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# → How agencies transform the customer service experience to better connect with communities

By Laura Fuller, ICF

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## Introduction

Federal and state agencies are modernizing their customer contact centers to create new and better ways to meet the needs of communities and improve accessibility, equity, and convenience. In doing so, they transform relationships with their constituents—the American people.



Agencies that provide information to the American public need to keep up with required ways to connect with the diverse demographics and the accelerating speed with which customers expect solutions.

Additionally, agencies must think differently; a one-size-fits-all approach is no longer adequate. They need to consider all the communities they want to engage—including the difficult-to-reach communities, such as people without internet and technically demanding audiences, non-English speakers, people with disabilities, and vulnerable and at-risk populations.

Contact centers are the face of the government. Customer service agents require training and tools to establish trust with the customers they assist, and self-service tools need to be able to learn and respond to all customer needs and demands. Agents must practice and demonstrate understanding, empathy, and respect for all customers by engaging in active listening and checking internal bias. They also need to be proficient in the latest offerings in technology available to enable improved engagement and 360° support. This includes such tools as artificial intelligence, translation, and live-call interpretation services for multiple languages, social media communications, and smarter customer relationship management (CRM) systems.

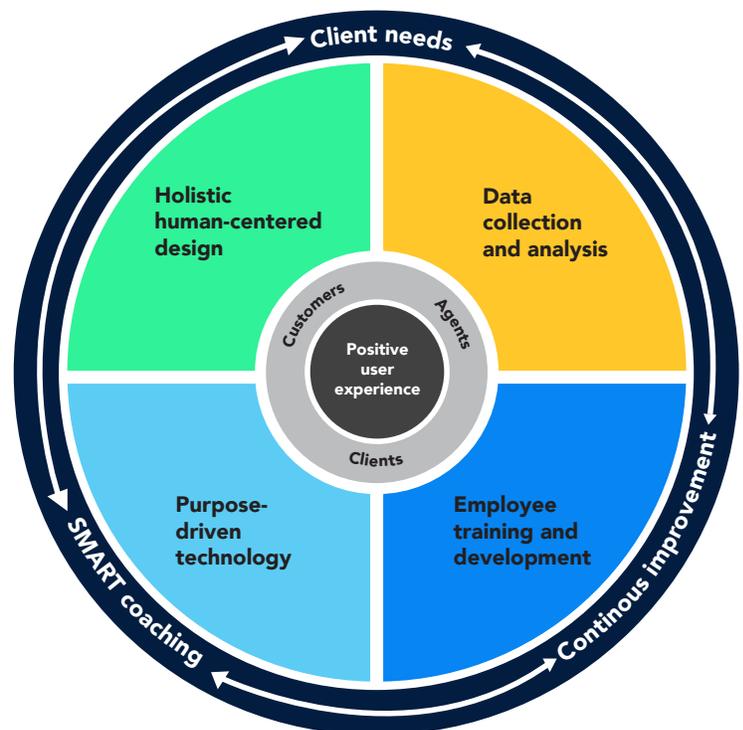
President Biden's Executive Order (EO), "Transforming Federal Customer Experience and Service Delivery to Rebuild Trust in Government," calls for designing and delivering government services with a focus on the actual experience of the people whom the government is meant to serve. The EO states that services should be simple to use, accessible, equitable, protective, transparent, and responsive for all people. It goes on to note that they should be developed with human-centered design methodologies; empirical customer research; an understanding of behavioral science and user testing, especially for digital services; and other mechanisms of engagement.

Human-centered design is an important element, but it's critical to focus on the end goal—a positive user experience for all users: customers, clients,

and customer service agents. Our use of holistic human-centered design works in combination with efforts to collect and analyze data about customers (we use a proprietary approach called Journey+™ to identify blind spots, gaps, and pain points in an individual's experience); deploy purpose-driven technology solutions driven by data; and provide ongoing training and development to our agents. Our all-in-one approach, shown in the figure below, ensures client and customer satisfaction by also ensuring employee satisfaction. This is accomplished by providing as-needed SMART (specific, measurable, actionable, realistic, and timebound) coaching and fostering a positive, growth-focused agent journey and professional work environment with a culture of continuous improvement.

This paper presents three case studies from the field, showcasing agencies that exemplify a new mindset of continuous improvement, social equity, and proactive response to improve and boost customer and community engagement.

