

# Implementing and operating call center technology to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic in Rhode Island



CONTRIBUTOR: *Michelle Barron Magee, Manager, Covid Information Line, Rhode Island Department of Health*

CATEGORY: **Epidemiology and Laboratory Capacity (ELC)**

The Rhode Island Department of Health implemented a new, more advanced COVID-19 call center system that allowed for a more timely and efficient response to constituents. The system has been used for millions of calls, effectively routing callers to information and resources to reduce the transmission of COVID-19 in Rhode Island's communities.

## The “What”

In early 2020, when COVID-19 began to emerge with force in Rhode Island, the Rhode Island Department of Health (RIDOH) was addressing several thousand calls per week that came into its call center. The technology available to RIDOH at the time consisted of in-office business phones. This required the physical transfer of all incoming calls to staff members located throughout the department. As positivity rates climbed, RIDOH was in urgent need of a more advanced system that would allow them to respond to constituents in a more timely and efficient manner.

Between August-October 2020, RIDOH used Epidemiology and Laboratory Capacity for the Prevention and Control of Emerging Infectious Diseases (ELC) funding to partner with IBM to build out a COVID-19-specific call center. In November 2020, the new call center was in operation, this included use of the NICE InContact cloud-based software solution and softphones. Both components allowed for safe remote operations of the call center during the height of the pandemic. A sophisticated Interactive Voice Response (IVR) system provided pre-recorded messaging for callers to access information without speaking to a staff person. This included calls related to frequently asked questions, callers needing clinical guidance, COVID-19 test scheduling, and results. It also served to efficiently route each call to the appropriate Subject Matter Expert (SME) on the RIDOH COVID-19 team. Finally, this technology enabled RIDOH to conduct outbound calls for case investigation practices.



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### The “So What”

This call center technology provided RIDOH with the ability to serve the people of Rhode Island through all phases of the pandemic. From September 2020 – March 2023, Rhode Island’s COVID-19 call center handled more than 1.3 million calls, scheduled 250,468 COVID-19 test appointments and 80,000 vaccine appointments, and addressed 300,000 calls from the K-12 school community. RIDOH also provided translation for 44,347 callers in 63 different languages.

These efforts have aided RIDOH in preventing the spread of COVID-19. In addition, RIDOH has instituted a robust quality assurance program through the NICE CXone platform. This technology has allowed for 100% of calls to be recorded as a means to evaluate each consumers interaction and ensure the accuracy and consistency of the information provided to each caller. This platform also provides quality management analytics that drive decision making for staff trainings.

### The “Now What”

The goal for the RIDOH Center for COVID-19 Epidemiology (CCE) has been to share with other programs in the department the “pearls of wisdom” gained while responding to the pandemic. This includes further building out the technological infrastructure in place to respond to constituents. Beginning in early 2022, the CCE call center and quality assurance team began to work with the RIDOH Health Information Line (HIL) to integrate the Nice InContact technology and mirror the same operational best practices used with addressing COVID-19 calls. This project went live in January 2023.

The IVR enhancements have provided callers inquiring about non-COVID-19 matters with a better customer experience. The data and analytics have also provided the HIL manager with metrics to guide staffing decisions and training. CCE has also started working to expand the COVID-19 call center technology into the RIDOH Immunization Program. The end goal is to re-route the COVID-19 vaccine calls coming into the COVID-19 Information Line directly to the Immunization Programs SMEs.

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Key contributors to this project include Theodore Marak, Deputy Chief, Center for Covid-19 Epidemiology and Richard Rozewicz, Operations Manager, IBM.