

PERFORMANCE AUDIT • REPORT NUMBER 23-17 • JUNE 2024

Customer Service

Performance Provided Through Call Centers, Chatbots, and Email Can Be Improved at Most Reviewed Agencies

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Why we did this review

State agencies are supported by and provide services to more than 11 million Georgians. While agencies share information through websites and other means, some customers have specific needs that are not addressed by those sources. In other cases, customers are expected to contact the agency for certain activities, such as making payments or providing information. Our review is intended to highlight the performance of a sample of agencies in responding to these types of inquiries.

About Customer Service

For purposes of this performance audit, customer service is generally limited to the ability of individuals to obtain answers to their questions via phone, email, or agency chatbot. Our review of agency websites—another source of information for customers—was limited to reporting the results of an existing evaluation program.

The state has a central customer service call center operated by the Georgia Technology Authority (GTA). If GTA cannot fully address the customer's question, it will transfer the customer to the appropriate agency. Large state agencies frequently have their own call centers, some of which handle more than one million calls a year.

Agencies may also respond to customer inquiries made via email, and agencies use chatbots that provide immediate responses without requiring the involvement of agency staff.

Customer Service

Performance Provided Through Call Centers, Chatbots, and Email Can Be Improved at Most Reviewed Agencies

What we found

Constituents seeking assistance from some agencies' call centers are unable to reach agents or have long waits during periods of high call volume. To varying degrees, the reviewed agencies have implemented technologies to better serve callers or allow customers to be served by other means. However, these technologies must be monitored to ensure proper functionality.

Most call centers struggle to provide appropriate customer service when call volume increases.

State agencies we reviewed often track relevant performance measures for their call centers to assess the extent to which callers reach an agent and how long it takes to be served. However, many agencies lacked goals or benchmarks. Management reports—along with our own testing—revealed varied performance among the agencies.

Most state agencies in our review track the rate by which callers hang up prior to speaking to a call center agent (known as abandonment rate), as well as how long a caller must wait to be connected. Some agencies experienced low abandonment rates throughout calendar year 2023, while callers to other agencies experienced long wait times and hung up at higher rates during peak seasons. For example, the Department of Revenue's (DOR) Taxpayer Services call center's volume peaked during the first half of the year, leading to abandonment rates more than four times the rates seen later in the year. Similarly, callers to the Office of the Secretary of State (SOS) on average experienced hour-long wait times at the end of the year during licensing season.

Importantly, three agencies reject a significant number of calls when volumes are particularly high. The Department of Human Services (DHS) rejected almost 50% of calls to one of its call centers in 2023, while one DOR call center rejected up to 25% in the early months of the year. SOS rejects calls due to volume but does not track the number.

Call centers use technology with varying rates of success.

Agencies can use various technologies to improve caller experience. In particular, Interactive Voice Response (IVR) systems can organize callers into queues based on their needs. All agencies reviewed utilize an IVR, but our testing revealed limitations. Most prominently, callers were disconnected from multiple agencies' IVRs when incorrect selections were made; additionally, some systems did not include foreign language assistance at the opening menu. Some agencies also use self-service options within their IVR, which can lessen call center workload. Finally, multiple agencies use courtesy callbacks to hold a caller's place in line after they disconnect, which can lower abandonment rates and are particularly useful for call centers with high volume.

Staffing may not be sufficient in all call centers.

Multiple agencies attributed instances of poor performance at least partly to staffing limitations. For example, SOS has recently increased its call center staffing by nearly 40% to address long wait times. Additionally, while one DHS call center experienced low abandonment rates due to its courtesy callback system, management stated it would need significantly more agents to handle more callers (as previously discussed, currently the system rejects approximately 50% of those wishing to speak to an agent). Agencies commonly cited turnover and hiring challenges due to pay but have implemented strategies to attract and retain employees, such as remote work and career paths in some cases.

Chatbots can be used to lower call volume but are less accurate than responses from agency staff.

In addition to phone calls, most agencies permit their customers to send written inquiries through chatbots, web forms, or direct emails, all of which help alleviate call center workload. Three of the six agencies reviewed use chatbots to immediately answer frequently asked questions; however, some answers to questions we posed were not accurate (e.g., chatbot was "stumped" and did not direct the user to accessible information). Our testing of web forms and emails—used by all agencies in our review—showed answers were more accurate. While most emails were answered within hours or one business day, some audit team inquiries never received a response and others took multiple days.

What we recommend

We recommend state agencies set performance goals for their call centers and track metrics that would inform causes for customer dissatisfaction (e.g., time to reach an agent). We also recommend agencies evaluate customer service technologies such as IVRs and chatbots to ensure they function correctly. Finally, we recommend agencies determine sufficient staffing levels to ensure effective call center performance.

See **Appendix A** for a detailed listing of recommendations.

Agency Response: *The six agencies generally agreed with the findings and recommendations. In some cases, agencies noted that recommendations were not relevant to their operations (e.g., the agency will not track rejection rates because it does not reject phone calls).*

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Purpose of the Audit

This report examines selected methods of customer service delivered by six state agencies. The report focused on call centers, with limited reviews of agency chatbots, email, and websites. Specifically, our audit set out to determine the following:

- Does the state’s central customer service center (www.georgia.gov and 1-800-GEORGIA) effectively address citizen inquiries by connecting them to agencies providing needed services?
- Do selected state agencies provide effective customer service for citizen inquiries?

A description of the objectives, scope, and methodology used in this review is included in **Appendix B**. A draft of the report was provided to the Georgia Technology Authority, the Office of the Secretary of State, and the Departments of Driver Services, Human Services, Natural Resources, and Revenue for their review. Pertinent responses were incorporated into the report.

Background

Customer service refers to the assistance an organization offers to its customers before or after they use products or services. For constituents interacting with state agencies, customer service occurs in many situations. Citizens contact agencies with questions about regulations, services, or resources, as well as to obtain required licenses or government benefits. While customer service ultimately includes the delivery of services (e.g., timely and accurately processing of a SNAP program application), this audit focuses on the ability of customers to obtain information from an agency.

In addition to in-person visits to agency offices, constituents are served through a number of channels. To varying degrees, this audit focuses on customer service delivered using the following methods:

- **Phones** – Customers may call agencies directly to ask an employee a general question or inquire about their account or case. Agencies with low call volume may publish a main phone line answered by administrative employees who have additional job duties. Agencies with large call volumes likely use call centers that employ staff who primarily field constituents’ questions. Call centers typically use an interactive system that directs callers to a queue that will then connect them to the appropriate agent.
- **Email and Forms** – Customer inquiries can be sent in writing via direct email or email submission forms on agency websites. Some agencies list an email address on their website that constituents can use to submit an inquiry. By contrast, email submission forms require the sender to fill in certain data fields (name, email address, topic, etc.) into a form that then sends the inquiry. Either method may send the inquiry to multiple employees to ensure that it is addressed.

In a recent survey, customer service provided by state and federal governments ranked last compared to airlines, banks, credit card companies, and other organizations.

- **Chatbots** – Artificial intelligence powered chatbots can provide immediate responses to questions 24 hours a day. Chatbots have varying levels of response capability and functionality (ranging from traditional frequently asked questions to checking case status and benefit delivery using personal information).

Original chatbots used by agencies required staff to manually enter potential customer questions and the corresponding answers. The chatbot would provide an answer if the customer's typed question contained keywords included in the programmed question. Advancements with artificial intelligence technology and data extrapolation have allowed chatbots to generate answers from available information without the need for pre-programmed responses.

- **Websites** – Agency websites are a common method of sharing information with the public. Frequently asked questions and how-to guides and videos allow customers to obtain information without directly interacting with agency staff. An effective and navigable website can act as a self-service option for constituents, which can reduce the volume of phone calls and emails to the agency.

Georgia's State Central Customer Service Center

The Georgia Technology Authority (GTA) operates the state's central customer service center, which serves as a one-stop resource directory for those who have questions about state services. The center has several components that work together to handle constituent inquiries, including:

- **Georgia.gov** – As the central customer service website for the state, Georgia.gov allows users to learn more about state government, how it works, ways to get involved, and how state services are delivered. The site also provides a list of services for constituents, such as how to apply for a firearm license or update a driver's license address. The site connects users to appropriate agency websites and provides corresponding agency contact information. The site also has additional how-to guides on state topics (e.g., assistance programs, recreation, how to start a business).
- **1-800-GEORGIA Call Center** – 1-800-GEORGIA is a toll-free service for citizens who are seeking state services but do not know whom to call. The call center is designed to connect callers to the correct government agency with their first call. The call center employs 10 agents.
- **Governor's Office of Constituent Services** – Parallel to the 1-800-GEORGIA call center, this office focuses primarily on written communication (traditional mail, emails, web forms, and chats), though its staff serve as backup for call center staff.

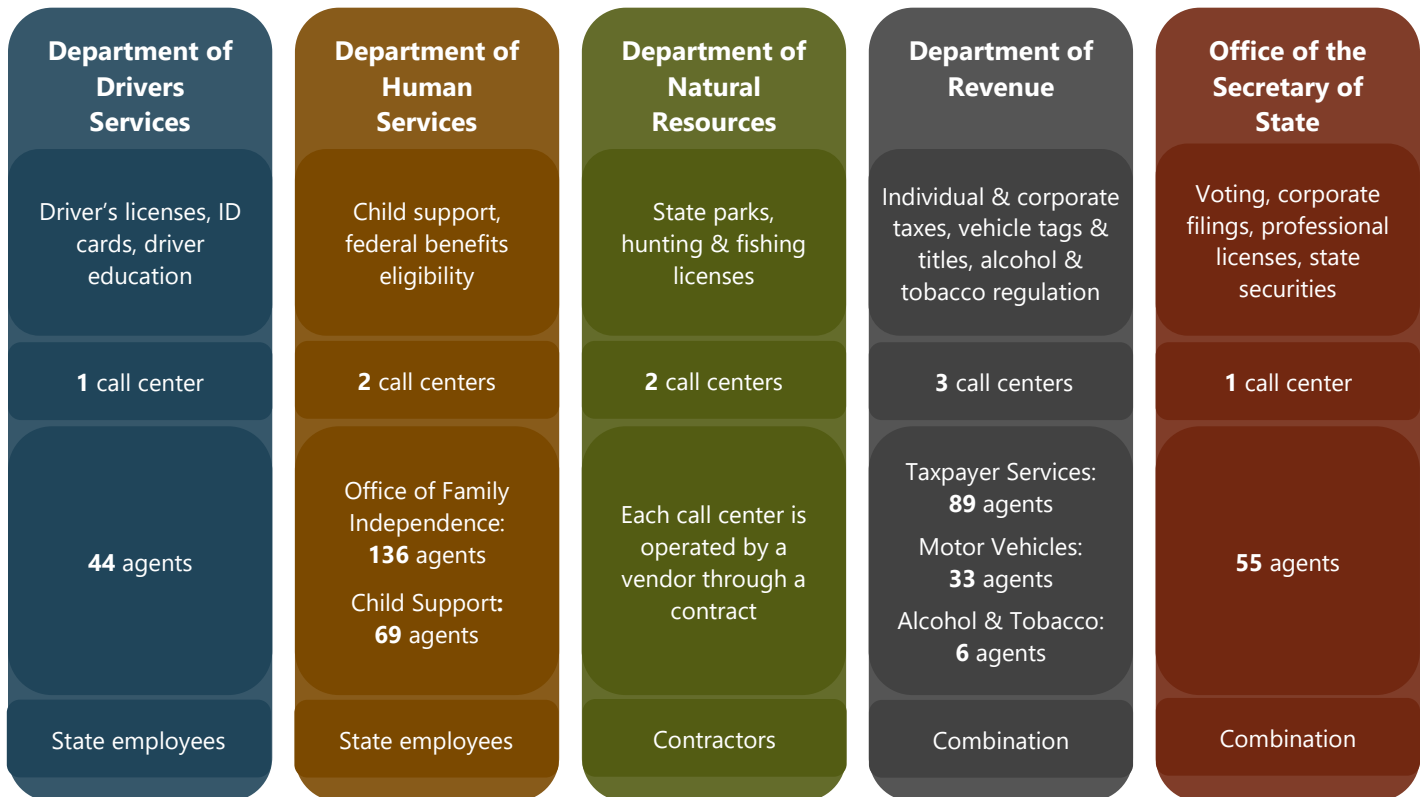
In addition to managing 1-800-GEORGIA and the Office of Constituent Services, the director of the 1-800-GEORGIA call center acts as a liaison across state agencies—providing guidance on matters such as management report evaluation, staffing changes, and technology advice.