#### ICF'S ALL-IN-ONE APPROACH FOR CONTACT CENTER USER SATISFACTION



## Critical success factors for a better contact center experience



- Professional, empathetic, and solution-oriented staff who provide respectful interaction with customers
- First-call resolution that provides speedy, accurate solutions, reducing escalation



- Accurate, up-to-date content, and easily updateable content management systems combined with ongoing training
- Able to reach and serve underserved, at-risk, and difficult-to-reach populations through multiple channels



- Good reputation among customers and potential users through word-of-mouth
- A culture of continuous improvement driven by quality and customer satisfaction

## Case Study #1: An intelligent system yields heightened self-service, easier navigation for vulnerable audiences, Customer Service Center/Maryland Department of Human Services

**Context:** The Maryland Department of Human Services (MD DHS) is responsible for critical services and programs for vulnerable, at-risk families, children, and adults. This includes supplemental nutrition assistance program (SNAP) services, energy and housing assistance, and fraud support. To better serve its residents, MD DHS and ICF offer a single, centralized customer support center and CRM system that ICF helped consolidate from 24 jurisdictions.

During the pandemic, this customer service center—like many across the country—faced increased demand, and MD DHS needed increased support. In response, we doubled the size of the team serving MD DHS, and its agents now handle more than 3.5 million customer requests annually.

We provide a secure and accessible way for the most vulnerable part of the state's population to reach out for assistance, regardless of language, internet access, or computer access.

All agents are required to have at least one year of customer service experience, pass an assessment to identify their strengths and determine if they will be a good fit for the team, and then receive empathy and demeanor training as well as de-escalation training. We provide a centralized work order management system for more than 4,000 case managers and social workers, with all inputs and outputs visible to the executive leadership team via dashboards and reports. We cover inbound and outbound calls as well as the option of printing and mailing forms to people for accessibility, and faxing, as needed, for court records and other needs.

**Challenge:** With a mindset of continuous improvement, we identified an opportunity to connect with customers outside of open hours and simplify how to reach the information they need.

**Solution:** By using intelligent interactive voice response (IVR) to customize the experience, we can handle more of the customers' needs in an automated, self-service fashion that's available 24/7. We combined reporting and analysis of call reasons to understand that customers frequently call for the same reason. Then we designed an intelligent IVR based around that finding. Now, MD DHS's intelligent IVR offers targeted customer support, such as proactive suggestions of frequent callers' selections. In addition, it offers the option of having links and information sent via text/SMS to the caller's mobile phone along with print and mail support when needed. These capabilities increase self-service, deflect calls from agents, improve customer service, and help reach people with all types of accessibility. Working from a daily feed of data from MD DHS, it offers up-to-date information about each customer's account, to provide the latest balances and appropriate content and solutions for each person, allowing customers who work outside of normal business hours or shift work to easily access information as needed. Surveys show that the intelligent IVR system increased responsiveness, efficiency, and overall service. As an additional bonus, it also increased the percentage of calls handled by self-service during normal operating hours.

## Case Study #2: Artificial intelligence speeds responses and increases consistency for elder support, Training and Technical Assistance Center, The National Elder Fraud Hotline/U.S. Department of Justice Office for Victims of Crime

**Context:** In March 2020, the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) launched the National Elder Fraud Hotline to help combat fraud against older Americans and provide services to victims. As of 2019, more than 2 million elder Americans were targeted with such fraud. Managed by the Office for Victims of Crime (OVC), ICF agents who staff the hotline receive more than 40 hours of OVC training, including training on serving specialized populations, sensitivity training involving examining internal and cultural bias and assumptions, using language that avoids revictimization, and training in financial scams. Additionally, they receive customer service training followed by a nesting period to apply their knowledge in a setting with support and coaching. Treating all callers with dignity and respect, agents couple knowledge of common scams with a victim-centered approach to handling calls. This hotline serves as a resource hub to provide guidance on how to report, where to report, and what steps to take. Agents also support the potential victims and help to renew their confidence and reclaim their lives from the hands of the fraudsters.

**Challenge:** With a mindset of continuous improvement, we identified an opportunity to:

- speed agent familiarity with resources and ability to locate them for customers;
- speed agent response time and reduce customers' hold time and thereby reduce any loss of confidence they might feel in the service; and
- increase consistency related to the responses given—regardless of whether the agent is new or tenured

**Solution:** We leveraged technology and human-centered design to understand the agent journey. We then connected keywords to fraud types and scams and set the foundation for an artificial intelligence (AI) system. We shifted the model from agents accessing resources by searching a Microsoft Teams site during calls, which was time-consuming, to agents receiving support from an agent-assisted chatbot powered by AI to complement human productivity and free up time for more complex tasks. The chatbot processes keywords, uses machine learning, and returns required resources as the customer requests, giving agents answers to common questions and resources for everyday needs. By design, we built this tool with the customer experience in mind. Simultaneously, it increased the confidence of agents, both tenured and new, by providing the correct resources and increasing the speed of locating the relevant resource.

The system is constructed on a knowledge base we assembled with resources from across the United States for agents to provide to callers based on their location. This includes contact information for the Federal Trade Commission, FBI state offices, Long-Term Care (LTC) Ombudsman Map, Adult Protective Services (APS) Map, Elder Justice Initiative Resource Roadmap, and the Eldercare locator. While much of the system is self-service, agents can still provide extra services, such as completing common complaint forms like the Federal Trade Commission complaint form or the FBI Internet Crime Complaint Center form for those who have limited resources, don't have internet or an electronic device, or are disabled.

