COUNTY SERVICES
Help citizens find their way

April 1995

Gary Blackmer
Multnomah County Auditor

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County Auditor

MULTNOMAH COUNTY OREGON

MEMORANDUM

DATE: April 21, 1995

TO: Beverly Stein, Multnomah County Chair
            Dan Saltzman, Commissioner, District 1
            Gary Hansen, Commissioner, District 2
            Tanya Collier, Commissioner, District 3
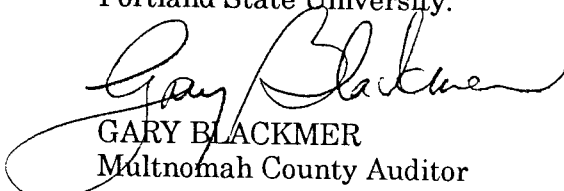   Sharron Kelley, Commissioner, District 4

SUBJECT: Audit of public access to County services

The attached report covers our audit of public access to County services, which was included in the FY94-95 Audit Schedule.

Trying to find our way to a destination is a challenge everyone regularly experiences. In this audit, the destination is a County service, and we conclude that citizens will find many unintended obstacles in their way. As a result, both citizens and County employees must make unnecessary expenditures of their time and patience. A results-oriented organization views these two commodities as valuable resources that must be used wisely.

We have discussed our findings and recommendations with representatives from the County's departments. We would appreciate receiving a written status report in six months from the County Chair, Sheriff, and District Attorney, or a designee, indicating what further progress has been made regarding the recommendations identified in this report. This response should be circulated to the Commissioners. The Auditor's Office also plans to evaluate and comment on access issues when we conduct future audits of County programs.

We appreciate the cooperation and assistance extended to us by County reception and telephone staff, and program staff from the departments. We also appreciate the mapping performed by METRO staff, and the assistance of Dr. Nancy Chapman of Portland State University.

GARY BLACKMER
Multnomah County Auditor

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SUMMARY

More can be done to help citizens find their way to County services. Signs, directories, and other aids are not always adequate to direct citizens to County program sites. In addition, some automated telephone answering systems are unnecessary, confusing, or flawed. Responses to the audit are included in the back of the report.

It can be difficult for citizens to reach the right County office and to obtain services. The local telephone directory contains over 300 County numbers, and the County provides services directly or through contractors at more than 250 locations. Citizen face further obstacles when signs and other visual aids at these locations are not clear and consistent. Environmental psychologists and architects have identified "wayfinding cues" which can guide citizens to and through buildings to their desired location.

Citizens and County programs are adversely affected when signs and other wayfinding cues are inadequate. Citizens may be late, or miss appointments, and become frustrated, angry, or discouraged. County staff may be required to spend time answering directional questions instead of performing other important duties.

We surveyed 25 buildings and found access problems at most of them. We did find that the Health and Library departments have recently introduced better signs and other cues at some of their sites to assist citizens. Some County buildings are not easily identified from the street. Addresses or program information may be obscured or missing. Parking lots for public use are not always clearly identified. Many of these buildings are located on busy streets which makes it even more difficult for citizens who must travel slowly enough to identify the location and find parking.

Once the building is found, it is not always easy to find the correct entrance. Many buildings lacked directories and maps at the main entrance to assist citizens. Wayfinding cues are also sometimes missing for citizens with disabilities who may have difficulty finding the accessible entrance to a County building or reaching their destination inside.

Signs could be improved inside the buildings we surveyed. In some buildings the signs were inadequate for citizens to find their intended destination, requiring them to ask directions from County staff. Some signs were unreadable or unclear. Except at Health Department facilities, translated signs for non-English speaking citizens were rare.

Signs are also important to direct citizens exiting a building, especially in emergencies. We noted that some exit signs were difficult to see even though they meet building code and fire safety requirements. In addition, departmentals are not clearly charged with developing evacuation plans for citizens.

We also reviewed the 59 automated telephone answering systems in the County to identify access problems that citizens might encounter. Recent technology has allowed the County to record messages which offer a "menu" of options to direct the caller more efficiently to the correct number. Some of these systems have a low number of calls which could be handled by a receptionist. We found some message menus were too complex, or contained complicated language. In some cases, a selected option sent the caller to the message "your call cannot be completed at this time, hang up and dial again." This may be caused by technical problems which need to be resolved by County Telecommunications Services.

We recommend that the County develop a coordinated and consistent approach for wayfinding improvements in all of its facilities. In addition, County program personnel should review their automated telephone answering systems to ensure that they provide good access for the public.

BACKGROUND

County service sites

The County is responsible for social, health, and criminal justice services provided to specific populations in the County, as well as other services available to the general public such as animal control, libraries, property assessment and taxation, and elections. There are 78 different locations in the County where departments provide direct services to residents. There are at least 180 other locations where services are provided by non-profit organizations under contract with the County. Exhibit 1 on the following pages indicates all the sites where the County provides services, and a partial list of the sites where the County contracts with non-profit agencies to provide services.

Some County services, such as Elections, are provided at a single location. Other County services such as libraries and social services are provided at multiple sites in the community, to make them more easily accessible to citizens. The County adopted a policy which calls for the coordination of some County social services with non-County service agencies. To accomplish this goal the County was divided into six service districts to provide better access to citizens throughout the County.

An accessible location is only one element of an effective customer-oriented service. For example, clearly worded brochures, steamlined forms and procedures, and extended business hours can also improve citizen access to services.

Providing good customer access is particularly challenging for a government organization like Multnomah County. Unlike most businesses which produce a few distinct products or services, the County provides hundreds of services, which can make it difficult for citizens to find the right program or location. For example, in addition to the hundreds of service sites, the County also has over 300 telephone numbers in the *Government Listings* of the U.S. West telephone directory. The County general information number is listed prominently in the directory to assist citizens, but they may still have to describe their problem to several different County employees before reaching the right person or office. Citizens may also have difficulty distinguishing which services are provided by County, city, or state government.

