

Chapter 4

Section 4.11

Ministry of Government Services

Office of the Registrar General

Follow-up to VFM Section 3.11, *2005 Annual Report*

Background

The Office of the Registrar General (Office) registers births, deaths, marriages, stillbirths, adoptions, and name changes and provides certificates and certified copies of registrations to the public. In the 2006/07 fiscal year, approximately 300,000 events were registered (the same in 2004/05) and 600,000 certificates and certified copies (400,000 in 2004/05) were issued. (The considerable increase in certificates since our *2005 Annual Report* is primarily because of changed requirements for passports needed to enter the United States). In the 2006/07 fiscal year, the Office had operating expenditures of \$22 million (\$30.3 million in 2004/05), and collected \$24.3 million in fees for issuing certificates (\$19.6 million in 2004/05).

In our *2005 Annual Report*, we found that, until a few years earlier, the Office had registered all vital events and provided the public with timely and reliable service for all document requests. However, owing largely to significant and continuing problems with a new computer system and human resources issues, the turnaround time for getting essential documents, formerly about three weeks, had increased to several months, even a year or more, despite more than a doubling of staff. At the

time of our audit, the Office advised us that the situation had improved; however, we found that it often still took months to obtain certificates.

We concluded that significant improvements were required in a number of key areas. For instance:

- The Office's call centres were not effective in handling the public's inquiries and complaints—99% of calls either produced busy signals or were disconnected before callers could reach someone to help them.
- Prudent business and information technology practices were not being followed in the acquisition, development, and implementation of a new computer system. As of March 2005, the system had cost over \$10 million—more than \$6 million above the original estimate of \$3.75 million. Furthermore, the system was implemented before it was ready, with numerous outstanding work orders and without many of the necessary capabilities in place.
- Staff morale and productivity had declined significantly because of a poorly planned organization restructuring and questionable promotion practices. Specifically, a new level of managers was appointed, without competition or job specification. Clerical staff with little management experience were appointed to supervise existing managers to whom they used to report. None of the existing managers

was given an opportunity to compete for the new positions.

- There were inadequate controls to safeguard registration information from unauthorized access and from loss in the event of a disaster.

We made a number of recommendations for improvement and received commitments that the Office of the Registrar General would continue to take action to address our concerns.

Current Status of Recommendations

According to information received from the Office of the Registrar General, significant progress has been made in addressing most of the recommendations in our *2005 Annual Report*. Additional work is still required and under way to further reduce backlogs in certificate applications and the Office's call centre service. The current status of action taken on each of our recommendations is as follows.

REGISTERING VITAL EVENTS AND ISSUING CERTIFICATES

Delays in Registrations

Recommendation

To properly discharge its legislative responsibilities in registering vital events, the Office of the Registrar General should:

- *take steps to bring all outstanding registrations up to date and process incoming registrations when notification of the vital events is received;*
- *correct all errors in the original registration records promptly once they have been brought to the Office's attention; and*
- *inform certificate applicants on a timely basis in cases when the vital event has not been registered and specify what, if any, action is required on their part.*

Current Status

According to the Office, the number of vital events not registered decreased by 75%, from 178,000 to 45,000, between December 2004 and April 2007. The Office's goal is to maintain the inventory of registration applications at no more than 40,000 to 50,000 at any given time in order to meet service standards. As well, the Office told us that it had consistently processed registrations that were complete and clear of errors within its six to eight week service standard since 2005. The Office suggested that this service improvement is owing in part to the introduction in 2006 of the Newborn Registration Service, an online integrated birth registration service that combines completion of the birth registration form with applications for a birth certificate and social insurance card. Specifically, parents now complete onscreen a birth registration form that they then print and mail to their municipality. As part of the same transaction, they also automatically send in the request for the birth certificate and social insurance number without having to key in the information again. This single-input method helps reduce errors in registration forms and improves processing time. The next phase of this project allowing both parents and hospitals to complete and submit their registration forms on-line—with no need to mail paper documents to local municipalities—was to be launched in selected parts of the province in summer 2007. The Office informed us that it planned to roll out the service across the province starting in late 2007.

