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Committee on Commerce and Consumer Services

Senator James E. "Jim" King, Jr., Chair

ACCESSING CONSUMER SERVICES OF STATE GOVERNMENT

SUMMARY

State government offers a variety of resources and assistance to consumers who are about to enter, or have entered, the marketplace and have an inquiry, concern, or complaint about a business or professional. Consumers familiar with the jurisdiction of state agencies are able to contact those agencies directly using call centers, websites, or traditional mail. For consumers unfamiliar with agency jurisdictions, however, navigating the maze of an enterprise as large as state government can be more difficult. To enhance consumers' ability to access the existing consumer services of state government, this report recommends:

- Codifying, and expanding the role of, an informal roundtable of agency consumer-service staff who have been exchanging information in order to improve the referral of consumer inquiries and complaints;
- Establishing a specially featured subportal or page on myflorida.com which aggregates and accessibly packages agency consumer-service resources; and
- Increasing the marketing of the state's existing complaint clearinghouse, to the extent fiscal considerations permit.

BACKGROUND

State agencies offer a variety of services to consumers who are preparing to enter the marketplace and want information on a business or professional, as well as for consumers who feel they have been aggrieved in the marketplace. A consumer can, for example, check on the licensure status of a construction contractor licensed by the Department of Business and Professional Regulation or of a doctor licensed by the Department of Health. Similarly, a consumer can file a complaint against a motor vehicle repair shop by contacting the Department of Agriculture and

Consumer Services or against a health care facility by contacting the Agency for Health Care Administration.

In support of these kinds of consumer services, the state employs various infrastructure, such as toll-free or other telephone numbers, agency-staffed or contracted customer call centers, and agency websites with regulatory information or on-line licensure and complaint capabilities. The following table contains estimated expenditures related to the consumer-service functions of some of the key state agencies that consumers likely contact with consumer complaints.¹ The table is designed to be illustrative rather than comprehensive and captures principally the "frontline" activities closely related to a consumer's initial contact with a state agency (e.g., call center operations).

Estimated Consumer Service Expenditures for FY 2003-2004				
Agency	FTE	Salaries/Benefits	OPS	Expenses
AHCA	7	\$358,483		\$892,000
DBPR	82	\$3,335,944	\$225,000	\$754,753
DOH	35	\$1,438,214	\$35,000	\$218,900
AG	13	\$470,566	\$21,462	\$98,346
DACS	31	\$987,438	\$3,725	\$124,597
DFS ²	195	\$8,543,756	\$700,315	\$1,885,412
PSC	9	\$280,400	\$40,000	\$34,500

Because agencies generally have their own consumer-service operations, a Floridian familiar with the division of responsibility in state government may be served most efficiently by directly contacting, via telephone, the Internet, or regular mail, the agency with responsibility for the particular issue. However, a consumer unfamiliar with the jurisdiction of agencies may experience difficulty determining where to start to turn for assistance. In the latter case, two important avenues for information are the state's official Internet

¹ This report focused on the following agencies: Agency for Health Care Administration (AHCA); Attorney General's (AG) Office; Public Service Commission (PSC); and the Departments of Agriculture and Consumer Services (DACS), Business and Professional Regulation (DBPR), Financial Services (DFS), and Health (DOH).
² Captures the entire DFS Division of Consumer Services.

portal, which operates as myflorida.com, and the state operator and directory assistance system, known as the State Information Center. In addition, the Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services is statutorily tasked with serving as a clearinghouse for the receipt and referral of consumer inquiries and complaints. Nevertheless, in an enterprise as large and complex as state government, a consumer may reach the incorrect state agency and find himself or herself in a frustrating process of being referred among agencies.

This interim project report examines some of the state's existing consumer-service resources and activities in order to identify options for facilitating a consumer's contact state government. The report focuses on those instances when a consumer is turning to a state agency for help (e.g., consumer-protection services) related to the consumer's dealings in the private marketplace.³ The report does not address local "211" information and referral services⁴ or temporary referral services offered in response to disasters.⁵

The size and scope of state government have prompted prior efforts to coordinate agency consumer-service functions and resources. In 1999, for example, the Cabinet endorsed the creation of the Strikeforce Against Fraudulent Enterprises (SAFE). The director of the Department of Law Enforcement and the Comptroller conceived the strikeforce in response to difficulty in obtaining data to assess the extent of fraudulent activity in Florida. Originally designed to improve coordination and communication among state agencies, the strikeforce evolved into a coalition of governmental agencies and private organizations whose goal was to combat fraud and provide consumers with information on fraudulent enterprises.