Other Evaluated Agencies

In addition to the central state customer service center, individual state agencies operate their own customer service programs. We selected the following state agencies for our review based on the services provided and related customer volume (we also included GTA—discussed above—in our review). Agencies are described in **Exhibit 1** and below.

Exhibit 1

Agency call centers¹ vary in number and size



¹ Exhibit describes the call centers included in our review and their associated services only. We excluded call centers in these agencies, generally those with lower call volume, as well as those that served as reporting hotlines.

² Number of call center agents varies due to departures and new hires. The amounts shown were provided in early 2024.

Source: Interviews of agency staff

- Department of Driver Services (DDS)** – DDS serves hundreds of thousands of Georgians each year through the issuance of driver's licenses and identification cards. DDS operates customer service centers throughout the state; as such, it serves many of its customers in person. In early 2024, DDS's single call center had 44 agents who field all customer inquiries. All call center agents are state employees.
- Department of Human Services (DHS)** – DHS delivers a wide range of programs related to aging, child support, child protection, and eligibility determination for federal benefit programs such as Medicaid. This report includes two of the DHS call centers staffed by state

employees.¹ In early 2024, DHS reported that the Office of Family Independence had 136 agents in its call center. The call center for the Division of Child Support Services had 69 agents. Unlike other agencies, DHS's call center employees are caseworkers trained to evaluate eligibility for its programs and conduct other program casework.

- **Department of Natural Resources (DNR)** – DNR operates state parks and wildlife management areas, issues hunting and fishing licenses, protects coastal areas, and enforces environmental laws.

Unlike the other evaluated agencies, DNR contracts out two large functions with significant customer service impacts (recreational licenses for hunting and fishing and lodging reservations). Each has an independently managed call center on a separate contract overseen by two DNR divisions. For other services and inquiries, DNR publishes a phone directory on its website, which contains numbers for dozens of individuals in each division, unit, or office.

- **Department of Revenue (DOR)** – As the principal tax administration and tax law enforcement agency for the state, DOR interacts with individuals, corporations, and tax professionals for individual and corporate income tax issues. The department is also responsible for alcohol and tobacco laws and regulations, as well as vehicle tag and title administration.

The agency manages three primary call centers associated with its main functions. The largest call center, Taxpayer Services, employs a mix of both state employees and contracted staff to meet seasonal volume increases (89 agents in early 2024).² The call center for the Motor Vehicles Division had a staff of 33 call center agents, including both state employees and contracted staff. The Alcohol and Tobacco Division's call center had six contracted positions.

- **Office of the Secretary of State (SOS)** – SOS oversees voting, tracks annual corporate filings, grants professional licenses, and oversees the state's securities' market. SOS is supported by a single call center that is growing from 32 agents in early 2024 to 55 agents. The agents are a combination of state employees and contractors.

¹ The report does not include the call centers for Aging, Child Protective Services, or Adoptions and Foster Care.

² The number of contract agents DOR hires each year is dependent on expected workload and available funding.

Findings and Recommendations

Finding 1: Call center performance varied among the state agencies reviewed, with some agencies unable to serve all callers during high volume periods.

Management reports and secret shopper testing by the audit team revealed varied performance among the state agency call centers reviewed. The agencies reviewed generally track relevant performance metrics, but many lacked benchmarks or goals. Regardless of the presence of goals, management reports indicated that performance declined at points during the year for several call centers—some callers were rejected by the phone system, experienced long wait times, or gave up before reaching an agent.

Call center performance varied by agency and time of year, and nearly half of secret shopper calls were unsuccessful.

To ensure its operations are performing adequately, management is responsible for setting performance goals, collecting relevant data, and employing strategies to improve performance that does not meet goals. Regarding call centers, an overarching goal is to ensure customers are satisfied. Performance metrics related to timeliness should be tracked to quantify what often leads to customer dissatisfaction, while goals tied to these metrics can help identify performance outliers.

We identified five performance metrics that allow management to track service for all callers who would like to speak to an agent (see **Exhibit 2**). Those who never reach an agent are captured in the reject rate (if a call center rejects the call) and in the abandonment rate (if the caller hangs up while waiting), while the time waiting for an agent is captured as average speed of answer. Service level threshold is an alternate metric that captures abandonment and speed of answer by measuring the portion of all callers who reach an agent within a time period (e.g., 90% within 4 minutes). The time an agent spends handling a caller’s case is captured as average handle time, and after call work may be captured by call centers when resolution is not achieved while the caller is on the phone.

Exhibit 2

Call center performance metrics capture total customer experience

Metric	Definition
Reject Rate	Percentage of callers unable to join a queue because the maximum call volume for the center has been reached
Abandonment Rate	Percentage of callers who enter the phone system but disconnect before they speak to a call center agent
Average Speed of Answer	Time required for an agent to answer the call after a caller enters the waiting queue
Average Handle Time	Time an agent spends handling a caller’s inquiry, including talk time and in-call holding time
After Call Work	Time for an agent to complete necessary post-call documentation before moving to the next call
Source: Oracle	

We reviewed each agency’s performance management reports for calendar year 2023. Performance was compared against agency call center goals, though goals had not always been established. We also noted instances in which agencies did

not track metrics relevant to their operations and when metrics were not applicable.³ Finally, we performed “secret shopper calls” to each customer service line to ask basic questions about the agency’s services. Calls were considered resolved when we spoke to an agent who provided a correct answer or the call center IVR provided an answer to our question. A detailed description of our methodology can be found in **Appendix B**.

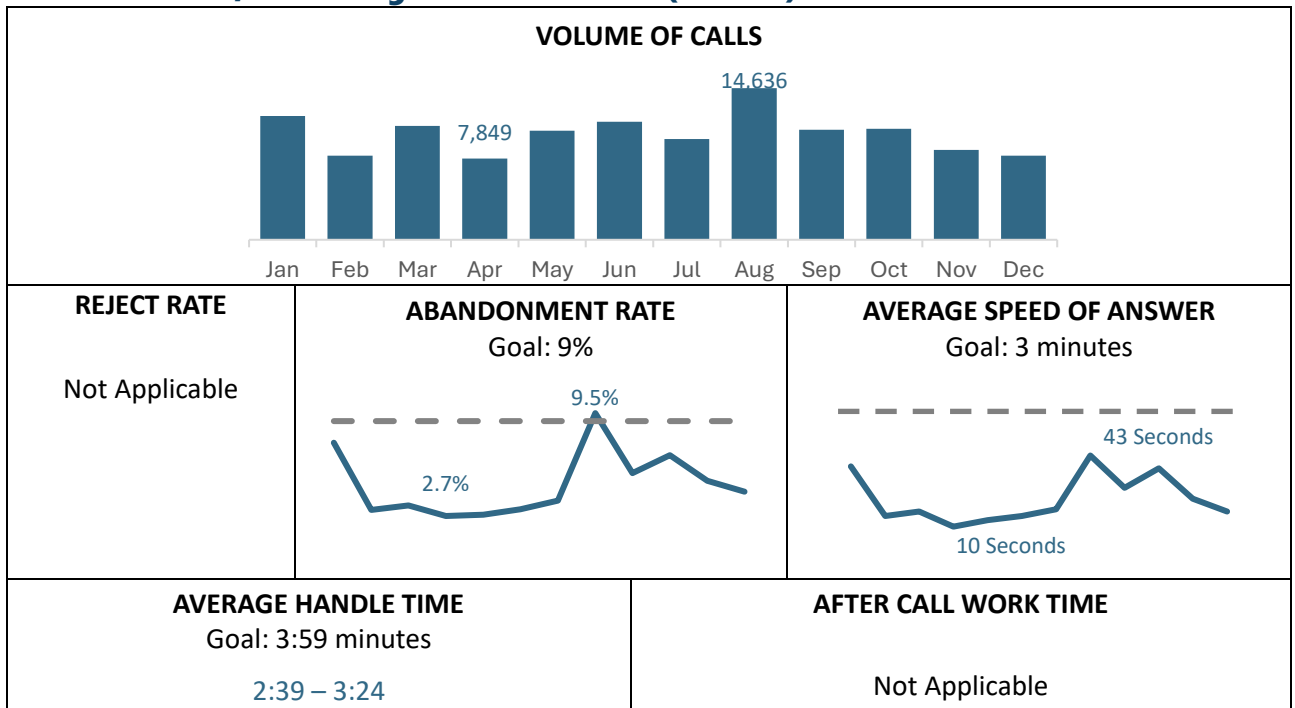
Call center performance for each agency in our review is described below. Call center performance varied by agency and by time of year, often due to the volume of calls. The extent to which secret shopper calls resulted in a resolution also varied by agency; however, nearly half of the calls were ultimately unsuccessful. This was frequently because a couple of agencies’ IVRs often did not connect calls to an agent or agencies failed to return voicemail messages.

Georgia Technology Authority

As shown in **Exhibit 3**, GTA met its performance goals through much of 2023. Abandonment rates exceeded 9% in only one month during the back-to-school season (it should be noted this goal is higher than the 5% set by some agencies). Additionally, callers were able to speak to an agent in less than a minute on average throughout the year. GTA does not track rejection rates or after call work time because agents accept all callers and fully address questions during the call.