Exhibit 1

Service sites of the County and its contractors (incomplete list)
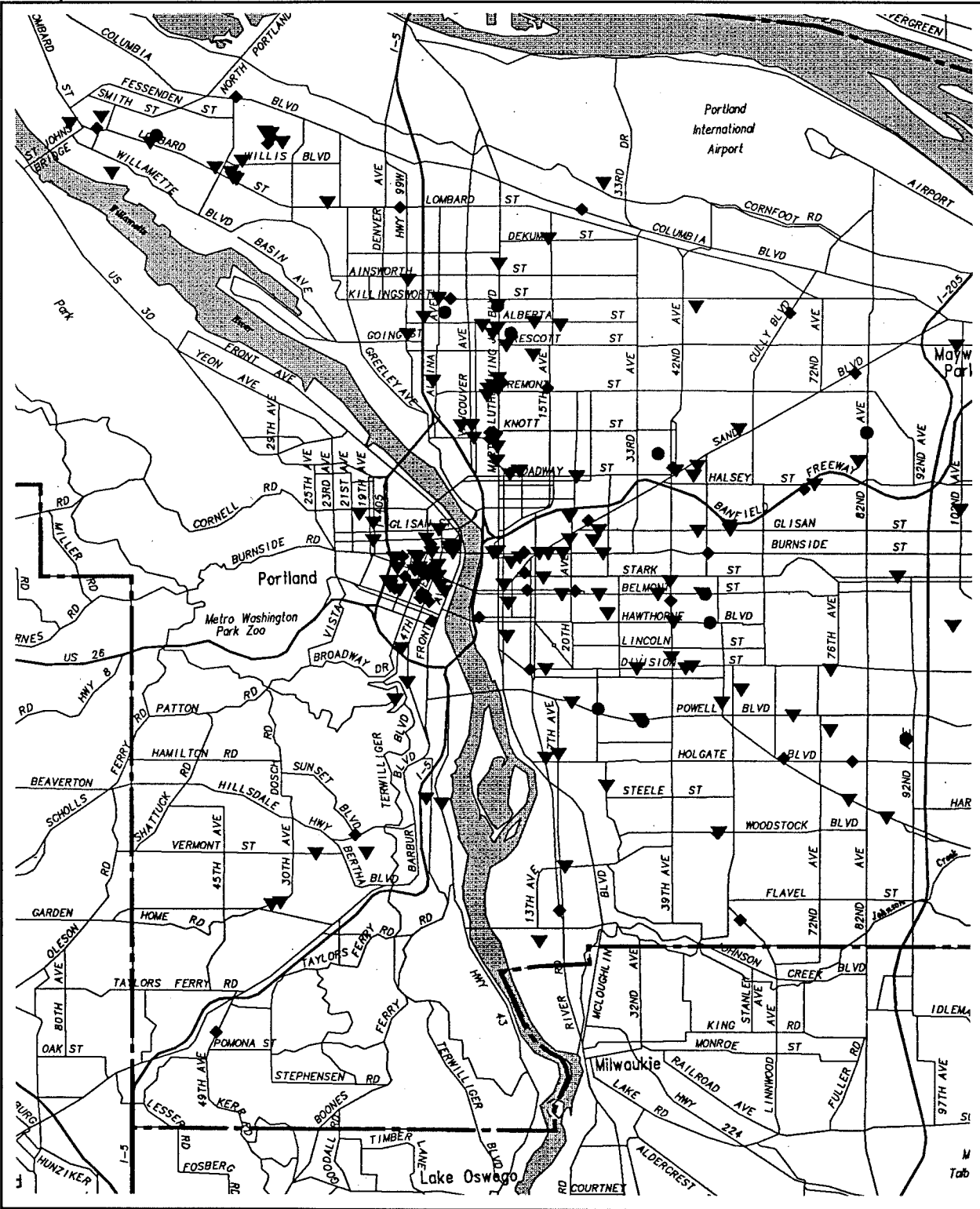
Because of the broad range of services provided, citizens who seek County services also have a broad range of needs. Some may have difficulty speaking or understanding English. Others may be disabled, either physically, emotionally or developmentally, which can make it difficult to talk on the telephone and locate services. Good public access must also recognize these needs.

Citizens learn about County service sites in several different ways. The area's most prominent directory, U.S. West, has three different listings, the *Easy Reference Guide*, a *Community Services* section and the *Government Listings*, which list the addresses and telephone numbers of County organizations, and sometimes indicate the services they provide. County organizations also distribute descriptive brochures to sites within the community. Citizens may also be referred to a County program by other government agencies, other County programs, or community organizations. Usually the first contact a citizen has with a County service is by telephone or in-person at an office site.

Improving access to service sites

Environmental psychologists and architects have identified "wayfinding" aids such as signs and other cues which can guide citizens through buildings to their desired destination. Consideration must be given to variances in citizen age, abilities, and transportation mode (by foot, bicycle, wheelchair, car, bus).

As citizens travel into and within a building, they reach choice points where they must decide which direction to travel, such as the choice of going left or right as they exit an elevator. Visual cues at these points, such as a waiting area, can assist in the decision-making. Architectural cues can also direct citizens. For example, a broad hallway in one direction and a closed door in the other direction will generally lead citizens down the hallway. If architectural cues are not sufficient, citizens may be further assisted by signs, directories, and maps.

At each choice point, signs must provide the relevant information for citizens seeking various destinations. Identification signs supply information such as the building address, program name, and room designation. Directional signs, which include an arrow or "to", indicate the route to reach a destination. Subsequent signs can reassure citizens that they are proceeding in the right direction.

Uniform sign conventions and placement make wayfinding easier. Citizens quickly learn where, and in what manner, information will be provided. Text should be concise, consistent, unambiguous, and understandable by its intended audience. "Kids' Playroom" on a directional sign may be overlooked if a previous sign listed it as "Children's Corner". Logos and symbols can impart information at a glance if they are consistently used and understood. For example, Tri-Met has effectively educated the public on the location of mall bus stops by printing symbols on bus schedules, on bus stop signs, and in the yellow pages.

Experts caution that too many signs and information can create confusion. Wayfinding aids should be sufficient to direct most citizens to their desired destination, while recognizing that signs and cues will not be adequate for some citizens. For example, citizens seeking the more specialized programs or who have impaired vision may still need individual assistance from program staff.

One means of reducing confusion is to provide information in a hierarchy with general information at major choice points, and more specific information provided at other points. Sign and lettering size can be used to denote the importance of information as well. An example of this hierarchy is the huge sign on a freeway to indicate major arterial streets or districts, smaller local street signs, the generally smaller numbers affixed to buildings, and building directories that list individual occupants.

Accessing the County by telephone

Citizens can often conduct their business with the County by telephone. Improved technology has allowed County programs to record messages. Citizens can select from a "menu" of options to help them reach the specific office that they need. Recorded answering systems can create efficiencies when a large portion of the calls received are for a particular service or seek the same information. Telephone calls can interrupt the work of staff and in many cases may be more efficiently handled with recorded information.

However, consideration of citizen needs is even more important in telephone systems. While several types of aids can be used in buildings to guide citizens, only verbal information can be communicated by telephone. The telephone call may be the citizen's first contact with the County. Telephone directories cannot always be comprehensive enough to expect all citizens to always find the correct number to dial.

Telecommunications experts indicate that care should be taken in designing these systems to make them as simple as possible. Recorded systems should also be periodically re-examined to ensure that the volume of calls is sufficient to warrant a recorded message, and to ensure that citizens are actually able to access services.

Recorded telephone messages must be simply worded and the number of options limited. Citizens can easily become confused if too much information is offered. Callers should be told how to reach a "live" person if needed and the system must be designed so that any confused callers who do not select options will be quickly routed to a program receptionist. Phone recordings should not be used to avoid, but rather to assist the public.

County commitment to provide good access

The County is committed to improving the quality of service to the public and has recently implemented its RESULTS campaign based upon the principles of total quality management. Fundamental to total quality management is customer service. One of the most critical elements of customer service is the initial contact. The success of a service activity can be greatly influenced by the quality of the first contact made with the County. Improving access to services was identified as a high priority item in the FY94-95 budget. Also, the Facilities Division is leading a strategic planning effort to develop goals for the County regarding space needs which address some aspects of public access.

There are other standards which address public access on a more limited basis for special populations or special situations. The American Disabilities Act (ADA) prohibits discrimination by public entities on the basis of disability. The act requires that the County remove architectural barriers for the physically handicapped, provide signage for the visually impaired, and communication devices for the hearing impaired. In 1992, the County began making modifications to County sites. Due to budget constraints, the County will not be able to meet ADA's January, 1995 compliance deadline.

It is also important for citizens to find their way out of County facilities, especially in emergencies. Fire evacuation procedures and building safety codes are imposed and monitored by the state and local jurisdictions within the County. Requirements include quarterly safety inspections, as well as monthly meetings of safety committees.

Federally-funded health clinics must provide interpreters trained in medical terminology for their non-English speaking patients. In addition, the Health Department is required to provide translated signs. Legal documents such as those administered by the Offices of the Sheriff and District Attorney, and the Community Corrections Department also require translation as needed.

Scope and Methodology

This audit was included on the audit schedule for FY94-95. The objective of this audit was to determine if County buildings and recorded telephone answering systems provided easy access for the public. All County departments that provide direct services to the public were included in the audit. Some County contracted services that are considered primary service entry points for County services such as the Senior Service Centers and Youth Centers were also included. We did not audit the County's compliance with the American Disabilities Act of 1990, or other laws, ordinances, and regulations relating to access or building safety.

We interviewed departmental staff and managers regarding the County's responsibility and commitment to providing easily accessed services. We interviewed the managers and staff of the Telecommunications Office and Facilities Management regarding current responsibilities of those programs in ensuring public access. We also interviewed

representatives of the Portland Office of Neighborhood Associations, the County Citizen Involvement Committee, and METRO to gain an understanding of current regional needs and efforts.

