



**Public Health
Environmental Health Services**

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2017 CCDEH Excellence in Environmental Health Award

ALICE the Virtual Receptionist

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**County of San Bernardino
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Overview

The County of San Bernardino Department of Public Health Division of Environmental Health Services (DEHS) is dedicated to improving the quality of life for all residents and visitors by protecting public health, promoting safety, and preventing environmental hazards. As the agency designated by the State and the County to enforce laws and regulations, DEHS aims to provide the best customer service possible. In efforts to continue to service customers in the remote High Desert area, DEHS implemented a virtual receptionist in December 2014 to improve efficiency and reduce customer wait time. With the use of existing staff and technology, collaboration with another department, and the addition of the “A Live Interactive Customer Experience (ALICE)” Virtual Receptionist System, DEHS has been able to successfully help its customers in a remote office that is difficult to staff. To ensure DEHS continued to attend to its customers’ feedback, ALICE was equipped with a short customer service survey. With the capability to make online payments as well as print and scan documents, DEHS was able to create a well-rounded virtual receptionist; the next best thing to a live person DEHS has to provide service to customers in remote areas.

Problem

The San Bernardino County Division of Environmental Health Services (DEHS) has multiple offices geographically located throughout over 20,000 square miles of county land, including an office location in the remote High Desert area in the city of Hesperia. The Hesperia office was staffed with a few inspectors that go out on the field most of the day, along with one clerical person who covers the front counter to assist visiting customers. The clerical person usually helped an average of four customers a day, did not have direct supervision, and could not help with the workload and special assignments of the staff at the main office in San Bernardino. During breaks and lunches, customers were made to wait or come back for service; and due to the short staffing levels at the Hesperia office, there was lack of specialized staff available for customer concerns. This environment sometimes generated customer complaints, triggering a greater need to look into helping those customers in the High Desert. DEHS wanted to establish a way to provide customer service during all of its office hours, with little wait time, and provide the access to specialized staff.

Solution

In order to provide better customer service, DEHS utilized ALICE, the virtual receptionist in the Hesperia office. Transitioning to ALICE improved efficiency, lowered customer wait times and increased availability of fiscal, technical, and professional staff.

DEHS began to research a good solution to address the dilemma in Hesperia. The goal was to find a way to increase the average number of customers assisted per day while increasing productivity of the Hesperia staff, which would further help alleviate the workload in the San Bernardino office. After several suggestions and evaluations, DEHS decided to try ALICE. By using this new technology, DEHS would be able to bring together many existing resources and help its customers via a virtual receptionist, especially since DEHS already had payment options in place other than cash payments for customers to pay for services. ALICE allows customers in the Hesperia office the ability to virtually speak to a clerical person in San Bernardino, make a

payment online, or take a quick customer service survey. DEHS agreed to pilot this new process for three months and track customer satisfaction.

Using Microsoft Lync (already in use by DEHS), ALICE accessed the logins of designated staff and notified customers which staff was available to answer a call. The customer simply touches the "Receptionist" button, and then the name of the clerical person who is shown to be available. This puts in a call to the available clerical staff in San Bernardino, who answers it. At this point in time, the customer and clerical person can now see each other "face-to-face" for a customary interaction. If the customer needs assistance from specialized DEHS staff, the clerical person can locate the needed individual to come and continue to virtually assist the customer. When the customer is ready to make a payment, they can touch the "Make a Payment" button and pay either by check (checking/savings accounts) or major credit card. Before customers finish their interaction with DEHS, they are encouraged to take a short customer service survey by touching the "Survey" button.

During the pilot, both customers and clerical staff provided their input, which resulted in an enhancement to the virtual receptionist experience; adding printing and scanning capabilities to ALICE. With the addition of the printer and scanner, a customer may state they need a certain document or application. The clerical person in San Bernardino simply locates the document on their own computer and then sends the document to the printer next to the ALICE monitor where the customer is in the Hesperia office. Customers have instant access to anything the clerical person prints for them, almost as if someone is there to personally hand it to the customer. If a customer is there to submit information/documents, DEHS provided a very easy-to-use scanner for customers. They simply place their documents in the scanner and press the only existing button on the scanner. The document is automatically converted to a portable document format (PDF) and saved in a common folder for the clerical person to access immediately. This allows for the clerical person to process any application right away.

The success of ALICE could not happen without DEHS' collaboration with the Land Use Services Department (LUSD), which is co-located in the Hesperia office. DEHS contacted LUSD management for their feedback on the ALICE pilot and they were very receptive. LUSD committed their staff to troubleshoot ALICE if a technical issue were to occur and to contact a DEHS Supervisor so the customer is minimally impacted. LUSD staff would also mail DEHS any original documents left by the customer. LUSD was impressed with the new process and is now considering the use of ALICE for customers in some of their remote locations.

Once the pilot was over, DEHS was satisfied with the results, as were most customers who used the new process. DEHS decided to permanently re-assign the clerical person in Hesperia to the San Bernardino office and make ALICE a permanent process. ALICE has now been in place for well over a year and minimal problems have arisen, but so many benefits have come from it. Customers in the High Desert can now access the same level of customer service as those coming to the main office in San Bernardino, almost forty miles away.

Cost Effectiveness

There are low costs associated to implementing a virtual receptionist. The costs associated with implementing a virtual receptionist includes \$4,283 for the ALICE software, \$1,800 for a computer (both a one-time purchase), along with the time of an Automated Systems Analyst (ASA) I. A total of about 60 person-hours of the ASA I was required to obtain, test, and implement the virtual receptionist. The budgeted annual expense for employing one fulltime ASA I is approximately \$100,000 (salary and benefits). DEHS values this time at \$2,884.00. This brings the total estimated cost to implement a virtual receptionist to approximately \$8,967. There was minimal training for existing clerical staff, and they, in turn, guided customers through the new process.

About 60 person-hours of DEHS staff time total	\$2,884.00
ALICE Software	\$4,283.00
HP Touch Screen Computer	\$1,800.00
Total estimated cost	\$8,967.00

Results/Success of the Program

It is important for DEHS to know how customers feel about being served via a virtual receptionist and the service they are receiving. Prior to ending a conversation with a customer in the Hesperia office, clerical staff in the San Bernardino office ask customers to click on the “Survey” button to complete a quick survey, consisting of only seven questions. On average, those who completed the survey showed 65% obtained the services needed; 75% were satisfied with the services received; 80% were helped in three minutes or less; 82% felt the person helping them was helpful; and 100% of customers were successfully connected to a representative. Overall, there were over 800 customers served since January 2015, averaging about 75 a month.

Aside from the great response from customers, DEHS was successful in relocating the clerical person from Hesperia to San Bernardino. This person went from producing the work of half of a full-time employee to a full-time employee, contributing time to the workload in the San Bernardino office. Once clerical staff began helping customers via ALICE, customers in the Hesperia office were able to receive service while staff take breaks and lunch periods as there was ongoing coverage, avoiding the need to have them wait unnecessarily or come back at a different day or time.

Lastly, through ALICE, customers in Hesperia can now speak to available fiscal, technical, and professional staff in the San Bernardino office. Due to the time it took to contact someone at the San Bernardino office before ALICE, customers would usually have to leave their information and wait for a call back from other staff. Most customers and staff have embraced the addition of ALICE in their day-to-day transactions, and DEHS is excited to be a part of this new process.

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