Exhibit 3

In most months, GTA met goals in all metrics (CY2023)



Source: GTA documentation and interviews

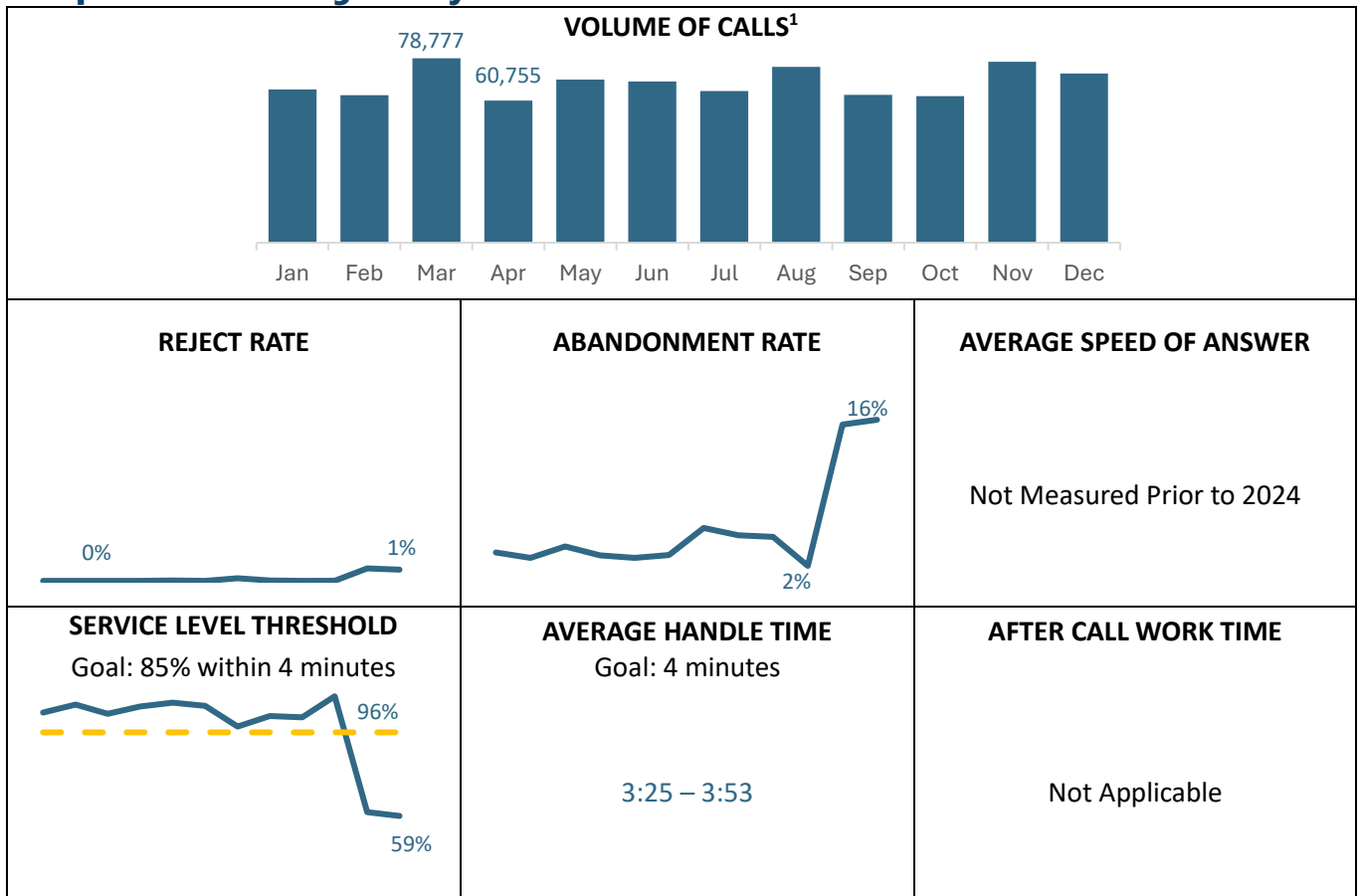
³ All five metrics are not relevant to the operations of all call centers. Specifically, call centers may not reject calls or perform after call work.

GTA was the only agency that connected all audit team secret shopper calls to a live agent during normal business hours. Of the seven secret shopper calls, only the one seeking assistance in a foreign language was unresolved. Agency officials stated that Spanish language callers are generally transferred to an employee who can assist them. GTA’s call center does not accept phone calls or permit voicemails outside of normal business hours.

Department of Driver Services

DDS met its average handle time goal during the entirety of 2023 (see **Exhibit 4**) and its service level threshold goal in all months but two. During those same months, the abandonment rate increased from below 5% to approximately 16% and almost 1% of calls were rejected due to high volume. According to DDS, this was due to a temporary process to address fraudulent activity that required customers to verify their identity on a phone call or in a DDS customer service center.⁴ DDS does not collect after call work data due to the nature of its call center’s work.

Exhibit 4
DDS performance was generally consistent in CY 2023



¹ Volume includes both rejected calls and those that entered a queue for a call agent. The abandonment rate and service level threshold are based only on those calls that entered a queue.

Source: DDS documentation and interviews

⁴ DDS has since returned to a process that allows constituents to make address changes without contacting the call center.

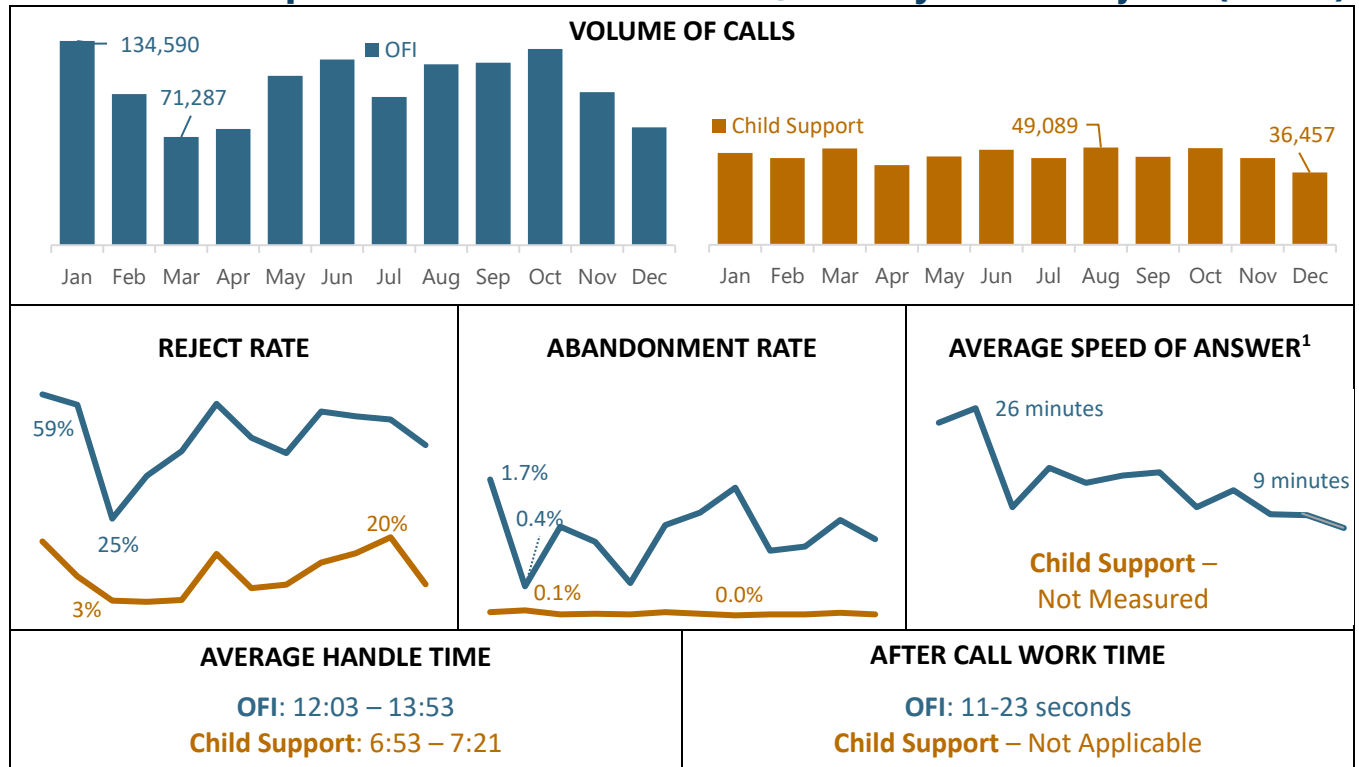
During secret shopper calls, the audit team was able to speak with an agent in all but one instance. In that case, the audit team experienced problems with the agency’s IVR system, which resulted in a disconnected call. DDS does not take after-hours phone calls or allow a caller to leave a voicemail.

Department of Human Services

As shown in **Exhibit 5**, the DHS call centers reviewed rejected a significant portion of callers throughout 2023, with the Office of Family Independence (OFI) call center rejecting more than half in some months. The call centers’ abandonment rates are significantly lower than other agencies, which DHS attributes to its callback system that allows callers to choose to receive a call from an agent instead of holding (see Finding 2 for more information). OFI’s average speed of answer reflects the time it takes for the courtesy callback to occur.

Exhibit 5

DHS call centers experienced low abandonment rates, but many calls were rejected (CY2023)



¹ For DHS, average speed of answer also includes the time required for agents to make courtesy callbacks.

Source: DHS documentation and interviews

Average handle time for each call center was relatively consistent throughout the year, though OFI’s time was much higher than that of Child Support. Instead of typical call agents, OFI’s call center is staffed by economic support specialists who determine client eligibility for benefits programs, a process that may require significant time. While OFI agents may complete work after the call ends, child support staff complete all work during the call.

Neither call center has performance goals, but agency leadership indicated that it intends to create consistent goals across call centers.

Many of the audit team's secret shopper calls to the call centers were unresolved. Of the 17 calls conducted, only 5 were resolved with a correct answer. More than half of the unsuccessful calls could be attributed to IVR failures. In multiple instances, analysts were "trapped" in the phone tree and unable to get to the desired division (see Finding 3 for additional discussion). In other cases, the audit team was routed to a voicemail box that was full or not yet set up, no call back occurred after leaving a voicemail, or a line was temporarily out of service.

Department of Revenue

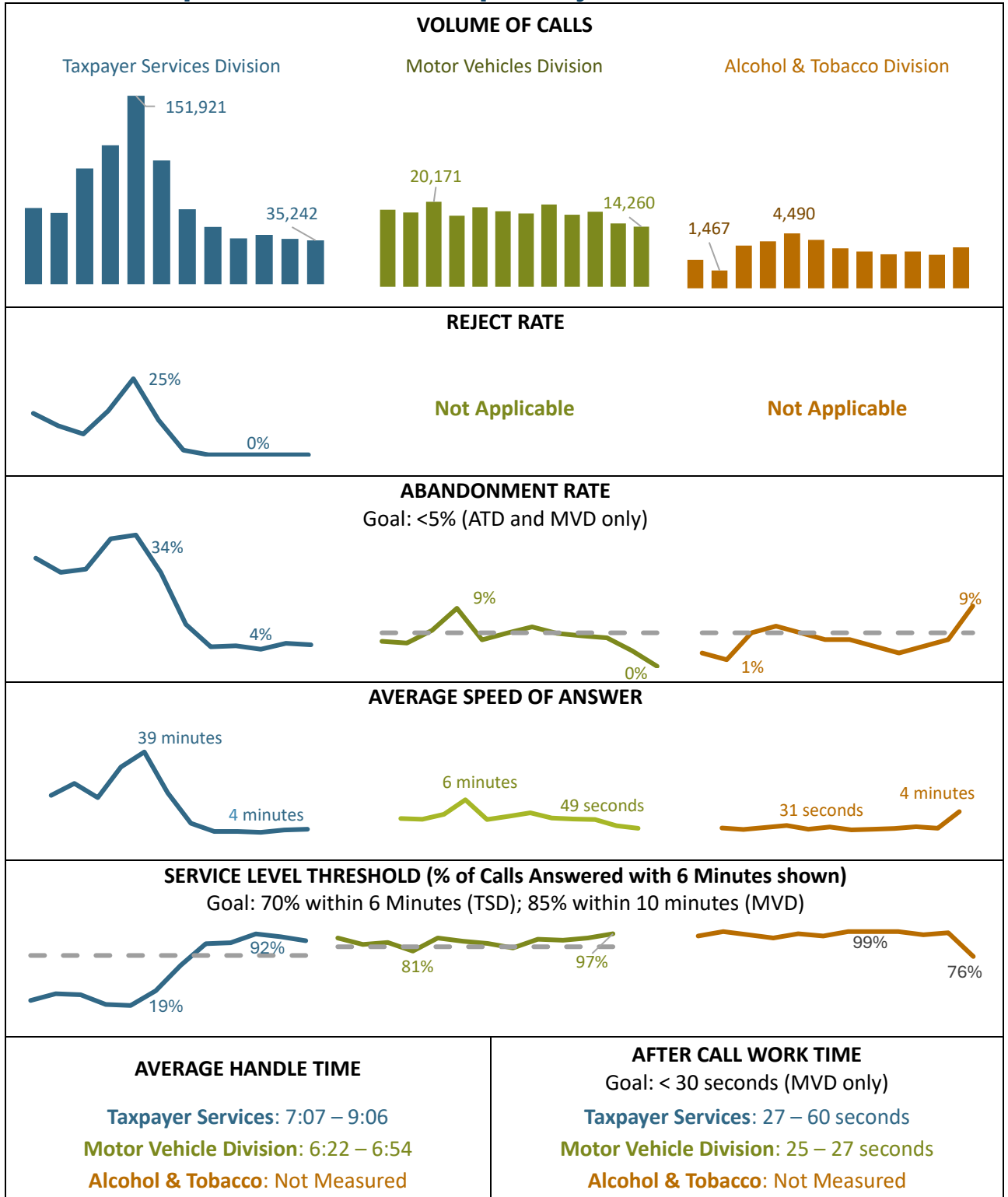
As shown in **Exhibit 6**, DOR's Taxpayer Services Division call center rejected a significant portion of calls early in the year due to the call volume attributed to tax season and the special tax refunds distributed in 2023. For calls that reached a call center queue during those months, the abandonment rate and average speed of answer were significantly higher.

