

# Chapter 2

**Human Resources Development  
Canada**

Service Quality at the Local Level



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# Human Resources Development Canada

## Service Quality at the Local Level

### Main Points

**2.1** Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) has made considerable progress in addressing service quality. National initiatives in recent years have included developing a policy to guide its approach to high-quality service, implementing a new service delivery network to make services more accessible to Canadians and setting out national service commitments to clients. Initiatives at the local level include upgrading the service-related skills of employees and using new technologies.

**2.2** Although HRDC has defined national service commitments, we found they are not communicated consistently to clients at points of service. Further, local offices do not consistently inform clients about performance toward service delivery targets, the cost of services, and how to lodge complaints about the service received and obtain redress.

**2.3** The Department does not have performance measures for all of its national service commitments. Measures of service performance focus on waiting time for counter services and the speed of processing and payment, but there are weaknesses in the measurement of both these indicators.

**2.4** Despite improvements in the timeliness of Employment Insurance payments over the past three years, estimated incorrect payments have increased over this period from \$4 to \$6 for every \$100 paid out. Available information shows that both underpayments and overpayments have increased for a variety of reasons, including a decline in the quality of information submitted by employers. We found that local office managers focussed mainly on speed of payment. There are neither performance targets nor measures of accuracy for the processing of claims at the local level.

**2.5** Employment assistance services are increasingly provided by non-governmental organizations, under contribution agreements with HRDC. The agreements we reviewed do not set out service performance expectations or targets. Nor do they require the non-governmental organizations to be accountable for the quality of the services they provide.

**2.6** There are gaps in the information the Department provides to Parliament on its performance in meeting its national service commitments. We also found gaps in the information that would help to provide context for the service performance that it does report. For example, information on the timeliness of paying Employment Insurance claims cannot be assessed in relation to information on the accuracy of payments.

### Background and other observations

**2.7** Almost one in three Canadians is a client of HRDC. Each year the Department processes 60 million to 80 million program claims and applications, sends about 100 million letters and pays out over \$50 billion in various benefits. Most programs and services are offered at the local level, through one of the federal government's largest service delivery networks. It comprises 320 Human Resource Centres of Canada, 5,000 self-service kiosks, 21 telephone centres and 10 mail centres. Almost 80 percent of HRDC's 21,000 employees work at the local level.

**2.8** To make continuous improvements in the quality of services, managers need to seek more feedback from clients at the local level through such means as client satisfaction surveys and analysis of client complaints. There is no policy for handling complaints in either the Employment Insurance Program or the Income Security Programs. However, the latter has started to develop such a policy.

**2.9** The Department does not have the cost information it needs to manage the trade-off between the cost of its main services and their quality. We believe it needs to give more attention to developing and implementing action plans at the local level for continuous improvement in service quality.

**The Department's responses to our recommendations are included in this chapter. For the most part, the Department agrees with the recommendations and indicates the steps that it is taking or intends to take to address them.**

## Introduction

### **The Department's main services are delivered locally**

**2.10** Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) is the largest of the federal government departments with a social mandate. Each year, it provides services to nearly 9 million Canadians in all regions of the country. It processes between 60 million and 80 million program claims and applications, sends about 100 million letters to Canadians and pays out over \$50 billion in various benefits.

**2.11** The Department delivers its main programs and services locally because they require that staff deal directly with clients. About 80 percent of its 21,000 employees work in local and regional offices.

**2.12** Services delivered at local offices include income support and income supplement programs for the unemployed, senior citizens, persons with disabilities and persons who are enrolled in retraining programs or are trying to enter or re-enter the labour market. Other services to clients range from counselling to referring them for training and development. Local offices may also provide information on local labour markets, as well as other information.

### **Delivering high-quality services: A cornerstone of the Department's vision**

**2.13** In August 1995, the Minister of Human Resources Development announced plans to make services more accessible to Canadians. A new Service Delivery Network would provide the full range of HRDC services at client contact points, and would include offices, kiosks and electronic on-line services. The new network would rely on partnerships with other levels of government and non-governmental organizations to improve access to HRDC services for all

clients — seniors in particular. The network and electronic services would give more clients access to HRDC services from their homes.

**2.14** The Minister went on to say, “This new network represents a reduction in costs while actually giving Canadians greater access to our services. We are creating an affordable, highly flexible, and decentralized service delivery network to deliver the social supports Canadians need in today’s society.” Exhibit 2.1 illustrates the network.

**2.15** Today, the network comprises 320 Human Resource Centres of Canada (HRCCs), about 5,000 self-service kiosks, 21 telephone centres and 10 mail service centres. It uses television and the Internet to distribute information. In addition, HRDC has signed labour market development agreements with nine provinces. Under those agreements, services related to labour market development are delivered by the provinces or co-managed with them. HRDC also has a large number of contribution agreements with non-governmental organizations (such as community service agencies) to deliver services to its clients.

**2.16** In June 1995, Cabinet approved the Quality Service Initiative — a government-wide strategy aimed at improving the quality of service to Canadians. HRDC set out its approach to providing high-quality services in a 1996 document entitled “Quality Services Journey”. The key elements of the approach were consultation with clients, employees, unions and partners; development and communication of service commitments; accountability; measurement of results; and continuous improvement.

### **Focus of the audit**

**2.17** The objectives of the audit were to determine the extent to which HRDC:

**Each year, Human Resources Development Canada provides services to nearly 9 million Canadians and pays out over \$50 billion in various benefits.**

**The new Service Delivery Network comprises 320 Human Resource Centres of Canada, about 5,000 self-service kiosks, 21 telephone centres and 10 mail service centres.**

**We examined how the Department manages the quality of locally delivered services.**

- integrates service quality into its operations and identifies opportunities to continue improving;
- manages local service quality efficiently and effectively; and
- provides Parliament with relevant, understandable and balanced information on service quality.

**2.18** We examined how the Department manages the quality of locally delivered services. We looked at the following major services of HRCCs:

- providing Canadians with information about Employment Insurance (EI) and Income Security services;
- delivering front-line services; and