The Office also reported that the timely correction of errors was ongoing, with errors being corrected in six to eight weeks once they had been brought to the Office's attention.

With respect to informing certificate applicants on a timely basis in cases when the vital event has not been registered, the Office indicated that it had implemented procedures to accomplish this. Specifically, in cases where parents have applied for a birth certificate but have not registered the birth, the Office sends a letter reminding them of

the required process. The Office sends up to three reminder letters. In addition, the Office introduced an on-line birth-certificate application in 2005. This system reminds applicants that the birth must be registered prior to certificate issuance and suggests that parents use the on-line Newborn Registration Service if they have not registered the child's birth.

Delays in Certificates

Recommendation

To provide more timely and effective customer service, the Office of the Registrar General should:

- *provide a more reliable estimate to applicants on the turnaround time for birth, death, and marriage certificates;*
- *track incoming applications for certificates better and, if information is missing, promptly advise applicants and follow up when the information is not forthcoming; and*
- *promptly process the applications where additional information has been provided as requested.*

Current Status

In December 2005, the Office implemented an on-line status-inquiry system for certificate applications. This system maintains information about completed applications for 30 days, cancelled applications for 60 days, and applications in progress for a year. In addition, the Office launched what it says is the first-ever government-service guarantee for service delivery. For births (since November 2005) and marriages and deaths (since January 2007), a full money-back guarantee has been offered to customers who apply on-line. If an application is complete, accurate, and meets the Office's terms and conditions, there is a 15-business-day service guarantee for processing marriage and death certificate applications, and for the processing and delivery of birth certificates. As of June 2007, the Office indicated that it had met the service guarantee standard over 99% of the time, and had only issued about 150 refunds for on-line certificate applications

(the clients who received the refunds on average received their certificates within 24 business days).

In the case of applications where further information is required from clients, the Office told us that, after the initial request was sent to the clients, it would not send another request unless the customer contacted the Office. The Office advised us that at the time of our follow-up, there were 75,000 applications awaiting applicant response. Of these 75,000 applications, two-thirds were over a year old, which might indicate that the clients have abandoned these applications. The Office indicated that, once outstanding information was received from the client, the application was processed within six to eight weeks.

HANDLING INQUIRIES AND COMPLAINTS

Recommendation

To deal more effectively and efficiently with applicant inquiries and complaints, the Office of the Registrar General should:

- *consider providing automated prerecorded messages to inform applicants of the delays and estimated times for delivery of various types of certificates; and*
- *review the current deployment of staff with a view to increasing the efficiency of the Office's operations.*

Current Status

The Office acknowledged that there were still calls that were not able to get through; however, it indicated that, as of the time of our follow-up, the number of calls that received a busy signal had decreased from 130,000 per day in 2005 to about 5,000 per day in March 2007. The Office had introduced pre-recorded messages that included processing times for certificate requests and general information to callers. The Office had also introduced on-line self-service status checking, which allows clients to determine the status of their applications on-line instead of over the telephone.

The Office informed us that, at the time of our follow-up, staffing was being monitored and reviewed daily. The Office indicated that it looked for continuous improvement opportunities through productivity reviews. All areas relating to certificate issuance, registration, and specialty services had been or were being reviewed by outside consultants or internally by ministry staff.

VISION: A NEW COMPUTER SYSTEM

System Procurement

Recommendation

To promote better value for money for taxpayers when acquiring any major computer system, the Office of the Registrar General should:

- *ensure that sound project-planning practices for information technology are followed when deciding whether to buy the system or build it internally, giving due consideration to the capacity and experience of staff as well as objectively considering whether proven solutions exist in the marketplace;*
- *ensure that timelines and project costs for acquiring the system, whether it is built internally or bought from outside vendors, are based on a sound and objective analysis; and*
- *ensure that specific Management Board of Cabinet approval is obtained when there are significant changes to the originally approved business case and approach.*

Current Status

The Office indicated that it, along with the Government Services Delivery Cluster, had ensured that government-approved procurement business practices would be followed, including considerations as recommended in our *2005 Annual Report*, for systems developed subsequent to VISION. System development under way at the time of our follow-up included implementation of a new fully on-line death registration system, and the

upgrading of the Registrar General Document Management System.