The DOR Motor Vehicles Division met its abandonment rate goal for most of 2023, with the rate highest in April (coinciding with the longest average speed of answer for the division). Performance in the Alcohol and Tobacco Division was consistent throughout the year, with the exception of higher abandonment rates and average speed of answer late in the year.

A relatively high portion of the secret shopper calls to DOR were successfully resolved. Of 22 calls made, 15 were resolved correctly during our secret shopper testing. As seen with DHS, IVR issues were an issue, causing three failed resolutions. Additional issues experienced during testing included being unable to leave a voicemail because the mailbox was full or not yet set up, as well as a single instance of a phone line temporarily out of service. We also left a voicemail after placing a call after business hours but received no return call.

Exhibit 6

DOR call center performance was often impacted by volume (CY2023)



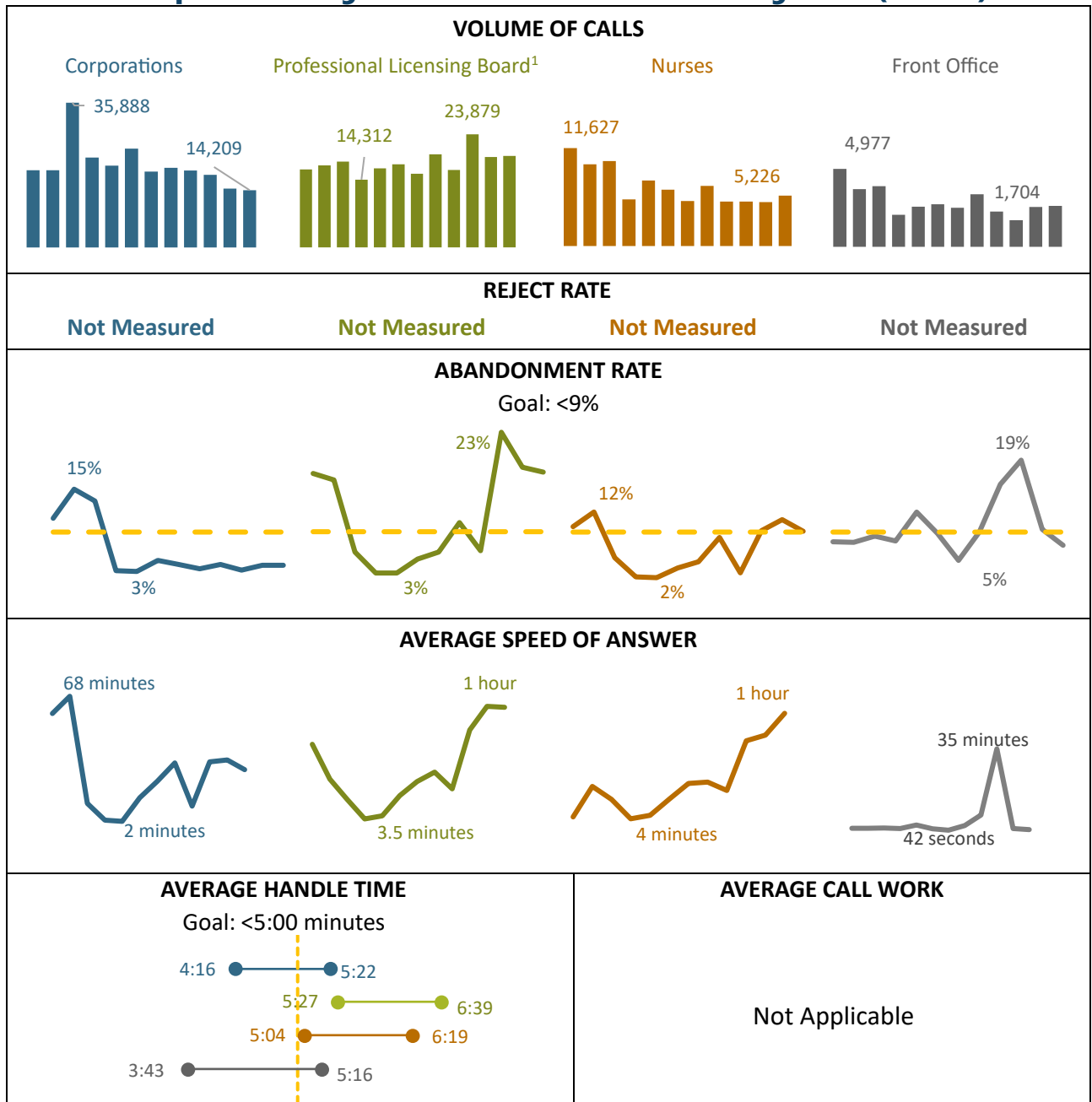
Source: DOR documentation and interviews

Office of the Secretary of State

All SOS divisions are served by a single call center that has goals for abandonment rate and average handle time but does not track the calls that it rejects when the number of calls exceeds its capacity. Like most calls centers, the system assigns callers to a queue depending on their needs (e.g., professional licensing versus corporations). Due to noticeable performance differences, we chose to report the SOS call center performance by queue.

Exhibit 7

SOS callers experienced long wait times and disconnected at high rates (CY2023)



¹ The Professional Licensing Board (PLB) queue includes all licensed professions other than nursing. In October 2023, a second PLB queue was added to manage the volume of calls.

Source: SOS documentation

Performance for the queues⁵ varied over the course of the year but often did not meet established goals (see **Exhibit 7**). For example, the queue for corporations experienced its highest abandonment rates and longest speed of answer time early in the year when call center volume exceeded the annual monthly average. Professional licensing queues experienced abandonment rates higher than the goal for six months, and in some months speed of answer exceeded one hour. Performance was significantly impacted late in the year by the implementation of a new licensing system for several professions. Only a limited number of call center agents had access to the system; as such, only a few agents were able to assist with the increase in call volume from those professions. Average handle times also often exceeded the goal of five minutes, especially related to professional licensing, including nursing.

Secret shopper calls to SOS were often unresolved—with only 6 of the 22 resulting in a connection to a call center employee. We experienced several instances of IVR disconnects (e.g., caller asked to remain on the line and then call was dropped). Additionally, the agency failed to return four calls after voicemails. In multiple queues, testing did not result in a single resolution.

Department of Natural Resources

As previously noted, DNR does not have call centers to address general questions to most of its divisions and units; it instead publishes a comprehensive list of direct phone numbers on its website. The performance metrics discussed are not reasonable to collect for this type of customer service strategy. (We did perform secret shopper calls to DNR units; see results below.)

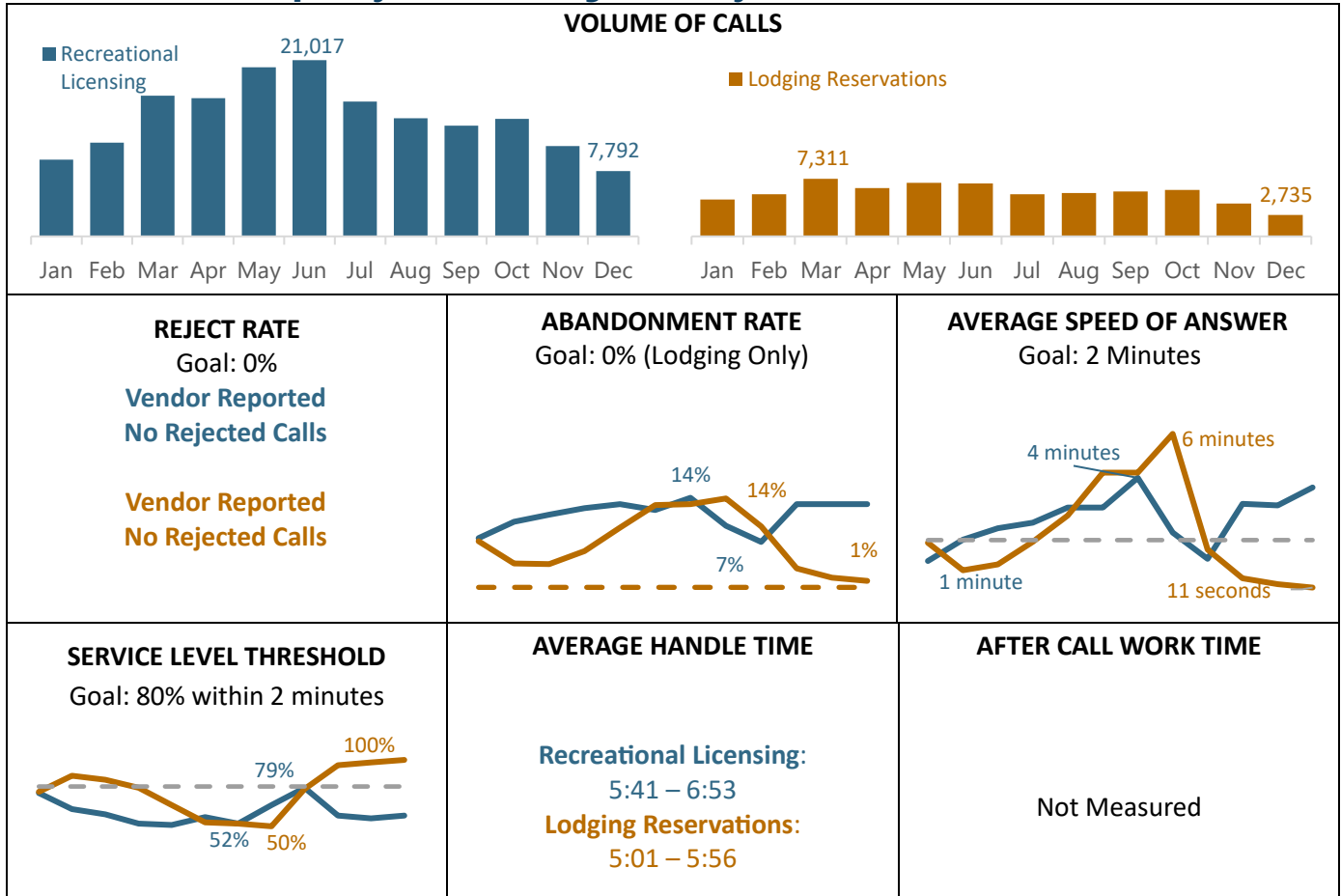
DNR has call centers managed by third party vendors for two high-volume services—recreational licenses and lodging reservations. The performance and contractual goals for each are described below and in **Exhibit 8**.

