

Election Time & Telephone System

SUMMARY

Election Day creates an enormous demand for information from the Orange County Registrar of Voters (ROV). The Grand Jury studied ROV telephone system due to perceived problems during the November 2000 election. The current telephone system is adequate throughout the year, but does not at this time have the capacity to handle the demands placed on it during a countywide election. The ROV has recently made improvements to their telephone system with technical assistance of Chief Executive Officer/Office of Information Technology (CEO/OIT). The Grand Jury notes a need for more improvement and makes several recommendations.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this study is to determine if ROV and CEO/OIT are utilizing all the means available within the Orange County communications system to fulfill their functions.

BACKGROUND

The 2000-2001 Grand Jury studied ROV. The current Grand Jury reviewed ROV response to the 2000-2001 report to assess compliance with the recommendations, and noted that the telephone and communications system was not addressed within the previous report. The Grand Jury also became aware that people had been unable to reach ROV due to busy signals during the previous presidential election.

Telephone Upgrade

In 2001, the Board of Supervisors approved \$10.4 million for CEO/OIT to upgrade the County's overloaded and antiquated telecommunications system, which provides service to 71 facilities and services to 17,000 users. The main focus of that upgrade was to bring

the county telephone equipment up to a level that could be supported by vendors. CEO/OIT made no assessment as to whether any individual agency's phone service meets that agency's specific needs; that decision is left entirely to the agency using the service. It should be noted that ROV's unique needs were not included on the list of upgrades.

ROV Telephone Volume During Elections

During an election, the phone system needs to provide service to candidates, over 7,000 election workers, and the general public. ROV has made an improvement in their website and telephone systems a specific goal in their current business plan. On March 4th and 5th of this year during the primary election, ROV received a total of 7,841 phone calls and over 13,000 visits to their website. Telephone volume during a primary election is less than that of a general election.

Limited Equipment Capacity

In 2001, ROV had 48 phone lines to serve a population of 2.8 million, which includes more than 1,260,000 registered voters. Of these 48 phone lines, 36 phone lines could accept incoming calls and 12 calls could be placed on hold. Simultaneous calls in excess of 48 received a busy signal. The ROV communication volume greatly increases during the period immediately prior to election time. Prior to the March 2002 primary election, ROV had not gathered any statistical data on telephone calls, and were unaware that any calls had received a busy signal. An unknown number of calls were lost or abandoned.

The ROV has one of the three Automatic Call Distribution (ACD) systems in use in the county. The ACD system employed on the main ROV phone number is capable of directing the disposition of telephone traffic and capturing data on the telephone volume received. During discussion with ROV, the Grand Jury learned that ROV planned an update their Interactive Voice Response (IVR) system to accommodate staffing constraints. It was also proposed to include capability of the Spanish and Vietnamese language. At the time of those discussions, ROV was unaware that the public often

encountered busy signals during the days prior to the last presidential election. Even telephone lines dedicated exclusively to poll workers went unanswered on the day of the presidential election. Prior to the March 2002 primary election, ROV was unaware of the ACD volume measurement capability and therefore never measured their telephone volume. To exacerbate the problem, the printer that could have been used to report telephone volume was misplaced.

Without the above-mentioned report, it is impossible to assess the peak telephone traffic on the ROV lines at election times. Without data analysis of past performance, it is difficult to identify a problem, and any corrective action would be based on guesswork. Thus, those responsible for defining the specifications of equipment and software did not have adequate data to perform their task. In addition, the IVR system in use is connected to the main ROV phone number. Telephone volume and traffic to the main ROV phone numbers, such as those listed on the sample ballot or provided to poll workers, remain unknown.

