

Department of Health and Human Services: An Analysis of the Application Process for Public Assistance Programs



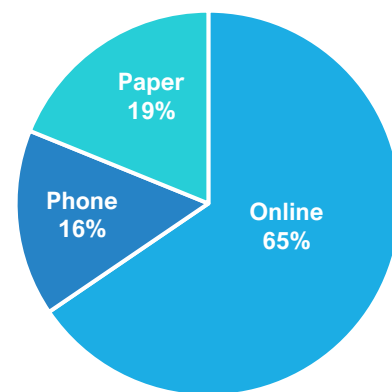
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Public Assistance Programs

The Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) administers a number of public assistance programs for the state. There are four ways to apply for these programs: online through the iServe Nebraska portal, calling DHHS, visiting a DHHS-staffed office, or printing an application and mailing it to DHHS.

From 2019 through 2024, there were over two million applications for public assistance programs submitted. The majority of applications, about 1.3 million (65%), were completed online. There were about 386,000 paper applications and over 320,000 phone applications submitted during this same time period.

From 2019 to 2024, about two thirds of public assistance applications were completed online.



iServe Nebraska

DHHS began the transition to the iServe Nebraska portal in April 2022. In October 2023, an integrated application combining both Economic Assistance and Medicaid applications launched (previously, applying for both program categories required two applications).

The iServe project had a budget of almost \$105 million, however, DHHS spent a little less than \$50 million, or slightly less than half of the budgeted amount. Additionally, all outstanding implementation projects were finished within their targeted timelines and the portal is fully complete and operational.

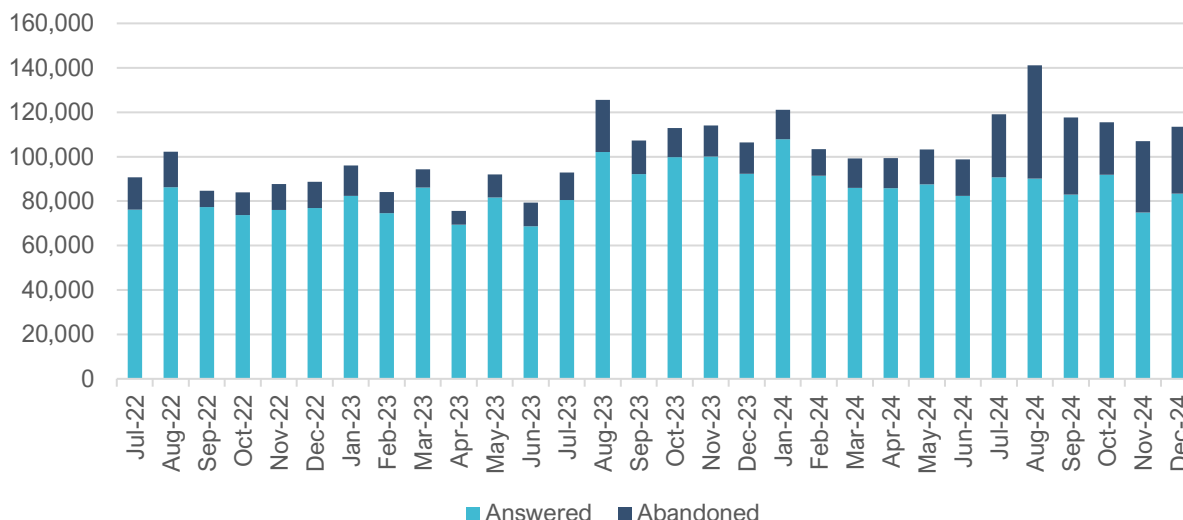
Call Centers

DHHS has five call centers in Fremont, Lexington, Lincoln, Omaha, and Scottsbluff that assist individuals with applying for public assistance programs over the phone. DHHS call center staff can take phone applications, interview individuals when required by the program, and make determinations regarding program eligibility.

In 2020, DHHS contracted with outside vendors to assist with an increase in customer calls caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. When call volume returned to pre-pandemic levels, contractors were mostly phased out: only one vendor continues to process incoming calls. Staff working for outside call center vendors have a more limited scope of tasks: they can answer questions and take phone applications but cannot make eligibility determinations.

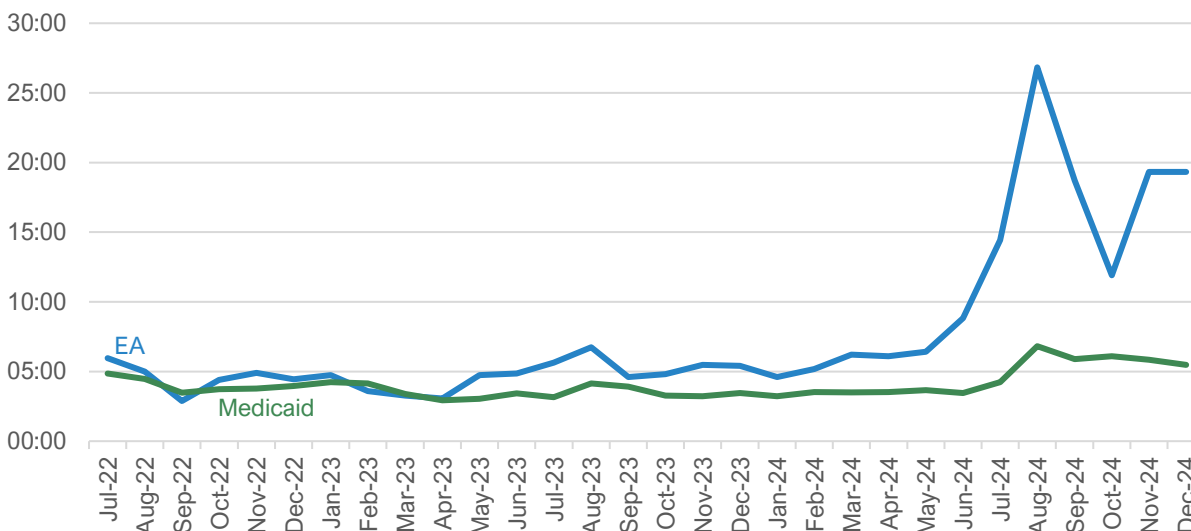
From July 2022 to December 2024, the total number of calls received by DHHS and their contractors together, for all public assistance program calls, was just over 3 million. Overall, there was an increase in the number of calls received. While the number fluctuated month to month, there was also an increase in the percentage of abandoned calls—increasing from 16% in January 2022 to 27% in December 2024.

Looking at both DHHS and contractor data, August saw spikes in the number of calls received every year.



The amount of time a caller waited for their call to be answered was relatively steady in 2022 and 2023, generally below or around 5 minutes for both Economic Assistance and Medicaid. However, starting in March 2024, Economic Assistance calls surpassed 6 minutes of wait time and grew steadily to a high of almost 27 minutes in August 2024. In August 2024, Medicaid calls also hit their longest wait time, around 7 minutes.

The average call wait time increased substantially for Economic Assistance calls in 2024.



From 2022 to July 2024, DHHS' goal was an average wait time of 5 minutes or less. In August 2024, this goal was changed from 5 minutes to 10 minutes. For Economic Assistance calls during our review period, the wait time was at or near the 5-minute goal until June 2024. Even with the increase to a 10-minute goal in August 2024, the wait time goal was not met for the remainder of the review period. For Medicaid calls, wait times met the goal for the entire review period, as the average wait time did not exceed 5 minutes until August 2024, when the wait time goal was raised to 10 minutes.