

City of Buffalo

Buffalo Moves Critical City 311 Call Center Home Amid Pandemic Closure

Cisco works with university and city to meet 48-hour deadline for transition of critical call center with unified communications



The customer summary

Customer name

City of Buffalo

Industry

Government

Location

Buffalo, New York, US

Number of employees

6700+



Challenges

- Continue essential services during COVID-19 business closures
- Deploy remote worker solution without added infrastructure
- Transition 311 Call & Resolution helpline to home offices in 48-hours



Solutions

City of Buffalo:

- Cisco Webex Contact Center
- Cisco 8800 Series IP phones

University at Buffalo:

- Cisco Unified Communications Manager (UCM)
- Cisco Mobile and Remote Access (MRA)
- Cisco Expressway Series



Results

- Seamless transition of call center in 48-hours
- Collaborative approach of City, University and Cisco meets challenge
- Vital communication continuity for 250,000 Buffalo residents
- Essential team of 12 City call center agents work from home in COVID-19 crisis

Transition call center to home offices

Buffalo is the second largest city in the state of New York, home to more than 250,000 people. The Division of Citizen Services acts as a link between City Hall and residents, helping to ensure the smooth running of the city. If you have an issue with waste collection, a dark streetlight or a fallen tree blocking the road, Citizens Services is the group to call.

“We give citizens a sense of equity in their city,” says Oswaldo Mestre, Chief Service Officer, Division of Citizen Services, City of Buffalo.

Open, always-on communication is a must.

The City runs an online portal and an app to log requests, but the primary communications route is the 311 Call & Resolution Center. The call center takes up to 600 calls a day from Buffalo residents. Real people speaking to real people about everyday issues.

“311 is the lifeblood of the City,” says Mestre.

“It shows citizens that there is always a way to reach out to City Hall.”

Then COVID-19 arrived. As New York State battled to contain the virus, City of Buffalo staff were instructed to work from home. All offices were to close. It would be impossible to operate the 311 Call & Resolution Center.

“The stay-at-home instruction came on a Friday afternoon. We knew there would be a lot of people with questions and worries,” Mestre explains. “Closing the line was not an option. We had to have 311 open as usual on Monday morning.”

Citizen Services needed its call agents to be able to work from home, to take calls from concerned residents, and to have secure access to city information and the latest guidance. And it needed this set up over the weekend. But an infrastructure for the call center to work remotely was not in place.

“It was essential to keep channels of communication open for our citizens. The City responded to residents with important information when it was needed most.”

Mayor Byron Brown
City of Buffalo

Unified communications from University at Buffalo

Buffalo proudly shares its mantra as, “The City of Good Neighbors.” It’s times like these that good neighbors are needed most.

“We spoke to our IT team, we then spoke to Cisco, our long-term partner, and they suggested we speak to the University at Buffalo,” says Mestre. “That’s when the wheels started turning.”

Both the City and University work with Cisco, but only the University infrastructure included the communications solutions to set up remote workers.

Collaboration, shared files, and always-on communication are standard in modern higher education. University at Buffalo uses Cisco Expressway to deliver highly secure access to collaboration workloads, including video, voice, content, IM, and presence.

“Over the years working with Cisco, we’ve developed procedures and standardized solutions that help us in our day-to-day work,” says Adam Pawlowski, IT Communications Systems Engineer, University at Buffalo. “We’d proven to ourselves we can scale up and deploy quickly to our faculty and staff as needed. Could we do the same for the City? You bet.”

The 48-hour deadline was no issue explains Steven Heist, Director of Network and Communication Services, University at Buffalo. The University has always built resiliency and scalability into its systems.

“Even though it was late on Friday night, there was a sigh of relief and certainly some excitement in the air that we could actually pull this off,” he says.

“Knowing we could help get the call center up and running was a great feeling.”

The University runs the latest version of Cisco Unified Communications Manager (UCM) – which provides reliable, secure, scalable, and manageable call control and session management – as well as Cisco Expressway. These collaboration tools provided the University with the ability to cloud connect into Cisco Webex Contact Center for the City of Buffalo and provide the link between the City’s phones for remote workers and the call center application the City runs within Webex.

Pawlowski was then able to connect the 311 number to the University system. Meanwhile, Mestre and team organized the drop-off of new phones, headsets, and training information to call center agents’ homes on Sunday.

311 Call Center boasts smooth remote operations

Monday morning at 8:30 a.m., the first calls come in to the 311 Call & Resolution Center. “We never missed a beat,” says Mestre.

The dozen 311 call agents were able to work from home. Everything they needed to work effectively was in hand.

“We were able to bring in new users, quickly and securely, using tried and true, repeatable methods and procedures,” says Pawlowski. “With our experience on campus being nimble and constantly adding new users, we knew we could respond to this challenge and it was going to work.”

Mestre praises the technology, and the attitude of the 311 team.

“Cisco uniquely understood our situation. We needed to think outside the box and having the collaboration of the University at Buffalo and Cisco working with us in a singular purpose made all of the difference.”

Oswaldo Mestre

Chief Service Officer, Division of Citizen Services, City of Buffalo

“Working remotely from home with a new system was a leap for our call takers. We had to scale up and adapt very quickly,” says Mestre. “Normally, it would take some time for call center agents to train and process the system differences. Everyone working in our call center really stepped up to the plate to play a critical part in the ramp up and success.”

It meant the City was able to keep citizens informed of the latest updates on testing information, social distancing, and any new guidance from the Mayor or Governor. It also demonstrated that Buffalo continued to function, that City Hall was engaged with the community and that essential services remained in place.

The 311 Call Center was always considered mission critical to provide a continuity of service in the challenges of the pandemic. “During this time, I tested positive for COVID-19,” Mestre explains. “For me, it highlighted even more the importance of having a robust call center, making sure people knew about testing sites and were connected to different parts of our social service network.”

It was natural for people to be anxious and providing information was so important, he explains. “We can’t forget the human element and how this affects people in the community,” Mestre expresses. “The consistent access to the 311 Call & Resolution Center showed the City of Buffalo government at work providing for the needs of the community.”

Next steps toward the call center future

As City government opens for business, the process is happening slowly in phases. The Division of Citizen Services is reviewing a combined model for the 311 Call & Resolution Center with both remote workers and some limited in-office staff. The office agents also provide the unique service of responding to walk-in requests. “We are gearing up for a future hybrid model where we can do a remote call center in perpetuity,” Mestre says. “Operating a remote call center showcases one of the successful efforts City government accomplished for the community.”

Watch customer video

For more information

Please visit [cisco.com/c/en/us/products/contact-center](https://www.cisco.com/c/en/us/products/contact-center)

Product list

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- Cisco 8800 Series IP phone systems

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