaves a deficit in understanding County residents' needs.

11. In "Call Center Metrics and Evaluation": *"Our calculations show that over an 8-hour call day the average call duration is 4 minutes and 30 seconds"* The Ulster County Service Center is not open for calls 8 hours a day. The Center takes calls for 6 hours a day (9:30-4:30 and closed from 1:30-2:30 for lunch). Voicemails from the evening before are answered before the phones open at 9:30 and wrap-up tasks are done after 4:30.

12. Pages 12 & 13 detail the conceptional framework of the Ulster County Service Center. The current operating program model is much more comprehensive and offers expanded channels of access to residents. The information detailed on pages 12 & 13 and used to form the basis of this audit present an immature representation of the program.

13. Appendix B shows a chart of County extensions that receive over 400 calls a month. Please note that calls that enter the Ulster County Service Center that are transferred to another County extension will count as an incoming external (not internal) call for the extensions listed in this chart.

The Ulster County Service Center strives to provide multi-channel service delivery to all residents who avail themselves of the program, including those who speak a foreign language, are speech or hearing impediments, or lack of access to a computer/internet. Multi-channel access includes the call center, website, mobile app (in development), and SMS messaging (in development). Requests for information and services are all captured in a service request ticket, including for which Departments and from where in the County the requests originate. This reporting informs both County Departments and County leadership to ascertain the resources residents need. A mobile device is all that is needed, and residents have one central starting point to get where they need to in Ulster County government.

Municipalities can also participate in this program free of charge. The Customer Service Representatives can perform intake for municipalities and collect that information in a service request ticket. User accounts can be created for up to three employees from each municipality, who can then have service requests routed to them. This will free up municipal employees to focus on tasks and not have to field general/common requests. The municipalities may also receive reports of the types of service requests and their location in the municipality.

Other benefits of this program include:
- Benefits to the Residents
    - 24-hour access to government
    - Assumed the County's main line – truncated process for a resident to speak with an individual
    - Real-time resolution of issues and requests for information
    - **Residents with multi-layered requests** are saved time/energy from calling several departments, when the Ulster County Service Center can coordinate between the various departments to have the request fulfilled
    - **Technologically challenged individuals** can get information/assistance they need without having to place many phone calls or get transferred multiple times
- Benefit to County Departments
    - **Relieves 911 of non-emergent calls**, especially during unique situations (Ice Storm, Minnewaska Fire) and provides residents with information they need

- o On-going COVID support **alleviates DOH from general questions** and will help with eventual surge phone calls
  - o **Answering non-IT related inquiries** in the Clementine system
- Benefit to County Leadership
  - o **Metrics provided can highlight the needs of municipalities to best allocate resources** (can report by Legislative District, Municipality)

Thank you, again, for the chance to address the results of the Draft Audit of the Ulster County Service Center. Should you wish to review the above items and revise the Draft Audit accordingly, I will gladly welcome the opportunity to review.

MEMORANDUM

TO: Information Services Director Alan Macaluso

CC: Acting County Executive Joanna Contreras
                  Deputy County Executive Chris Kelly

FROM: Comptroller March Gallagher

RE: Comptroller's Reply to Management Comments

DATE: November 23, 2022

We are in receipt of your response regarding the Program Audit of the Ulster Service Center. We appreciate your cooperation throughout the audit and the additional information you provided in your response. We would like to address some of your concerns and provide additional clarification on several of the points expressed in your memo.

The Ulster County Service Center expenditures are receiving a heightened level of review as expenditures under the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA). ARPA was specifically intended to be used for one-time expenditures that should not create ongoing operational expenditures. In this case, ARPA funds were used to pilot a program that will result in ongoing expenditures for taxpayers. Rather than pilot a program that has shown robust returns, the program has been slow to launch and is underutilized. The audit presents an evaluation of what has occurred, not what the Administration hopes for the future of the program.

We would first like to note that we based our audit on the materials circulated to our Office by Deputy Executive Chris Kelly in an email on November 19, 2021. The information was shared with legislative committee members as justification for the initial budgeting of the program per his email. The email stated: "This is what was presented to the [Ways and Means] Committee." If there are additional materials that summarize the goals of the program, they have not been shared with our Office. While the program's objectives may have evolved over the last year, our audit seeks to determine if the program is meeting the goals and objectives as they were presented to leadership to justify funding the division.

While the intent and vision for this program are to enhance the County's mobile and web-based interfaces and improve connectivity of users with County services, based on the limited call volume and use of the phone service we feel there should be additional consideration as to whether the call center aspect of this program is the best use of County funds. While the robust technology you have described in your response would undoubtedly be state of the art technology and improve usability, the objectives seem to mostly relate to website and application-based developments, not the utilization of the established call center.

It does not appear based on the data presently available that there will be sufficient usage to justify the cost of the program. Additionally, as noted previously the program is being supported by ARPA funding that will not be available in the future. While the funding source is set to sunset, it appears the costs of operating this program are anticipated to increase.

We recognize that there are other events that might result in a temporary increase in call volume, like significant weather events in addition to the health-related examples we provided. We found that the Center is not structured in a way to address these temporary increases, while leaving staff idle in times of low volume. When considering outgoing calls, we would like to note that the outgoing call volume does not make a significant change in our calculation of staff idle time, and that the effect of those outgoing calls was not mentioned in any of the Center's reporting. If the center is proactively reaching out to residents, we suggest that they document these connections and services as well and include them in reporting. Management comment provided the opportunity to provide additional data on outgoing call volume, methodology and tracking but this was not provided.

