

SESSION WATS LINE SERVICE - INCOMING LINES - MESSAGE OPTIONS

CURRENT INCOMING WATS LINE SERVICE Number of Calls

During the 1987 legislative session, four incoming WATS lines were provided for residents in the state to contact legislators or obtain information concerning legislative proposals. In 1989 the number of WATS lines was increased to six. The number of calls received during recent sessions generally has declined—60,896 in 1991, 62,320 in 1993, 41,668 in 1995, and 31,541 in 1997. These numbers do not include local calls.

In 1991, a new type of WATS line service—AT&T 800 Masterline—was installed which provided extensive monthly reports detailing the number from which each call is placed; the date, time, and length of each call; and an executive summary of the information. In addition, information was available on the number of incompleting calls, i.e., calls that receive busy signals or are unanswered (calls after hours). According to AT&T, incompleting calls during the 1991 session averaged 18 percent in January (10,250 calls received) and February (28,193 calls received) and dropped to 11 percent during March (19,245 calls received). As the AT&T account executive stated regarding the incoming WATS lines service:

I also looked at the incompleting calls. . . . The ratio is not significantly high. The State has done an excellent job of determining the right amount of lines necessary to handle the volume of calls.

Number of Telephone Attendants

Telephone attendants during recent sessions have worked staggered shifts. One has worked 7:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. while the others have worked 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. All took staggered coffee breaks and lunch hours. The chief telephone attendant and two telephone pages have taken calls when they were not occupied with other duties, e.g., the telephone pages also sorted and delivered incoming fax messages, which numbered over 8,000 in 1997 and ranged from 1 to 40 pages in length. The 1997 session was the first session in which faxes were received in the telephone room. In prior sessions, pages retrieved fax messages from the Information Services Division and delivered the messages to legislators.

The following table describes the number of employees in the telephone room during recent legislative sessions (the chief telephone attendant has been one of three positions that has alternated between the houses—the other two are the supply room attendant and the payroll clerk):

Session	House	Senate	Total
1987	3 telephone attendants 1 telephone page	Chief telephone attendant 3 telephone attendants 1 telephone page	9
1989*	Chief telephone attendant 3 telephone attendants 1 telephone page	4 telephone attendants 1 telephone page	10
1991	3 telephone attendants 1 telephone page	Chief telephone attendant 4 telephone attendants 1 telephone page	10
1993	Chief telephone attendant 3 telephone attendants 1 telephone page	4 telephone attendants 1 telephone page	10
1995	4 telephone attendants 1 telephone page	Chief telephone attendant 4 telephone attendants 1 telephone page	11
1997	Chief telephone attendant 4 telephone attendants 1 telephone page	4 telephone attendants 1 telephone page	11

* Number of WATS lines increased to six.

During the 1997 session one telephone attendant left employment in mid-March and was not replaced.

Call Distribution - "Busy" Signals

In recent sessions, incoming WATS line calls have been subject to automatic call distribution (ACD). Under ACD, no caller receives a busy signal, and the call is answered immediately, either by presenting the call to an available operator or by generating a recorded message. Calls are answered on a first-come, first-served basis. Calls are sent to the operator who has been waiting the longest for a call. The recorded message differs, depending on whether the call is during regular business hours, after hours, or on weekends.

During the 1997 legislative session, a caller who was not routed to a telephone attendant heard the following message:

Thank you for calling the 1997 North Dakota Legislative Assembly. Session hours are 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Monday through Friday. All lines are currently busy. Your call is important, so please try again.

A caller who called after hours or during weekends heard the following message:

Thank you for calling the 1997 North Dakota Legislative Assembly. Session hours are 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Monday through Friday. Please call back during those hours.

In order to retain the incoming WATS line number (1-888-ND-LEGIS), the service is continued during the interim. Since adjournment on April 11, 1997, a caller on the incoming WATS line has heard this message:

Thank you for calling the North Dakota Legislative Assembly. The session adjourned on April 11, 1997, and will not reconvene until January of 1999. Thank you.

"BUSY" SIGNAL MESSAGE OPTIONS

Call Hold Option

One option is to use the current procedure except when a caller is not routed to a telephone attendant, the caller would have the option of staying on the line and being routed to the next available telephone attendant. A suggested message is:

Thank you for calling the 1999 North Dakota Legislative Assembly. All lines are currently busy. You may call back later or stay on the line and your call will be answered in the order in which it was received. (During this time music would be heard and after a period of time a second recording would inform the caller that all operators are still busy. The sequence of music and second recording would be repeated as many times as necessary until a telephone attendant is available to take the call or the caller decides to call back later.)

Under this option, a person's call would be taken as soon as a telephone attendant becomes available. There would be no limit on the number of callers waiting or on the length of the wait.

Message Option

Another option is to use the current procedure except when a caller does not reach a telephone attendant, the caller would have the option of leaving a message. A suggested message is:

Thank you for calling the 1999 North Dakota Legislative Assembly. All lines are currently busy. If you would like to leave a message for the legislators from your legislative district, please do so after the tone by spelling your last name and giving your first name, your telephone number, mailing address, and e-mail address if you have one. Please give your legislative district number and the names of your legislators if you know them. If your message relates to a particular bill, please provide the bill number and the message with respect to that bill. Unless you request otherwise, your message will be given to the three legislators from your district.

Note that if a message is to be left for legislators, specific information needs to be obtained in order for the telephone attendants to adequately relay the message to the appropriate legislators. As reported by the telephone attendants, most callers do not know their legislative district or who their legislators are, many callers do not know the number of the bill on which they want to comment, and many callers request messages to be given to several legislators. In addition, legislators have requested that the telephone attendants be accurate in spelling the names of the callers. Thus, this type of information would be essential for any message that is to be left.

Call Hold or Message Option

Another option is to use the current procedure except provide an option for a caller to stay on the line or leave a message for a legislator. A suggested message is:

Thank you for calling the 1999 North Dakota Legislative Assembly. All lines are currently busy. If you would like to speak to a telephone attendant, please stay on the line and your call will be answered in the order in which it is received. If you would like to leave a message for the legislators from your legislative district, press "one" and leave a message after the tone by spelling your last name and giving your first name, your telephone number, mailing address, and e-mail address if you have one. Please give your legislative district number and the names of your legislators if you know them. If your message relates to a particular bill, please provide the bill number and the

message with respect to that bill. Unless you request otherwise, your message will be given to the three legislators from your district.

RECOMMENDATION

The option allowing a person to stay on the line until the next available telephone attendant is routed the call or leaving a message provides the greatest flexibility to callers—they can hold or leave a message. After hours, they could leave messages, and thus “service” would be provided 24 hours a day, seven days a week. This would also distribute workload evenly, if the telephone attendants would retrieve messages whenever calls are not being directed to every attendant. If messages provide insufficient information, this option could be reviewed after the

first month of the session to determine if the option to leave a message should be deleted in order to provide quality service (direct contact with a telephone attendant who can obtain the information). Because there has been no experience with callers leaving messages, it is not possible to determine the impact on the workload, nor is it possible to predict how this option might affect the timeliness of messages. If numerous messages were to be left overnight and the telephone attendants could not transcribe all the messages in a timely manner, it is possible some messages might not be delivered on time, such as a constituent calling to inform a legislator of the constituent’s ability or inability to attend a hearing the next morning.