We contacted other jurisdictions regarding the implementation of wayfinding systems and recorded telephone services. We visited several local institutional sites to observe wayfinding systems and met with a consulting firm that assists institutions in implementing such systems. We reviewed budget documents, RESULTS campaign documents, management reports and planning documents. We reviewed State and Federal laws, County ordinances and administrative rules relating to public access.

To gain an understanding of the number of sites where County direct or funded services are provided we obtained and modified databases received from the County mail distribution center and from a previous audit of buildings as well as from County contract administrators. Applying standards found in County, research, and business literature, we inspected a sample of 25 buildings and 35 programs. We developed diagrams of all telephone recordings supported by the County telecommunications system and performed tests on the systems to determine their effectiveness.

This audit was conducted in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards, except for the new requirement for periodic external quality control review. As the first step of quality control review, three audit managers from other jurisdictions have reviewed and approved the policies and procedures manual of this office for compliance with Government Auditing Standards.

AUDIT RESULTS

Cost of poor access to the public

For citizens, poor access creates problems that are obvious, but hard to measure. Citizens may spend extra time driving around the block or wandering corridors to find a program. They may be late for appointments resulting in less service, more time to complete a service transaction, or a need to re-schedule appointments. Citizens may direct anger at County staff, and the quality of the service may be reduced. For some individuals, feelings of anger, embarassment, or frustration with a confusing bureacracy may lead to a decision to delay or not to pursue needed services.

Poor wayfinding cues also have implications for public safety. The inability to independently navigate a building can put citizens at risk in an emergency. Without good emergency exit cues, the public may require County staff assistance which reduces the ability to escape quickly.

Becoming lost in a telephone system can be even more discouraging to a citizen seeking service. In a building, citizens usually can find someone to ask directions. In an automated telephone system without adequate instructions, citizens may have no other option but to hang up and try again. These "dead ends" are frustrating and discouraging.

Poor access can also increase County costs

Modern technologies such as recorded answering systems can reduce government costs. However, if used inappropriately, savings may be offset by an increased loss of public access. If recorded messages are too long and confusing, callers may find it easier to opt for an operator to supply the information they seek. Difficult or confusing access can create the perception that government lacks a commitment to customer service. Poor access may reduce public cooperation with County programs such as dog and cat licensing.

When access information is inadequate, citizens direct questions to staff. These situations result in increased workloads for staff who are designated to assist, and as well as other County employees who may be asked for assistance. Some information and reception desk staff we contacted were giving directions to as many as 75 citizens per hour. This figure does not take into account questions received by other staff in the building.

Angry and frustrated citizens may demand immediate service and interrupt work routines. This, in turn, can reduce the morale of County staff who are attempting to provide quality service.

Little consideration of public access

While we noted efforts made by all County organizations to comply with access standards mandated by ADA and OSHA, we found few instances where general wayfinding was being addressed. The Health and Library departments have initiated efforts to improve citizen access to their services, but most County programs do not consider it their responsibility. Department managers and operations supervisors generally believe that it is the responsibility of Facilities Management to install adequate signs. However, Facilities Management staff indicate that they do not have an understanding of the full range of services and citizen needs at each site to address wayfinding issues.

Facilities Management has recently purchased a sign-making machine and is working jointly with the Health Department to develop sign design standards for all the Health facilities. The sign design takes into account ADA regulations and is being developed with input from representatives of the disabled community. In addition, as a result of workload and sign issues raised in a 1994 audit, the Library Department has evaluated the layout of its branches and developed sign standards to help citizens find the materials that they are seeking.

Similarly, few departments have taken the responsibility of ensuring good citizen access by telephone to County programs. The County Telecommunications Section is responsible for installing telephone and voice mail services based upon needs identified by department management. The Telecommunications Section provides technical support for the systems and can generate monthly statistical reports on telephone usage to measure a telephone system's effectiveness. However, most departments are not using the information to identify access problems or improve the design of their system. The County currently has few guidelines which identify appropriate uses and design of recorded telephone systems.

County buildings are not easily recognizable from the street

Citizens can approach Multnomah County facilities by bus, car, bicycle, wheelchair, or on foot. Building identification should meet the requirements of these various modes of travel. We found that 14 of the 25 buildings we surveyed for this audit were not easily identified from the street. Some exterior signs failed to supply the address, Multnomah County name, program, or department. Some letters were not large and distinct enough to be seen from a moving vehicle.

At several sites trees or poles reduced the visibility of signs. At the Morrison Building, 2115 S.E. Morrison, the lettering and logo on the face of the building was obscured by a tree. The Mid-County Health Clinic, 12710 S.E. Division, had a two-sided free-standing sign which was obscured by a telephone pole and tree. Both sites are on busy streets and poor sign visibility could require citizens to circle the block to confirm the location and obtain access.

Additional factors may also obscure the line of vision. At the Community Corrections North District Office, 2205 N.E. Columbia Boulevard, a large parking lot and the steep slope of the property make it impossible to see the program identification and address sign located several hundred feet back from the street. Other occupants of the complex have placed large freestanding signs near the street.

Exhibit 2

The North District Office of Community Corrections has no signs visible from the street.
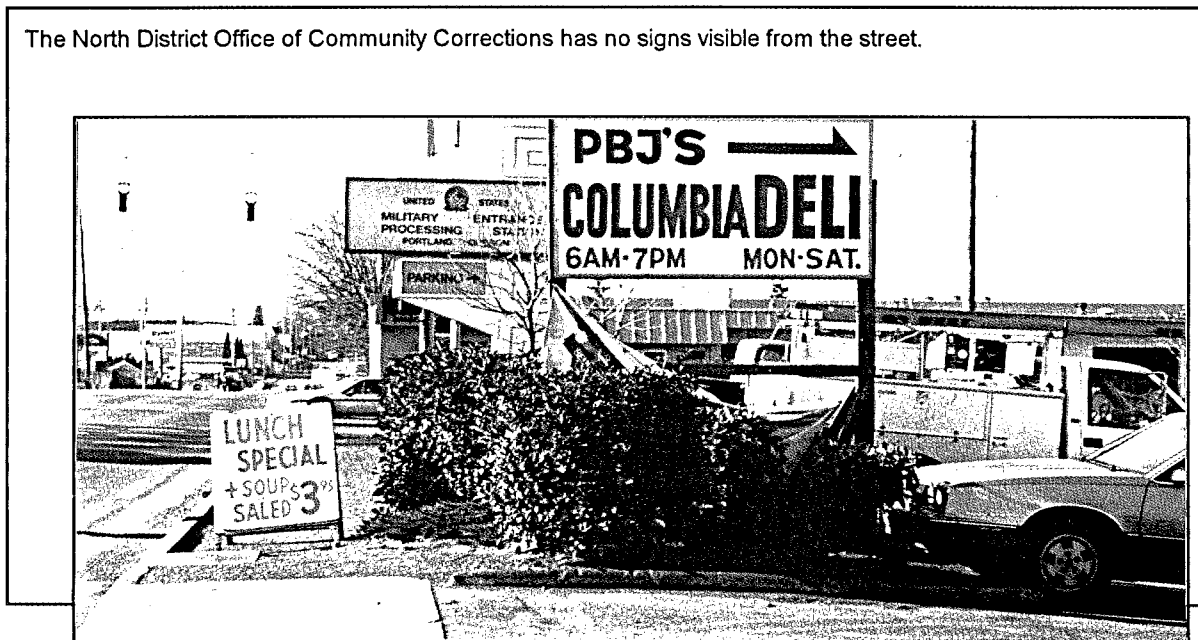
Exterior signs cannot list all programs, especially in large, high-rise buildings. However, architecturally distinctive sites such as the Justice Center, Courthouse, and Portland Building can serve as 'landmarks' for citizens, especially if building names are consistently used in published addresses and by information and referral staff. However, current practices do not take advantage of these landmarks. For example, the Multnomah County Detention Center, which is located at the Justice Center, is only listed in the telephone directory by the street address. Similarly, Community Corrections has offices in the Justice Center and the Courthouse, but only lists the street addresses in the directory. From a car, neither the Courthouse nor Justice Center had street numbers which could be readily seen. Published addresses should include both the landmark building name and street address, and the landmark building should clearly display its address.

