

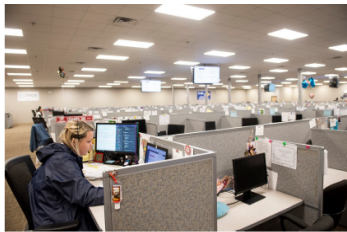
SHARE



U.S.

Isolated by Coronavirus, Frightened Americans Welcome Calls From Phone Banks

Pandemic brings wrenching emotion to routine calls, prompting agents to take more breaks: 'I'm sobbing.'



A call center in Montgomery, Ala., last month. Many call-center workers are phoning from home in light of coronavirus social-distancing measures.

PHOTO: JAKE CRANDALL/ASSOCIATED PRESS

By *Aaron Zitner*

April 20, 2020 5:30 am ET

A homebound nation is turning to the telephone to connect with the outside world amid the [coronavirus pandemic](#). For customer-service agents and others who work by phone, that has added new tension and emotion to normally routine calls.

People are quick to pick up calls that in the past might have gone to voice mail—and eager to share their anxieties. While the agents aren't on the front lines of hospital work, they say they are bearing some of the emotional weight of a frightened public.

Kelleigh Sheridan has worked as a customer-service representative for much of the past 28 years, fielding calls for clients ranging from doctors to garage-door companies. Now, she spends her days calling New York residents with coronavirus symptoms to arrange for Covid-19 testing, giving her a window into the lives of parents panicked about their children, seniors dealing with illness in isolation and, at times, people gasping so hard for breath that she has called for emergency help.

She starts the day with a prayer: "I say, 'Shield my sadness from the people I'm calling, so that I don't make their days worse than they are,'" said Ms. Sheridan, who works from home in Stockton, Calif., for a call-center company contracted by New York state.

"Sometimes I just have to get off the phone and cry," she said.

A scared public has grown more welcoming of call-center workers, even when they are calling about matters far removed from the pandemic. "We have callers who want to go on and on on random things, because they are lonely and at home and don't have anything better to do," said Mark Pereira of Fort Wayne, Ind.-based Brijent LLC, which provides some of the agents who handle calls for Indiana's Medicaid program. "And then you have some people who are afraid and just want to talk."

Yaron Zimmerman, who leads the voices-services division at Dynata, a consumer-research firm with about 3,000 phone agents, said response rates for consumer surveys conducted by landline have tripled since February, from below 2% to nearly 6%. Cellphone response rates have jumped from 2.5% to more than 7%.

"People will just start talking about one thing, and it snowballs from there," said 24-year-old Rebecca Mollere of Phoenix, who conducts consumer surveys for Dynata. A woman alone with two young children told her she hadn't talked to anyone outside the home for days. A man who had just lost his job wanted to talk through his financial fears.

"You hear the fear, and that's disquieting," said Darlene Campbell, owner of Information Communications Group in Leawood, Kan., which handles call-answering services for more than 3,000 medical offices. Her phone lines have been inundated with people trying to reach their doctors for information, even if the medical specialty is far afield from infectious diseases.

Callers were giving so much of their medical histories in hopes of reaching a doctor immediately that Ms. Campbell had to instruct her agents to cut down on the information they were recording.

"The panic in peoples' voices was the part that moved my agents," she said.

When Ms. Sheridan called one woman in the Bronx to schedule Covid-19 testing, she heard gasping and heavy breathing on the other end of the phone. The woman, who Ms. Sheridan knew from health records to be 62 years old, was speaking in Spanish, but it was clear she was asking for help.



'Who's taking care of you?' phone worker Lisa Winterbottom found herself wondering in talking to one woman burdened by coronavirus's toll.

Ms. Sheridan, based in California, began searching the internet for an emergency number in New York. "She's moaning and asking for help, and I'm calling and getting answering machine after answering machine," Ms. Sheridan said. "And I'm sobbing, and tears are streaming down."

Finally, a business line for the New York City Police Department led her to an emergency line. Because of privacy rules, Ms. Sheridan couldn't retain the woman's personal information or contacts and never found out whether she received help.

The call-center company Ms. Sheridan works for, AnswerNet of Willow Grove, Pa., recently told agents they could ask supervisors for a break after emotional calls to collect themselves, rather than moving directly to the next call. Gary Pudles, the company's chief executive, said he didn't want the emotion of one call to carry over to the next.

Sometimes, agents go out of their way to offer emotional support. Lisa Winterbottom, who is also scheduling Covid-19 testing as an AnswerNet agent, spoke recently with a woman to schedule tests for her mother, her child and her husband, who was required to leave the house every day for work.



Amanda Schaffer, a Philadelphia-based phone agent.

PHOTO: AMANDA SCHAFFER

"And I'm feeling: 'Who's taking care of you?'" Ms. Winterbottom said. "I told her, 'I'm so proud of what you're doing. You're doing a great job. You're holding the family together.'"

Amanda Schaffer, a Philadelphia-based AnswerNet agent, said for many people she reaches, the phone has become a welcome alternative to social media.

"In a world full of texting and social networking, where everyone's thoughts and feelings are typed out, I find that in the past month of calling people how much we miss talking on the phone, just conversing," Ms. Schaffer said.

"Even though it's not face-to-face," she added, "it's the human touch that everyone needs right now."

STAY INFORMED

Get a coronavirus briefing six days a week, and a weekly Health newsletter once the crisis abates: [Sign up here](#).

Write to Aaron Zitner at Aaron.Zitner@dowjones.com