

NEWS FROM THE ULSTER COUNTY OFFICE OF THE COMPTROLLER

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Ulster County Comptroller's Audit Shows Ulster County Service Center Receives Few Calls

Kingston, NY (November 23, 2022) – The Ulster County Comptroller has released a program audit of the Ulster County Service Center. The Center, formerly known as the Constituent Services Navigator, was introduced in the 2022 Ulster County budget utilizing \$310,325 funds from the American Rescue Plan to fund the new division's expenses. The program grew out of a call center originally established during the pandemic to answer the influx of calls from constituents regarding the COVID-19 pandemic. The 2023 proposed executive budget includes \$341,327 of taxpayer funds to cover the cost of the Center's operations for the upcoming year.

The Ulster County Comptroller is charged with evaluating the efficiency and effectiveness of County programs under the Ulster County Charter § C-57. The audit sought to evaluate if the Service Center is meeting the programmatic goals that were presented at its onset, and to determine if the Center is a good use of taxpayer resources.

"While our county residents are facing difficult times, it is more important than ever to consider how effectively we are using available funding to address public needs," said County Comptroller March Gallagher. "As we struggle to address large issues like affordable housing, the opioid epidemic, and needs for substantial investment in emergency services operations, we must carefully review every investment and the impact it has on residents. Our audit reveals that the Service Center is not operating in an efficient and effective way. The Legislature and incoming County Executive may find that the staff and resources dedicated to the Service Center might be better used elsewhere."

The Audit found that during 2022 the call volume for the Service Center dropped from 6,723 calls in January to 478 calls in October, which caused an escalation in the average cost per call from \$11.01 per call to \$39.15 per call. The reduction in call volume came despite efforts to promote the Service Center and broaden its scope.

The audit recommends that the County increase call volume by directing other high-volume numbers to the Service Center line. The audit identified 22 other Ulster County lines that receive more than 400 calls per month. A second recommendation is that the County look for a more flexible model to accommodate emergencies while relying on the existing 211 system operated by United Way. United Way of Putnam and Westchester operates a 211 system that handled over 1000 calls from Ulster County residents between January and September of this year.

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Report available at: <https://comptroller.ulstercountyny.gov/audit-reports/2022-audit-ulster-county-service-center>