

Administrative Policy No. 8.11

Subject: Complaint Resolution and Response Standards

Information Contact: Office of Government and Community Relations
Constituent Services
MS 45130, (360) 902-7878, 1-800-737-0617

Authorizing Source: Office of the Secretary
Governor's Executive Order 06-02

Effective Date: September 1, 2004

Revised: December 22, 2021

Approved By: Original signed by Dana Phelps
Deputy Chief of Staff

Purpose

This policy establishes the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) guidelines for resolving and responding to complaints regarding delivery of DSHS services and establishes a standard for DSHS administrations and employees in responding to general constituent complaints.

Scope

This policy applies to all DSHS administrations and employees.

Definitions

Acknowledge means informing constituents that their complaint has been received and a date by which a response can be expected.

Complaint means a constituent's expression of dissatisfaction with DSHS service delivery where the constituent clearly requests a response or resolution.

Constituents are any individuals or entities that contact the Department with a complaint, and may include clients, client's family members, advocates, members of the general public, elected officials, and businesses, excluding vendors, suppliers and contractors of the department.

Respond means to answer a question or complaint to the best of one's ability.

Service delivery means performance of job duties or interaction as a DSHS employee involving delivery of goods, services, or information to constituents.

Policy

- A. DSHS will provide timely response to constituent complaints regarding service delivery ensuring the constituent receives fair, courteous and equitable treatment.
- B. DSHS Constituent Services will serve as the central point of contact for this policy and constituents who wish to make a complaint to the DSHS Secretary or Chief of Staff.
- C. Each DSHS administration, division, office, facility, or unit will develop and maintain written procedures for handling constituent complaints as outlined in this policy and designate a central point(s) of contact for receiving and responding to constituent complaints in a timely and fair manner. The procedure(s) at each DSHS administration, division, office, facility, or unit shall incorporate general guidelines in this policy into their policy and procedures for responding to a complaint.
- D. Each administration's procedures need to specify how complaints are recorded, tracked, and handled within the unit, division, or administration and must ensure compliance with [Administrative Policy 5.01 Privacy Policy—Safeguarding Confidential Information](#).
- E. Managers and supervisors of DSHS administrations, divisions, offices, and units must review and communicate the expectations of this policy and procedures with staff at all levels of the organization.
- F. All complaints must be resolved at the lowest possible level within the administration, unless permitted as described in section I of this policy. The administration's procedures must include a process for the complaint to be elevated to the next level within DSHS.
- G. DSHS employees will communicate in a courteous, respectful, and professional manner with constituents making a complaint. However, employees may redirect or discontinue communication with a constituent(s) who is being abusive or threatening.
- H. DSHS employees will take appropriate steps to communicate with the constituent in their preferred language, using the constituent's preferred mode of communication, and providing access and information to accessibility resources, such as auxiliary aids and services as appropriate, ensuring compliance with [Administrative Policy 7.20](#)

[Communication Access for Persons who are Deaf, DeafBlind, Hard of Hearing, Late Deafened, Deaf Plus and/or Speech Disabled](#), [Administrative Policy 7.21 Access to Services for Clients who are Limited English Proficient \(LEP\)](#), [Administrative Policy 7.02 Equal Access to Services for Individuals with Disabilities](#), [Administrative Policy 14.10 Accessible Meetings](#), and [Administrative Policy 18.81 Nondiscrimination in Direct Client Services](#).

- I. This policy does not replace or supersede:
 1. Any existing DSHS administration, division, office, facility, or unit written complaint resolution and response procedure(s), contractual terms and conditions that govern DSHS relationships with our service providers, vendors or suppliers.
 2. Any procedure developed to implement federal law, state law, or Washington Administrative Code (WAC) requirements, such as procedures for responding to abuse allegations.
 3. Human Resource [Administrative Policy 18.69 Delegation of Authority for Civil Rights Complaint Investigations](#), for constituent allegations of civil rights discrimination by staff.
 4. [Administrative Policy 5.02 Public Disclosure of and Access to DSHS Records](#), for responding to public disclosure requests.
 5. Any procedure that identifies client rights, such as procedures for responding to a request for information about financial or social service programs or request for an application for emergency assistance.