- **Recreational Licenses** – Overall, performance of the recreational call center did not align with the contractual performance standards in all cases. Call abandonment rates exceeded 10% in nine months, and average speed of answer exceeded the two-minute goal in 10 months. Finally, the goal of 80% of calls answered within two minutes was not met in any month. The contract states that no calls can be rejected, and no rejected calls were reported.
- **Lodging Reservations** – Call volume for lodging reservations varies with the seasons, peaking March through June. The abandonment rate and average speed of answer increased during this period. The vendor was unable to achieve the challenging goal of no abandoned calls in any month. The goal of 80% of calls answered within two minutes was met in five months, with a low of 50% in August. The contract states that no calls can be rejected, and no rejected calls were reported.

⁵ SOS operated with seven queues in its call center during most of 2023. We excluded call data for those with significantly lower volume—elections, Secure the Vote, and securities.

Exhibit 8

DNR call centers frequently did not meet goals set by their contracts (CY2023)



Source: DNR documentation

Given the purpose of the secret shopper calls, we did not attempt to contact the vendor-operated call centers (which serve to issue licenses and make reservations). Because DNR publishes a call list for those seeking information, we contacted those direct lines for our testing. Of the 32 phone inquiries, 21 were resolved. The agency’s main issue was failing to return voicemails, though we also encountered out-of-service phone lines and were unable to obtain Spanish-language assistance.

Recommendations:

1. Agencies should establish performance goals for their call centers.
2. Agencies should track call reject rates, abandonment rates, average speed of answer, and average handle time to allow management to diagnose potential problem areas impacting overall customer satisfaction.
3. If an agency outsources call center services, it should include performance goals and required metric reporting in the contract.

GTA Response: *The agency agreed with the finding and recommendations. It noted that it had already implemented recommendations one and two but that it does not reject calls (therefore, it does not track them). It also does not outsource its call center.*

DDS Response: *The agency agreed with the finding and recommendations. It stated that it has added a performance goal of 4 minutes for average speed of answer, which was first measured in 2024.*

DHS Response: *The agency agreed with the finding and recommendations. It noted that all of its call centers were moving to a single platform that will allow for one common set of performance goals. Regarding recommendation two, DHS stated that it does track “average speed of answer, abandonment rates, and average handle time...to increase staffing and customer satisfaction rates. Average handle time is measured but not enforced due to customer service initiatives.” Regarding recommendation three, DHS stated that any outsourced call center activities are under the same standards as other agency operations.*

DOR Response: *The agency agreed with the finding and recommendations. Regarding recommendation two, DOR stated that it “has established some performance goals and will establish all as recommended.” It noted that it already tracks all metrics as detailed in recommendation two and noted that it does not outsource any call center.*

SOS Response: *The agency agreed with the finding and recommendations. It stated that it has goals for all call centers, including a target of less than 3% for abandonments. Regarding recommendation two, SOS stated that it tracks all metrics included in the report but added that the rejection rate will no longer be applicable. “Starting in May 2024, callers now can wait on hold or choose to go into the call back queue. With that workflow there are no rejects to track.”*

DNR Response: *The agency agreed with the finding and recommendation three, which was relevant to its outsourced call centers. DNR noted that the recreational licensing vendor did not meet the service level goal of 80% of calls answered within two minutes and said that the issue was investigated and rectified. It added that the vendor will begin providing monthly call center performance reports and that “call center performance will become a permanent discussion point of the biweekly meetings” that occur between the agency and vendor. DNR noted that the vendor was meeting other measures, including that all calls are answered within five minutes after making an IVR selection and no caller receiving a busy signal.*

Regarding the lodging call center, DNR stated that the vendor provides a weekly call center report with various performance data. It noted that the contract had goals of 0% abandonment rate and 0% rejection rate but that the reservation system contract resulting from the upcoming solicitation process will have more “realistic goals.”

Finding 2: Agencies use call center technology with mixed success to improve customer service.

Agency call centers have adopted technologies in an effort to improve customer service. However, these technologies do not always function as expected, and some agency call centers have not used all technology options that could be employed.

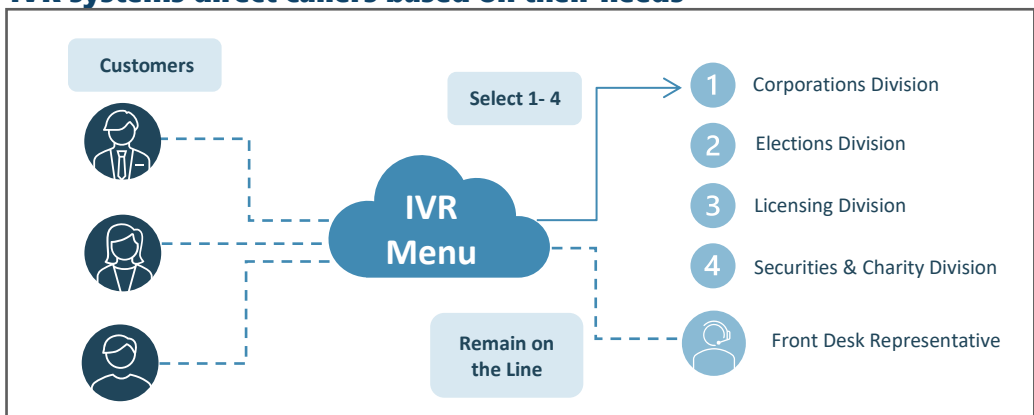
As discussed in Finding 1, call volume can impact a call center’s ability to serve customers in a timely manner. To accommodate the volume of calls, agencies use Interactive Voice Response (IVR) systems that provide a series of menus to connect the caller to the correct department. IVRs can also provide immediate assistance to foreign language speakers. A portion of agencies in our review also use courtesy callbacks, which allow the caller to hang up and wait for an agent to return their call rather than remain on hold. Finally, some agencies’ IVRs include self-service options that eliminate the need to speak with an agent. These technologies—and agencies’ utilization—are described below.

Interactive Voice Response Systems

Interactive Voice Response Systems (IVRs) are traditionally used to organize queues of call centers and can provide a variety of customer service functions without speaking to an agent. As shown on **Exhibit 9**, an IVR routes a caller based on their needs, which may or may not require connection to an agent. This can expedite a call resolution and potentially assist with managing call volume.

Exhibit 9

IVR systems direct callers based on their needs



Source: Industry description

All agency call centers in our review use an IVR, though the setups may vary. For example, when a constituent contacts the main DHS phone line, the selection menu gives the caller the opportunity to identify the relevant division, which connects to different call centers. SOS uses its IVR to organize callers into specific queues that are then prioritized within a single call center. Finally, 1-800-GEORGIA allows IVR users to select from a menu or remain on the line to speak to a representative.

Call Center Data

The use of IVRs and call center management software provide call center managers with a significant amount of data. Reports containing the types of data discussed in Finding 1, as well as other data (e.g., purpose of call, longest wait time), can be reviewed in real time or for specific periods (days, weeks, months). Viewing data in real time may allow managers to take actions to improve performance, such as adjusting the number of agents serving a queue or engaging a courtesy callback feature. Reports covering longer periods can point to the need for additional resources or the need to improve other forms of communication about a topic (e.g., guidance on the agency website, chatbot responses).

As discussed in Finding 1, we conducted secret shopper calls to test agency call centers' responsiveness and response accuracy. During those calls, issues were identified with several IVRs, as described below. The first two issues can be identified by regular, comprehensive testing of IVRs.

- **Disconnections** – A portion of secret shopper call failures were the result of IVR disconnections. These were more likely to occur at agencies with more complex IVRs, which are in place when agencies operate multiple call centers or queues. For example, the SOS IVR automatically disconnected a caller who pressed a number outside of the menu options. (SOS was unaware that a disconnection would occur in this circumstance.) By contrast, DOR's IVR notifies users that they have made an incorrect selection multiple times before disconnecting a call.
- **Improperly Rejected Calls** – After changes were made to SOS's IVR in October 2023, the audit team discovered that the IVR's design prohibited some callers from entering available queues. Depending on the contact number used by the caller, one queue at maximum capacity prevented callers from accessing other queues that could have accepted additional callers.

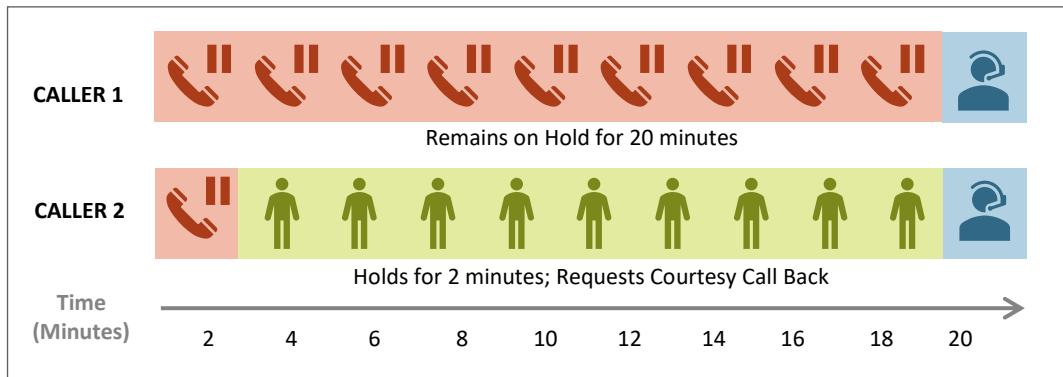
The SOS system also rejected some calls during business hours, incorrectly stating that the agency was closed.

- **Lack of Foreign Language Option** – Only two of the six agencies tested had IVR systems offering the menu in a different language. The 1-800 number maintained by DHS offers immediate foreign language assistance; none of the other agency call centers (or the DNR vendors) provide assistance prior to reaching an agent.

Courtesy Callbacks

As shown in **Exhibit 10**, courtesy callbacks allow a caller to hold their place in line without remaining on the phone. This can improve the customer service experience and lower the number of abandoned calls. It is important to note that while courtesy callbacks reduce abandonments, callers will ultimately wait longer to speak with an agent because more callers remain in line.

Exhibit 10
Courtesy callbacks allow customers to receive a call instead of holding



Source: Industry description

Six of the 10 call centers reviewed use courtesy callbacks to some extent. Courtesy callbacks are always available for the two evaluated DHS call centers, resulting in significantly lower abandonment rates (see **Exhibit 5** on page 8). By contrast, SOS uses the technology in queues when call volume reaches a certain level.

Among the four call centers that have not implemented courtesy callbacks, most perform at a level suggesting that the additional feature is not necessary. GTA leadership indicated the agency does not use this technology because the call center does not have call volume to warrant the service. Additionally, two DOR call centers do not have call wait times that would necessitate the technology most months. By contrast, DDS customers do not have this option but may benefit due to the volume and long wait times that occur on certain days.

Self-Service Options

Call centers may also provide self-service options in which callers obtain needed information without speaking with an agent. The information may be as general as office locations or specific to the caller, such as the status of a tax refund. Self-service features can both improve the customer service experience and lessen the burden on call center staff.

Four of the six agencies reviewed provide self-service options to at least a portion of their callers.

- **Department of Driver Services** – DDS’s self-service line assists callers with obtaining agency office locations and hours, learning license requirements, and scheduling road test appointments. Nearly 1.5 million callers used the self-service option in 2023, significantly more than the 822,000 callers who chose to speak with an agent.
- **Department of Human Services** – Both DHS call centers provide self-service options, which include basic information about agency services and the option to make child support payments. Approximately 400,000 used the child support call center’s self-service options, compared to 537,000 who attempted to speak to a call

center agent. Nearly 2.1 million callers chose the OFI call center's self-service option versus 1.3 million who attempted to reach an agent.

- **Department of Revenue** – DOR's Taxpayer Services Division provides a self-service option to obtain the status of income tax refunds or make payments. Agency officials reported that approximately 60,000 taxpayers used the self-service option in 2023, compared to 831,000 callers to the division call center.
- **Department of Natural Resources** – The recreational license call center vendor has a self-service option for individuals to submit game harvest reports.