Ease of access by mode of travel

The County is committed to encouraging alternative modes of travel. The majority of the sites we surveyed were located within one block of a bus stop. However, support for bicycle travel is not as evident. Few County sites provide bicycle racks, and riders would be forced to bring their bicycles into the building in order to provide security.

Parking lots were provided for the public in 18 of the 25 surveyed sites. In most cases, however, signs indicating the entrances and exits of the lots were inadequate. Of the six parking lots that were not visible from the street, only one had adequate signs for finding the lot. When parking lots are not visible from the address side of the building, signs should be placed near the front indicating where parking may be found. Signs indicating parking lot entrances and exits, and directions of travel, are important for safety as well as wayfinding reasons.

Parking lot signs at the Morrison Building can produce problems for citizens. There are three parking lots at the building but only one lot is marked. The sign only indicates "Planning, Development and Permits" although several other programs are also located at this site.

Exhibit 3

There are no directions for the thousands of property owners who also need to park at this building to appeal their property values.

Parking lot usage limitations should be clearly posted to ensure that citizens' cars are not ticketed or towed while they are at a County building. At the Hollywood Branch Library, for example, the parking lot located directly under a large "Multnomah County Library - Hollywood Branch" sign is reserved for patrons of a nearby church. Patrons traveling north can only see a small sign to this effect after driving into the lot. At the Walnut Park Building, 5329 N.E. Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd., where there are health and aging programs, an obsolete sign states "Permit parking only, except in spaces marked visitors." However, all parking spaces are unmarked.

Better entrance identification needed

Once a citizen has identified the correct building, the next step is to find the correct entrance to the building. Clear architectural cues, such as a large double door or columns can successfully lead to the right entrance. If buildings lack good cues or have multiple entrances, effective signs are needed. In the 25 different buildings that we looked at, 10 had multiple entrances, and in eight cases the correct entrance was inadequately identified.

At the site of the Sheriff's Office Safety Action Team, located at 8920 N. Woolsey, identification signs at the building corner and over the side door seem to indicate that this side door is the correct entrance. However, Sheriff's Office personnel indicate that this door is always locked for security reasons. Access is only permitted through the Housing Authority of Portland/Columbia Villa office, although the Safety Action Team office is not listed at the main entrance of the building, nor in the building lobby.

Exhibit 4

Visitors who are drawn to this door by the signs will always find it locked.
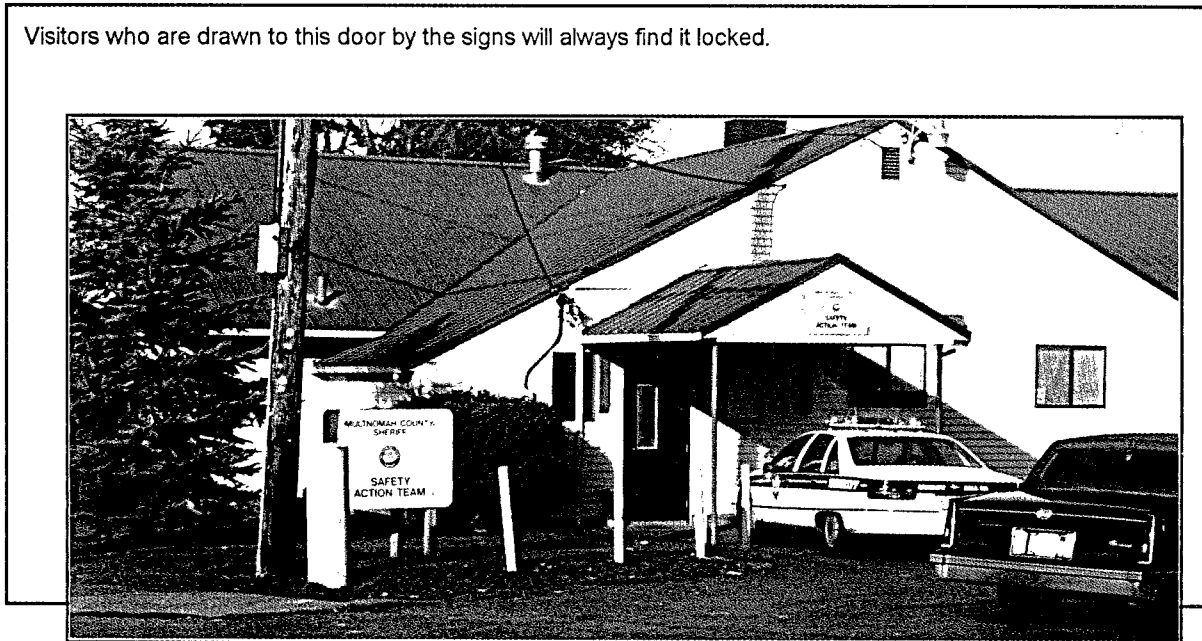
Although, the County is in the process of complying with ADA requirements, additional wayfinding cues may be necessary for handicapped citizens. We found two examples where citizens seeking handicapped accessible entrances could have easily been confused. Aging Services and Community Corrections both have offices at the east end of the Tabor Square building which is a long connected building with several addresses. As one approaches the entrance from the east, a sign at the lower west end of the stairs to the entrance indicates "Handicapped entrance off parking lot." Immediately visible to the east is a directional sign to a parking lot. Putting these two signs together will result in a handicapped person proceeding to the east parking lot that has no handicapped entrance. Handicapped access

is in a lot to the west and behind the building. There is a sign to this lot but it is not visible from the building entrance when approaching from the east.

Handicapped access at the Morrison Building is also very poor. Directional signs at the entrance to the building indicate handicapped access is to the west of the building. No other signs are visible to guide the citizen any further. A handicapped ramp is barely visible from the sidewalk and is not located adjacent to the handicapped parking stalls. At the top of the handicapped ramp the door enters a stair well. Once inside, there is only an unsigned door and no button to automatically open it. Through this door is a corridor of offices without any signs to direct persons toward a reception area. Staff at the facility stated that persons in wheelchairs need to call ahead to gain access.

Exhibit 5

Handicapped persons entering this handicapped entrance will need more assistance.
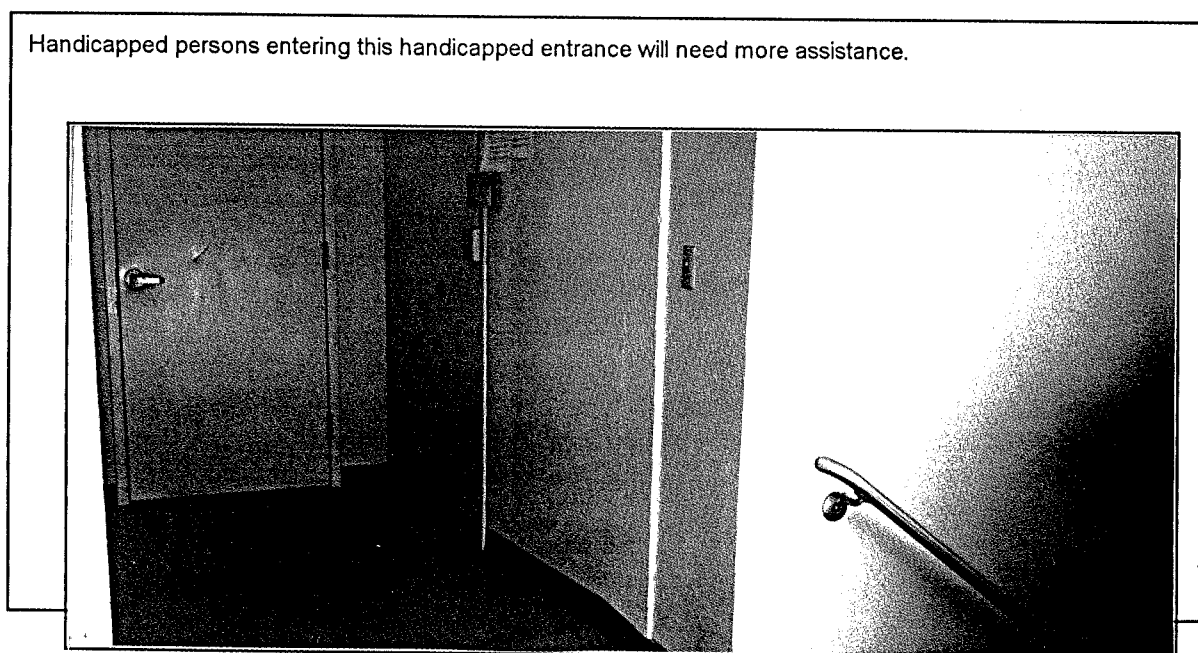
Better interior building signs are needed

