

Customers Observing and Researching Experience (CORE) Program

Final Report



**Mayor's Office of Operations
Customer Service Group**

September 2008

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Background: Citywide Customer Service

The scope of the City of New York's services is enormous, with more than 40 city agencies providing services directly to the public or to other agencies. Until recently, there has not been a comprehensive effort to centralize oversight and measurement of customer service

Scope of Services

- In 2007, New Yorkers made more than **32.1 million contacts** with City agencies to receive information or services by phone, letter, email or in-person visit
- More than 700 walk-in facilities throughout the 5 boroughs
- Walk-in facilities manage at least **9.2 million customer visits** each year, nearly 29% of reported customer contacts
- 80% of agencies use service centers to interact with customers

Background: Citywide Customer Service & the CORE Program

In the past six months, two Executive Orders have emphasized the City's commitment to providing good customer service to New Yorkers

- **Executive Order 115 (May 2008): Mandates that all customers receive high quality customer service, regardless of how they contact the City. Established the Customer Service Group at the Mayor's Office of Operations**
- **Executive Order 120 (July 2008): Mandates agencies to provide meaningful access to services to customers with limited English proficiency**
- **The Mayor's Office of Operations Customer Service Group developed the Customers Observing and Researching Experience (CORE) program to determine the quality of customer service provided by the City**
 - The program used trained observers to represent real customers requesting actual services, information and referrals
 - Observations were made from the perspective of a first-time customer
 - Participants were provided high-level background information, and made service inquiries or requests related to the facilities' primary services

The CORE program is the largest municipal secret shopper initiative of its kind, visiting 308 walk-in facilities across all five boroughs

Methodology: Walk-in Facility Scoring

- **CORE observers documented their experience through two methods:**
 - I. Quantitative score in five key areas of customer service
 - ① **Language Access.** Could customers obtain services in their preferred language?
 - ② **Service & Accessibility.** Was the facility easy to find?
 - ③ **Queuing Experience & Service Transparency.** Was it easy to know where to go, what to do and what documents were needed to obtain services?
 - ④ **Facility Conditions.** Was the facility clean and well-maintained?
 - ⑤ **Staff Customer Service.** Was staff courteous and knowledgeable?
 - II. Qualitative assessment with actionable suggestions and observations that emphasized the human side of service experience
- **Quantitative Scoring**
 - CORE Observers evaluated walk-in facilities on a scale of poor, fair, good, or excellent, which were translated to a 4.0 scale for further analysis

Methodology: Observer approach & Data Collection

“Agency Snapshots”

General agency information

Description of the specific walk in facilities

Types of services provided by each agency

Guiding questions specific to each center

Sample

- **CORE observers were impartial trained participants**
 - Most observers had never interacted with a city agency prior to this program
 - Observers were provided agency-validated “Agency Snapshots.” Snapshots included general background information related to each facility’s services and were reviewed by each agency
 - Observers were provided comprehensive training with a shared trial period to normalize responses
 - Facilities were visited by pairs of observers
- **Data was collected using leading technology to improve data quality**
 - Facility scores were submitted in real-time, using a BlackBerry-based form
 - Reports and tracking were managed through Telenav, an online tool also used by the SCOUT reporting team

