

Health Department Improves Services and Reduces Communication Costs

Alabama Department of Public Health uses Unified Communications to improve client satisfaction across the state.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

ALABAMA DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH

- Montgomery, Alabama, United States
- 3700 employees

CHALLENGE

- Improve voice quality of interactive voice response menus
- Simplify IT management across 67 counties and 110 sites

SOLUTION

- Customized TCL scripts for deployment on local Cisco Integrated Services Routers
- Unified Communications solutions that simplify communication management across WAN
- Cisco Meet-Me Conferencing and Unity voicemail and email system for reducing conferencing costs and saving time

RESULTS

- Enables callers to quickly reach the correct person, reducing caller hang-ups to almost zero
- Saves thousands of dollars per month in conferencing service costs
- Reduces management time from eight to two hours per month, per site

Challenge

The mission of the Alabama Department of Public Health is to provide caring, high-quality services to residents across the state's 67 counties. Residents obtain information and contact program staff at one of the department's 110 local facilities through interactive voice response (IVR) menus. Callers can reach the right staff member for a range of programs that include Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), environmental concerns, Medicaid, Home Health, and others.

Each local site is connected by a WAN to the main office in Montgomery. The department has implemented Cisco® Unified Communications solutions across its network and originally hosted the IVR application and separate menu trees for each site at its Montgomery headquarters. When voice calls came into a local office, packets were routed across the network to the Cisco Unity® server to access the correct local menu structure, carrying it back over the network to the caller. However, the

service provider-based WAN did not provide quality-of-service (QoS) capabilities, and with a high volume of critical applications also delivered over the WAN, voice call quality suffered. Callers could not understand the garbled voice menus and often hung up in frustration. Office managers reported high numbers of dropped calls each day, and callers who did manage to get through were often irate about the poor voice quality. The IVR application reflected poorly on the department and drove the IT team to begin looking for a solution.

“Unified Communications capabilities have enabled us to save thousands of taxpayer dollars in infrastructure. At the same time, we are helping the department achieve its mission and deliver better service to Alabama residents. We look forward to building on our foundation to continuously improve citizen services.”

– Gene Hill, County Support Manager

Solution

Gene Hill, the county support manager, and his telecommunication team leader, Ronnie McLendon, evaluated several possible solutions, but each alternative still required sending voice traffic across the WAN. When they met with their Cisco account manager, together they identified a new possibility: why not implement the IVR menus at each local site? The Cisco team created a programming script that resides on each site's Cisco Integrated Services Router and enables the department to deploy each county's menus locally and maintain them from the Montgomery headquarters. In addition, the script allows Hill and his team to tailor each county's IVR menus to automatically dial specific telephone extensions or to reach a live operator when the caller presses "0".

The IVR application's audio files are installed on the local router, eliminating the need to transport them across the WAN. Callers now hear crisp, clear voice prompts, and menus are available as soon as they are installed.

"The Cisco script solution made a tremendous difference in voice quality and manageability," says Hill. "It also provided the impetus for standardizing our menu system across the entire state, which makes it easier for us to maintain. We appreciated Cisco's creative approach to the problem and their understanding of our needs."

Employees at local Department of Public Health locations benefit from Cisco Unity messaging, which combines employees' voicemail and email in one mailbox. By integrating Cisco Unity with Lotus Domino, the department enables employees to have messages pop up in their email and play them or to retrieve them by telephone and listen to them. Today, more than half of the locations use Cisco Unified IP Phones and by April 2009, they will be implemented across the state for all employees. Hill has also deployed Cisco Unified Communications Manager Express Meet-Me and Ad Hoc Conferencing features at Montgomery headquarters.

"I easily built the Meet-Me numbers in Unified Communications Manager so that anyone here in Montgomery can instantly initiate a conference call," says James Henderson, IT telecom technician for county support. "Our 800 numbers point to one number on each floor, and the user simply dials, brings up Meet-Me, and dials in a four-digit number to start the conference, right through the Cisco phone."

Results

"With the ability to host menus on the local router, voice quality improved so dramatically that complaints almost completely stopped," says Hill. "Standardizing and shortening the menus also reduced callers' frustration. At the same time, we are able to tailor individual site extensions, so that people can quickly contact the right person, the first time."

Implementing Cisco Unified Communications simplified management for each location, reducing management time from approximately eight hours to two per month.

"With centralized management, the IT team can quickly and easily add a phone, delete a phone, or change a name without having to travel to the location," says McLendon. "If a phone must be replaced, it is mailed to the site, and the user simply plugs it in and begins using it." Cisco Unified Communications have also reduced the amount of cabling required for new buildings or building renovations. A single data line serves voice and data needs.

In addition to greatly improving client service, Cisco Unified Communications significantly reduced the number of phone lines needed across the state. For example in Huntsville, the department

eliminated more than 15 analog phone lines, and reduced the monthly telephone bill from US\$3000 to US\$700 for the remaining analog lines needed for security, faxes, and fire alarms. Long-distance telephone charges also declined.

Using Meet-Me conferencing saves the department thousands of dollars per month in conference calling charges and reduces the amount of travel required for employees. Hill is currently

implementing a pilot project using Cisco VT Cameras, which will allow employees to hold face-to-face meetings from their desks and further reduce travel requirements.

Next Steps

The department is planning to expand its Cisco Unified Wireless Network capabilities, which would enable home health nurses to immediately connect to the network from their laptops when they travel between clients' residences and local offices. They are also beginning to develop a customer satisfaction application that will enable the department to solicit client feedback for identifying new levels of service improvement.

"Unified Communications capabilities have enabled us to save thousands of taxpayer dollars in infrastructure," says Hill. "At the same time, we are helping the department achieve its mission and deliver better service to Alabama residents. We look forward to building on our foundation to continuously improve citizen services."

For more information

To find out more about Cisco solutions and services, visit: www.cisco.com.

To learn more about the Alabama Department of Public Health, visit www.adph.org.

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