Finding a County service within a building is fairly easy when only one program is housed at each site. However, of the 25 buildings we surveyed, only 9 were single occupancy. The other sites were either multi-departmental or shared occupancy with non-County services. In addition, some County programs are located in leased buildings and will need to negotiate design features such as signs. Some of these buildings have multiple floors without a main lobby or central information desk. In addition, at some shared sites, sign style and usage did not appear to be coordinated.

We found that most County buildings failed to provide adequate interior signs. We examined seven factors: legibility, clutter, clarity, hierarchy, naming consistency, style

consistency and translation to determine the quality of the sign system. Only three of the buildings we surveyed, Tax Collection and Recording, 610 S.W. Alder; S.E Aging Services and Community Corrections in the Tabor Square Building; and N.E. Health Clinic in the Walnut Park Building had consistently good signs. Even those sites were lacking to some degree in foreign language translation.

Exhibit 6 shows the results of our visual survey of 25 County buildings.

Exhibit 6

Visual survey of 25 County buildings	Sign Factor	Generally	Sometimes	Never	n/a
	Legibility	6	14	5	0
	Uncluttered	16	5	1	3
	Clarity	14	9	0	2
	Hierarchy	5	10	7	2
	Naming consistency	8	6	0	11
	Style consistency	6	11	6	2
Source: Auditor's Office analysis	Translation	0	9	12	4

Legibility

It is important that legible signs be provided at choice points. Many surveyed buildings lacked adequate directional signs at choice points, and room or program identification signs were too far away to provide assistance. In other cases, low contrast between lettering and background, small or overly ornate lettering, poor illumination, or glare impeded sign readability. For example, there are no directional signs in the lobby of the Donald E. Long Home. One frequent destination, the District Attorney's Office, is located down a corridor off the lobby, with a small sign above the door frame. It is impossible to read this sign from the lobby choice point.

Clutter

It is important that wayfinders aren't subjected to information overload. Directional and identification signs can be overlooked if walls are filled with posters and other written materials. To reduce confusion, the libraries we surveyed have placed specially-constructed literature racks in their outer lobbies. In this way, the libraries can serve as a

clearinghouse for community information while keeping library functions distinct.

Clarity

Clarity is achieved when signs are concise, unambiguous, and jargon-free. The citizen entering the door to the Food Handlers Program will see three signs. The top sign states, "Food Handlers Testing" and includes an arrow pointing to an entrance. The middle sign states, "Authorized Personnel Only Beyond This Point." The bottom sign only contains arrows pointing to the same entrance. This apparent contradiction can confuse citizens. The Courthouse contains three directional signs for "Traffic Tickets", "Traffic Citations", and "Traffic Stubs" – to direct citizens to the same location.

Hierarchy

Another component of sign quality that we rated was whether there was a logical heirarchy of lettering and sign sizes. We found signs of lesser general importance were sometimes larger than signs of greater or equal importance. For example, the floor directory sign by the elevator on the 14th floor of the Portland Building lists 'receptionist' with an arrow in larger letters than 'Multnomah County Chair, Beverly Stein.' This conveys the message that all visitors to the floor are to check in with the receptionist located in Employee Services.

Naming

We also determined whether programs and offices were consistently named on signs and directories. Consistent naming in telephone directory listings and brochures can help to avoid confusion. For example, at the Justice Center, the names 'detention center' and 'jail' are used interchangeably. The "Donald E. Long Juvenile Detention Center" is listed in the government section of the phone book. However, identification signs at the site use "Donald E. Long Home," "Juvenile Detention Center," or "Juvenile Court."

Style

Consistency in construction styles and graphics assist in sign recognition and legibility, and also help to create an image for a department or the County. Many buildings that we surveyed looked like they had started out with a uniform set of signs. As time progressed, and the need for additional or different signs evolved, signs of assorted styles were added. For example, at the senior service center on S.E. 122nd, original signs had been augmented with many signs of various colored paper, lettering style, and size. The YWCA's "Senior Services Center" sign was handwritten on a small piece of cardboard taped by the door. Some sites consistently display the Multnomah County logo, others do not. The

Sheriff's and District Attorney's offices each have their own logo. This does not create public awareness of the range of services provided by the County.

Exhibit 7

These signs may be adequate for citizens to find their way, but the style could be improved.
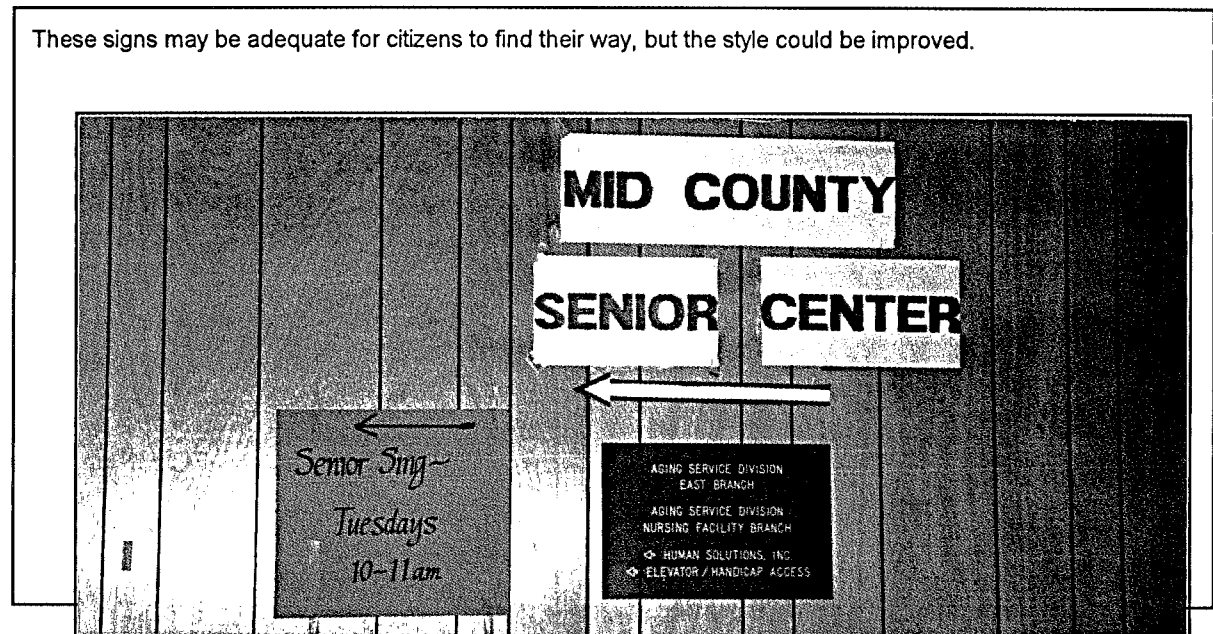
Translation Many programs serve populations with limited abilities to speak English. Among the sites we visited, the number and type of signs that are translated varies widely. Only Health sites had consistently translated program, transaction window, and amenities signs. We found few translated signs at other sites, and of these, most were only in Spanish.