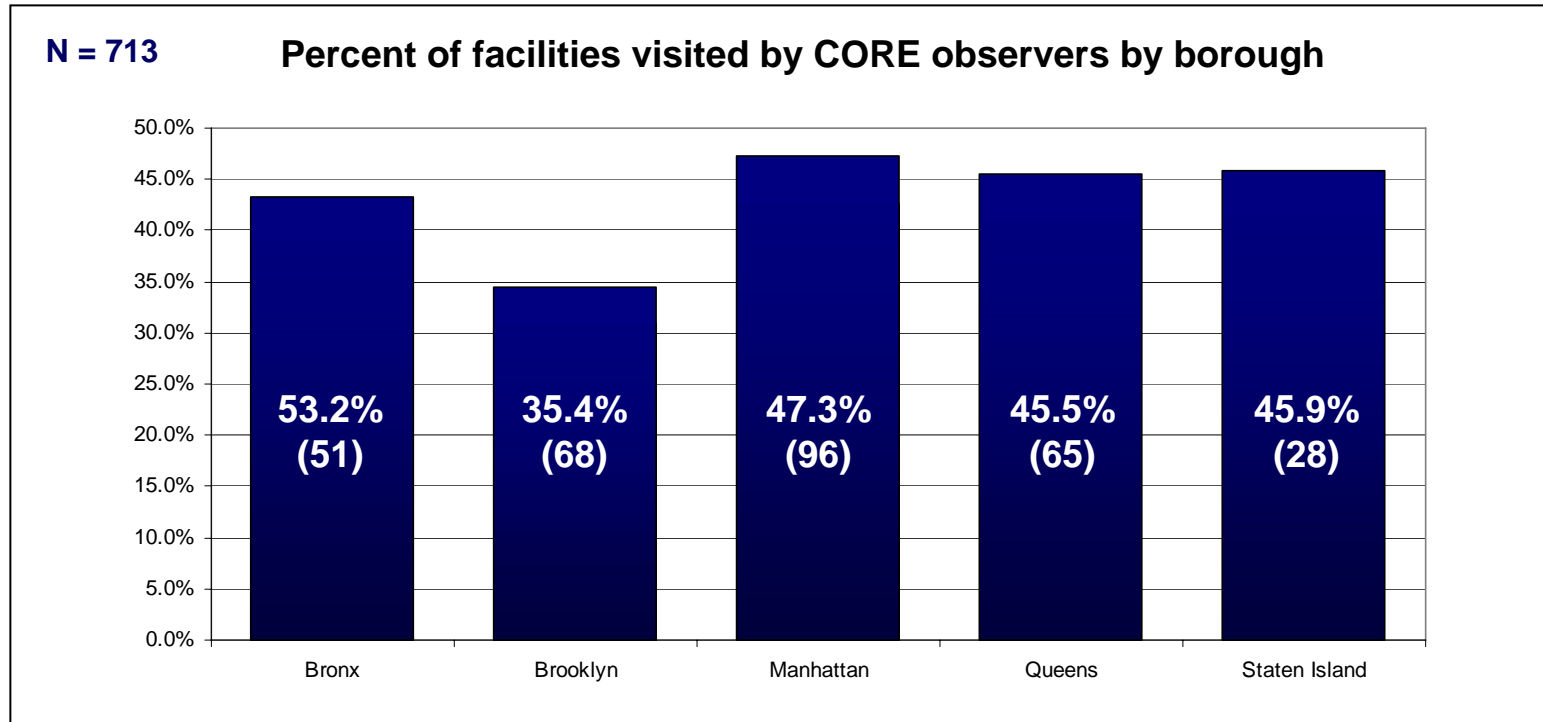
Implementation: Facility Targeting

- **CORE developed a comprehensive list of agency walk-in facilities to determine the size and scope of the city's customer operations**
 - 713 walk-in facilities, belonging to 25 agencies were identified as locations for CORE reviews
 - Agencies were sent the compiled list, along with a service description for each site (“Agency Snapshots”), for validation
- **Walk-in facilities were broken up into distinct clusters**
 - Locations were divided into 45 regions based on:
 1. Proximity to other locations, and
 2. Relation to public transportation
 - Targets were selected such that at least one location per agency was visited in every borough
 - For agencies with multiple services, one location per service was visited in each borough