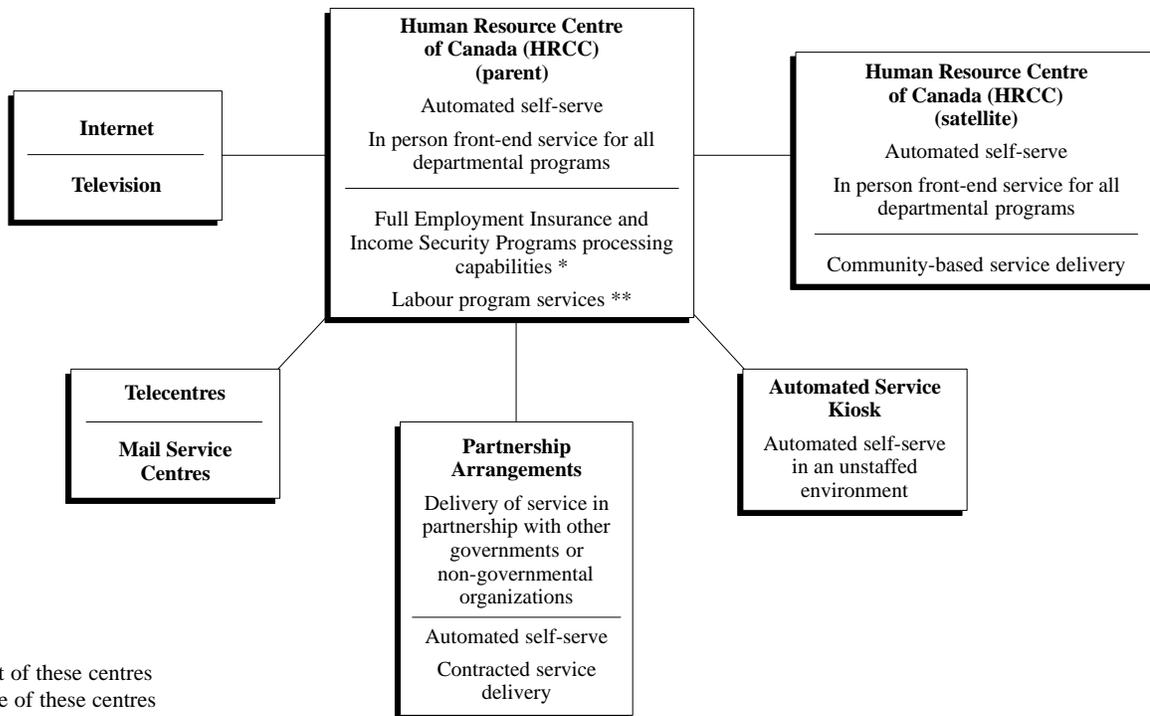
- processing EI claims and Income Security applications (excluding Canada Pension Plan disability benefits).

**2.19** We also examined the employment assistance services that non-governmental organizations provide under contribution agreements with the Department. Exhibit 2.2 gives a brief description of each of the services we examined.

**2.20** We put particular emphasis on services provided in person and by mail. Although telephone services are a key part of the Service Delivery Network, we did not include them in this audit because they were covered in our audit of service quality government-wide (see Chapter 1 of this Report, Service Quality). Further

**Exhibit 2.1**

**Service Delivery Network**



\* In most of these centres  
\*\* In some of these centres

Source : Human Resources Development Canada

details are given at the end of this chapter in **About the Audit**.

## Observations and Recommendations

### Considerable Progress Toward a Focus on Service Quality

**2.21** The Department has faced major challenges in recent years. Among other things, it implemented a new *Employment Insurance Act* in July 1996, began implementing the new Service Delivery Network in 1995 and embarked on its “quality services journey” in 1996. In addition, following the Program Review in 1994–95, it had to reduce its work force by 5,000 and its annual operational spending by \$200 million. More recently, HRDC devoted considerable attention and resources to ensuring that its systems could cope with the Year 2000 computer problem.

**2.22** The new Service Delivery Network was designed to provide services at the same (or even greater) quantity and quality, but with fewer resources. This required a major redesign of the local

delivery structure. The Department consolidated service in 100 parent HRCCs that provide all services, including administrative and support functions. Another 220 satellite offices offer core services and report to the parent HRCCs. About 150 local offices closed when the new network began to operate.

**2.23** The new Service Delivery Network also called for a major reorganization and change in culture. It flattened the organization and cut management layers. There is only one person now between each HRCC Director and the Deputy Minister. Directors of HRCCs have full autonomy to provide clients with the best possible service. Front-line staff have been trained and given authority to deal with a broad range of client needs at the first point of contact.

**2.24** Under the new network, the Department developed new models of service to Canadians. These included partnerships with other levels of government and with non-governmental organizations, and client self-service through computerized facilities and the Internet. Telephone services were upgraded. More than 5,000 kiosks (computer terminals) are located in

**Front-line staff have been trained and given authority to deal with a broad range of client needs at the first point of contact.**

Services	Description
<b>Information</b>	Self-serve – general information on Human Resources Development Canada programs and services and the services provided by Human Resource Centres of Canada (HRCC).
<b>Front-line services</b>	Front-line services are the first point of contact for clients who come to an HRCC to obtain information or assistance in using the self-serve tools, to determine their eligibility for a program or service, or to resolve problems or changes in status in connection with current benefits.
<b>Processing of claims and applications</b>	Processing of Employment Insurance (EI) claims and applications for Canada Pension Plan benefits (excluding Disability) and Old Age Security benefits.
<b>Employment assistance services</b>	Employment support services provided by non-governmental organizations to members of a particular group in the community served by a Human Resource Centre of Canada.

**Exhibit 2.2**

#### Description of Services We Covered

**Source:** Human Resources Development Canada

**The Department recognizes the need for a corporate quality framework to link service quality initiatives, monitor progress and plan for continuous improvement.**

HRCCs and in partners' premises. Clients use kiosks to obtain information on job vacancies and the labour market. In addition, clients use the kiosks located in HRCCs to file Employment Insurance claims by computer instead of on paper. HRDC told us that in some regions, kiosks account for more than 70 percent of Employment Insurance claims.

**2.25** Our government-wide audit of service quality (see Chapter 1) found that HRDC has improved its telephone services to Canadians since 1996. Recently introduced telephone technology now allows Employment Insurance claimants to use the keypads of their touch-tone telephones to report their availability for work, and any earnings while on claim. In the past, claimants had to mail this information to the Department.

**2.26** HRDC has established a results-based accountability framework and defined its approach to service quality. To demonstrate its commitment to service quality and to provide leadership, it set up a team of champions (four assistant deputy ministers) and related

committees. It also created regional and local committees to improve communication throughout the Department and to share best practices for service quality.

**2.27** The Department has recognized the need for a corporate quality framework to link its various service quality initiatives, to monitor progress and to plan for continuous improvement. We agree that such a framework would help it identify areas it needs to improve as a priority and integrate service quality initiatives into its operations.

**2.28** HRDC has adopted the National Quality Institute (NQI) quality framework as a pilot for this purpose. It has carried out the NQI quality fitness test in three regions and one branch at headquarters, although the reports were not yet available when we completed our audit.

**2.29** The Department recognizes that the focal point for enhancing service quality must be the local level. All the HRCCs we visited were working on a variety of national, regional and local initiatives to improve service quality. Examples include creating local quality

*Clients using kiosks in a Human Resource Centre of Canada (see paragraph 2.24).*



committees, creating new positions such as service delivery representatives, upgrading employees' skills, and increasing the availability and use of new technologies. One of the parent HRCCs we visited was planning to obtain ISO 9002 certification of its approach to service quality, and we were told that five HRCCs have received ISO 9001 certification.

**2.30** However, improving service is a continuing journey, and we identified several areas where improvements are needed.