We also reviewed the proposed signs which the Health department had developed for its sites. We found that the proposals successfully address many deficiencies currently found in current signs. Some wayfinding concepts were not employed, such as lettering hierarchy, which emphasizes that more general or important information appear in larger lettering.

Use of building directories could be improved

Building directories can be an effective wayfinding aid, especially in buildings with multiple occupants or programs. Combination floor directories and directional signs, such as those found on upper floors of the Courthouse, are useful tools as well. Several complex sites we surveyed could have benefitted from directories.

At the David Douglas Building, 2900 S.E. 122nd, the County Aging Services programs and contracted aging programs are located at the same site. Many of the services in the

building have similar names such as YWCA Senior Center, Senior Service Center, and Aging Services Program Office, which makes differentiation among the programs difficult. There are three public entrances, one at the north end of the building, one at the south end, and a main entrance on the west side, which is the farthest entrance from parking areas. There is a County-staffed information desk at the main entrance, but the only building directory is inside the north entrance, and it provides an incomplete listing. At the south entrance door, there is a map for the previous tenants. A sign for the Energy Assistance Program directs citizens to the north entrance, without indicating which direction is northerly, or denoting which office houses this program. A directory, or directional signs to a directory, placed at each entrance would better orient the citizen.

Exhibit 8

An elderly visitor to this site may be unsure whether to go downstairs to Aging Services or Reception, or to the Aging Services Division to the right.

In order to be easily understood, directories need to be written in alphabetical order and list all occupants of the site. The County name and logo should be included, if possible, to aid recognition. Multi-jurisdictional sites, such as the Justice Center which houses the Portland Police Bureau, Courtrooms, Multnomah County Detention Center, and offices of the District Attorney and Community Corrections has two main entrances, one to the Police Bureau and one to the other programs. Neither side has a comprehensive directory.

Directories should provide translations in the most commonly spoken languages where non-English speakers can access information. This is especially important in multi-story facilities that lack ground floor information desks. None of the directories in the 25 buildings we visited had translated directories.

Poor placement of a directory can diminish its usefulness. At the Courthouse, the directory is placed past the information desk, and it is inaccessible to those citizens who have entered the main lobby through the security checkpoint.

Maps could be helpful at some buildings

Although the floorplans of most County buildings are simple enough not to require maps, wayfinding at some sites would be improved if maps were provided. Some citizens find maps more helpful than signs or directories, as they provide information in a different format. Maps can be useful at sites undergoing construction, or where offices and programs are moved frequently. Maps constructed for public use need to be simplified. They should be oriented to the viewer's perspective and indicate "You Are Here." Travel routes should be clearly indicated, only public access areas should be labeled, and unfamiliar codes should not be introduced. Maps may also be printed on handouts that citizens can refer to during travel.

Among our survey sites, maps could improve wayfinding at the Justice Center, the Donald E. Long Home, the Portland Building, and the Morrison Building. Libraries could benefit from printed or posted stack and section maps, like those employed at Powell's Books and recently introduced at Transcentral, the temporary main branch.

The public often go to the Portland Building, the Courthouse, Portland City Hall, or the Justice Center seeking services located elsewhere because these buildings are government landmarks. Publishing a downtown area map highlighting City, County, and State service sites and locations could prove valuable to citizens.

Information desks over used

Generally, we found that most information or reception desks were not identified as to purpose. The public will turn to desk staff to answer whatever questions are not answered by wayfinding aids. Repetitive questions, and a heavy volume of questions, are indicators of deficient wayfinding aids. At the Donald E. Long Home, staff at the lobby desk stated that most of the 300 - 700 citizens who come there each weekday ask them for directions. Many sites lack directional signs to public amenities: "Where's the restroom," ranks high on the list of wayfinder queries at most locations. At shared sites, County staff may be spending time directing the public to other agencies.

Good identification, directional, and instructional signs can reduce the workload at information/reception desks and at security checkpoints. Where appropriate, directories and maps can also be valuable. Free-standing displays could be further explored for presenting information such as court dockets, inmate visiting hours and regulations, and procedures for adopting stray animals. Assessment and Taxation, for example, has an excellent wall display which explains the steps necessary for appealing a property's value.

Exhibit 9

Better signs and a free-standing display could reduce the workload and crowding at this reception desk
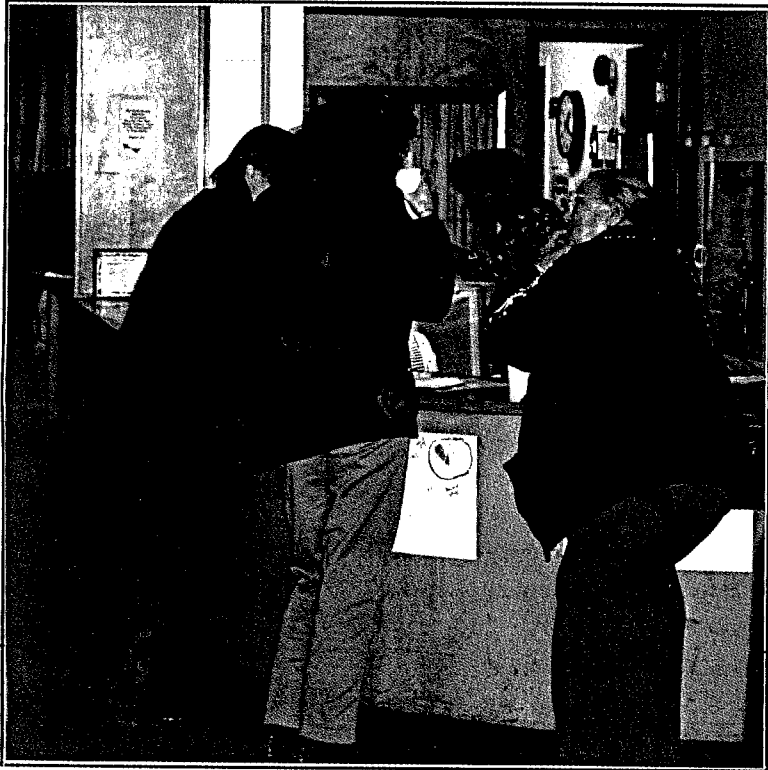
It is important that the public be able to obtain commonly-used materials independently. Printed materials can offer reinforcement of verbal information. Citizens can refer to them later, which may decrease the need for future queries and phone calls.

Programs varied greatly in their ability to provide customer service for non-English speaking citizens. Some had bilingual front desk staff, some relied on other program personnel, and many had no bilingual staff present. The Health Department, and their Language Services Division, have developed a computerized system for tracking patient translation needs. Few programs, however, have systematically identified the language needs of their clients. The provision of translators and translated materials varies widely across departments.

More attention to emergency planning needed

Citizens not only need to be able to find their way into a building but also to exit it successfully. Many times a client will be expected to independently exit an office after completing an interview or medical examination. A good wayfinding system, therefore, will also provide cues for navigation out of the building. These become particularly important if there is an emergency. In times of stress, individuals have more difficulty understanding complex information. If the individual is handicapped or non-English speaking the need is even greater for simple and clearly visible information.

The County is required to hang green-lit exit signs above doors for fire safety. In some cases, these signs were not visible from decision points. At the East County Health Clinic, for example, signs in the hallways do not provide adequate information to assist citizens out of the facility. At the Animal Control facility, there are prominent red exit signs on the doors. These large cues, particularly where there are long corridors, become important in emergency situations.

