

## Proactive efforts drive down delinquencies at water utility.

*Inbound and Outbound IVR delivers the foundation for a successful customer service solution in Thornton.*

### Situation

Thornton's population was growing rapidly, rising from 82,000 in 2000 to 114,000 in 2009. The utility department was challenged to keep up with the demand for services as the total number of customer accounts had risen by 50% during the same 10-year period.

The slowing economy was having an impact as well. More and more customers were falling behind on their utility payments and delinquencies were rising. Customer service personnel were experiencing a sharp increase in calls and walk-ins from customers who were questioning their bill details and asking for payment extensions. Shutoffs due to delinquency were also rising.

With increasing workloads for customer service staff and collections mounting, City management passed down a directive to "improve collections and processes without hiring new staff."

### Solution

Tele-Works worked closely with City staff to implement interactive voice response (IVR) and web solutions to cut down on the many obstacles customers faced when making their monthly water bill payments. The Utility now offers convenient customer self-service access to account information by phone and web. Customers can quickly check their account balance, get their payment and consumption history, and make payments by credit card or eCheck – all in real time. Customers now have the opportunity to transact business without having to speak to a live person, make the trip to City Hall, or wait in line, saving everyone time and money.

The City also wanted to maintain the personal touch a live person adds to customer service. So, during business hours, citizens always have the choice to press '0' to reach a live agent, which maintains the personal aspect while increasing the service options available to customers. Nevertheless, a large segment of the population has come to rely on the convenience of conducting business with the IVR and web since it is available 24/7.

To directly combat the rise in delinquencies, the Utility Customer Service Department instituted a number of proactive measures to overhaul the collection and delinquency

### 2009 Statistics

Population: 114,000 (39% growth since 2000)  
Utility customers: 36,800

- ✓ Shutoffs due to delinquency declined 30% in just one year.
- ✓ \$8.9 million was collected through the system (23% of total payments).
- ✓ IVR handled 250,000 minutes, the equivalent of more than 2 full-time staff!

process. Central to these efforts was implementing *alertworks™* Outbound Call Manager from Tele-Works to deliver approximately 400 reminder calls each week to past-due customers. At the same time, Customer Service made a significant effort to redefine the entire delinquency/collections process in the eyes of its customers. One key change was to begin more stringent enforcement of payment dates and cut-off deadlines. The City instituted a new \$10 late fee, and with the additional fees collected, the City was able to initiate a payment assistance program for its low-income customers.

### Benefits

The results have been stellar. The City now takes over 100,000 payments and collects more than \$9 million each year through the system, which is approximately 23% of total payments. After seeing a rise in delinquencies in 2008, the City experienced a fantastic 30% reduction in shutoffs due to delinquency in 2009 – from 6,230 (2008) to 4,300 (2009).

The IVR system automatically handles 8,250 inbound and outbound calls per month, which is the equivalent of 250,000 minutes each year. By automating many manual processes and being proactive in customer service delivery, Thornton has been able to avoid the expense of hiring additional work crews and customer service personnel while delivering a more positive experience for its customers.