The remaining agencies reviewed do not have self-service options. The GTA call center does not provide the type of services appropriate for self-service and is able to provide agent services to all callers. SOS does not have self-service options, though callers may benefit given the high call volumes.

Recommendations

1. Agency IVRs should not disconnect callers who make an incorrect selection from the menu but instead place them into a predetermined queue.
2. Agencies should have established procedures to consistently evaluate the functionality of their IVR systems, especially when changes to the menu have been made or when the system has reached maximum capacity for certain queues.
3. Agencies that experience issues with abandonment and long wait times for agencies should use courtesy callback functionality.
4. Agencies that experience issues with especially high call volume should evaluate the use of self-service options for callers.

GTA Response: *The agency agreed with the finding and recommendations. In relation to recommendations 1 and 2, GTA stated that it does not disconnect callers who make an incorrect selection and that it tests the IVR routinely. Regarding recommendation 3, it partially agreed noting that it does not have the volume to require the feature. Finally, regarding recommendation 4, GTA stated that it would recommend that "all agencies take an active role in exploring opportunities where we may improve services."*

DDS Response: *The agency agreed with the finding and recommendations. DDS stated that its IVR does not disconnect callers who make an incorrect selection and that it tests the IVR routinely. Regarding recommendation 3, it partially agreed with the use of courtesy callback. It noted that it used the feature in 2019 but did not have the staff to address the volume, leading to more complaints.*

DHS Response: *The agency agreed with the finding and*

recommendations. Regarding recommendation one, DHS stated that callers who fail to authenticate have been disconnected and that when the agency moves to a new platform, “these callers will be provided with a clear option to return to the main menu or select other options.” It will also ensure this function is working through quarterly tests. Regarding recommendation two, DHS stated that it will “establish surveys so that clients can evaluate the IVR, and we will have our internal workforce management staff test the systems monthly for technical failure and/or low performance rates.” Finally, the agency noted that it already provides courtesy callbacks.

DOR Response: *The agency agreed with the finding and recommendations. It noted that its IVR allows customers to correct selections and uses courtesy callbacks already. Regarding recommendation two, DOR stated that it “has weekly meetings with the vendor to discuss issues/concerns, including IVR functionality. DOR has recently changed vendors to upgrade our system stability. DOR also has an alert when approaching maximum capacity.”*

SOS Response: *The agency agreed with the finding and recommendations. Regarding recommendation one, SOS stated that the system had been changed to “not disconnect any caller, regardless of caller selections.” Regarding recommendation four, the agency stated that self-service is being investigated, but that “it is difficult to establish workflows with the phone systems given the highly individualized nature of issues faced by customers. The current goal is to push them to the self-service websites, which has been successful.”*

DNR Response: *The agency agreed with the finding and recommendations. Regarding recommendation one, DNR noted that the recreational licensing call center does not disconnect callers who make incorrect selections, with the exception of one queue in which callers self-report game harvests. The disconnect prevents inaccurate reports that may wrongly suggest a violation of hunting laws. Regarding the other recommendations, DNR stated that reviews of the IVR are performed by the vendor and agency and that both vendors use courtesy callbacks.*

Finding 3: Call center performance is impacted by staffing levels.

Various technologies can be employed to reduce call volume, but the need for all citizens to speak directly with agency staff cannot be eliminated. Multiple agencies pointed to the need for additional staff to fully address some call center performance issues. To ensure they can successfully serve those individuals, agencies must attract and retain sufficient call center staff.

While agencies can use various strategies to reduce the number of customer phone calls (see Finding 4), call center staffing levels must be adequate to handle the volume that is not addressed through websites, chatbots, or written inquiries. To ensure effective customer service at all times, agencies must be prepared for

both anticipated and unexpected changes to call volume. For example, DOR experiences large changes in call volume during each tax season and works to hire and train additional staff in the months prior. To manage unexpected call volume increases (resulting from a gubernatorial announcement on a public health issue or a benefit program, for example), GTA cross trains employees from multiple call centers.

As discussed in Finding 1, some call centers did not meet performance goals, and agencies attributed those issues partly to staffing limitations.

- **Department of Driver Services** – Agency officials noted a need to increase staffing from 51 to 60 agents to offset frequent resignations, call outs, and extended leave situations; however, the agency has generally met its performance goals despite these staffing challenges.
- **Department of Human Services** – Agency officials stated additional call center caseworkers are needed to reduce the high rejected call rate for the OFI call center. According to call center data, approximately 50% of calls are rejected by the phone system due to volume. To answer every call at the current rate per caseworker, DHS would need significantly more than its current 136 agents.
- **Department of Revenue** – Agency officials stated that its Taxpayer Services Division—which experienced high abandonment rates and increased answer times during its peak volume season—would need 17 more agents than its current 89 to fully address workload without pulling staff from other responsibilities.
- **Office of the Secretary of State** – The agency, which had high abandonment rates and answer times throughout the year, is in the process of growing its call center from 32 to 55 agents to handle both phone calls and emails directed to the call center.⁶

Agencies indicated that staffing challenges—including hiring and turnover—are often related to pay. Most of the reviewed state agencies with call centers have starting pay between \$15 and \$18 per hour, though DDS reported paying \$12 per hour. DOR reported that it increased its pay from \$12 to \$15 because temporary staffing firms were unwilling to provide employees at the lower amount; DOR has since increased its rate to \$17.

Despite pay, not all agencies reported a problem with turnover. In some instances, this may be attributed to the nature of the work and office culture (for example, GTA does not regulate or deny benefits to callers, likely limiting confrontational interactions). Other agencies have implemented various strategies to attract and retain their call center employees. These include:

- **Temporary to Permanent Jobs** – SOS and DOR indicated they use

⁶ SOS call center staff also respond to emails sent by those who choose not to wait in the phone queue. While on hold, callers are provided with an email address for call center staff.

temporary staff and then will move good performers to state employee status. State employment provides benefit packages, including health insurance, retirement, and paid time off.

- **Advancement Opportunities** – Some agencies reported different types of advancement opportunities for call center staff. The SOS office has four levels of call center agents, increasing pay with experience and performance. DOR hires temporary call center representatives who have an opportunity to move into a state customer service representative position based on performance and availability. At that point, staff may be promoted to tax examiner or other roles in the agency. DHS increases pay for caseworkers as they become able to handle multiple types of social services cases (e.g., SNAP vs. Medicaid).
- **Remote Work** – All but one agency in our review allow staff to primarily work from home, which aligns with industry practices and is seen as a benefit for staff. DDS, by contrast, requires its call center staff to report in person 90% of the time.

Recommendations

1. Agencies should continually assess whether they have sufficient staffing levels to meet desired customer service levels and agency performance goals.
2. Agencies should continually assess the extent to which other methods, such as chatbots, can reduce the need for additional staffing.

GTA Response: *The agency agreed with the finding and recommendations. It noted that it maintains a staff of 9-12 agents with no concerns. Regarding recommendation 2, GTA stated that it is “committed to continuous improvement of service delivery, including actively seeking ways in which automation and technology can be leveraged to improve quality of service and efficiency, including operational costs and staffing demands.”*

DDS Response: *The agency agreed with the finding and recommendations. It stated that it has assessed its staffing levels, which indicate that it needs 60 agents (up from 51). It also noted that it uses a self-service function to help reduce the need for agents and an “Address Change Video Verification” to address fraud and identify theft.*

DHS Response: *The agency agreed with the finding and recommendations. It noted that it evaluates its staffing needs annually. Regarding recommendation two, “We have implemented a chatbot to assist with certain benefits-related services and are continuing to evaluate other methods to reduce the need for additional staffing.”*

DOR Response: *The agency agreed with the finding and recommendations. Regarding recommendation one, DOR stated that “Division Directors assess staffing levels to meet customer service levels*

and performance goals. DOR call center management teams monitor performance daily and add personnel as needed. Call volume forecasts are run throughout the year and adjusted as needed. Staffing changes are made annually as needed when the budget is set.” Regarding recommendation two, “DOR is in the process of implementing [an upgraded] chatbot to reduce the need for additional staffing and is continually reviewing other available technologies.”

SOS Response: *The agency agreed with the finding and recommendations. SOS stated that it regularly evaluates call center staffing and noted challenges with hiring and retaining personnel. It noted that “it very often takes multiple rounds of advertising and interviewing, with no shows at interviews being a regular occurrence.”*

Regarding recommendation two, the agency noted that it “tested chatbots with low adoption in 2020 and 2021.” SOS now has a focus of “getting customers to new interactive portals for the services they need. Corporations is currently at 98% of transactions being online. GOALs is a new system for Professional Licensing Boards that is being piloted currently and began in October 2023...GOALs will have more transparency [than the prior system] and a checklist for applicants/licensees to see what they need to upload and won’t require calls in to the call center for follow up. We are also investing in a tool for Securities to cut down on calls as well.”

DNR Response: *The agency agreed with the finding and recommendations. It noted that its recreational licensing vendor hires additional staff during peak boat registration and license sales seasons.*

Finding 4: While agency chatbots deliver information faster, emails and web forms yield more accurate results.

In addition to phone calls, many agencies use chatbots or email/web forms to assist with customer inquiries. Four of the six agencies reviewed had chatbots available for customers, though answers to sample questions were not always accurate. While responses to email and web form inquiries—if provided—were less immediate, they were always accurate.

Written customer service options such as chatbots and emails can help remove workload from call centers. Chatbots can be particularly useful for frequently asked questions, though they can also be used to provide an individual with specific information about their case, license, tax return, etc. State agencies in our review have used these tools with varying degrees of success.

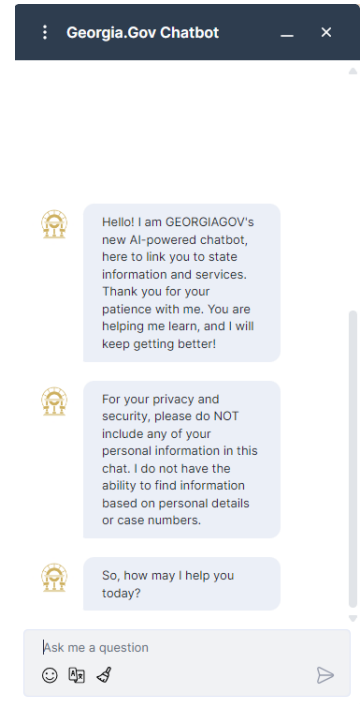
Chatbots

A chatbot is a computer program that simulates human conversation. Chatbots vary by type and complexity. Some chatbots can provide only limited answers pre-populated by agency staff, while others can develop their own responses by

reviewing information made available to the chatbot (e.g., the agency website). Additionally, some chatbots allow users to enter personal information for account status checks.

Four of the six agencies in our review had some form of chatbot. Three have traditional chatbots that allow the user to ask any type of question (e.g., “What are your hours of operation?” or “How do I apply for a firearm license?”). By contrast, DHS limits its functionality to allow customers to check their benefits or application status. While both remaining agencies (DNR and SOS) give customers access to call centers, they do not have a chatbot feature on their website. Without this self-service option, staff obligations related to customer inquiries are likely higher at these agencies.

While chatbots provide immediate assistance, we identified limitations when testing the three agencies’ traditional chatbots. Each chatbot was asked a series of five general questions about the agency’s services (see **Appendix C**). As described below, 10 of 15 questions were answered accurately, with at least one incorrect response at each agency. Regular testing and monitoring of chatbots can improve functionality to better ensure constituent inquiries are sufficiently resolved without contacting the agency through a call center or via email.



We limited the questions to services provided by the tested agency.

