

Righting the Wrongs: Complaints Management in the Western Australian Public Sector

Report 9 – October 2001

Background

Public sector agencies in Western countries are increasingly placing greater emphasis on government services becoming more customer-orientated and being responsive to customer feedback.

Complaints are expressions of dissatisfaction made by customers and as such form a major source of customer feedback of services received from government agencies. Agencies implement complaints management systems to effectively manage individual complaints and facilitate service improvements.

Managing individual complaints alone, without the extra effort of service improvement, is very much a 'band aid' treatment of a symptom without addressing the cause of the service deficiency. Well-managed complaints handling can lead to improved services and more cost-effective systems.

The examination evaluates the complaints management systems at six agencies with a high degree of service provision to the public.

What the examination found...

- Of the six agencies evaluated only Royal Perth Hospital and Western Power were able to demonstrate a satisfactory level of performance in effectively managing individual complaints.
- The Department of Education, the licensing section of the Department of Transport, the Library and Information Services of WA, and the former Department of Productivity and Labour Relations all had complaints management systems that failed to meet the Australian Standard on Complaints Handling (AS 4269-1995).
- Most agencies are still grappling with the use of complaints to drive service improvements. Only two out of the six agencies, namely, Royal Perth Hospital and Western Power, achieved an acceptable level of performance for using complaints data to improve services. Both agencies were able to demonstrate that their systematic approach to the use of complaints had led directly to improved services.
- Aside from Western Power which has a newly implemented complaints system not yet due for review, none of the agencies has properly reviewed their complaints management systems.
- It was noted that the public might not generally be aware of their appeal rights, such as the right to appeal to the Ombudsman. Agencies could distribute such information via pamphlets and in response to individual complaints.
- Since the audit, all agencies have initiated processes to review their systems and progress identified issues.

In summary what the examination recommended...

Major recommendations made in the report are that agencies need to:

- demonstrate they are able to manage individual complaints efficiently and effectively, for example, by applying the essential elements of the Australian Standard on Complaints Handling.
- appropriately resource the complaints management function, particularly by establishing and maintaining an adequate complaints recording system and ensuring staff are trained in complaints management.
- demonstrate accountability for their handling of complaints by setting target timelines, monitoring progress and regularly reporting on outcomes.
- actively encourage communication of complaints by providing a highly visible and easily accessible process for making complaints and by assisting individuals to lodge complaints.
- invest appropriate resources in staff time and systems for analysing whole of agency complaints data in order to identify possible service improvements.
- periodically review their complaints management system with a view to improving services.