

Administrative Policy No. 8.11

Subject: Complaint Resolution and Response Standards

Information Contact: Office of Constituent Services
MS 45130, (360) 902-7878, 1-800-737-0617

Authorizing Source: Office of the Secretary
Governor's Executive Order 06-02

Effective Date: September 1, 2004

Revised: November 9, 2017

Approved By: Original signed by Sharon Swanson
Senior Director, Policy & External Relations

Purpose

This policy establishes the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) guidelines for resolving and responding to complaints regarding delivery of DSHS services and establishes a standard for DSHS administrations and employees in responding to general customer complaints.

Scope

This policy applies to all DSHS administrations and employees.

Definitions

Acknowledge means communicating with and informing the customer that his/her complaint has been received and a date by which a response can be expected.

Complaint means a customer's expression of dissatisfaction with DSHS service delivery where the customer clearly requests a response or resolution.

Customer means any individual or entity that contacts the Department with a complaint. Customers may include clients, advocates, concerned citizens, elected officials, and businesses, excluding vendors, suppliers and contractors of the department.

Respond means to answer a question or complaint to the best of one's ability.

Service Delivery means performance of job duties or interaction as a DSHS employee involving direct delivery of goods, services, or information to customers.

Policy

- A. DSHS will provide timely response to customer complaints regarding service delivery ensuring the customer receives fair and courteous treatment.
- B. DSHS Constituent Services will serve as the central point of contact for this policy and customers who wish to make a complaint to the DSHS Secretary or Deputy Secretary.
- C. Each DSHS administration, division, office, institution, or unit will develop and maintain written procedures for handling customer complaints as outlined in this policy and designate a central point(s) of contact for receiving and responding to customer complaints in a timely manner. The procedure(s) at each DSHS Administration, Division, Office, Institution, or Unit shall incorporate general guidelines in this policy into their policy and procedures for responding to a complaint.
- D. Each administration's procedures need to specify how complaints are recorded, tracked, and handled within the unit, division, or administration and must ensure compliance with [Administrative Policy 5.01 Privacy Policy—Safeguarding Confidential Information](#).
- E. Managers and supervisors of DSHS administrations, divisions, and units must review and communicate the expectations of this policy and procedures with staff at all levels of the organization.
- F. All complaints must be resolved at the lowest possible level within the administration, unless permitted as described in section H of this policy. The administration's procedures must include a process for the complaint to be elevated to the next level within DSHS.
- G. DSHS employees will communicate in a courteous and professional manner with customers making a complaint. However, employees may redirect or discontinue communication with a customer(s) who is being verbally abusive or threatening.
- H. This policy does not replace or supersede:
 - 1. Any existing DSHS administration, division, office, institution, or unit written complaint resolution and response procedure(s), contractual terms and conditions that govern DSHS relationships with our service providers, vendors or suppliers.
 - 2. Any procedure developed to implement federal law, state law, or Washington Administrative Code (WAC) requirements, such as procedures for responding to abuse allegations.
 - 3. Human Resource [Administrative Policy 18.69 Delegation of Authority for Civil Rights Complaint Investigations](#), for customer allegations of civil rights discrimination.
 - 4. [Administrative Policy 5.02 Public Disclosure of and Access to DSHS Records](#),

- for responding to public disclosure requests.
5. Any procedure that identifies client rights, such as procedures for responding to a request for information about financial or social service programs or request for an application for emergency assistance.

Procedures

- A. For in-person or telephone complaints, employees will:
 1. Acknowledge or respond within 48 hours to recorded telephone messages;
 2. Identify themselves and use a courteous and professional tone when speaking to customers;
 3. Use plain language and explain any agency terminology or acronyms;
 4. Identify the complainant and attempt to resolve the complaint during the contact;
 5. Give the customer an estimated timeframe in which the Department will respond to problems or issues that extend beyond the initial conversation; and
 6. If the employee is unable to resolve the complaint, follow-up with appropriate action, such as making a referral to the appropriate DSHS administration or program for resolution.
- B. For written contacts (letters or e-mails), DSHS employees will:
 1. Respond to written correspondence received by mail or e-mail within seven calendar days. If the response will take longer than seven calendar days, make an interim contact with the customer and give a reasonable estimated date of response.
 2. Received by e-mail within 48 hours of receipt or return to work, as described in DSHS Administrative Policy No. 14.18.
 3. The written response must:
 - a. Acknowledge receipt of the correspondence;
 - b. Include a salutation. If the writer is anonymous, address the letter "Dear Concerned Citizen" or another similar salutation;
 - c. Make reference to the customer's correspondence and restate the customer's complaint(s) or concern(s) in the body of the letter;
 - d. If the customer wrote to a different party, inform the customer why the letter was referred to your administration or division;
 - e. Use proper grammar, spelling, capitalization, punctuation, and formatting (e.g., paragraphs);
 - f. Close with a signature block that includes:
 - 1) The writer's full name;
 - 2) Title or office; unit, division or administration; and
 - 3) If applicable, a name and contact information for the customer to contact for questions.
 4. When using e-mail to respond, use an easy to read font and avoid active backgrounds, bright colors, moving icons, and other distracting elements.

Remove any internal e-mail dialogue before sending the response to the customer.

- C. When a customer alleges civil rights discrimination based on race, color, creed, religion, national origin, sexual orientation, age, sex, presence of any sensory, mental or physical disability, or use of a trained dog guide or service animal by a person with a disability, disabled veteran status or Vietnam Era veteran status, or other protected veteran status, the administrative unit shall immediately send the complaint to the DSHS Human Resources Division Investigations Unit at PO Box 45839, Olympia, WA 98504-5839.
- D. How to interact with a Legislative member's office.
 - 1. Call the constituent directly unless e-mail or hard copy mail has been requested or is the preferred contact method. Explain that you are calling the constituent inquiry to the legislator's office.
 - 2. Contact the legislator's office regarding the outcome. Case specific details may be provided to the legislator or their staff if DSHS has been provided an authorization form signed by the constituent. If DSHS has not received an authorization form, provide the legislator's office with general program or policy information. Note: Disclosure of confidential information contained in special records (i.e. mental health treatment, chemical dependency, HIV/AIDs/STD) requires an additional level of authorization, in accordance with DSHS Administrative Policy No. 5.02.
 - 3. The appropriate DSHS staff should update Constituent Services by sending an e-mail confirming that contact with the constituent and legislator's office has been attempted.
 - 4. The appropriate DSHS staff should coordinate responses with administration/division legislative coordinators.
- E. How to interact with the Governor's Office.
 - 1. No authorization is required for any inquiries from the Governor
 - 2. Do not have staff contact the Governor's Office directly. Instead, staff should refer any questions or concerns to the Constituent Services Manager.
 - 3. Contact the constituent on behalf of the Governor and send Constituent Services updated information regarding details of the correspondence.

Note: Legal authorization from the client or a personal representative is required to share information with persons outside of DSHS unless otherwise authorized by law. Authorization from the client is not required when responding to the Governor's Office correspondence assignments or inquiries as part of the administration of DSHS programs.