## The Department Has Defined National Service Commitments

### Need to better communicate service commitments

**2.31** The Department has defined national service commitments in four main areas: a statement of principles for the quality of treatment and the quality of information that clients can expect; waiting time in offices; speed of payment of Employment Benefits and Measures, Employment Insurance and Income Security benefits; and commitments specific to the Labour component of HRDC (see Exhibit 2.3).

**2.32** HRDC's preferred approach is to ensure that every office posts the national service commitments. Telling clients about its commitments to service quality supports its primary objective — to provide high-quality services. It is also an important part of its Quality Services Journey.

**2.33** We found that 12 of the 13 HRCCs we visited displayed some or all of the national service commitments in the client waiting area. The other HRCC delivers services to which the national commitments apply, but it had not posted those commitments. Instead, it had posted its own local commitments, involving mostly aspects of service quality that differed from those covered by the national commitments. For example, none of the local service commitments referred to speed of payment, waiting time for counter services or complete and accurate information on entitlements and obligations.

**2.34** Among the HRCCs that had posted components of the national service commitments, we found that:

- two did not display “within 35 days” as the target for speed of payment in Income Security Programs;
- three did not indicate that clients are entitled to complete and accurate

**Improving service is a continuing journey; we identified several areas where improvements are needed.**

#### Our Service Commitment to You

- You are entitled to courteous and considerate treatment and complete and accurate information about your entitlements and obligations.
- We aim to keep the waiting time to meet a client service officer to a minimum. Waiting times will be posted in our offices.
- You are entitled, if you qualify, to receive your first payment within:
  - 28 days for Employment Benefits and Measures;
  - 28 days for Employment Insurance benefits; and
  - 35 days for Old Age Security or Canada Pension Plan benefits.
- We will provide 24-hour emergency response service for fatal accidents and refusals to work in the federal jurisdiction.
- We will respond to complaints of unjust dismissal under federal jurisdiction within two working days.

#### Exhibit 2.3

#### “Our Service Commitment to You”

Source: Human Resources Development Canada

**The government has identified a set of six key elements for improving service quality and has asked all departments and agencies to communicate them to clients at points of service.**

**We found that national, regional or local service commitments communicated to clients did not cover all key elements.**

information about their entitlements and obligations; and

- seven did not indicate how long clients could expect to wait to meet a service delivery representative.

**2.35** Finally, although the brochures, Employment Insurance claim forms and Income Security applications that are available to clients at HRCCs describe the nature of the services, they do not clearly identify all the pertinent elements of the national service commitments. In particular, they provide little or no information on delivery targets.

**2.36 Human Resources Development Canada should ensure that, where applicable, Human Resource Centres of Canada clearly communicate all national service commitments to clients.**

*Department's response: The policy is that all national service commitments including client wait time must be posted, where applicable, in Human Resource Centres of Canada. The policy will be reaffirmed.*

**Some Human Resource Centres of Canada have expanded on national service commitments**

**2.37** The Department's service philosophy allows the regions and HRCCs to establish service commitments that respond to the specific needs and priorities of their clients. Most of the HRCCs we visited had taken the initiative to develop and post their own regional or local service commitments. In no case did these local commitments set less-demanding targets than those established at the national level. Rather, they went beyond the national commitments. For example:

- one HRCC displayed a commitment that Employment Insurance appeals would be heard by the Board of Referees in less than 30 days;

- three HRCCs said they would respond to inquiries in less than 48 hours; and

- four HRCCs were committed to providing clients with information to help them better understand available programs and services.

**The national service commitments do not include all key elements**

**2.38** The government has identified a set of six key elements for improving service quality and has asked all departments and agencies to put them in place and communicate them to clients at points of service. These elements include a description of the service, pledges of the quality of service that clients can expect to receive, delivery targets, cost information, the availability of complaint and redress mechanisms, and performance toward delivery targets (see Exhibit 2.4).

**2.39** In the 13 HRCCs we visited, we found that the national, regional or local service commitments communicated to clients were incomplete (see Exhibit 2.5). For example:

- none of the posted service commitments included all key elements;
- in only two HRCCs was performance toward delivery targets posted at service points; and
- none of the HRCCs communicated the cost of services or provided information about available complaint and redress mechanisms.

**2.40** Delivery targets are one of the most important elements of a commitment to high-quality service. They are targets for levels of performance in the main aspects of service, including accessibility, speed, reliability or accuracy, courtesy of staff and other measurable aspects of the service environment (for example, comfort in waiting areas).

**2.41** We found that the targets the HRCCs communicated are primarily for

waiting times for counter service and speed of payment of Employment Insurance and Income Security benefits. Targets for accuracy or reliability of services are not communicated to clients at points of service.

**2.42** Clients can obtain service in person at an HRCC, by mail or by telephone. The service commitments posted in the HRCCs we visited did not include delivery targets for telephone services. When a service delivery representative in the HRCC is unable to answer a client's question, he or she asks the client to call a telephone centre using the telephone (1-800 line) provided at the HRCC. Because the posted service commitments do not indicate the service clients can expect from telephone centres, they are not able to compare the quality of the service with reasonable expectations (for more information on HRDC's telephone services, see Chapter 1, Service Quality).

**2.43 The Department should develop and ensure that Human Resource Centres of Canada clearly communicate to clients:**

- **delivery targets for the main aspects of quality in the various modes of service as well as performance toward those targets; and**

- **information on the cost of services and on complaint and redress mechanisms available to clients.**

*Department's response: Objectives are included in the statement of each of the program-specific national service commitments (see Exhibit 2.3). The Department will report results on national service commitments in the Departmental Performance Report.*

*Because the period during which the service commitments were being introduced was characterized by a number of far-reaching changes, innovations and adjustments, the number of national service commitments was limited. The resulting service commitments focus mainly on direct interaction with clients. However, the importance of cost-of-service information is recognized and a draft methodology is being studied. The Department's approach to service quality recognizes the importance of informing clients of available complaint*

<b>Descriptions</b>	Descriptions of the services the government intends to provide and, where applicable, the benefits clients are entitled to receive.
<b>Pledges or principles</b>	Pledges or statements describing the quality of service clients should expect to receive, focussing on such elements as openness, fairness and courtesy.
<b>Delivery targets</b>	Delivery targets for key aspects of service, such as timeliness, access and accuracy.
<b>Costs</b>	The cost of delivering a service, which shows clients how much a service costs.
<b>Complaint and redress mechanisms</b>	Complaint and redress mechanisms, which give clients the means to obtain satisfaction when they feel the government has not met the stated service commitments.
<b>Performance in relation to delivery targets</b>	Performance toward delivery targets, measured and communicated.

**Exhibit 2.4**

**Key Elements for Improving Service Quality**

**Source:** Service Standards: A Guide to the Initiative, Treasury Board of Canada, 1995

and redress mechanisms, and this will be followed up.