System Development and Implementation

Recommendation

To ensure the delivery of timely service to the public and to help achieve the original objectives of the project in making the Office of the Registrar General more effective and efficient, the Ministry should:

- *establish accountability for development and implementation of the project to make sure that the roles of respective stakeholders are clearly understood and fulfilled; and*
- *expedite efforts to fix all critical outstanding work orders to ensure that the system functions properly and provides a stable environment for staff to work with.*

Current Status

The Office indicated that, since 2005, all planned project deliverables and system improvements have been delivered on time. It further indicated that, as of the time of our follow-up, project charters that established the roles of stakeholders and their accountability for development and implementation had been established for all system projects. These projects included those that had either been completed or were in the process of being completed since our *2005 Annual Report*.

In 2005, we reported that approximately 130 work orders relating to the VISION system that were deemed critical had yet to be dealt with. The Office advised us that, as of the time of our follow-up, the number of work orders critical in terms of enhanced service levels and efficiency remaining to be implemented had decreased to 73. The Office stated that work orders that were deemed critical would continue to be addressed on a priority basis and work orders that were deemed low-priority would be addressed as appropriate based on business needs.

MANAGING HUMAN RESOURCES

Recommendation

To improve staff productivity and morale, the Office of the Registrar General should comply with prudent human resources management practices that include:

- *proper planning and approvals before proceeding with an organizational restructuring;*
- *the development of clear job specifications to ensure that staff are fully aware of their duties and responsibilities;*
- *a proper assessment of staff qualifications before appointing anyone to a position, including an assessment of the required education, experience, and skills of the position;*
- *the advertising of and competition for job openings to ensure fairness and accessibility unless extenuating circumstances warrant otherwise; and*
- *the proper approval for any departure from Public Service Act requirements or Management Board of Cabinet directives.*

Current Status

The Office employed 280 staff at the time of our follow-up, compared to approximately 350 in 2005. According to the Office, since 2005, all permanent recruitments were conducted through advertised competitions and job specifications had been written for all new positions. The Office indicated that, from January 2005 until the time of our follow-up, 16 new job specifications had been written and classified, and 30 competitions had been completed that resulted in the hiring of operational and management level positions. The Office also indicated that a new training program was introduced in 2006 to strengthen staff competencies and enhance productivity.

SAFEGUARDING VITAL EVENTS INFORMATION

Recommendation

To ensure that confidential data are adequately protected against unauthorized access and tampering,

the Office of the Registrar General should implement appropriate access and security controls, including promptly addressing the security concerns already identified.

Current Status

In its original response included in our 2005 Annual Report, the Office indicated that it had implemented off-site tape backup storage and was in the process of implementing enhanced firewall protection. At the time of our follow-up, the Office informed us that it had subsequently implemented enhanced firewall protection.

INTEGRATING REGISTRATION AND CERTIFICATE ISSUANCE

Recommendation

To meet its mandate of registering vital events and providing certificates more efficiently, the Office of the Registrar General should formally assess the option of integrating the registration and certificate issuance processes into one combined process.

Current Status

The Office indicated that the on-line Newborn Registration Service, which integrates birth registration and certificate issuance, was rolled out across Ontario in 2006. According to the Office, 35% of birth registrations were completed using this service between September 2006 and March 2007. The Office indicated that further promotion and marketing of this service is likely to increase uptake rates across the province. The Office also indicated that a system that would allow birth registrations to be submitted on-line, rather than by paper documents mailed to local municipalities, was to be launched in selected parts of the province in summer 2007. The Office informed us that it planned to roll out this service across the province starting in late 2007.