## Case Study #3: Contact center uses proactive approach to help customers save money and energy, Contact Center/Consumers Energy

**Context:** Consumers Energy (CE), a public utility, offers residential energy efficiency programs to its 6.6 million customers in Michigan, including ENERGY STAR® and other programs related to home performance,

insulation, windows, HVAC, and lighting and appliance rebates—and they all require 24/7 customer support. To meet customer needs, ICF supports toll-free phone numbers with an efficient IVR solution designed to quickly connect the caller to a dedicated program agent. We manage more than 8 million outbound calls annually and over 200,000 inbound energy program calls. As the programs change throughout the year, the size of the team surges to meet program needs. We also offer webchat support.

**Challenge:** In addition to providing responsive customer service, CE wanted to use the contact center as part of a larger proactive marketing strategy to promote energy efficiency programs implemented by ICF. A particularly acute scenario arose when Michigan became one of the nation's hotspots for COVID-19. CE knew its customers would be hit hard, as Michiganders dealt with the dueling challenges of unemployment and uncertainty amidst a state-mandated stay-at-home order. CE knew that utility bills would pile up, requiring additional assistance.

**Solution:** Leveraging over a decade of experience providing energy efficiency technical support, program customer support, and incentive rebate fulfillment, we produced a solution for Michigan: Our CE customer care team personally reached out to a select group of customers who would benefit the most from a free smart thermostat, allowing them to cut their annual energy costs by up to 15%. This strategy mirrored our ongoing approach of leveraging interactions through the contact center to promote the energy efficiency programs. These efforts led to customers saving millions in gas and electric HVAC incentives in 2020. In 2021, CE's appliance rebate program resulted in energy savings with more than 11,000 appliance rebates distributed.

## ICF works with public agencies to facilitate meaningful customer engagement

ICF is a global advisory and digital services provider, but we are not your typical consultants. We combine unmatched expertise with cutting-edge engagement

capabilities to help clients solve their most complex challenges, navigate change, and shape the future. We provide solutions for fast-changing industries, building lasting relationships that continuously evolve.

**Purpose-driven technology:** We use cutting-edge communication platforms, industry leading omni-channel contact center systems, advanced reporting, AI driven quality management platforms, learning management solutions with both on-demand and live training options, and quality assurance analytics. With our secure technology solutions, we successfully operate with a flexible work-from-home model.

**Ready to surge:** With the limitless capacity of our telephony solution and workforce management to monitor and identify trends—including cross-training staff and maintaining ongoing relationships with staffing agencies—we are ready to respond to surges and spikes. For example, during a recent need to staff and surge, we identified and onboarded 500+ individuals within a two-week timeline.

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### ICF contact centers: Fast facts

ICF has supported state and federal government agency contact centers since 2011:

- 4.5 million inbound calls annually, with capacity to grow
- 22 million annual outbound survey research calls
- 600+ contact center agent staff, onsite and remote
- 67 office locations worldwide; 8,000+ specialized experts; headquarters in Fairfax, VA
- Multiple contact center locations including a 91,000-square-foot contact center located in a Historically Underutilized Business (HUB) Zone in Martinsville, VA, that includes print and mail capabilities
- Contact center clients include 40+ energy efficiency clients, the U.S. Department of Defense/U.S. Marine Corps, the U.S. Internal Revenue Service, the U.S. Department of Justice Elder Fraud Hotline, the Maryland Department of Human Services, and other state and local government agencies and commercial clients
- Wide range of subject matter expertise in-house, in addition to technologists, customer experience experts, contact center experts, training experts, communication experts, and health and social equity experts to help reach vulnerable populations



## About the author

**Laura Fuller**

Senior Manager, Business Development

Laura is a Business Development professional with more than 10 years' experience in customer service leadership and assistance. Having started as a customer service agent, Laura is passionate about improving all pillars supporting the user experience: clients, customers, and agents. She has experience supporting, leading, and training in contact center operations, reporting, quality efforts, and more.



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## About ICF

ICF is a global consulting services company, but we are not your typical consultants. We help clients navigate change and better prepare for the future.

Our team provides digital, cyber, and cloud-based platform services that drive transformational solutions across business and government. From cloud platforms and automation to machine learning and AI, we provide the foundation to meet dynamic end-user requirements and stand up a modern enterprise. We combine the best of advanced analytics, industry expertise, and enterprise technologies to build agile solutions that evolve to meet your changing needs. Our extensive suite of proprietary software and other technology tools add value to your projects from the outset. Learn more at [icf.com/work/digital](https://icf.com/work/digital).