## Measuring and Reporting of Performance Need Improvement

### Gaps in measuring performance against national service commitments

**2.44** Performance measurement makes it possible to determine whether the provision of services meets national service commitments, including the specific targets for service performance. Thus, we expected performance measurement to be a key element in the Department's efforts to continuously improve service quality and account for results.

**2.45** We found that the main aspects of quality that HRCCs measured are the speed of processing claims and payments and the waiting time for counter services. The Department has no measures of the speed of payment of Old Age Security or Canada Pension Plan benefits. As a result, the timeliness of these payments cannot be assessed against the targets set out in the national service commitments.

**2.46** We found that few HRCCs had developed measures of client satisfaction

with services. Exhibit 2.6 shows that in Employment Insurance services, only four of the 13 HRCCs we visited had measured clients' satisfaction with staff courtesy, and none had measured clients' satisfaction with the information they received about entitlements and obligations.

### 2.47 The Department should develop and implement systems to measure performance against all aspects of its national service commitments.

*Department's response: A client survey will be administered during 2000–2001 to determine the level of clients' satisfaction with the courtesy of treatment and the completeness and accuracy of information they receive. This survey should provide HRDC with a benchmark and will serve as a basis for developing a national improvement plan, taking into account priorities identified by clients. HRDC is also planning to implement a national system that will provide consistent information on wait time.*

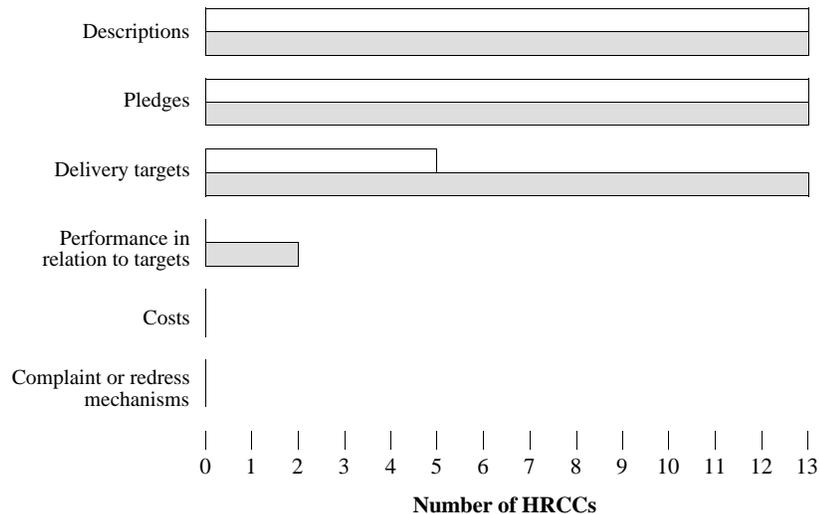
*For the Income Security Program portion of the payment process, the current measurement system reflects application-processing times. Enhancements are being made to improve client service information.*

**Few local offices we examined had developed measures of client satisfaction with services.**

**Exhibit 2.5**

### Communication of Service Commitments in Human Resource Centres of Canada (HRCCs) – Employment Insurance Program

- Front-line services
- Processing of claims



Source: Office of the Auditor General of Canada assessment

**Waiting time for counter services is not consistently measured or reported**

**2.48** Service delivery representatives provide an increasingly broad range of services. The number and complexity of tasks have increased as staff have been required to provide more integrated services that cover HRDC's main programs. The national service commitment is to minimize clients' waiting time and to post waiting times in local offices. For example, in the HRCCs we visited, the waiting times posted for Employment Insurance services ranged from 15 to 30 minutes.

**2.49** We observed that 10 of the 13 HRCCs (see Exhibit 2.6) used computer systems to measure waiting times. These systems allowed the HRCCs to identify peak periods and manage client flow proactively. However, two of the 10 HRCCs that used computer systems were not using them to full capacity. One was not using the system during peak times, and the other was not measuring waiting times from the time when clients first entered the office.

**2.50** The Department told us that only about a third of the 320 HRCCs use automated systems to measure waiting times. The vast majority of satellite

offices, which provide counter services only, have no automated systems for this purpose.

**2.51** The lack of consistent measurement makes it difficult for managers to account for their performance in meeting this national service commitment. We noted that most of the HRCC business plans we reviewed did not report actual waiting times for counter services.

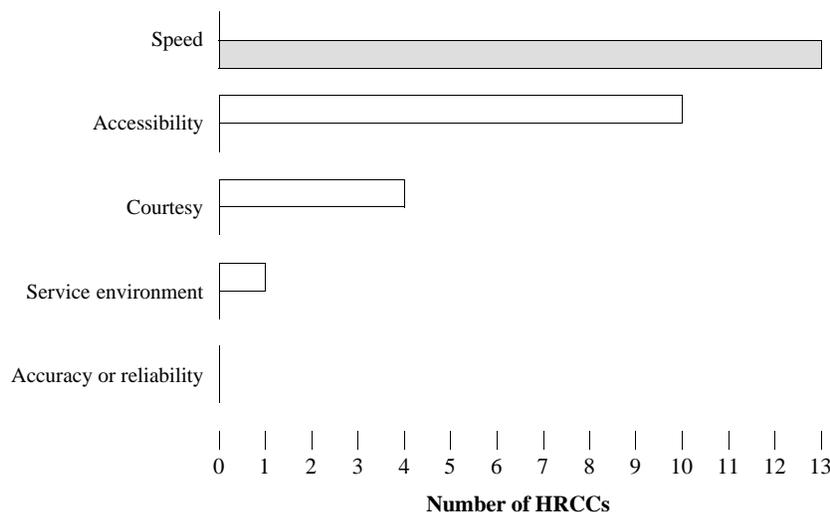
**2.52 The Department should ensure that managers of Human Resource Centres of Canada consistently measure and report waiting times for counter services, and account for their performance in relation to this national service commitment.**

*Department's response: As mentioned in the response to the recommendation at paragraph 2.47, HRDC is planning to implement a national system that will provide consistent information on wait time.*

**Improvements needed in measuring speed of payment**

**2.53** For Employment Insurance claimants as well as Income Security beneficiaries, speed of payment is an important element of service quality, as reflected in the national service

**Inconsistent measurement of waiting time for counter services makes it difficult for local office managers to account for their performance in meeting this commitment.**



**Exhibit 2.6**  
**Aspects of Quality Measured in Human Resource Centres of Canada (HRCCs) – Employment Insurance Program**

Front-line services   
Processing of claims

Source: Office of the Auditor General of Canada assessment

**Over the past three years, the proportion of local offices exceeding the target for timely payment of Employment Insurance benefits rose from 57 percent to 99 percent.**

commitments. HRDC acknowledges in its 1999 Performance Report, “Our top priority in the Employment Insurance program is to provide the highest speed of benefit payments possible.”

**2.54 Employment Insurance Program.** Our visits to the 13 HRCCs confirmed that speed of payment is measured and monitored weekly. Over the past three years, the proportion of HRCCs exceeding the performance target (payment within 28 days of registering a claim) rose from 57 percent to 99 percent (see Exhibit 2.7). Over the same period, the proportion of HRCCs exceeding the goal for productivity also increased.