Chief Executive Office/Office Information Technology (CEO/OIT)

CEO/OIT is responsible for the development and maintenance of the Orange County telephone communications system and to provide support, when requested to do so, to all county departments. In practice, each county agency hires its own technology support personnel. These staffers report to the agency that hired them, with no direct link to CEO/OIT. In smaller agencies, this may be a part-time position. Ordinarily, CEO/OIT does not participate in the review of applicants nor the hiring decisions. CEO/OIT does disseminate information to the user community through various inter-agency forums. Support and advice from CEO/OIT is supplied in response to specific requests by agencies. Prior to Grand Jury interviews, ROV had not requested technical advice from CEO/OIT; nor is there any procedure that states that any other county agency must ask for advice or technical assistance from CEO/OIT. Any agency is free to go out to technology vendors and solicit any addition or modification to their system, provided they are within the county standards.

Discussions between ROV and CEO/OIT

Subsequent to meetings with representatives of the Grand Jury, CEO/OIT offered its services to ROV. A series of meetings ensued. Topics of discussion were identified at these joint meetings, and committees formed to resolve the problems in preparation for the upcoming primary election in March 2002, and all future elections. ROV added 24 phone lines prior to the 2002 primary election, increasing their capacity from 48 to 72 phone lines. When a call is received at the ROV main telephone number, that call is answered by the IVR system, which offers an automatic voice recording for information on voting precincts. A caller has the option to be transferred to an operator. If the operator could not answer the questions, the caller was passed on to a specialist who provided the information to the caller. During the primary election, the ACD system was utilized for the first time to track performance, including wait times on the main telephone line. The data gathered showed more than 7,000 phone calls received in a two-day period.

METHOD OF STUDY

The Grand Jury toured the ROV facility and conducted interviews with the ROV staff. The Grand Jury also toured the CEO/OIT data center and conducted extensive discussions with the CEO/OIT staff on the county communication system in general, and how it applies to the ROV in particular. The Grand Jury also conducted its own assessment of telephone service during the day prior to the primary election, and on Election Day.

FINDINGS

Under California Penal Code Section 933 and Section 933.05, responses are required to all findings. The Orange County 2001-2002 Grand Jury arrived at seven findings:

1. ROV telephone system and staff is inadequate to meet demand at peak election times.

2. A provision of the ROV ACD system designed to record calls was not used in the last presidential election.
3. Without adequate data, an accurate analysis of the systems shortcomings was not feasible.
4. The IVR system currently in use at ROV does not accommodate Spanish and Vietnamese languages.
5. County agencies are free to go to outside vendors to address specific needs to their internal telephone system.
6. CEO/OIT has the responsibility to maintain the county's telephone and computer system.
7. There is no requirement for ROV or any other agency to consult with CEO/OIT or seek their expertise.

A response to Findings 1 through 4 is required from the **Board of Supervisors** and requested from the **Orange County Registrar of Voters**.

A response to Finding 5 through 7 is required from the **Board of Supervisors** and requested from the **County Executive Officer/Office of Information Technology**.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In accordance with California Penal code Section 933 and Section 933.05, each recommendation must be responded to by the government entity to which it is addressed. These responses are submitted to the Presiding Judge of the Superior Court. Based on the findings, the 2001-2002 Orange County Grand Jury recommends that:

1. ROV should increase the number of telephone lines and staff to meet demand at peak election times. (Finding 1)
2. ROV should obtain and analyze ACD data reports after every election to assess whether county needs are being met. (Finding 2)
3. ROV should analyze its telephone system for shortcomings after every election. (Finding 3)

4. Expand the ROV IVR system to include Spanish and Vietnamese language capability. (Finding 4)
5. County agencies should consult with CEO/OIT prior to any system modifications or purchases of new information technology equipment. (Finding 5)
6. CEO/OIT should maintain control of changes to the County telephone system. (Finding 6)
7. CEO/OIT should write and disseminate a procedure that requires all county agencies to consult with CEO/OIT prior to any information technology system modification or equipment purchase. (Finding 7)

A response to Recommendations 1 through 4 is required from the **Board of Supervisors** and requested from the **Registrar of Voters**.

A response to Recommendations 5 through 7 is required from the **Board of Supervisors** and requested from the **County Executive Officer/Office of Information Technology**.