Procedures

- A. For in-person or telephone complaints, employees will:
 1. Identify the constituent's preferred mode of communication, constituent's pronouns or preferred salutation (i.e. Ms., Mr., Dr., Mx., etc.); identify proper pronunciation of constituent's name, and determine any ADA auxiliary aids and services or language services needed.
 2. Acknowledge or respond within 48 hours to recorded telephone messages;
 3. Identify themselves and use a courteous and professional tone when speaking to constituents;
 4. Use plain language and explain any agency terminology or acronyms;
 5. Identify the complainant and attempt to resolve the complaint during the contact;
 6. Give the constituent an estimated timeframe in which the Department will respond to problems or issues that extend beyond the initial conversation; and
 7. If the employee is unable to resolve the complaint, follow-up with appropriate action, such as making a referral to the appropriate DSHS administration or program for resolution.

B. For written contacts (letters or e-mails), DSHS employees will:

1. Respond to written correspondence received by mail within seven calendar days. If the response will take longer than seven calendar days, make an interim contact with the constituent and give a reasonable estimated date of response. Respond to correspondence received by e-mail within 48 hours of receipt or return to work, as described in [DSHS Administrative Policy 14.18](#).
2. The written response must:
 - a. Acknowledge receipt of the correspondence;
 - b. Include a salutation. If the writer is anonymous, address the letter "Dear Concerned Citizen" or another similar salutation;
 - c. Make reference to the constituent's correspondence and restate the constituent's complaint(s) or concern(s) in the body of the letter;
 - d. If the constituent wrote to a different party, inform the constituent why the letter was referred to your administration or division;
 - e. Use proper grammar, spelling, capitalization, punctuation, and formatting (e.g., paragraphs);
 - f. Use constituent's specified pronouns and preferred salutation throughout the message.
 - g. Close with a signature block that includes:
 - i. The writer's full name;
 - ii. Title or office; unit, division or administration; and
 - iii. If applicable, a name and contact information for the constituent to contact for questions.
3. When using e-mail to respond, use an accessible font and avoid active backgrounds, bright colors, moving icons, and other distracting elements. Remove any internal e-mail dialogue before sending the response to the constituent.

C. When a constituent alleges civil rights discrimination based on actions or inaction by a DSHS employee, by name or title, based on race, color, creed, religion, national origin, sexual orientation, age, sex, presence of any sensory, mental or physical disability, or use of a trained dog guide or service animal by a person with a disability, disabled veteran status or Vietnam Era veteran status, or other protected veteran status, the administrative unit shall immediately send the complaint to the DSHS Human Resources Division Investigations Unit at PO Box 45839, Olympia, WA 98504-5839 or via the Investigations Unit inbox at iraucomplaints@dshs.wa.gov. When a constituent alleges civil rights discrimination that does not appear to contain any allegation against specific DSHS staff, by name or title, or which are related to a programmatic function or decision, the administrative unit shall immediately send the complaint to DSHS Constituent Services at DSHS Constituent Services PO Box 45130 Olympia, WA 98504-5130 or via the Constituent Services inbox at askdshs@dshs.wa.gov.

D. Responding to referrals from a Legislative member's office.

1. Call the constituent directly unless e-mail or hard copy mail has been requested or is the preferred contact method. Explain that you are calling the constituent in response to their inquiry to the legislator's office.
2. Constituent Services or designated administrative staff should contact the legislator's office regarding the outcome.
 - a. Case specific details may be provided to the legislator or their staff if DSHS has been provided an authorization form signed by the constituent. If DSHS has not received an authorization form, provide the legislator's office with general program or policy information. Note: Disclosure of confidential information contained in special records (i.e. mental health treatment, chemical dependency, HIV/AIDS/STD) requires an additional level of authorization, in accordance with [DSHS Administrative Policy No. 5.02](#).
3. If responding directly to the legislator, the designated administrative staff should update Constituent Services by sending an e-mail to the constituent services inbox at askdshs@dshs.wa.gov confirming that contact with the constituent and legislator's office has been attempted.

E. Responding to referrals from the Governor's Office.

1. No authorization is required for any inquiries from the Governor
2. Do not have staff contact the Governor's Office directly. Instead, staff should refer any questions or concerns to the Constituent Services Manager.
3. Contact the constituent on behalf of the Governor and send Constituent Services updated information regarding details of the correspondence.

Note: Legal authorization from the client or a personal representative is required to share information with persons outside of DSHS unless otherwise authorized by law. Authorization from the client is not required when responding to the Governor's Office correspondence assignments or inquiries as part of the administration of DSHS programs.