**2.55** The speed-of-payment indicator measures the period from the date a claim is registered in the computer system to the date of the first payment to the claimant. The current policy is to register claims by the end of the working day following the day of receipt.

**2.56** However, a recent audit performed by HRDC’s Internal Audit Bureau noted delays in registering claims that had the effect of “artificially” improving performance, with no gain in speed of payment from the client’s perspective. Our own audit of a sample of

56 claims — chosen at random from the claims reviewed by the Comprehensive Tracking System — showed delays in registering about one third of the claims, with the average delay about three days.

**2.57** We observed that on a pilot basis, one region was calculating speed of payment from the start of the benefit period — that is, from the qualifying date. The results show that the speed of payment decreases when measured from the qualifying date instead of the registration date.

**2.58** This new measurement of speed of payment could lead to improved client service because to meet the target, managers would have to be more proactive in processing claims. They would have to do more, for example, to inform clients of their obligation to submit required documents in a timely manner. Furthermore, delays in registering claims would have no impact on speed of payment if speed were measured from the qualifying date and not the registration date. However, the measured performance of HRCCs may suffer, as they have little control over when a client files a claim.

**2.59 The Department should ensure that the speed of payment of**

**Exhibit 2.7**

**Exceeding Performance Targets at Human Resource Centres of Canada – Employment Insurance Program**

Performance Target	1996–1997	1997–1998	1998–1999
	(percentage of HRCCs that exceeded target)		
<b>Speed of payment</b> 90% of benefits paid within 28 days after the initial or renewal claim is registered	57	86	99
<b>Productivity</b> 1,200 initial and renewal claims settled per full-time equivalent, productive time <sup>1</sup>	53	58	70

<sup>1</sup> The productivity target was 1,125 in 1996–1997.

**Source:** Office of the Auditor General of Canada calculations using HRDC data

**Employment Insurance claims is measured in a consistent way.**

*Department's response: Our operating policy is to register a claim within 24 hours of the individual's application for benefits. We are considering an approach to bringing greater accuracy to the calculation of speed of payment by measuring the time between the commencement of the claim and the date the first warrant is issued. Our intention is to begin calculating speed of payment in this manner as of the 2000–01 fiscal year and to work toward further refinement prior to reporting on this basis in 2001–02.*

**2.60 Income Security Programs.** The national service commitment for Income Security Programs is to pay all recipients within 35 days of the date when they become eligible. That target applies to all types of benefits. However, at the time we completed our audit, the Department did not have a measurement system to determine whether or not this national service commitment was being met. Local service managers told us that they had no information about performance toward this target.

**2.61** The Department has started to develop a measurement system designed to produce reliable information on the timeliness of Income Security benefit payments. This will enable managers to give an account of their performance in this important aspect of service to clients.

**2.62** In addition to measuring performance against the national service commitments, other key service-related performance measures need to be implemented or improved.

**Service performance measures and targets for Income Security Programs need to be strengthened**

**2.63** Most Income Security clients mail their applications and account maintenance requests to one of the

12 Income Security Programs (ISP) processing centres. Some parent HRCCs also process Income Security applications and account maintenance requests for clients who go there in person.

**2.64** Account maintenance can represent up to 75 percent of the workload at ISP processing centres. In the quarter ending 30 June 1999, for example, there were approximately 1.2 million account maintenance transactions. These are the updating of beneficiaries' information, including the recording of deaths and changes in eligibility status. Failure to keep an account up-to-date can lead to inconvenience to the beneficiary as a result of inappropriate payments.

**2.65** We found that the Department has no adequate system to determine whether accounts have been updated in a timely fashion. It has not established measures of performance or a target for speed of service in account maintenance.

**2.66** In ISP processing, the key performance measure is the time it takes to process an application from its receipt until a decision to pay or deny a benefit is entered into the system. With the exception of disability claims, the target is to process applications within 16 days (the target for initial disability claims is 62 days). The Department recently implemented a computer system to calculate the speed of service in processing applications. In the quarter ending 30 June 1999, most regions processed only 30 percent of their applications within the 16-day target. The national average in that quarter was around 27 days.

**2.67** The managers of the three ISP processing centres we visited challenged the validity of the 16-day target, as clients can apply up to one year before they become eligible for benefits, particularly Old Age Security. They pointed out that even if it takes more than 16 days to process an application, the client is unlikely to be penalized because the

**The Department has started to develop a system to produce reliable information on the timeliness of Income Security benefit payments.**

**Employment Insurance claimants are entitled to be paid the right amount at the right time, all the time.**

eligibility date is usually several months away. They believe what matters most to clients is that payment starts in the month when they become eligible.

**2.68** We noted that, with the exception of disability benefits, the 16-day target is the same for all types of benefits, such as death benefits and Old Age Security benefits. The needs and priorities of clients were not taken into account in establishing this target.

**2.69** In the Income Security Programs, the Department should consult clients to establish service delivery targets. It should implement performance measures for account maintenance transactions to ensure that accounts are updated in a timely fashion.

*Department's response: As part of an information technology renewal initiative, a project is under way to develop automated account maintenance performance measures. Measures and targets will be established in conjunction with this project. Plans are in place for client consultations throughout 2000.*

**The timeliness of Employment Insurance payments has improved while accuracy has declined**

**2.70** Increased errors in payment. Despite the challenges of implementing the new Service Delivery Network and the new *Employment Insurance Act* during a period when its work force was being reduced, the Department significantly improved the timeliness of Employment Insurance benefit payments. Over the past three years, the proportion of claims paid in less than 28 days increased from 90 percent to 95.5 percent (see Exhibit 2.8).

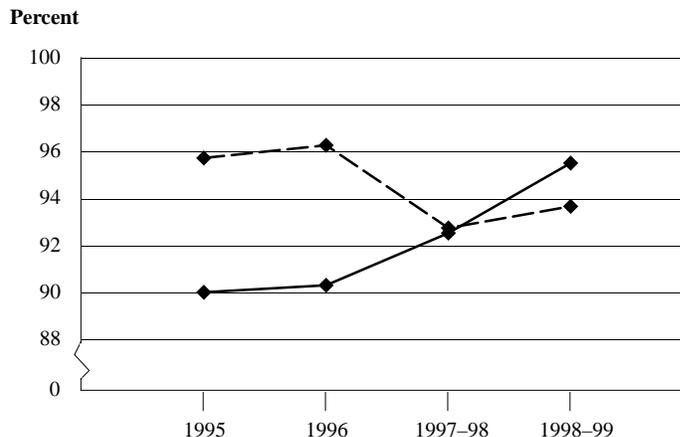
**2.71** Claimants are entitled to be paid the right amount at the right time — all the time. But how accurate is the Department in paying benefits? Its Comprehensive Tracking System is used to assess the processing of Employment Insurance claims and to estimate, by means of statistical inference from a sample, the most probable error in benefit payments nationally. However, given the small number of claims selected for the sample, the results are not statistically representative when analyzed at regional or local levels.