While not included in our testing results, we noted that some questions about services provided by other agencies could lead to nonsensical responses. Chatbots would attempt to answer instead of stating that it had no answer or providing a link to a resource like georgia.gov.

- **Georgia Technology Authority (2 of 5)** – GTA’s georgia.gov chatbot is intended to connect constituents to information about all forms of state services. For example, users can ask about registering a child for school or how to apply for Medicaid benefits. The chatbot may provide direct answers or a link to a webpage with requested information.

GTA’s chatbot answered only two of the five questions accurately. For example, when asked how to apply for the HOPE scholarship, the chatbot stated it was “stumped” and referred the user to a “How to Guides” page that did not include the desired information.

- **Department of Driver Services (4 of 5)** – DDS’s chatbot provides content relevant to the agency, including information regarding driver’s licenses. According to agency leadership, it is intended to be a secondary resource compared to the audio chatbot built into the phone IVR system or in-person contact at its offices.

Four audit team test questions to the DDS chatbot were answered correctly. In one correct instance, the chatbot answer linked to a webpage with the answer clearly shown. In the instance where the chatbot was unable to provide the correct answer, it attempted to direct the user to pages with more detailed information, but the information was not readily accessible.

- Department of Revenue (4 of 5)** – The DOR chatbot operates similar to DDS’s, though it should be noted it was not accessible on the DOR homepage but only when selecting a certain service area or division (e.g., taxes, motor vehicles).

Most questions posed to DOR’s chatbot by the audit team were answered correctly, with answers linking to DOR webpages with the answer easily found in some cases. One question about non-profits’ tax status resulted in an off-topic response related to mailing paper checks for refunds. Agency leadership stated that functionality is expected to improve with the implementation of a new chatbot, expected in late 2024.

Email Form Submissions and Direct Email Correspondence

All agencies reviewed have email addresses or web forms to allow written inquiries to agency personnel. These tools are commonly placed on websites to collect contact information related to a direct customer inquiry and then forward them to the responsible staff member.

The audit team tested the written communication channels for the evaluated state agencies using a similar methodology as chatbots (five inquiries). In addition to response accuracy, we collected information on the agency response rate as well as the time to respond. As described below, answers to written inquiries were more accurate than chatbot responses, though there was a slower response time.

The screenshot shows a web form with the following fields:

- Category***: A dropdown menu with the text "- Select -" and a downward arrow.
- Your Name***: A text input field.
- Your Email Address***: A text input field.
- Your Phone Number***: A text input field.
- Your Fax Number**: A text input field.
- Your County***: A dropdown menu with the text "- Select -" and a downward arrow.
- Type Your Message***: A large text area for writing the message.

- Response Rate** – Three agencies (GTA, DDS, and DOR) responded to all five inquiries. DHS responded to four, SOS responded to three, and DNR responded to only two. For SOS and DNR, the non-responses were related to questions submitted via their web forms, while the DHS inquiry was sent to a general agency email address. It should be noted that DHS’s email response system informed the constituent that their inquiry had been received.
- Response Times** – While results were not instantaneous like chatbots or phone calls, agencies generally responded to written inquiries within a reasonable amount of time. GTA, DDS, SOS, and DOR typically responded within the same or next business day (some DDS and DOR responses were within minutes after the inquiry). DHS response times were within two to four business days, and one of DNR’s two responses took seven business days.

- **Response Accuracy** – Every inquiry that was responded to via written communication was answered correctly.

Recommendations

1. Agencies that experience high call volumes should provide a chatbot as a self-service tool for constituent convenience.
2. Agencies with a chatbot should use data collected from chatbots (e.g., common topics) to build chatbot knowledge and ensure more accurate information is provided.
3. Agencies should establish controls to ensure all written inquiries are accurately responded to in a time frame that aligns with expected agency performance.

GTA Response: *The agency agreed with the finding and recommendations. GTA noted that it implemented a chatbot in 2020 and upgraded to incorporate GenAI in 2022. Regarding recommendation two, GTA stated that “information provided in a chatbot is only as good as what it is being fed. It would be ideal if the State had one chatbot that could talk to all state agencies. GTA does a chatbot conversation audit on a regular basis and informs the content team to update the Georgia.gov website.” Finally, regarding recommendation three, GTA stated that its Constituent Service team “has raised the bar year over year from 2019 and is currently responding within 48 hours to each inquiry with a goal of resolution within 5 business days.”*

DDS Response: *The agency agreed with the finding and recommendations. Regarding recommendation one, DDS noted that it uses a voicebot to address call volume (it also has a chatbot on its website). Regarding recommendation two, the agency noted that it routinely analyzes chatbot data to improve and enhance it. Finally, regarding recommendation 3, DDS stated that “written inquiries are triaged and resolved by the appropriate department within the agency.”*

DHS Response: *The agency agreed with the finding and recommendations. Regarding recommendation one, DHS stated that it will add an additional chatbot as they move to one call center platform. Regarding recommendation three, DHS stated, “We will review our guidelines for responding to written inquiries and update them as needed.”*

DOR Response: *The agency agreed with the finding and recommendations. It noted that its upgraded website chatbot will transfer users to a call center agent when it cannot provide an appropriate answer. The agency expects the chatbot to “improve the success rate of self-service interactions and solve customer requests via self-service. Management will review the data collected and make the necessary updates to the database to improve functionality.” Regarding the final recommendation, DOR stated each division has procedures to ensure accurate and timely responses.”*

SOS Response: *The agency agreed with the finding and recommendations. Regarding recommendation one, the agency stated that it has “worked with some chatbot solutions. However, given the complexity and individual nature of the issues involved, it is hard to get customers the correct information.” It noted that can work well for basic information related to voting but “for licensing, corporations, securities and charities, chatbots may work in the future, but current technology cannot serve customer needs appropriately.” Regarding recommendation three, SOS stated that each division, not the agency, sets its performance goals for responding to written inquiries.*

DNR Response: *The agency agreed with the finding and recommendations. DNR stated that it is creating agency-wide procedures to cover email and web form inquiries that will focus on submission monitoring and response times. It noted that divisions currently have their own.*

Finding 5: Most reviewed agencies’ websites perform above the state’s desired goal.

All state agencies have access to a tool that can evaluate their websites to improve customer service. The websites of agencies in our review generally received scores above the state benchmark. While most other agencies participating in a state evaluation program met overall state standards, some did not meet standards related to website usability.

State agencies that use the GTA’s web platform are evaluated as part of the Georgia Analytics Program (GAP), which assesses website functionality in the three key areas described below. The program provides a continuously updated numeric score on these key areas, as well as an overall score. The GAP also sends feedback to agency content managers with instructions on how to improve their site score.

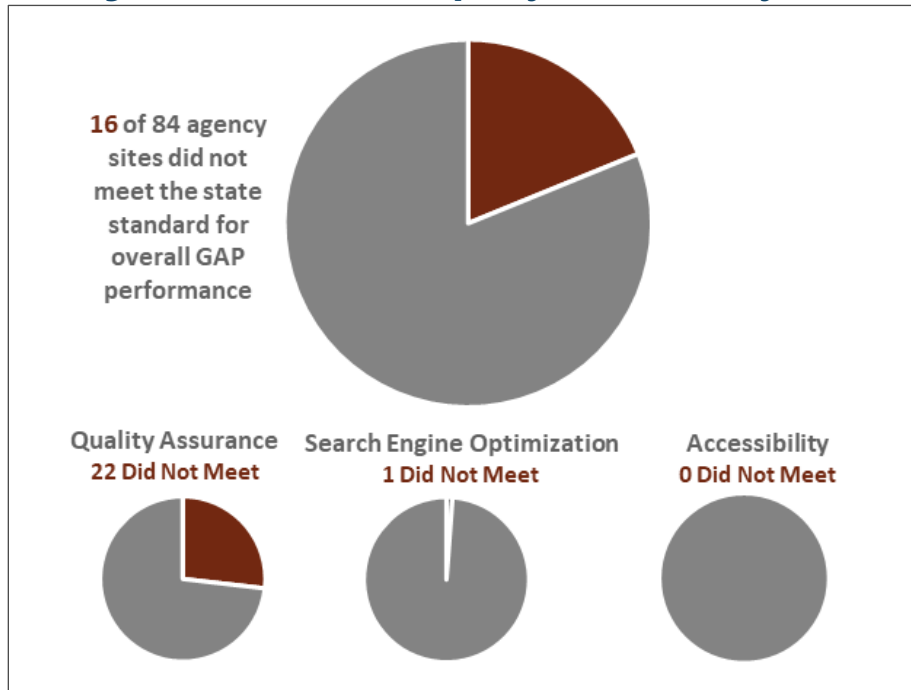
- **Quality Assurance** – Addresses credibility and usability of the customer-facing aspects of the website. This includes security, broken links, typos, and ease of usability (navigation, site load speeds).
- **Search Engine Optimization** – Evaluates the success of the website content appearing in results in search engines like Google. The category also includes information such as the effective use of links and the website’s use on mobile devices.
- **Accessibility** – Ensures the site has no barriers to constituents with different ability levels, including accommodations for keyboard only and screen reader users.

Agencies are expected to remain above a score of 80 out of 100-point scale. In every month of calendar year 2023, agencies in our review scored higher than the state benchmark, with the exception of the DHS Office of Child Support Services

site (which scored slightly below in seven months). Four other sites had multiple months with scores between 80 and 85.

We also reviewed individual area scores for a single day in May 2024 for the 84 sites of all agencies within the GAP. As shown on **Exhibit 11**, 16 sites (18%) did not meet the overall state standard, with scores as low as 69. Performance varied across the three areas scored, with nearly 30% of state agency scores below 80 for quality assurance, including eight scores below 60.

Exhibit 11
State agencies score lowest in quality assurance (May 6, 2024)



Source: Analytics.georgia.gov

The GAP provides reports and solutions to issues, but we noted relatively low scores for some sites for an extended period of time. GTA staff stated they periodically notify agencies with lower site scores, but the agency is ultimately responsible for making improvements. For example, DHS Child Support was able to improve its scores significantly soon after the audit team’s discussion about the site’s calendar year 2023 performance. GTA staff noted content managers receive training and can obtain GTA assistance if needed.

While agencies that do not use the GTA platform for their website may procure their own evaluation method, they may still participate in the GAP. The GAP provides a set of evaluative criteria that allows comparison with other agencies, and the scores are available to the public. In addition, an agency not on the GTA platform stated that it participates in the GAP because the service costs were significantly lower than separately acquiring the same services from the vendor.

Recommendation

1. Agencies should regularly evaluate website quality, accessibility, and search engine optimization through participation in the Georgia Analytics Program or through the procurement of a similar service.