One of SAFE's initiatives was development of a database of closed fraud cases. Language differences in agency computer systems, however, impeded the submission of case information to the database. Also,

³ The report does not focus on cases in which a person is a direct customer of the agency (e.g., a business seeking a permit from the Department of Environmental Protection).

⁴ Although systems vary among communities, the 211 network provides callers with information about and referrals to human services for every day needs and in times of crisis. The Agency for Health Care Administration certifies local 211 network providers. (See <http://www.flairs.org/211statecertification.htm>.)

⁵ During the recent hurricanes, for example, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, other government agencies, and private organizations maintained assistance centers and hotlines specifically to assist storm victims.

agency participation in the submission of data to FDLE was low. For a period starting in late 2000, SAFE members, including private sector participants, were able to access the entire database through a password system. The general public could access selected information from the database through the state's official portal. Today, however, the database is inactive, and agencies no longer download data into it.

SAFE also explored the concept of a centralized fraud complaint and referral center. As envisioned, the center would have featured a single statewide number to contact in order to file a fraud complaint. The complaint information would have been provided to the appropriate investigators in the agency with jurisdiction over the subject of the complaint. The center was never established. Among the unresolved issues were which agency would administer the complaint center and how the center would be staffed and funded.

In a recent example of interagency coordination in the consumer-protection area, consumer-service staff from multiple state agencies have formed a Consumer Roundtable to exchange information on agency services and thereby improve the referral of consumers among agencies. (See **Findings** section of this report.)

METHODOLOGY

Committee staff interviewed consumer-service personnel from multiple state agencies; conducted site visits to agency consumer call centers; reviewed agency websites; and surveyed or interviewed other governmental, public-interest, and private-sector representatives with experience on consumer and business issues. Research for this report focused on those state agencies a consumer is likely to contact when he or she plans to interact, or has interacted, with a business and wants information or has a complaint.

FINDINGS

Official State Portal: Myflorida.com

Amid the global proliferation of the Internet as a tool for communication, information-gathering, and commerce, the state's official portal – www.myflorida.com – is an increasingly important avenue for consumers to access services of state government. The portal receives approximately 150,000 visits⁶ per day.⁷

⁶ State Technology Office staff explain that a visit is a

Access to Consumer Services through the Portal

Among the access points available on the portal are:

“Find an Agency” – This feature provides an alphabetical listing of state agencies, with links to their websites. It also provides links, among others, to county and municipal home pages.

“411” – This feature includes an online, searchable directory of telephone numbers and other contact information for state, local, university, and community college offices and employees. The database that supports the “411” feature on myflorida.com is maintained by the SunCom directory records unit at the State Technology Office, based on information provided by the agencies.

Get Answers Now – Here a user finds prepared answers to frequently asked questions in multiple categories. (For example, under “Moving to Florida,” there is an answer to the question “How do we establish residency in Florida?”.) A user whose questions is not covered by one of the prepared answers may submit a question, which a representative of the State Library will research and answer electronically.

e-Government Services – This feature provides linkages to a wide variety of government services organized alphabetically or by broad categories (e.g., “Environment and Natural Resources”). Through this feature, an individual, for example, could link to the Department of Business and Professional Regulation’s (DBPR’s) on-line system for the renewal of licenses or complete a complaint form related to a licensed professional for submission to DBPR via regular mail.

Keyword Search – At the top of the portal’s home page is a function through which a user may initiate a keyword search of a database that regularly sweeps and collects data from agency sites. The State Technology Office notes that this feature, which is one of the most popular with users of the portal, relies upon cooperation with the state agencies in identifying the particular terms that, when searched, will trigger a link to the agency’s home page. As with some other Internet searches, the number of hits may vary based on the

specificity and accuracy of the search terms. For a consumer who wanted to file a complaint against a bank, for example, a search of the terms “bank” and “complaint” produces 23,544 results, most of which are not relevant. An agency can notify STO that the agency wants its home page to be a “Selected myflorida.com Match” when certain terms are searched.

Contact Us – Selecting the “Contact Us” feature provides a user with email addresses for the Governor and certain state agencies. In addition, this feature offers a link to a webpage of the State Library and Archives of Florida which contains mailing address information, telephone numbers, and website links for certain state agencies.