**2.72** Exhibit 2.8 shows that at the national level, the estimated accuracy of

**Exhibit 2.8**

**Estimated Accuracy Rates and Speed of Payment – Employment Insurance Program**

—◆— Estimated accuracy rates  
—◆— Speed of payment



Source: Human Resources Development Canada and Employment Insurance Account financial statements

benefit payments fell from about 96 percent in 1995 to about 94 percent in 1998–99. An inaccurate payment is either an overpayment or an underpayment. The estimated rate of underpayments has risen steadily since 1996, when the new *Employment Insurance Act* was implemented. Estimated total underpayments increased from \$125 million in 1996 to \$211 million in 1998–99 — more than 60 percent. Overpayments also increased over the same period, from \$334 million to \$445 million.

**2.73** Investigation and control activities at HRCCs are carried out to protect the integrity of the Employment Insurance Program. These activities are aimed at preventing, combating and detecting fraud and abuse. Their focus is thus on overpayments and they are not intended to detect or record underpayments.

**2.74 Incorrect information from employers.** Incorrect payments can be attributed in part to employers, claimants and HRDC. Exhibit 2.9 shows an increase in the proportion of incorrect payments that result from incorrect information submitted by employers on Records of Employment. Incorrect information from employers accounted for 10 percent of

total errors in 1995; this had risen to 33 percent in 1998–99.

**2.75** The Record of Employment is the most important document in the Employment Insurance system because it contains information on insurable earnings, insurable hours and the reasons why the employee left his or her job. This information is needed to determine eligibility, benefit rates and the benefit period.

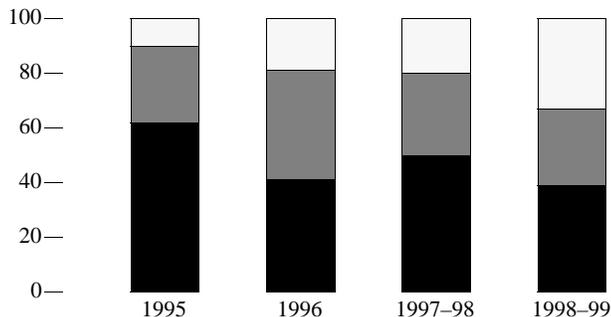
**2.76** During our audit, the Department conducted a special study to identify the main types of error that employers make in preparing Records of Employment. The study showed that the two most frequent errors were made in determining insurable earnings and insurable hours. However, as the study looked at only one year (1998–99), it was not possible to determine whether the frequency of those two types of error has increased or decreased in recent years.

**2.77** The Department has taken several steps to inform employers about the new Record of Employment system. It has held information sessions for employers; it has set up a 1–800 line where employers can obtain information; and it has reviewed the employer’s guide to Records of Employment. Despite these efforts, the amount of inaccurate

**Estimated Employment Insurance underpayments and overpayments have risen since 1996.**

**Incorrect information from employers accounted for 33 percent of incorrect Employment Insurance payments in 1998–99, up from 10 percent in 1995.**

**Breakdown of errors (%)**



**Exhibit 2.9**

**Causes of Incorrect Payments – Employment Insurance Program**

Errors attributable to employers   
 Errors attributable to claimants   
 Errors attributable to HRDC

**Source:** Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC)

**Establishing performance targets for the accuracy of Employment Insurance payments would help clarify the delicate balance between speed of payment and accuracy.**

information submitted by employers has increased.

**Lack of local performance measures and targets for accuracy of Employment Insurance payments**

**2.78** Although processing Employment Insurance claims is a major activity of HRCCs, the Department does not have a system for measuring its accuracy at the local level and local managers do not report on this important aspect of their work. None of the 13 HRCCs we visited had measures of accuracy, and none of the business plans we reviewed included information on the accuracy of Employment Insurance payments.

**2.79** In our view, establishing measures of accuracy in processing claims at the local level would be a necessary first step in developing appropriate performance targets. Having measures and targets would help ensure that accuracy of payment is given the same attention as speed of processing and the timeliness of payment of Employment Insurance benefits.

**2.80** In the course of our audit, we noted that one regional office had asked each HRCC in the region to review the quality of a representative sample of claim files to determine the frequency and causes of errors in processing. This initiative was being implemented in the region during our audit. In our view, it needs to be extended to all HRCCs that process claims.

**2.81** The Department has established neither national nor local performance targets for the accuracy of payments under the Employment Insurance Program. We noted that the Social Security Administration (the United States' equivalent of HRDC) publishes delivery targets for not only speed of payment but also accuracy. We believe that establishing performance targets for the accuracy of benefit payments and reporting the results

to Parliament would help clarify the delicate balance that has to be struck between speed of payment and accuracy.

**2.82 The Department should develop local measures of accuracy of Employment Insurance payments and communicate the results to Parliament in its annual Performance Report.**

*Department's response: The accuracy of claims processing is an important element of quality management at the local level. The Employment Insurance Quality Management policy requires regular monitoring for purposes of staff coaching and training as means to maintain and improve the quality performance. The program relies on national sampling to provide statistically valid reports on the accuracy of benefit payments, to indicate trends in various error categories and to guide corrective action at all points of service. Recent action has included:*

- activities aimed at increasing employer accuracy in completing some 8 million records of employment annually;
- activities aimed at reducing mis-reporting of earnings by active claimants in some 20 million biweekly reports submitted each year; and
- increased monitoring of quality and staff training at all points of service.

*The Department will include in its yearly Performance Report to Parliament the results from the national sample on accuracy of benefit payments.*

**Quality of Service by Non-Governmental Organizations**

**No accountability framework for quality of employment assistance services**

**2.83** Delivering services in partnership with other governments and non-governmental organizations is an important part of HRDC's service delivery network (see Exhibit 2.1). In three of the

five regions we visited, we examined arrangements for dealing with service quality when employment assistance services are provided by non-governmental organizations (sponsors) under contribution agreements with HRDC. We did not examine services provided by provincial governments under labour market development agreements.

**2.84** Employment assistance services cover a whole range — from the distribution of “self-serve” labour market information to complete case management services, including access to employment benefits administered by HRDC or another agency. Employment assistance services represented spending of almost \$238 million in 1998–99, up from \$96 million in 1996–97. These expenditures are funded under Part II of the *Employment Insurance Act* as part of Employment Benefits and Support Measures.

**2.85** During our visits to HRCCs, we reviewed 42 contribution agreements to determine how they addressed service quality. Most of these agreements were for a one-year period and the contributions ranged from \$30,000 to about \$1.5 million, depending on the nature of the services. The agreements provided for non-governmental organizations to conduct and complete the work under the agreements diligently and in a professional way, using qualified staff. In addition to setting out the basic terms and conditions, one agreement provided that the Department would monitor activities regularly to clarify performance expectations, and would pay special attention to best practices in looking at the services provided. While such clauses do not deal specifically with service quality, they do not exclude it.