GTA Response: *The agency agreed with the finding and recommendation. It noted that “employees are able to regularly check the user friendliness of websites each day. If they find an error, GTA will internally escalate the issue to quickly resolve the problem. GTA also partners with agencies to assist in fixing content and technical issues to better their web presence and manages the dashboard and the analytics tool to assist agencies check their scores and findings.”*

DDS Response: *The agency agreed with the finding and recommendation. It stated that it consistently reviews the website and noted that the site score exceeded the GAP rating of 80%.*

DHS Response: *The agency agreed with the finding and recommendation. “We recently became aware of the Georgia Analytics Program (GAP) and have since brought our Division of Child Support Services (DCSS) webpages into compliance with the state benchmark. DCSS’s GAP score has been above 80 since February 15, 2024, and as of June 2, 2024, is 91.1/100. Additionally, we will ensure compliance with the new U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Section 504 rule.”*

DOR Response: *The agency agreed with the finding and recommendation. DOR added that it had “completed a website usability project following feedback from Georgia Digital Services. DOR is currently working on a content inventory to review our 1,000+ website pages and 3,000+ PDFs. Senior leadership receives a monthly analytics report from the External Affairs team utilizing SiteImprove. External Affairs also reviews website analytics through Crazy Egg, Google Analytics, and the Georgia Analytics Program.”*

SOS Response: *The agency agreed with the finding and recommendation. “Our current website management provider not only engages in website optimization and Google search support optimization but provides and supports overall web infrastructure. Further, they provide ADA updates and make improvements to support best practices. They have been our vendor since the launch of the new website in the fall of 2021.”*

DNR Response: *The agency agreed with the finding and recommendation. “DNR uses SiteImprove to track Digital Certainty Index which tracks a website’s accessibility and usability. DNR websites consistently score above 85.”*

Appendix A: Table of Findings and Recommendations

	Agree, Partial Agree, Disagree	Implementation Date
Finding 1: Call center performance varied among the state agencies reviewed, with some agencies unable to serve all callers during high volume periods. (p. 5)	Agree	N/A
1.1 Agencies should establish performance goals for their call centers.	N/A – DNR Agree – Others	DOR – July 2024 DNR – N/A Others – In place
1.2 Agencies should track call reject rates, abandonment rates, average speed of answer, and average handle time to allow management to diagnose potential problem areas impacting overall customer satisfaction.	N/A – DNR Agree – Others ¹	DNR – N/A Others ¹ – In place
1.3 If an agency outsources call center services, it should include performance goals and required metric reporting in the contract.	Agree – DNR N/A – Others	In place
Finding 2: Agencies use call center technology with mixed success to improve customer service. (p. 15)	Agree	N/A
2.1 Agency IVRs should not disconnect callers who make an incorrect selection from the menu but instead place them into a predetermined queue.	Agree – All	DHS – Jan. 2025 Others – In place
2.2 Agencies should have established procedures to consistently evaluate the functionality of their IVR systems, especially when changes to the menu have been made or when the system has reached maximum capacity for certain queues.	Agree – All	DHS – Jan. 2025 Others – In place
2.3 Agencies that experience issues with abandonment and long wait times for customers should use courtesy callback functionality.	Partial – DDS Agree – Others ²	In place ²
2.4 Agencies that experience issues with especially high call volume should evaluate the use of self-service options for callers.	Agree – DOR, DNR, GTA	In place
Finding 3: Call center performance is impacted by staffing levels. (p. 19)	Agree	N/A
3.1 Agencies should continually assess whether they have sufficient staffing levels to meet desired customer service levels and agency performance goals.	Agree – All	In place
3.2 Agencies should continually assess the extent to which other methods, such as chatbots, can reduce the need for additional staffing.	Agree – All	In place

Finding 4: While agency chatbots deliver information faster, emails and web forms yield more accurate results. (p. 22)	Agree	N/A
4.1 Agencies that experience high call volumes should provide a chatbot as a self-service tool for constituent convenience.	Partial – SOS Agree – Others	SOS – When tech improves Others – In place
4.2 Agencies with a chatbot should use data collected from chatbots (e.g., common topics) to build chatbot knowledge and ensure more accurate information is provided.	Agree – All	SOS – N/A Others – In place
4.3 Agencies should establish controls to ensure all written inquiries are accurately responded to in a time frame that aligns with expected agency performance.	Agree – All	DNR – Aug. 2024 DHS – Jan. 2025 Others – In place
Finding 5: Most reviewed agencies’ websites perform above the state’s desired goal. (p. 26)	Agree	N/A
5.1 Agencies should regularly evaluate website quality, accessibility, and search engine optimization through participation in the Georgia Analytics Program or through the procurement of a similar service.	Agree – All	In place

¹ Some agencies agreed that they should track all relevant metrics but noted that they do not reject calls or have after call work.

² Some agencies agreed that courtesy callbacks should be used when wait times are long, but they noted that their performance does not necessitate use of the feature.

Appendix B: Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

Objectives

This report examines selected methods of customer service delivered by six selected state agencies. The report focused on call centers, with limited reviews of agency chatbots, email responses, and websites. Specifically, our performance audit set out to determine the following:

1. Does the state’s central customer service center (www.georgia.gov and 1-800-GEORGIA) effectively address citizen inquiries by connecting them to agencies providing needed services?
2. Do selected state agencies provided effective customer service for citizen inquiries?

Scope

This performance audit generally covered activity related to customer service provided by six state agencies from January 2023 to December 2023, with consideration of earlier or later periods when relevant. The agencies reviewed included the Georgia Technology Authority, the Office of the Secretary of State, and the Departments of Driver Services, Human Services, Natural Resources, and Revenue. Information used in this report was obtained by interviewing agency officials, analyzing call center performance reports provided by each agency, comparing call center performance to stated goals (when applicable), conducting “secret shopper” calls to each call center included in the review, conducting “secret shopper” emails to each agency’s primary “contact us” email address or webform, testing agency chatbot answers, and reviewing data from the Georgia Analytics Project.

Government auditing standards require that we also report the scope of our work on internal control that is significant within the context of the audit objectives. Both objectives address aspects of customer service internal controls to a limited degree. Our work was primarily limited to gaining an understanding of the management monitoring of performance through data reports. Specific information related to the scope of our internal control work is described in the methodology section below.

Methodology

To determine the extent to which the state’s central service center effectively addresses citizen inquiries and the extent to which other selected state agencies effectively address citizen inquiries, we reviewed the performance of agencies’ call centers, chatbots, email responsiveness, and websites. The paragraphs below detail the methodology associated with each customer service channel.

Call Centers – Our review included the primary call centers in each reviewed agency and excluded certain hotlines or centers with lower volume. For example, we excluded the Department of Human Services hotline related to child protection services and the Department of Driver Services line to address questions for the legal community. For the Office of the Secretary of State, we reviewed the single call center but did not report the low volume queues related to elections.

Our evaluation of call centers included interviews of the agency officials to determine the performance metrics used and whether the agency had performance goals. We compared the metrics across agencies and to research about call center performance. From the agencies, we obtained monthly performance data for calendar year 2023 and compared the performance to the stated goals. During subsequent

interviews, we determined that the reported data was consistent with call center managers' experiences—including fluctuations in volume and performance over the course of the year—and was sufficiently reliable for our purpose. Interviews also focused on the reasons for performance.

Finally, we placed five calls to each call center to determine the functionality of the agencies' interactive voice response (IVR) system and whether we were able to reach a call agent. To assess agent knowledge, we asked one of five basic questions related to the agency's service (if we reached an agent during the call or after leaving a voicemail). The calls were placed between November 2023 and January 2024.

Chatbots – We researched the types and functionality of chatbots and interviewed agency officials about their chatbots. Three agencies had a chatbot intended to answer basic customer questions about agency services. We tested the accuracy of the chatbots with five basic questions about the appropriate agency's services between February and April 2024. The questions and responses are in **Appendix C**.

Emails – We tested the primary “contact us” email or webform for each agency by sending five emails with five different questions between November 2023 and March 2024. We noted the length of time for the receipt of the response and the accuracy of the response.

Website – We interviewed the program manager of the Georgia Analytics Program (GAP) and obtained the 2023 average monthly program score for each website associated with five of the six reviewed agencies. We obtained Department of Natural Resources scores directly from the agency, which does not participate in GAP but does use the same program to assess its websites. We also obtained the May 6, 2024 scores of all websites participating in GAP to determine the number receiving a passing score of 80 and the performance within each scoring category.

We conducted this performance audit in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

If an auditee offers comments that are inconsistent or in conflict with the findings, conclusions, or recommendations in the draft report, auditing standards require us to evaluate the validity of those comments. In cases when agency comments are deemed valid and are supported by sufficient, appropriate evidence, we edit the report accordingly. In cases when such evidence is not provided or comments are not deemed valid, we do not edit the report and consider on a case-by-case basis whether to offer a response to agency comments.

Appendix C: Testing of Agency Chatbots

Test Question	Response to Test Question	Correct?
Georgia Technology Authority/1-800-GEORGIA		
How much does a tobacco license cost for a special event?	Uh oh! It looks like I'm stumped! Try our How to Guides.	No
Where is the Governor's mansion?	Here are the best results I found. https://georgia.gov/locations <i>(The site was not listed.)</i>	No
How do I get a marriage license?	To get a marriage license in Georgia, you need to apply at your county probate court. Both parties must be present to obtain the license. You must be at least 18 years old, of sound mind, and have no living spouse from a prior un-dissolved marriage. If you're 17, certain conditions must be met. If at least one person is a Georgia resident, the license can be issued in any county. If neither person is a resident, the license must be issued in the county where the ceremony will take place. You'll need proof of age, proof of divorce (... Find more information at https://georgia.gov/apply-marriage-license.)	Yes
What age do I have to register my child for school?	You should register your child for the state's Pre-K program when they are at least 4 years of age on Sept. 1 of the school year.	Yes
How do I apply for the HOPE Scholarship?	Uh oh! It looks like I'm stumped! Try our How to Guides.	No
Department of Driver Services		
How do I transfer my license from another state?	You must apply for a Georgia driver's license within 30 days of becoming a Georgia resident. All Customer Service Centers can transfer an out-of-state license to a Georgia Driver's License or ID. Learn how to transfer an Out-of-State Driver's License or ID here. Learn more: How to apply for a new Georgia driver's license.	Yes
How much is a replacement license?	You can order or replace your driver's license and identification card (ID) by logging into the Department of Driver Services Online Services or via the DDS 2 GO mobile app from the App Store or Google Play Store.	Yes
Do I have to have insurance to get a license?	Road Test Vehicle Requirements Bring a paper copy of the vehicle registration and current valid insurance card. If the vehicle is a rental car, please make sure the name of the person testing is on the rental agreement. If your vehicle has temporary tags or the vehicle was purchased within the past 30 days, you must provide a bill of sale. The vehicle must pass a safety inspection test by DDS before getting on the road.	Yes
Where can I get study materials for the driving test?	The Georgia Department of Driver Services (DDS) offers an online appointment system to schedule and take an automobile, motorcycle, and CDL road tests. Road Skills Test are offered by appointment only. Walk-ins are not accepted. Learn more: Road Test Appointments	No

Test Question	Response to Test Question	Correct?
How old do I have to be to get my license?	Teenage and Adult Driver Responsibility Act (TADRA) is a graduated driver's license program for young drivers ages 15 to 18. It involves an intense, three-step educational process that allows the young driver to gain more experience behind the wheel with certain restrictions in place. As you complete the requirements of your current permit or license, you are allowed to graduate to a less restrictive license and eventually receive a full unrestricted license. Read more resources for teen drivers here.	Yes
Department of Revenue		
When is the tax filing deadline?	The Georgia Individual Income Tax due date is April 15, 2024. Tax returns must be received or postmarked by the due date. Learn the return and remittance dates for different types of taxes.	Yes
How do I file a tax extension?	You can request a 6-month extension to file your state income tax return.	Yes
Is there an extra \$250 refund this year?	If you filed individual income tax returns for the 2021 and 2022 taxable years, you may qualify for a refund of your Georgia income taxes. Depending on your filing status, you could receive a maximum refund of \$250 for single filers, \$375 for head-of-household filers, and \$500 for married couples filing jointly. Qualified taxpayers now include dependents with earned income in 2021. Read more information about the Georgia Surplus Tax Refund.	Yes
How do I make my non-profit tax exempt?	As a fraud prevention measure, we don't adjust banking information on returns. If the refund is sent to a closed or non-existent account, the bank will return the funds to us. Once received, we will generate and mail a paper check to the address on file. First-time filers will receive a paper check even if they provide direct deposit information.	No
When should I renew my car tag?	All motor vehicles must be registered at the County Tag Office where the owner lives, and this must be renewed yearly. More information: New to Georgia Renew tag online Check registration status Expired tag / due date About the ad valorem tax	Yes

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