In addition to the access points described above, myflorida.com currently features navigation keys based on the following taxonomy: “Visitor,” “Floridian,” “Business,” “Government,” and “Get Answers.” The Floridian key offers, among other categories of information, a subheading of “Consumer Information.” This subheading, in turn, includes a variety of links related to registering a complaint, as well as links to other consumer resources. The linkages, however, may not be intuitive to a consumer and are not always representative of the scope of consumer assistance available from state government. For example, selecting the complaint link “Fraud Hotline” connects a user to a portion of the website of the Department of Transportation (DOT) which advertises a toll-free telephone number to report use of DOT property for personal gain. The “Fraud Hotline” link does not connect a user to more general call centers maintained by the Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services and the Attorney General. In another example, selecting the resource links “Consumer Brochures,” “A to Z Guide Consumer,” and “Consumer Bulletins” connects a user to the website of the Public Service Commission, which is one of only multiple agencies providing consumer services.

On average, respondents to a survey for this interim project indicated that they do not perceive the myflorida.com portal as being extremely effective in helping consumers to access complaint forms and processes or to identify the correct agency to contact on a particular consumer issue. Respondents opined, however, that in general the Internet does have the potential to be an effective tool to educate consumers about consumer assistance from the state, thereby illustrating why the state may wish to enhance the provision of information on the portal. Although

unique session on the portal. One visit typically results in several “hits” to stage-agency pages during the visit.

⁷ A “portal” generally refers to a website designed to be a starting place for users to access content and services. It may feature a directory of websites or a search capacity.

specific suggestions for enhancing myflorida.com varied, some ideas included:

- presenting information using terms and navigation paths that are intuitive to consumers; and
- centralizing resources and complaint forms from multiple state agencies in one place on the portal.

Portal Governance and Budget

The foundation for myflorida.com is a commercial portal product from Yahoo, purchased by the state and maintained by the State Technology Office (STO). Individual state agencies, however, separately host and maintain their own portals. In this manner, STO develops the taxonomy on myflorida.com and works cooperatively with other state agencies to identify the appropriate linkages on the official state portal. The agencies themselves, however, control the content once a user links from myflorida.com to the agency's website. There is not currently a portal authority or governing body of agency chief information officers or similar representatives who direct decisions about how the state portal should be designed and function from a business/customer perspective.⁸ The STO staff who manage the portal do meet bi-monthly with, and make decisions with input from, the webmasters assigned to represent six knowledge domains into which the agencies are divided (i.e., general government, public safety, education, finance, human services, and economic development). All of the agency webmasters meet four times per year. For the current fiscal year, the Legislature appropriated \$1.215 million for operation of the portal. The Legislature required STO to prepare and regularly update a detailed operational work plan that, among other elements, describes the business objectives and expected outcomes.⁹

Complaint Clearinghouse

The Division of Consumer Services of the Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (DACS) serves as the state's clearinghouse for consumer protection, consumer information, and consumer services in general.¹⁰ Under this responsibility, the division

receives consumer complaints and transmits them for handling by the appropriate agency with jurisdiction over the complaint's subject matter. In this manner, for example, a consumer who is unaware that the Department of Business and Professional Regulation (DBPR) has oversight of cosmetologists can submit a complaint to DACS, which in turn will forward the complaint to DBPR. As part of this clearinghouse arrangement, if a state agency receives a complaint that addresses a consumer fraud or consumer protection issue outside that agency's jurisdiction, the statute directs the agency to refer the complaint to the Division of Consumer Services at DACS for re-referral to the proper agency.¹¹ When the subject of a complaint is not within the regulatory authority of any state agency, the division is directed to pursue formal or informal methods of mediating a settlement of the complaint between the consumer and business.¹²

In the implementing bill for the 2003-2004 General Appropriations Act, the Legislature eliminated, for that fiscal year, virtually all portions of DACS' clearinghouse responsibilities – including the provision directing DACS to receive complaints from consumers related to any subject area and refer them to the appropriate agency, and the provision directing the division to mediate complaints in areas unregulated by the state.¹³ The changes accompanied a reduction of seven positions in the General Appropriations Act. For fiscal year 2004-2005, the statutory authority for the complaint clearinghouse was restored, as were four of the original seven positions. In its last full year serving as the complaint clearinghouse (FY 2002-2003), DACS processed approximately 45,000 written complaints, of which 25,000 were complaints in areas not regulated by any state agency.

Most project survey respondents opined that consumers generally are not aware that the Division of Consumer Services is a clearinghouse for complaints. They added, however, that the state should continue to maintain a complaint clearinghouse and generally favored continuing to have the division perform that function.

⁸ There is an Agency Chief Information Officers Council, which is designed to encourage cooperation on state enterprise technology issues beyond only myflorida.com. (See s. 282.315, F.S.)

⁹ Proviso accompanying Specific Appropriation 2709, *General Appropriations Act for Fiscal Year 2004-2005*, ch. 2004-268, L.O.F.