Oregon statutes require that employers have safety committees. The County has implemented multiple safety committees, generally one for each building site. Safety committees are required to meet monthly and perform quarterly site reviews. They are not clearly charged with developing emergency evacuation plans. Risk management informally tracks safety committee activities and is developing a training module that will provide general guidelines for safety committees. We found almost half of the sites or programs we surveyed did not have written evacuation plans, posted evacuation maps, or formally assigned and trained staff to assist the public in evacuations. In addition, we found little coordination of safety committees at shared sites.

Recorded answering systems not always effective
There are currently 59 recorded answering systems in the County. Some recorded answering systems have very low usage which could be handled by a receptionist. We calculated the total number of calls for each recorded telephone system for a business week and also an average volume per hour. Total number of calls received weekly by these systems ranged from 1 to 3,353. Average hourly calls received ranged from almost no calls per hour to 83 calls per hour. Nearly 50% of the systems we reviewed averaged less than 5 calls per hour. It may be preferable to set call volume standards for recorded answering systems so that County citizens can directly reach receptionists unless the volume indicates it would be more efficient to have a recorded system. For example, if 20 of the recorded answering systems which currently have 100 or less calls in a business week were eliminated approximately 700 people per week could speak directly to County programs without an intervening recorded message. The County would also realize an annual savings of $8,500.

Exhibit 10 shows the average calls per week received by the County's automated answering systems.

Exhibit 10

Call volume of County answering systems

Automated answering system

NE District Probation
Juvenile Dentention
Animal Control
Developmental Disabilities
Corrections Records - Public Info
West District Probation
Support Enforcement
Mental Health & Community Action
Central Library
School Mental Health
Community & Family Services
A & T Appraisal
Day Reporting
Diagnostic Center
Information Services Division
Alternative Community Services
A & T Recorder's Office
Health Services Administration
Adult Home Care
Human Solutions
MidCounty Aginig Services
A & T Records Management
Gresham Library
Midland Library
Alcohol & Drug Program
Hollywood Library
MidCounty PC
Belmont Library
HIV Testing
A & T Administration
Hillsdale Library
Capitol Hill Library
Rockwood Library
Holgate Library
A & T Exemptions
North Portland Library
Woodstock Library
Gregory Heights Library
St. Johns Library
Information Services Help Desk
SE PC Providers
MidCounty WIC
Intensive Case Management
Sellwood Library
Albina Library
Community Health Education
NE Health
SE Health Administration
Health Supplies
NE Aging Services Administration
East County Health Field Services
Network Auto Attendant
Corrections Records - police number
MidCounty Internation Health Clinic
NE Health Field Team
MidCounty Dental Clinic
SE Wellcare Providers
East County Health Clinic
CareOregon

0   500   1,000   1,500   2,000   2,500   3,000   3,500

Average calls per week

Source: Auditor's Office analysis of Telecommunications data

Some County telephones have "outside lines" which can be dialed directly by citizens, while others are extensions which can only be reached by transferring from an outside line. Almost half the recorded answering systems are designed to transfer callers to an extension. These systems were intended to relieve receptionists of transfers to individual staff. However, when there is low volume or a very low rate of diversion, the County should re-consider the use of such a recorded system.

To reduce caller frustration and increase efficient use of the County's automated capacity, messages should be designed so that the most heavily used options are offered first. However, some recorded messages in the County only offer the most heavily used option

following several other choices. Also, some messages may be too complex for callers. We found some recorded messages which included up to nine options, gave extensive information prior to offering any options, or multiple levels of options which could confuse the caller.

One of the more complicated automated attendant systems is for Support Enforcement in the District Attorney's Office (see Exhibit 11 on pages 24 and 25). Child Support Enforcement helps families obtain child support payments from a noncustodial parent. The recorded answering system for Support Enforcement received about 1,800 calls during one business week. Over half the callers chose the fourth of five options, while the second and third options were each chosen by less than 8% of callers. If the order of options were changed, most callers could be more quickly routed to their destination. In addition, they may be less likely to select the wrong option. Choosing the third option
directs the caller to six more options that can only be interrupted by hanging up. We also found that callers sometimes received the message, "Your call cannot be completed, please hang up and dial again." The Support Enforcement Manager regularly reviews telephone statistics and stated she will be changing the current message.

The best indicator of a successful recorded system is whether citizens can find the needed service. We found some automated systems where citizens may not be able to successfully contact services. We tested all of the systems for the ability of the caller to reach a receptionist or to automatically revert to a receptionist if an option was not chosen. Systems did not always inform callers that assistance was available. At two numbers there was no answer when the call was reverted to the operator.

The automated system can automatically change its messages and call-handling when office hours are over. However, callers who have been waiting for assistance are sometimes cut off and told to call back during business hours.

We also found cases where an option did not function properly. We selected a sample of 60 menu options and in 13 cases received a message that stated, "your call cannot be completed at this time, hang up and dial again." In one case there was no answer and the number kept ringing. In another case the option rang to a number that had been disconnected. The County Telecommunications Office stated that the "your call cannot be completed" message either represents a busy signal or a system overload. The disconnected line was the result of reorganization and the system is being re-designed.

The Telecommunications Office produces monthly statistics on the use of telephone systems, voice mail, automated attendant systems and announcements. These statistics have been available to all County managers and have recently been formatted for easier analysis. Currently, managers have requested routine reports for 12 of the 59 systems.

The Telecommunications Office staff report that it is rare to receive re-design requests from County managers based upon study of these reports. We did talk to one manager who had successfully used these reports to evaluate whether additional workload could be assigned to a receptionist position. He stated that after examining the hourly and weekly phone patterns it was clear that the workload was already too high and he decided not to assign additional workload.

Exhibit 11

MAIN
MENU

"This is the Multnomah County District Attorney's Office, Support Enforcement Division. To open a new case or for help in completing forms, please press 1. To confirm a hearing scheduled for next Tuesday, press 2. For recorded information on enforcement processes and services, press 3. To reach a case worker, press 4. If you are an attorney, employer, or public agency, press 5. To hear these choices again, press 8. For all other calls or if you have a rotary phone, please stay on the line. Thank you."

1 "Hello. You have reached the new case message desk. If you are currently receiving cash pay, are on Oregon Health or receiving some other form of public asssistance, please call 229-5825. If you are not receiving the above, please leave your first and last name with spellings, your mailing address, your day time telephone number and the other party's full name. You will receive forms in the mail to complete and return to our office. Thank you."

2 "The following cases will be heard on Tuesday, Month day, 1995 at at 9:00 am, in courtroom 508.... (List of names) The following cases will be heard on Tuesday, Month day, 1995 at 10:30am, in courtroom 508... (List of names) The following cases will not be heard.. (List of names) Please call after 5pm on Monday for last minute changes. To hear this message again, press 8. To return to the main menu, press 9. Thank you."

3 "The following recorded messages will give you information on various legal procedures and services that our office may take in its enforcement efforts. For Late Payment information, please press 1. For Wage Withholding, press 2. For Modification, press 3. for Child Attending School, press 4. For Tax Intercept, press 5. For Medical Insurance, press 6. To hear these choices again, please press 8. To return to the main menu, press 9. Thank you."

4 "For 24 hour toll-free payment information, call the Child Support Accounting Unit. the touch tone number is 1-800-850-0228. For rotary dial, call 1-800-850-0294. Please do not report a delinquency unless it is at least 10 days late. Normal mail delay and Child Support Accounting Unit processing may take this long. To reach your case worker, please select the appropriate number: If the person who owes support has a last name that begins with A through Cap, press 1. for Car-Eq, press 2. For Er-Har, press 3. For Has-Ld, press 4. for Le-Ne, press 5. For Nf-Po, press 6. For Pr-Ste, press 7. For Sti-Z, press 8. To hear these choices again, please press 9. To return to the main menu, press the pound sign. Thank you."

