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Australia | Public Sector

NSW DCJ's Housing Contact Centre turns to the cloud to deliver exceptional service

Client profile

The NSW Government's Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) is the lead agency of the new "Stronger Communities Cluster". The DCJ brings together the departments of Family and Community Services, and Justice to enable services to better work together, with benefits for the whole community. These benefits include providing housing and associated services for some of the most disadvantaged people, families and communities.

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We're all about the client. We help people who are living with great disadvantage and are probably at the lowest point in their lives.

Wendy Keith, Director, Housing Contact Centre, NSW Department of Communities and Justice

Which technologies

- Contact Center – Cloud
- Workforce Optimization – Cloud
- Voice Carriage

Which services?

- CX Consulting Advisory Services
- Customer Experience Technology and Project Management Services
- Managed Customer Experience Services
- RPA business process analysis and application development

Which partners?

- Genesys
- SecureCo
- NICE RPA

NSW GOVERNMENT | Communities & Justice

Summary

The NSW Department of Communities and Justice's Housing Contact Centre provides critical services to some of the most disadvantaged and in-need people. The deployment of a new cloud-based contact center and workforce optimization platform, with ongoing management and support by NTT, enables the Department's team to increase their focus on the people and communities they help. Since going live with the new platform in December 2019, NSW has faced unprecedent disasters, first with the Black Summer bushfires, followed by floods in February and then the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the disruption to their own operations and the increasing demand for their services as a result of the impact these disasters have had on the community, the Housing Contact Centre has "not missed a beat". They can now scale up and down as needed to meet changing circumstances and have seen an increase in the quality of the service they're delivering to clients.

Business need

Creating a multi-channel engagement to meet evolving community support needs

DCJ's Housing Contact Centre (HCC) is the main point of contact for anyone in NSW in need of housing services and support. The contact centre is a 24/7 operation with 400 agents actioning approximately 1.2 million transactions a year, including up to 19,000 phone calls a week. The contact centre was operating with a very basic inbound voice-only calling capabilities and a separate workforce planning system, making it very difficult to manage a high-volume operation with a 24-hour agent roster.

Increasingly, the Department's clients are expecting to be able to engage with HCC via digital channels, so they wanted multi-channel integration and the ability to offer live chat via their website, a call back feature and to run outbound campaigns. With HCC now coming under a much larger lead government agency, there was also the potential that they would need to quickly scale up and down to meet the needs of the broader portfolio of services now under the DCJ's remit.

This broader requirement for HCC's services has been called on twice since the new contact center platform was deployed. The first was during, and in the aftermath of, the Black Summer bushfires in 2019-20, providing assistance to bushfire-affected communities with emergency temporary accommodation, rental costs and short-term housing. The second has come in response to COVID-19, with a 30% increase in calls since lockdowns started in March, with people out of work and a big drive to find safe accommodation for the homeless.

"We're all about the client. We help people who are living with great disadvantage and are probably at the lowest point in their lives," said Wendy Keith, Director, Housing Contact Centre, NSW Department of Communities and Justice.

Solution

Optimized, omnichannel cloud platform allowing HCC to adapt rapidly to 2020's challenges

With a deadline for the new contact center platform to go live before Christmas 2019, DCJ and NTT designed and deployed a fully managed, cloud-based omnichannel contact center and workforce optimization solution. The platform is also integrated with DCJ's "Homes" CRM database. The eight-month project was delivered on time and on budget with a cut-over to the new platform completed late on a Friday night in mid-December.

This was complicated by an increase in call volumes that HCC had been experiencing since the first major bushfires started in NSW in September.

"By Monday, we were full-on; everyone was on the system and we didn't even miss a beat with service levels. So amazing." said Keith.

With the cloud-based contact center platform, the HCC team is able to manage most of the changes themselves. NTT provide ongoing monitoring and maintenance of the cloud platform and underlying carriage services, as well as any technical changes required, and are the first point of contact for any issues or problems.

After go-live, HCC set up a new disaster welfare line and brought in an additional 40 agents. They were able to set this up in a matter of hours, to help with emergency accommodation and ongoing housing needs for residents and communities affected by the bush fires.

"We pretty much did it ourselves, which is one of the great advantages of the platform. I can't begin to explain the pain that would have caused on our previous system," said Keith. At its peak, NSW had 48 bushfire evacuation centers open at the same time, when the previous record had been just nine.

Then, in March 2020 in response to the rising concerns over the COVID-19 pandemic, HCC set up a pilot group of 11 agents to work from home. Within two days it was obvious that the team could function very effectively, even with increasing call volumes due to the impact of the pandemic. After the success of the pilot, in 10 working days HCC moved their entire team out of their Liverpool office and into their own homes.

Outcomes

Maintaining the human connection in the team and to the community

The new platform allowed the entire HCC to continue to operate with a work from home model. While the technology has worked perfectly to support the home-based agents, Keith and her management team have been conscious of the need to keep the human connection and support during what can be stressful interactions with their clients, including a shared collaboration platform and access to on-call counselling services. HCC's quality teams are still able to monitor three calls for every agent every month, and record the agent's screen activity while they are on a call.

"Team meetings never get cancelled – they're done via a video chat. One-on-one meetings for each team member with their team leader never get cancelled. Our team leaders are extraordinary. They've just been so willing to go the extra mile to make sure that our people are okay, including driving out to their houses to see them face-to-face. When you're doing work that is so critically important but also mentally draining, the added complication of working from home can get really hard," said Keith.

"We're actually seeing, amazingly, that the quality of service increased. Knowing how they're feeling themselves, our team members have a lot more empathy for people who are stuck out on the streets. We're giving out a lot more customer service awards – where someone gets three 100% ratings on their calls."

While the bushfire threat diminishes during the cooler months, HCC now has the capability to switch the disaster welfare line on or off, and to scale up and down as needed. HCC also developed an application that correlates bushfire alerts with geographic locations so the HCC team can start contacting accommodation providers in those areas to work out what's available, making them more responsive to requests for emergency housing.

HCC is currently working with NTT to develop and trial an Attended Robotic Process Automation (RPA) solution for Rentstart to calculate the repayment schedule for clients applying for a bond loan, which has reduced the 30% error rate to zero and eliminated call backs from clients. Other parallel RPA projects are in development with NTT and vendor partners, which will significantly reduce the time taken to complete complex processes such as housing applications.

Critical to HCC's new contact center and workforce optimization capabilities is that they have a technology platform that frees up the organization to focus on their people – both the team in the HCC, and the clients and communities that they support.

"Our mission here at HCC is to minimize client effort. We need to make life easier for them. These people are cold, wet and hungry, and they need help immediately; not when we get our technology right," said Keith.

Keith is confident that between HCC and NTT, they are ready for whatever the future holds. "If the last year has shown us anything, it's that we can handle anything they throw at us. Really, there's not much bigger than what we've already dealt with."

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