**2.86** With few exceptions, we did not find commitments by sponsors that could be directly linked to quality of service. On the initiative of local HRDC staff, some agreements specified conditions for

clients’ access to services; for example, the hours during which the service will be provided. Another referred in the objective to the delivery of high-quality service in the shortest possible time, but did not set targets to indicate what “high-quality service” meant.

**2.87** Overall, sponsors are committed to the Department under their agreements to ensure that the services provided will be effective. But the agreements do not require a similar commitment to clients for service quality. Generally, the agreements do not require that sponsors provide courteous, accessible, timely or reliable services, or measure performance and costs and inform clients (and the Department) of the results.

**2.88** Some of the HRCCs we visited had made special efforts to give clients information about the services provided by non-governmental organizations. They did this by means of brochures, promotional items in local newspapers or information sessions for clients who had still not found a job 12 weeks after becoming unemployed.

**2.89** In the HRCCs we visited, managers did not receive reports from sponsors that provided information on service performance. Therefore, apart from the clauses in the contribution agreements already noted, there is no framework for managing the quality of HRDC services provided on its behalf by non-governmental organizations or for requiring accountability for service performance.

**2.90** **The Department should ensure that agreements with non-governmental organizations to provide employment assistance services on its behalf set out expectations for service quality and require accountability for service performance.**

*Department’s response: HRDC supports the recommendation, will set out performance targets or expectations and*

**There is no framework for managing the quality of services provided on the Department’s behalf by non-governmental organizations.**

*will require accountability for quality of service provided.*

## **Other Improvements Needed to Better Integrate Quality Into Local Operations**

### **More feedback from clients at the local level would help in improving services**

**2.91** Consulting clients and measuring their satisfaction is a way to understand what they think of the services they receive and the way those services are delivered. Feedback from clients can also help identify the aspects of service that are important to them. This kind of information makes it possible to improve desired services and to scale back services or aspects of services that clients consider to be less important. It also helps in addressing new client needs and targeting priority areas for improvement.

**2.92** In 1997 and 1998 HRDC conducted national surveys of client satisfaction with the services obtained in person at HRCCs. However, there are aspects of client satisfaction that are better measured locally to provide a basis for specific actions to improve service. For example, access, courtesy, and the environment in which services are delivered are all aspects of quality on which local feedback is particularly useful.

**2.93** In the past, the Department used a computer-based system to gather comments from clients. We reviewed one HRCC report generated in early 1998 that contained some revealing comments. For example: "Service was polite and friendly but it took too long just to reach the front desk for an inquiry." "Waiting in line by picking a number sometimes takes one hour." "The office is located in an inconvenient part (of town) as parking is expensive and space is limited." This system was abandoned in 1998–99.

**2.94** We found that 4 of the 13 HRCCs we visited had consulted clients and used the results to help improve services. One HRCC used client comments and suggestion boxes for this purpose; the three others surveyed their clients. Other HRCC managers told us that they did not have the tools and resources to consult clients. None of the three ISP processing centres had obtained feedback from the clients they serve through the mail.

### **2.95 The Department should develop and implement tools that managers can use to obtain feedback from clients on the quality of the services offered at the local level.**

*Department's response: The Department has developed tools to help managers choose research methodologies in gathering the clients' perspectives on service delivery. It has placed these tools on the departmental Intranet.*

### **More attention needed to complaint and redress mechanisms**

**2.96** Complaint and redress mechanisms are important elements of high-quality service. They allow clients to register their complaints about service quality and to obtain redress when appropriate. Moreover, information from complaints constitutes valuable feedback from clients that can be analyzed and used to identify opportunities for improving service. However, managers need to communicate clearly to clients how they can make complaints about service quality and how their complaints will be handled.

**2.97** We found that clients were not adequately informed at service points on how to file a complaint about service quality, where to send complaints, or what kind of redress is available. The national and local service commitments displayed in the HRCCs we visited did not mention these matters. Nor did the Department's information brochures that were available to clients in local offices.

**2.98** In all the HRCCs we visited, managers were unable to provide us with

**Clients are not adequately informed at service points how to lodge complaints about service quality or what kind of redress is available.**

information on the nature or frequency of complaints or on how complaints were resolved. We were unable to determine whether complaints were being handled in a timely and appropriate manner. Further, because information on the nature and extent of complaints is not available, managers cannot analyze complaints to seek opportunities for improving service quality.

**2.99** The Employment Insurance Program has no policy on handling complaints. During the audit, the Income Security Programs Branch started to develop such a policy.

**2.100 The Department should:**

- **develop and implement a policy on the management of complaints;**
- **communicate to clients at all points of service the availability of complaint and redress mechanisms; and**
- **compile, analyze and use information from complaints to improve the quality of service to clients.**

*Department's response: HRDC recognizes the importance of obtaining feedback from clients. The approach to quality of service that has been adopted and communicated affirms the importance of seeking client feedback, informing clients of available complaint and redress mechanisms, and using client feedback to improve service.*

**The Department does not have adequate information on the cost of services**

**2.101** Reliable information on the total cost of each service can be used to measure the efficiency of operations and to allocate resources among services. It can also be used to manage the inevitable trade-off that exists between service quality and cost and to reach an appropriate balance.

**2.102** The Department's vision of quality is to provide the highest-quality services. However, the vision makes no

explicit mention of the cost of services. We found that the HRCCs and processing centres we visited had limited information about the total unit cost of each major client service. Furthermore, no such information is compiled or communicated in the quarterly performance report to senior management.

**2.103** The Department's Quality Services Journey called for developing, by 31 March 1997, a method to determine the cost of the main services. A proposal for the costing of outputs has been drafted and is under consideration. We noted that the Employment Insurance Program is developing a unit costing methodology for costs associated with processing Employment Insurance claims. Income Security Programs is reviewing its activity structure.

**2.104** The Department should identify the link between the quality and the cost of services in its vision of service quality and implement a method for costing its main services.

*Department's response: HRDC recognizes the importance of costing information, and a draft methodology for costing services is being studied. In time, costing data on major services will be available to management.*

**Action plans are needed for continuous improvement in service quality**

**2.105** In 1994 the Department issued a policy on quality management in the Employment Insurance Program. The core objective of the policy is to promote error-free performance in processing EI claims. In addition, the policy requires each HRCC to develop and implement an annual quality management plan and to report on activities associated with that plan. We found that only two of the 13 HRCCs we visited had developed specific quality management plans.

**2.106** Inaccurate or unreliable service is not only unsatisfactory to clients but also increases the cost of service, because it

**The local offices and processing centres we visited had limited information about the total unit cost of each major client service.**

**Only two of the 13 local offices we visited had developed specific quality management plans.**

creates extra work for HRDC staff who have to make corrections. For example, errors in calculating Employment Insurance benefits can increase the number of enquiries from claimants and the number of complaints and appeals to the Board of Referees. In our view, a quality management plan would guide action to reduce the number of errors, and thereby help provide better service to clients while reducing costs.