1 Calls extension or accesses voice mail.

2 Calls extension or accesses voice mail.

3 Calls extension or accesses voice mail.

4 Calls extension or accesses voice mail.

5 Calls extension or accesses voice mail.

6 Calls extension or accesses voice mail.

7 Calls extension or accesses voice mail.

8 Calls extension or accesses voice mail.

5 Dials the receptionist

1

"Please do not report a delinquency unless it is at least 10 days late. Normal mail delay and Child Support Accounting Unit processing may take this long. If it has been over 10 days and you wish to speak to a case worker during our business hours, press 9 to return to the main menu. To hear this message again, please press 8. Thank you."

2

"Wage withholding orders are sent automatically to employers on any support order entered after November, 4, 1993. No delinquency in support is required. Once the notice is received by the employer, the employer must sent payments to the Child Support Accounting Unit no later than 10 days after payday. The amount of the withholding is 25% of net income or the current support amount plus $1, whichever is greater. Wage withholding orders are sent by the Child Support Accounting Unit and the process may take at least 45-60 days. The only objections to wage withholding are an error in the amount of support owed or an error in the identity of the obligor. To object, write or during business hours you may speak to a case worker by pressing 9 to return to the main menu. The only exception to wage withholding is if all arrears are paid in full and the parties agree to automatic withdrawal of support from the obligor's bank account. To obtain these forms, write our office at 1001 S.W. 5th, Suite 1075, Portland, Oregon 972104 or during business hours you may speak to a case worker by pressing 9 to return to the main menu. To hear this message again, please press 8. Thank you."

3

"Either party may request a review of their child support order if it has been over two years since the last modification. For support orders under two years, a substantial change of circumstances will need to be shown by you before a modification review can be made. The requesting party will be sent an application, affidavit, and income and expense forms. When these are completed and returned the opposing party will then be sent income and expense forms and be given 30 days to complete and return them to our office. At that time the case worker will apply the State of Oregon guidelines to compute a recommended child support order amount. Each party will receive a notice regarding the new amount. At that time, the parties may stipulate to the new amount or request an administrative hearing if either does not agree to the requested amount. At the hearing you may have your own attorney represent you and you may present any rebuttable information. To hear this message again, please press 8. To return to the main menu, press 9. Thank you."

4

"If your support order requires support for a child between 18 and 21, so long as the child is attending school, the obligee will be required to notify the Child Support Accounting Unit that the child is attending school. A child must be regularly attending school and enrolled as a 1/2 time student or more. Support continues through summer vacation unless otherwise ordered. If you want to verify that your child is attending school, Oregon law allows a parent to contact the school and request verification of the child's status. If you have further questions, you may contact your private attorney or during our business hours you may speak to a case worker by pressing 9 to return to the main menu. To hear this message again, please press 8. Thank you."

5

"Child support cases with arrears of $500 or more are automatically referred to the IRS for intercept of the obligor's tax refund each year in August. The Oregon Department of Revenue will intercept refunds in cases with arrears of $25 or more. Until refunds are received by the Child Support Accounting Unit, the refund is not credited or applied to your account. The only basis for objection to a tax intercept is that the obligor is not the correct person or the amount of support is wrong. To object, the obligor should write this office at 1001 S.W. 5th, Suite 1075, Portland, Oregon 97204. The obligor is entitled to an administrative determination. The Child Support Accounting Unit will refund any money intercepted, if appropriate. To hear this message again, please press 8. To return to the main menu, press 9. Thank you."

6

"Oregon law requires that all child support orders and modifications include a provision for health insurance coverage by the obligor if available at a reasonable cost and if requested by the obligee. Reasonable is defined as insurance available on a group basis or through an employer or union at a cost not to exceed the monthly support amount. If health insurance coverage is not part of your order, our office will assist you in modifying your order to include coverage. If health insurance coverage is part of your order and available, but the obligor is not providing coverage, the Child Support Accounting Unit will send a notice to the obligor and the obligor's employer advising that premium payments are to be automatically withheld from the obligor's wages. Our office is unable to assist you in collecting uninsured and unreimbursed amounts. If you have further questions and are calling during our business hours, you may speak to a case worker by pressing 9 to return to the main menu. To hear this message again, please press 8. Thank you."

RECOMMENDATIONS

A. To improve coordination and consistency, a multi-departmental group should address public access to County services.

B. To ensure that public access issues adequately address program, service population, and site issues, site staff should work with the multi-departmental group to:
    1. Familiarize themselves with wayfinding principles;
    2. Install adequate and appropriate visual cues, signs, maps, directories, and information desks at service sites;
    3. Ensure that brochures, telephone listings, and other instructional materials also provide consistent and adequate information for citizens;
    4. Routinely monitor access problems encountered by citizens, review them to determine the effectiveness of signs and other cues, evaluate alternatives, and make modifications consistent with wayfinding principles.

C. To assist citizens who wish to exit buildings, and to better prepare for emergencies, County department managers should ensure that committees at each service site:
    1. Review the adequacy of exit signs and evacuation maps, and develop emergency evacuation plans for staff and citizens;
    2. Provide leadership to ensure that emergency planning occurs at shared sites.

D. To improve telephone access to County services, the Telecommunications Section staff should:
    1. Develop a "best practices" manual which can assist program staff in designing automated answering systems that are cost-effective and accessible;
    2. Assist program staff by working with the telephone system vendor to resolve technical problems which could produce access problems.

E. To ensure that automated answering systems are effective, County program staff should:
    1. Periodically review statistics on the volume and transfers of calls to ensure that automated telephone answering systems are needed and the options are appropriate;
    2. Periodically review the message text, test the functioning of transfers, and the availability of receptionists to assist callers at all times.

RESPONSES TO THE AUDIT

Beverly Stein, Multnomah County Chair

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April 14, 1995

Gary Blackmer
Multnomah County Auditor
1120 SW 5th Ave., Room 1410
Portland, OR 97204

Dear Gary,

Your latest audit challenges us to look at the way we make our services available to the public in new and different ways. We enthusiastically accept your challenge.

I am absolutely committed to insuring that the County's customers receive excellent service and I very much appreciate the efforts of you and your staff to identify the many problems and obstacles that are currently barriers to our citizens and clients.

Staff from my office will take the lead in convening a multi-departmental committee to organize our efforts to improve public access. They will work closely with Facilities Management and the sign shop who will both play important roles in solving the problems identified in your audit.

I will ask this committee to review your audit and establish methods of surveying county facilities and to become trained in wayfinding techniques. They will manage the survey process and prepare specific recommendations for innovative ways to improve access.

Some improvements can be made without waiting for survey results. New signage for the courthouse and the justice center is already on order. Animal Control has a RESULTS team working on improved phone procedures. I think we can make substantial progress toward improving the effectiveness of our many other phone systems in the near future. I am asking every Department and Division to carefully review your audit and look closely at their operations for obstacles to public access. I believe that common sense, systematically applied, can help us do a better job of improving access for our customers.
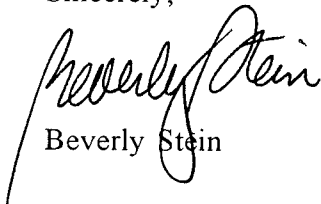
The committee's work will take a little longer, but we believe that we can have surveys in the field by June or July. I particularly want to involve front line workers who may have the most valuable input on both obstacles and possible solutions. I think receptionists, as our first

contact with constituents, may be our most valuable collaborators in this process. I want to encourage them to innovate and find new ways to meet our customers needs.

Your audit comes at a particularly opportune time as our RESULTS Initiative to create a high performance government is really beginning to take shape. Increasing our focus on customers and empowering front line workers to improve services are basic tenets of this new way of looking at the way we work. I believe teams all across the county will find very different ways to solve problems of access and I think those solutions will be better than any we would impose.

Thank you again for all of your work so far on this subject, but don't think that you are finished. This is an area where I very much want you and your staff to continue as collaborators in the process of finding solutions.

Sincerely,

Beverly Stein