The "Single Phone Number" concept was emphasized as necessary to allow a single portal for requests and complaints for the purpose of data collection and analysis. If the Center is no longer working towards the Single Phone Number model, the program and its data collection efforts will not meet the original stated goal to be a one-stop shop for County services.

Our recommendation on strengthening inter-departmental cooperation is not a suggestion to "usurp" any departmental processes, but for the Center to function as the liaisons between other departments, and a data collection center, per the program's original intent. There are several departments to which there has been little to no outreach or coordination regarding this program. While the call center may not be equipped to answer all incoming calls per the original presentation, there are many opportunities for the center to increase its call volume and data collection by integrating other departments and services. To date we have seen little efforts to meet this goal. For example, here has been no countywide email to employees promoting the Service Center.

While initial request types for incoming calls are documented, our comment as mentioned in your response relates to the lack of data related to the result of the connection of services. There is no reporting that summarizes the outcome of service requests sent to other departments. Thus, there are calls and communications with constituents by the referred departments that are not being captured by any means and could help with further evaluation of the program.

In reference to your proposed correction of the budget data presented in our audit, our budgeted information was taken directly from the County's executive budget website that provided a breakdown of these expenditures for the division when the data was retrieved at the departmental level.[1] A screenshot has been provided on the following page. The fact that these expenditures were "rolled up" into the department total for final budget presentation demonstrates the point that there are other costs associated with the division that are not being accounted for in a transparent way.

---

[1] https://county-ulster-ny-budget-book.cleargov.com/6689/departments/information-services

County of Ulster   powered by **ClearGov**

Introduction   Fund Summaries   **Departments**   Statement of Debt   🖨 Print

Constituent Service Navigator						
Regular Pay Regular Pay	AA.1680.1292-1300.1300	$0	$0	$270,725	$270,725	$296,133
Supplies Office	AA.1680.1292-4000.4025	$0	$0	$0	$0	$2,000
Professional Services Advertising	AA.1680.1292-4300.4325	$0	$0	$7,500	$7,500	$5,000
Professional Services Education/Training	AA.1680.1292-4300.4345	$0	$0	$0	$0	$1,500
Professional Services Interpreter	AA.1680.1292-4300.4405	$0	$0	$0	$2,000	$4,000
Professional Services Other Fees	AA.1680.1292-4300.4505	$0	$0	$0	$2,350	$1,000
Misc Contractual Expense Periodicals	AA.1680.1292-4600.4635	$0	$0	$0	$6,950	$8,000
Misc Contractual Expense Printing Service	AA.1680.1292-4600.4650	$0	$0	$0	$0	$1,000
Social Security/FICA SS/FICA	AA.1680.1292-8010.8010	$0	$0	$20,710	$20,710	$22,654
Total Constituent Service Navigator:		$0	$0	$298,935	$310,235	$341,287
Total Central Data Processing:		$6,464,092	$6,182,056	$7,668,531	$7,958,586	$8,518,028
Total General Government:		$6,464,092	$6,182,056	$7,668,531	$7,958,586	$8,518,028
Total Expenditures:		$6,464,092	$6,182,056	$7,668,531	$7,958,586	$8,518,028

For example, computer equipment and website development costs proposed in the 2023 budget and necessary for the achievement of the division's future objectives are obscured by their inclusion in the overall budget for the Information Services department. We recommend that these costs be separately identified so as to be transparent for decision-makers. The Legislature and Management should consider all other related costs when evaluating the overall efficacy of the program.

In general, the Comptroller supports the further development of web-based services that might improve accessibility and functionality. We do however feel that the goal should be focused on eliminating the need for review by call center staff to complete self service requests. Having staff review every electronic DOH submission negates the streamlined purpose of online reporting. Furthermore, the Comptroller's understanding is that the submission of DOH COVID test results (which is the largest service request generator) go directly to DOH without review by call center staff.

Regarding available 211 reporting, Ulster County contracted annually at a cost of $30,000 with United Way for the provision of the 211 Hotline from at least as early as 2014 through 2019 to answer phone calls through their 211 system. The 211 service is administered by United Way nationwide and by United Way of Westchester and Putnam on behalf of the entire Hudson Valley. The Comptroller's Office has been able to receive call information from United Way through a simple email request both in 2021 and this year.

You also noted in your response that one objective of the program is to be available to constituents in need 24/7, but also pointed out that the call center has extremely limited hours of operation and is closed during a peak call hour in the afternoon for lunch. As such we suggest that at minimum, you stagger your lunch hours and schedules, when possible, to improve the availability of the program to constituents attempting to use the service. It has been reported to our office by several individuals that when leaving messages, calls are not returned. Additionally, closing services from 1:30-2:30 pm daily seems to limit the availability of the center unnecessarily. Callers who receive voicemail are unlikely to recommend the service or return to it. Lastly, even when considering the hours of operation, and the outgoing call volume, there still appears to be significant downtime for these employees that may be better utilized by the County in several ways.

After careful consideration of your comments and reviewing the additional information included in your response, we feel that the audit should be published without any significant modifications. Again, we wish to reiterate the intention of the ARPA funding, which was to pay for one-time expenditures, not to create new ongoing operating costs to be borne by County taxpayers. At present, the program is not meeting the goals and objectives that were outlined at its development, and without an increase call volume or restructuring of the division to provide the service in a more efficient way, we conclude that the ARPA funds, and Ulster County taxpayer funds in future years, are not being used in an efficient and effective way.

Thank you again for your cooperation and professionalism throughout this process.