Example: Region 15

Implementation: Scope of CORE Program

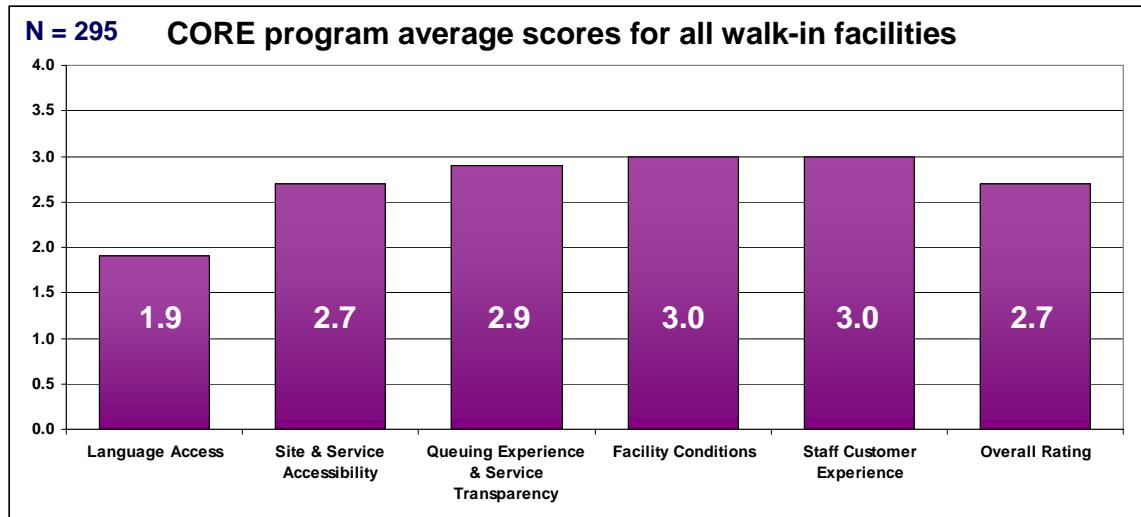


- **CORE Observers visited a total of 308 (43.2%) out of 713 agency locations**
 - Total identified sites include 219 FDNY firehouses and 84 NYPD precincts and related customer facilities
 - Excluding firehouses and precincts, CORE visited 68.0% of all agency locations
 - CORE visited 100% of all sites for 12 agencies. For 22 out of 25 agencies, CORE visited more than 60% of sites (an average of 12.3 sites per agency)

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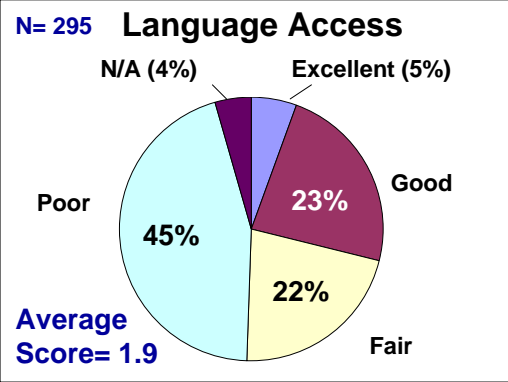
Overall Findings: Customer Service Scores Citywide



- **CORE observers gave generally solid marks to agency walk-in facilities across each of the key service areas:**
 - ① Language Access
 - ② Site & Service Accessibility
 - ③ Queuing Experience & Service Transparency
 - ④ Facility Conditions
 - ⑤ Staff Customer Experience
- **The majority of visited sites were rated well, with an overall average of 2.7 on a 4.0 scale**
 - Participants expected moderate levels of service, and some uniformity of customer experience and processes across a specific agency's facilities (for example, similar customer handling processes across all Parks' recreation centers)
 - Language access had the lowest overall rating, with an average 1.9 rating on a 4.0 scale
- **CORE Observers obtained 64 documents, pamphlets and forms from their facility visits**
 - 129 out of 308 service sites (41.9%) provided relevant materials for customer to review at home

Findings: Language Access

<p>Definition</p>	<p>Could customers obtain services in their preferred language?</p>
<p>General Findings</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Historically, agencies have not focused on customer support in multiple languages The majority of sites visited provided few resources for limited English proficient (LEP) customers, with a 1.9 rating on a 4.0 scale
<p>Positive Practices</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some agencies provide signs in multiple language or publicize interpretation services (examples at right) Some agencies provided multi-lingual forms and/or applications Several facilities staffed their facilities to ensure access to bilingual employees
<p>Key Challenges</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> For the vast majority of sites, translated signs were either minimal or non-existent. Most sites had limited multi-lingual materials available Interpretation services were limited for LEP customers Use of telephonic interpretation at walk-in facilities was likely impacted by customer and employee awareness as well as employee preference
<p>Recommendations</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Agencies shall consider walk-in centers as the “front line” for their language access plans Agencies shall create and widely circulate a language access plan. This includes customer service training to ensure services find their way from “plan” to the customer who needs them



