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2009 Professional Practices Program

“311 To The Rescue”

**Columbus, Muscogee County,
Georgia**

Submitted by:

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Columbus, Muscogee County, Georgia is a jurisdiction that is 216 square miles located in the heart of the Deep South and home to the first consolidated government in the state. Fort Benning Military Reservation encompasses the southeastern part of the county and is one of the area's largest employers.

Elections and voter registration in this county is conducted under the direction of a five member board consisting of one Republican, one Democrat, and three Columbus City Council appointees. A Director, five permanent employees, and numerous temporary/part time employees manage the day-to-day operations. There are approximately 118,000 registered voters in the county. During the November, 2008 General Election, 53% of the voters cast their ballots prior to election day either in-person or by mail.

During election time, the employee base is increased to provide customer service to in-office and mail out absentee voters, candidates, and poll workers. The biggest challenge election officials face is how to adequately provide telephone service during these peak times. It is difficult to acquire enough telephone lines with knowledgeable staff that can answer voter's questions appropriately and in a timely manner.

This challenge resulted in the forming of a partnership between the Elections Office and the 311 Call Center of the Citizens Service Center. The mission of the citizens service center is to provide quality service, to enhance the relationship between the citizens of Columbus and their local government and to promote the City of Columbus' commitment to community service by providing direct access to a call center designed to receive, relay, monitor and manage citizen requests. 311 is Columbus' one number for government information and non-emergency services where all calls are answered by a live operator, Monday through Friday, 7:00 a.m. to 5:30 p.m.

The 311 Call Center uses a state-of-the-art database of information and services about the government and can quickly scale to meet city demands in any situation. From September 1, 2008 through November 30, 2008, the Elections Office transferred all in-coming telephone lines to the Call Center for service. This resulted in the elections staff being able to conduct absentee voting, both in-person and mail out, in an atmosphere that was much less stressful. This resulted in fewer errors and increased customer service to voters. The large number of telephone calls to the Elections Office resulted in many calls going unanswered or citizens receiving busy signals because of overloaded telephone lines.

The 311 Call Center answered over 20,000 telephone calls during the time period that would have been the responsibility of the Elections Office. The implementation cost for this partnership was negligible. There were no additional staffing requirements for the call center and employees of the Elections Office conducted all training of the call center staff. The call center staff used databases that were previously established and currently in use. Additionally, a “frequently asked questions” document was put together to assist the call center staff. If a question needed further clarification, the call was forwarded to a member of the Elections Staff. All elections staff members had a direct telephone line where they could be reached.

The quality of services provided to the citizens and voters of Columbus, Muscogee County, Georgia was enhanced by the partnership of these two departments. This provided a way to accomplish the mission of both departments with no additional cost. This was very important considering current budget constraints. The only time required to implement the program was the amount of time required to train the call center staff. This one partnership is responsible for a greater level of satisfaction among the citizens we serve.

Calls coming into 311 CSC During Election 2008

Sep-07	Sep-08	Difference
12,114	18,536	6,422
Oct-07	Oct-08	Difference
12,980	21,454	8,474
Nov-07	Nov-08	Difference
11,023	16,270	5,247

Chart for Total Comparisons for September

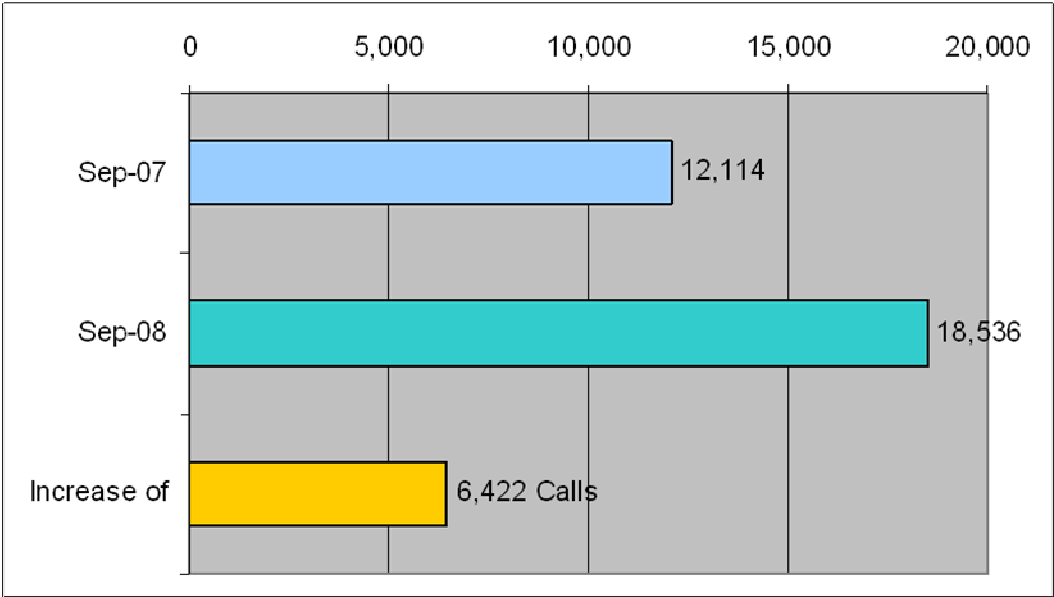


Chart for Total Comparisons for October

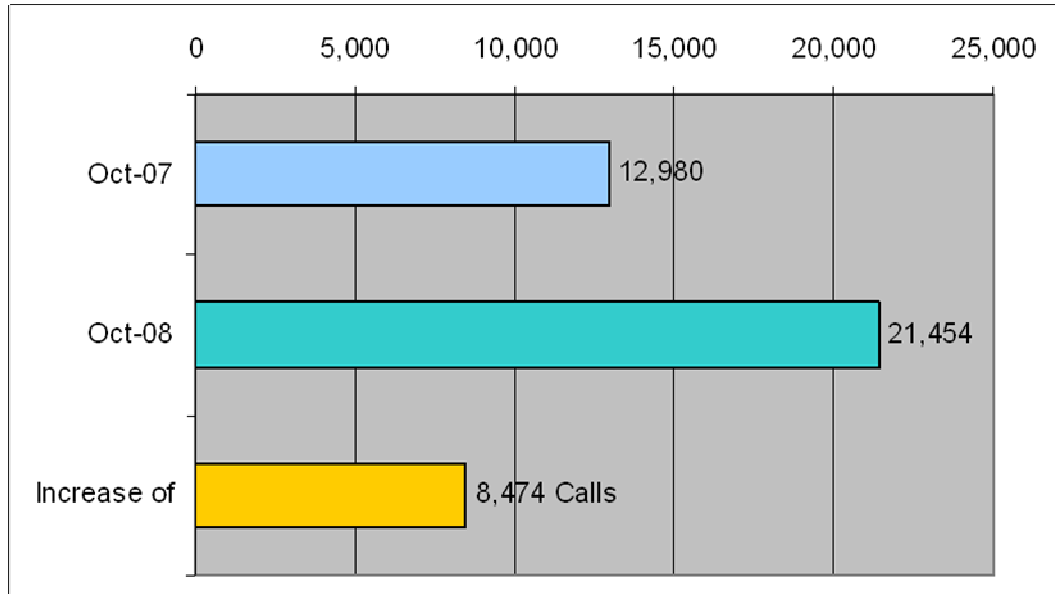


Chart for Total Comparisons for November

