USA SERVICES

USA Services' FirstContact Contract Vehicle Helps Agencies Serve Citizens

Partner Agency: U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

The Situation:

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) provides benefits to approximately 70 million veterans, dependents, and survivors. These benefits include pensions, financial assistance for education, rehabilitation, home loan guarantees, life insurance, burial assistance, medical care, and compensation payments for disabilities or death related to a veteran's military service. In most cases, the recipients are financially dependent on the benefits they receive.

So when a computer containing sensitive, personal information about 26.5 million veterans was stolen from the home of a VA analyst, the VA knew it needed a way to get information out fast and to answer thousands of calls from veterans concerned about the security of their private information—names, dates of birth, social security numbers, and in some cases, names of spouses. Before announcing the theft of the data, the VA called USA Services.

How USA Services Helped:

The VA call to USA Services came late Friday, May 19, 2006. The VA knew it needed to use the USA.gov website (formerly FirstGov.gov) and the FirstContact phone and e-mail centers to provide information to veterans and to answer their questions. The VA planned to announce the theft the following Monday, so the website and contact center agents had to be in place by noon on Monday, May 22, 2006.

FirstContact Telephone and E-Mail Response

The FirstContact team and the VA decided that the VA would refer callers to the 1-800 FED INFO number. Callers would find information through recorded messages or be routed to call centers for a response. E-mails to USA.gov would also be routed to agents in the contact centers. The FirstContact team immediately notified the FirstContact vendors that a request for proposals would be coming soon and worked closely with the VA to prepare a statement of work to define the requirements. On Saturday morning, the statement of work went to the vendors. Proposals were received later that day, and task orders were awarded that same night to TeleTech Government Solutions, LLC, and ICT Group. Concurrently, the VA developed agent scripting and FAQs for both agent and website use. USA Services staff modified the telecommunications structure to ensure that calls were routed appropriately to both contractors. Contact centers were ready to respond Monday morning, staying open from 8 a.m. to 9 p.m., Monday through Friday. Coverage quickly ramped up to include 1,500 agents in more than a dozen pre-existing call centers throughout the U.S.

By mid-week, the FirstContact team assessed the rapidly changing call volumes and worked closely with the VA to revise the task order so that the requirements for agent staffing matched incoming call volume. During the first week of operations, 1-800 FED INFO received nearly 130,000 calls from veterans seeking additional information. Of this amount, more than 50,000 were forwarded to agents at the call centers while the remainder were handled using a recorded message. An additional 1,300 email inquiries about the incident arrived and were answered in less than two days.

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USA.gov Website

The USA.gov (formerly FirstGov.gov) team swung into action Friday evening, knowing that both the Department of Veterans Affairs press release and the initial recording on 1-800 FED INFO would cite USA.gov as the website for current information. The team contacted Web managers from other federal agencies affected by the data loss—the Department of Veterans Affairs, the Social Security Administration, the Department of Justice, the Office of Personnel Management, the Federal Trade Commission, and the GovBenefits interagency website. Together they began to coordinate and consolidate information. After consultation with the Office of Management and Budget and the White House Office of Communications, the USA.gov team provided guidance to the other Web managers: approved link titles and placement of links to the information posted on USA.gov; the process for sending screenshots for review by the White House Office of Communications and the Office of Management and Budget; and the timing for synchronized updating of information on their websites.

To coincide with the VA press release on May 22, 2006, USA.gov posted a new page, "Latest Information on Veterans Affairs Data Security," featuring prominent links to this page from the USA.gov home page and other relevant pages. The team announced the new page to subscribers who had signed up for RSS feeds. USA.gov also established a sign-up for e-mail updates; immediately after the press release, people were signing up at the rate of 7 per minute, and 10,652 had subscribed by May 30. Since the creation of the page, there have been over 1 million page views of that information.

Overall traffic to the USA.gov website from May 22 through May 30 was over 3.5 million, and during all of May averaged 226,000 per day, up 21% over the previous month. Traffic to the site peaked at 370,000—more than double the normal usage—on Tuesday, May 23, after the story had hit all major media outlets and citizens had the time and access to follow up on the story through Internet browsing and research.

Department of Veterans Affairs Assessment:

"When we learned of the theft of a laptop computer containing sensitive information about millions of veterans, we knew we needed a plan of action to handle incoming questions from concerned veterans," said a VA spokesperson. "We turned to the General Services Administration (GSA) for assistance in hiring contractors to staff a call center. GSA not only helped us solicit and obtain bids, but with their help, we were able to award a contract very quickly. Additionally, GSA was able to route incoming calls to their 1-800 FED INFO number and to assist veterans by publishing up-to-date information on the theft, as well as identify theft prevention ideas, on their website, www.FirstGov.gov."

"GSA officials were able to offer a wealth of ideas and to help us turn those ideas into action. GSA's quick response to our immediate need to hire contractors, as well as their ongoing support throughout the process, was invaluable. We sincerely appreciate their assistance and would encourage other federal government agencies to consider their service as well."

E-GOV

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