Multi-lingual sign advertising free Interpretation

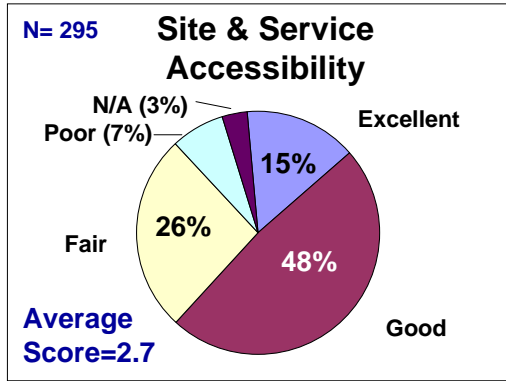
Sign is translated into multiple languages

- **LEP customers faced challenges at the majority of facilities**
 - Bilingual staff was found at 32 sites (10.8%), phone interpretation was found at 46 sites (15.6%), and both bilingual staff and phone interpretation were found at 13 sites (4.4%). Observers did not find any resources for interpretation at 204 sites (69.2%)
 - At many of the 30.8% of walk-in facilities offering some form of interpretation, observers found challenges in attaining LEP accommodations
 - Customer service staff used informal methods to obtain in person interpretation services (back-office staff, other customers, etc.)
 - Bilingual staff were often not readily available. Several sites requested that customers return on dates that a bilingual staff would be available
 - At an agency level, 56% had communication materials in languages other than English, and 36% had documents in English only, and 8% did not provide any materials altogether. Often, translated materials were not readily available at facilities
- **Agencies with existing language access plans provided greater access for LEP customers**
 - Agencies regulated by Local Law 73 passed in December 2003 (which required four city agencies to provide language assistance services to LEP customers) had an average rating of 2.4 significantly higher than the citywide average of 1.9
 - For LL73 agencies, concerted efforts to develop language access policies have resulted in greater service accessibility for LEP customers

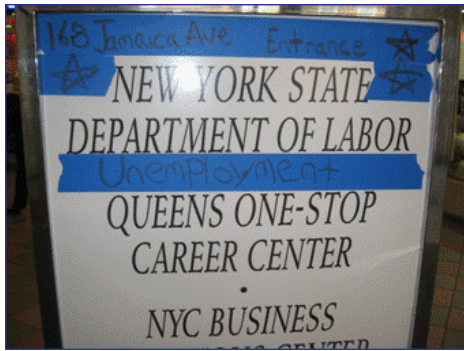
	Excellent	Good	Fair	Poor	N/A
Citywide Average	5%	23%	22%	45%	4%
LL73 Agencies	13%	45%	18%	19%	6%

Findings: Site & Service Accessibility

Definition	Was the facility easy to find?
<p>General Findings</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Overall, site & service accessibility was rated acceptable, with a 2.7 rating on a 4.0 scale <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Signs were rated 2.7 for professionalism, 2.4 for procedural accuracy, and 2.4 for directional accuracy
<p>Positive Practices</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Many agencies provide signs with clear descriptions of their service offerings and requirements for accessing completing a service Some facilities used a service directory in the lobby of a facility to instruct visitors on where to locate a service center
<p>Key Challenges</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Websites often gave incomplete information about their walk-in facilities. Few websites list service locations, hours of operation, languages available or types of services provided Frequent lack of professional, informative signage <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of information necessary to a customer (e.g., hours of operation) Paper signs were often aged, hand-written, included grammatical and/or spelling errors, or had graffiti. Many signs were covered by or made of duct tape On multiple occasions, CORE observers had great difficulty locating a service location <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Few sites had signs directing customers to appropriate floors, service centers, customer lines or service windows. Entrances were found in loading docks, in alternative buildings, and across campuses Several publicized locations were missing or closed temporarily/permanently (3.6% of visited sites). Closed locations often lacked instructional signs or contact information
<p>Recommendations</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Agencies shall review signage at all walk-in facilities and replace old or irrelevant signage CSG and Agencies shall develop consistent citywide signs as well as guidelines for signs at walk-in facilities