**2.107** However, we believe that quality management plans need to address not only EI claims-processing activities but all client services provided by HRCCs, including front-line services, complaints management and appeals processing. By setting out objectives and activities, timelines, responsibilities and budgets, such plans would provide a basis for continuous service improvement and for assessing results.

**2.108 The Department should ensure that managers of Human Resource Centres of Canada develop and implement action plans for continuous improvement of service quality.**

*Department's response: The National Quality Institute's "Framework for Effective Public Service Organizations" has been adopted on a pilot basis in HRDC and includes a detailed planning process for continuous improvement. The experience and recommendations of the pilot sites, including their views on the Framework as a means for planning continuous improvement, will be sought in deciding on the further implementation of the Framework in HRDC.*

### **Informing Parliament About Service Performance**

**2.109** In 1997, the Standing Committee on Public Accounts recommended that departments and agencies report on their service performance in Departmental Performance Reports. We reviewed HRDC's 1999 Performance Report as well

as its Report on Plans and Priorities. We expected that HRDC would be using these reports to inform Parliament, at a minimum, of its national service commitments and its performance in relation to them.

### **Gaps in information on performance in meeting national service commitments**

**2.110** Although both the Performance Report and the Report on Plans and Priorities set out the national service commitments (see Exhibit 2.3), we found gaps in the information the Department has provided on its performance in meeting them. More specifically, its 1999 Performance Report contains no information on the waiting times for clients at HRCCs or on performance toward the target of payment "within 35 days" for Old Age Security or Canada Pension Plan benefits. We were told that the Department's performance measurement systems are currently unable to provide reliable information on these aspects of performance.

**2.111** We also noted that the 1999 Performance Report contains no information for the Employment Insurance Program on client satisfaction with the courtesy of staff or with the information received about entitlements and obligations. However, for Income Security Programs the Report does include some information about client satisfaction with the services and information they received.

**2.112** We noted that the 1998 performance report of the U.S. Social Security Administration provides more information on client satisfaction with service. It gives the rate of client satisfaction with not only the courtesy of staff and the clarity of the information obtained but also several aspects of the service environment. These include the location of the office, hours of operation, office privacy and comfort of the waiting room.

**2.113** The Department told us that in 1999–2000 it plans again to measure client satisfaction with service in Income Security Programs. We expect that this will enable it to provide more information in its Performance Report for 2000.

**2.114** We noted that the Performance Report does not provide any historical information that could be used to identify trends in performance. Moreover, the report provides little information that would help provide the context of service performance. For example, although performance in the timely payment of Employment Insurance benefits is reported, no information is provided on the accuracy of the payments.

**2.115 In its annual Performance Report, the Department should clearly communicate to Parliament its performance in meeting the national service commitments.**

*Department's response: Performance in meeting the national service commitments will be included in the Departmental Performance Report.*

*Income Security Programs is re-evaluating the 35-day target as part of the performance measure revisions currently under way. In addition, focus groups will be used in 2000 to determine directly from clients what they expect of us. The results of this research will help Income Security Programs develop realistic service targets to meet client expectations. These will provide benchmarks against which we can monitor and report actual performance.*

## Conclusion

**2.116 Integrating service quality into operations.** The Department has made considerable progress in integrating service quality into its operations at the local level. It has defined its approach to delivering high-quality services, implemented a new service delivery network and set out national service

commitments to be communicated to clients at all points of service. The local offices we visited had completed or were undertaking a variety of initiatives to deliver better service to clients. However, we concluded that improvements in several areas would further integrate service quality into local operations.

**2.117** The Department needs to ensure that the national service commitments are communicated more consistently to clients at points of service, along with other key information such as performance toward delivery targets, the cost of services and the availability of complaint and redress mechanisms. Managers of local offices need to obtain more feedback from their clients and analyze it to identify opportunities for improving service quality. Finally, more emphasis on developing and implementing action plans at the local level would help focus attention on continuous improvement.

**2.118 Managing service quality efficiently and effectively.** At both the national and the local levels, the Department has not measured service performance for all of its national service commitments. Where service performance is being measured, we found some weaknesses — for example, in measuring waiting time for counter services and the speed of processing and payment. Nor does the Department measure other important aspects of service quality at the local level — such as the quality of the service environment and the accuracy of Employment Insurance payments.

**2.119** Agreements with non-governmental organizations to provide employment assistance services on behalf of the Department do not set out the quality of service expected. Nor do they require the non-governmental organizations to be accountable for service performance.

**2.120** We concluded that these gaps in the availability of performance information about service and cost make it impossible to determine whether the

**The Department does not have measures of performance toward all of its national service commitments.**

**Its Performance Report does not give Parliament a clear understanding of the Department's performance in meeting the national service commitments.**

quality of service at the local level is being managed efficiently and effectively.

**2.121 Reporting results to Parliament.** The Department sets out its national service commitments in its annual reports to Parliament on plans and priorities and on departmental performance.

**2.122** However, we concluded that the results it reports are not adequate to give Parliament a clear understanding of the Department's performance in meeting the service commitments. Nor does the Department report information (for example, the accuracy of Employment Insurance payments) that would help to put service results into context.



## About the Audit

### Objectives

The audit sought to determine the extent to which Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC):

- integrates service quality into its operations and identifies opportunities to continue improving;
- manages local service quality efficiently and effectively; and
- provides Parliament with relevant, understandable and balanced information about service quality.

### Scope and Approach

The audit focussed on the management of the quality of services delivered locally. We reviewed the following services: provision of information to Canadians about Employment Insurance and Income Security services; front-line services and processing of Employment Insurance claims and Income Security applications (excluding Canada Pension Plan disability benefits); and employment assistance services provided by non-governmental organizations under contribution agreements.

We reviewed documents and interviewed HRDC staff about the quality of the services we examined. We carried out the audit in 13 parent Human Resource Centres of Canada (HRCCs) and three Income Security Programs processing centres in the Department's Newfoundland, Quebec, Ontario, Alberta and British Columbia regions.

We did not assess the location of HRCCs or self-service terminals; nor did we examine service issues related to privacy, security or compliance with the *Official Languages Act*.

The quantitative data reported in this chapter were obtained from the various sources identified in the text. Unless otherwise indicated, we examined the reasonableness of the information but did not verify it.

### Criteria

- A framework for managing service quality that takes into account the needs and priorities of clients should be established and implemented to integrate service quality into day-to-day operations. Adequate quality management plans should be established and implemented in local offices.
- Descriptions of services, service pledges, delivery targets, the cost of services, and complaint and redress mechanisms should be clearly defined and communicated to clients, together with performance against targets.
- The quality and cost of services should be measured, analyzed, monitored and communicated to senior management in a timely fashion.
- Parliament should be provided with information on service quality that is relevant, understandable and balanced.

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