

An excerpt from the May 2003 issue of Call Center Magazine's "Out of Center Call Centers" by Brendan Read

Satellite Centers

Call centers that are leery of teleworking may find small (under 50-workstations) satellite centers a suitable alternative.

When member services staff at Kaiser Permanente's 13 Portland OR-area clinics are not handling in-person inquiries, they take calls from the HMO's 40-agent Portland call center. Calls are received through Siemens' (San Jose, CA) HiPath Teleworking rerouter, which attaches to Kaiser's HiPath ProCenter ACD.

The satellite program, instituted in August 2002, has dropped queue times (some clients penalize the HMO if it doesn't meet service level agreements). The initiative has also let Kaiser avoid hiring additional call center agents, says Rebecca Rowland, call center technology specialist with Kaiser Permanente.

Satellite centers can be formal mini-centers, with the switching and technology hosting handled centrally. Outsourcer Virtual-Agent Services (VAS, Schaumburg, IL) found this to be an effective method of tapping affordable rural workforces.

VAS has seven satellite centers in rural New Brunswick, Canada. These are linked with a field operations center in Moncton.

The centers have up to 50 workstations and 100 agents. VAS provides computer-based and instructor-led training at each center.

VAS contracts with Aliant to provide carrier-based routing of clients' calls to Moncton and to the agents in the satellite centers. Aliant also hosts VAS's contact management technology.

Agent turnover at the satellite centers is 15% or less compared to the 70% to 80% that Robert Camastro, president of VAS, has seen in call centers.

VAS also offers teleworking to its agents. But there has been limited take-up: only five of the company's 500 agents telework.

"Most of our agents like coming into town to work and socialize," Camastro points out. "Our satellite centers provide a productive community atmosphere for them that they wouldn't get from working at home."