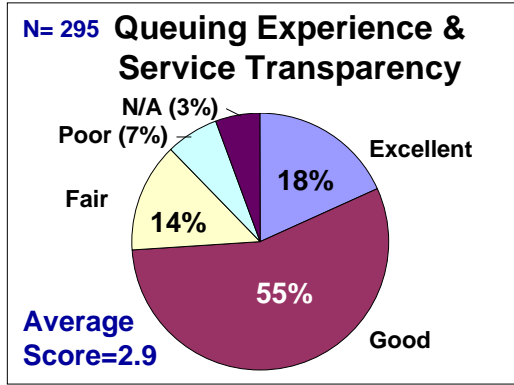
Clearly identifiable walk-in center



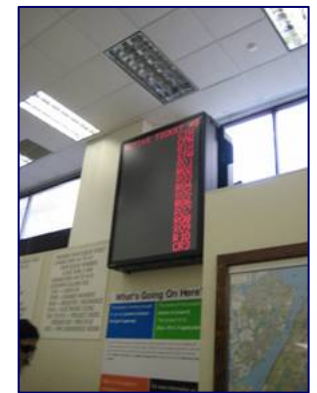
Signage altered with electrical tape and permanent marker

Findings: Queuing Experience & Service Transparency

<p>Definition</p>	<p>Was it easy to know where to go, what to do and what documents were needed to obtain services?</p>
<p>General Findings</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many facilities have appropriate processes to manage customers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – The majority of the 210 sites (71.2%) leveraged staff to act as a greeter who could give basic direction to customers
<p>Positive Practices</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many agencies used technology to provide information to customers regarding wait-time and routing (e.g., Q-Matic) • Use of a greeter <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Multiple sites had made it priority to ensure customers could speak with a staff member soon after entry – Greeter often had applications, basic agency information, and occasionally a computer terminal to answer customer inquiries
<p>Key Challenges</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At many locations, it was difficult to determine what line a customer is on, the wait time, or the steps that should be followed <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – 210 sites (28.8%) did not have a greeter to direct customers upon entry or some kind of information desk – Most sites did not provide a wait time to obtain a service, and several advised customers to reserve up to a full day to complete a service • Walk-in facilities used security guards for a multitude of purposes, and most prominently to direct customers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Security guards' temperament, customer rapport and knowledge of agency services varied widely – In some locations, guards greeted customers, directed traffic, patrolled halls and signed customers into restrooms, among other tasks
<p>Recommendations</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agencies shall use a trained staff member as a greeter at each service location to provide timely service • Agencies shall consider technology to promote efficient queuing • Agencies shall offer customers appointments whenever possible



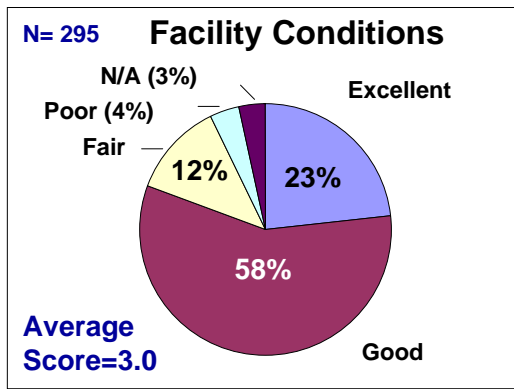
Greeter with internet access and customer literature



Electronic queuing system

Findings: Facility Conditions

Definition	Was the facility clean and well-maintained?
<p>General Findings</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Generally, facilities received solid scores, with 69 locations (23.4%) rated “excellent.” <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – The average overall rank for facilities was 3.0 on a 4.0 scale • For a significant number of facilities, maintenance issues and facility conditions were a concern <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Facility conditions such as maintenance in common areas and graffiti impacted the overall customer experience
<p>Positive Practices</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many sites were well-branded with agency or City logos • Waiting areas for high-trafficked facilities included televisions, play areas for children, and reading materials • Several sites publicized customer success stories in waiting areas • Many agencies use self-serve kiosks & pay stations at their facilities
<p>Key Challenges</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Graffiti was the most commonly cited facility issue, with 49 facilities (16.5%) having some form of graffiti <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Graffiti was most commonly located in customer bathrooms, building stairwells, and on doors, walls, and signs • After graffiti, the facility issue most commonly cited was dirty or damaged walls (35 of facilities, or 11.9%) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Facility wall condition was a strong indicator of overall facility conditions. 10 out of 11 facilities (91%) that received a rating of poor for overall facility conditions were found to have dirty walls – Duct tape was often used to repair objects in public areas, causing facilities to appear more distressed
<p>Recommendations</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agencies shall do consistent and regular facility review • Agencies shall create a quality assurance protocol to ensure problem areas are quickly reported and addressed



Men's bathroom during initial CORE visit

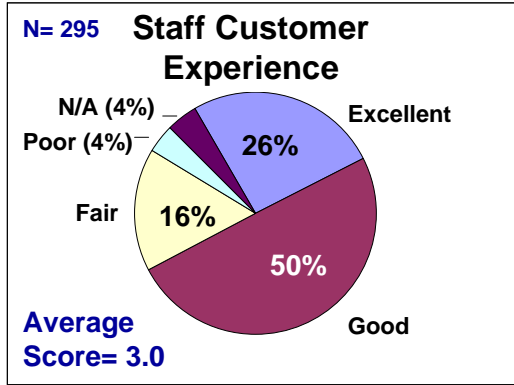


Men's bathroom, post clean up

Note: In re-shops of facilities originally cited for graffiti, observers have noted improvement

Findings: Staff Customer Service

Definition	Was staff courteous and knowledgeable?
General Findings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At most agencies, staff members were well versed in their programs <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – CORE observers found that most staff were able to provide a response to their inquiries – 29 staff across 14 agencies were identified by CORE observers as providing excellent customer service
Positive Practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff at many agencies were eager to help and find solutions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – In some cases, staff followed up to ensure that service had been received – Many staff members went above and beyond what was required to escalate issues or refer observers to different agencies
Key Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discourteous or unhelpful staff members were consistently given low marks for all aspects of customer handling • Negative impressions of customer service staff resulted from: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Inconsistent treatment of CORE observers and other customers – General discourteous service (rude, irritable or disinterested staff) • Oftentimes, staff members expected customer to know about the agency's services and processes. Examples included: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Misdirected questions were answered with confusion or irritation by staff members – Questions met a "dead end" – without any referral or attempt to find more information, or the recommendation that customers "call 311"
Recommendations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agencies shall institute comprehensive customer service training • Agencies shall review customer operations at a supervisory level at each walk-in center • Agencies shall assess their processes for informing customers on how to prepare for actual visits



Excellent customer service

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Next Steps

1. Distribution and communication with agencies

- Distribution of agency specific data and qualitative reports – week of 9/29
- Review of agency communication materials (e.g. forms, pamphlets, applications) from CORE visits

2. Create standards for walk-in center customer experience

- Steering committee developing standards incorporating report findings
- Measure agency success in FY2009 MMR

3. Plan for citywide resources to help agencies provide improved service

- Language Access policy and plans
- Standardized signage policy and plan
- 311 complaint processes
- Prioritize technology and contracts (e.g., Q-Matic or other customer relationship management tools)
- Agency guide for providing high quality customer service

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Appendix 1: Key Observation Area Rating Description

Key Area	Driving Question	Description
Language Access	Could customers obtain services in their preferred language?	Language Access refers to an agency's ability to communicate with and provide services for limited English proficient New Yorkers through interpretation and translated documents
Site & Service Accessibility	Was the facility easy to find?	Site & Service Accessibility measures a customer's ability to find a location, and to know how and where to access services once inside a walk-in center. Facility signage is an important component, including: usability of entry signs, professionalism and accuracy of interior signs, and whether signs communicate the necessary procedures
Queuing Experience & Service Transparency	Was it easy to know where to go, what to do and what documents were needed to obtain services?	Queuing experience and service transparency measures a customer's ability to determine where to go and what to do in order to receive services. This also includes the wait-time associated with completing the customer's business
Facility Conditions	Was the facility clean and well-maintained?	Facility condition refers to the general condition, cleanliness and upkeep of the physical space where agencies provide face to face services. This includes all spaces used by the general public, such as waiting areas, stairwells, bathrooms and elevators
Staff Customer Experience	Was staff courteous and knowledgeable?	Staff customer service measures the extent to which agency staff was courteous, knowledgeable and willing to help customers complete their service. This includes whether staff was able to resolve customers' issues, and was consistent in how they treated customers

Appendix 2: CORE Survey Form – BlackBerry Questionnaire

Mayor's Office of Operations
Customer Service Group

CORE PROGRAM SURVEY FORM

OBSERVER NAME(S):
1. _____
2. _____

DATE: _____
TIME STARTED: _____
TIME ENDED: _____

Site Location #: _____
Alternate Location Information: _____

Question Type: Information Request Service Request Referral Request

I. SITE & SERVICE ACCESSIBILITY

a. Location was easy to spot from the outside Yes No

b. Entry signage directs to proper locations

Poor	Fair	Good	Excellent
1	2	3	4

c. Safety and security

Poor	Fair	Good	Excellent
1	2	3	4

d. Facility signage is accurate and professional

Poor	Fair	Good	Excellent
1	2	3	4

e. Facility signage communicates processes and requirements

Poor	Fair	Good	Excellent
1	2	3	4

Overall site and service accessibility

poor	fair	good	excellent
1	2	3	4

II. QUEUING AND SERVICE TRANSPARENCY

a. Greeter Present Not Present

b. Type of Queuing System
 Manual Electronic No system provided System is broken/not in use

c. Issue routing (ability to identify the right place to go)

Poor	Fair	Good	Excellent
1	2	3	4

d. Service Transparency (knowledge of how long it will take to complete a service)

Poor	Fair	Good	Excellent
1	2	3	4

e. Estimated wait time (by staff): _____ (minutes)

f. Actual/Reported wait time: _____ (minutes)

Overall queuing experience

Poor	fair	good	excellent
1	2	3	4

III. LANGUAGE ACCESS

a. Multilingual signage provided Languages Available: _____ Yes No

b. Translated materials readily available Languages Available: _____ Yes No

c. Notice of interpretation services Languages Available: _____ Yes No

d. Type of interpretation available by request
 Bilingual Employees Phone Interpretation None available

1 of 2

Mayor's Office of Operations
Customer Service Group

CORE PROGRAM SURVEY FORM

Languages Available: _____

Overall language access

poor	fair	good	excellent
1	2	3	4

IV. FACILITY ENVIRONMENT AND CONDITIONS:

Item	Problem
Graffiti	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes
Privacy/ Accommodations	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes
Lighting	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes
Floorcarpeting	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes
Walls	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes
Windows	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes
Ceilings	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes
Elevators	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes
Escalators	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes
Stairwell stairs	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes
Restrooms availability	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes
Seating	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes
Other	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes

Graffiti location (if applicable): _____
 Other Description (if applicable): _____

Overall Condition

Poor	fair	good	excellent
1	2	3	4

V. STAFF SERVICE EXPERIENCE

a. Courtesy and professionalism of the staff

Poor	Fair	Good	Excellent
1	2	3	4

b. Willingness to help/understand problems

Poor	Fair	Good	Excellent
1	2	3	4

c. Offers clear explanation/procedures

Poor	Fair	Good	Excellent
1	2	3	4

d. Customer request was fully addressed and completed

Poor	Fair	Good	Excellent
1	2	3	4

e. Service was consistent and fair

Poor	Fair	Good	Excellent
1	2	3	4

f. Staff name (if exceptional service): _____

Overall staff service experience

Poor	fair	good	excellent
1	2	3	4

Overall Satisfaction in Customer Service

Poor	fair	good	excellent
1	2	3	4

VI. CLARITY OF FORMS AND INSTRUCTIONS

This will be completed by permanent CORE staff at the office. Please collect all relevant forms and turn them in upon your return to the office.

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Appendix 3: CORE Survey Form – Database Response Form

Mayor's Office of Operations
Customer Service Group

CORE PROGRAM SURVEY FORM

Site Location: _____

- I. Was this location easy to identify and access?
- II. What did you like best about your experience?
- III. Did you feel safe both inside and outside the walk-in facility? If not, why?
- IV. Was it obvious to you at all times where to go, what to do, and how long you would wait? Why or why not?
- V. Please note any attitude related issues (if applicable).
- VI. Please note any facility related issues (if applicable).
- VII. Please note any additional strengths, outstanding experiences, or potential best practices that could be shared with others.
- VIII. Identify any recommendations you would like to provide to this facility.
 - a. Facility, signage or layout
 - b. Intake Process, queuing and language access
 - c. Employee attitude, skills or knowledge
- IX. Overall comments
- X. Does this walk in facility need a re-shop? (check one) ___ Yes ___ No

1 of 1

Appendix 4: Leading Practice Research

CSG researched existing mystery shopping programs in both the private and public sectors

Private Sector

Services Mystery Shopped	
Hotels and restaurants	Retail stores
Amusement parks and attractions	Spas
Gas stations	Banks

Public Sector

	Chicago Transit System	Washington, DC	Dallas, Texas	Charlotte-Mecklenburg County, NC	Miami-Dade County, FL
Description	Recruits volunteer commuters	Phone, letter and walk-in centers Used a vendor for mystery riders (DC Metro)	Bi-lingual shopping of 311 experience	Used vendor for web, phone and walk-in shops	311 Secret Shops by local university
Primary Purpose	To gain a detailed understanding of the customer experience.	To measure performance against standards.	To capture data to improve 311 process.	To add depth to the performance measurement system	To identify areas for rapid course correction.
Outcomes	Information integrated into decision making process and used to track accountability and performance.	Department heads receive reports and are required to correct problems.	Provided data that identified areas for improvement.	Results broken out by immediate and long term fixes.	Improvement in areas of concern.
City of New York Considerations	Volunteers may be hard to recruit and monitor.	Good model for comprehensive mystery shopping.	Inclusion of needs for Limited English Proficient (LEP) customers	Vendor services are expensive.	Local colleges could be mystery shopping resource

1) Mystery Shopping Providers Association, <http://www.mysteryshop.org/>, August 2008

2) "How to Make Money as a Mystery Shopper", ABC News, March 2006

3) Ibid

Appendix 5: Agency Leading Practices

Category	CORE Observation
Accessibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exterior signs are easily seen from the outside from a reasonable distance • Sites are well-branded – “know where you are” through color-coded floors, and appropriate directional signage
Customer Experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff was friendly and was able to answer questions quickly and completely • Security guards helpful in providing directions and demonstrated concern for clients • Forms for services readily available • Staff provided contact follow up number • Pamphlets easy to read and understand • Greeter present to help triage issues for customers upon entry • Customer success stories publicized in waiting areas • Playroom provided for children (as appropriate) • Waiting areas for high-trafficked facilities included televisions, refreshments, and reading materials such as magazines and newspapers
Service Transparency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • QMatic system lets customers know their place in line • Manual queuing gave customer good sense of place in line
Language Access	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In-language service through phone interpretation are readily available and well promoted by staff and signage • Use of appropriately placed, trained bi-lingual staff (most frequently found Spanish speakers) • Staff members well-versed in language access procedures
Facility Conditions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sites clean and graffiti free support feelings of safety and professionalism • Many sites were very well maintained, inclusive of commonly shared areas (waiting rooms, elevators, escalators)