¹⁰ Section 570.544(3), F.S.

¹¹ An agency to which the Division of Consumer Services refers a complaint shall, within 30 days, acknowledge its receipt and report on its disposition or status. See s. 570.544(6), F.S.

¹² Section 570.544(3), F.S.

¹³ Section 60, ch. 2003-399, L.O.F. The implementing bill retained language in s. 570.544, F.S., however, directing state agencies to submit to DACS complaints they receive from consumers which are not within the agency's jurisdiction and directing DACS to refer those complaints to the proper agency.

In addition to serving as the state's complaint clearinghouse, DACS has statutorily assigned regulatory oversight of multiple business sectors (e.g., motor vehicle repair shops, sellers of travel, and dance studios).¹⁴ To facilitate the processing of unregulated complaints and complaints within the department's jurisdiction, as well as the referral of complaints to other agencies, the Division of Consumer Services at DACS maintains a call center (e.g., 800-HELP-FLA) and a website (www.800helpfla.com).

Consumer Services Call Center

DACS markets three separate toll-free telephone numbers – a “Lemon Law” number, a consumer services hotline, and a Spanish-language consumer services hotline.¹⁵ The general and Spanish-language hotline calls are routed to one call center.¹⁶ That center processes approximately 800 to 1,200 calls per day, with volume fluctuating at different times of the year. The calls range from inquiries about whether a particular business is licensed with the state to inquiries about how to file a complaint. The center is staffed with 24 individuals.

When a caller's issue falls within the jurisdiction of another agency, DACS staff do not currently transfer the caller to the other agency and instead provide the caller with the number.¹⁷ In addition to a concern about transferring a caller incorrectly, DACS reports that it has a policy not to transfer calls because the department would continue to incur costs for the call as long as the other agency stays on the line. DACS reports, however, that, with technological upgrades available for its telephone system, it is exploring the feasibility of making interagency transfers so that consumers do not have to make another call.

800helpfla.com

Among the consumer resources available on the Division of Consumer Services' website is an “A to Z

¹⁴ See, e.g., ss. 559.901-559.9221, 559.926-559.939, and 501.143, F.S.

¹⁵ “Lemon Law” hotline: 1-800-321-5366; consumer services hotline: 800-HELP-FLA (800-435-7352); Spanish-language consumer hotline: 800-FL-AYUDA (800-352-9832).

¹⁶ Calls to the “Lemon Law” hotline typically are processed by a separate staff at DACS.

¹⁷ The practice of not transferring calls is usually followed as well by the other state agencies contacted for this report.

Resource Guide,” which is an alphabetical listing of topics with corresponding governmental agency or business telephone contact information and website links. A user, for example, can select the letter “H” and scroll through that portion of the guide to find that a complaint against a hospital is within the jurisdiction of the Agency for Health Care Administration.¹⁸ The division is exploring the possibility of making the list searchable, rather than relying on manual scrolling.

The Division of Consumer Services website also includes a “File a Complaint” feature, through which a consumer may complete and submit a complaint on line and provide any supporting documents through traditional mail. (The division processes written complaints only, except for price gouging and certain cases under the “Do Not Call” telephone solicitation program.) The division uses a standard complaint form for all complaints except those involving motor vehicle repair shops or involving the state's “Do Not Call” telephone solicitation program.

Attorney General's Office of Citizen Services

Although it is not statutorily assigned to serve as the complaint clearinghouse, the Office of the Attorney General operates a consumer unit that provides some comparable services to the clearinghouse operated by the Division of Consumer Services at the Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services. The formation of the unit traces back, in part, to the Attorney General's creation in January 2003 of a toll-free hotline for Floridians who believe they are victims of fraud.¹⁹ Initially hotline calls were processed by the Attorney General's existing correspondence unit. From that existing operation, the Attorney General in September 2003 created an Office of Citizen Services.

The Office of Citizen Services is staffed with 13 full-time employees, 10 of whom are telephone and correspondence analysts, as well as approximately 60-80 hours of “other personnel services” (OPS) each week. The office processes approximately 630 calls per day. The core mission of the office is to identify and track fraudulent activity, and, upon seeing a pattern of this activity, to share the information with the Attorney

¹⁸ The myflorida.com portal currently has a subheading for an “A to Z Resource Guide,” but it links to the Public Service Commission rather than to the DACS “A to Z Guide to Government.”

¹⁹ Office of Attorney General, news release, *Crist Announces Toll-free Hotline*, Jan. 7, 2003. The telephone number is 866-9-NO-SCAM (866-966-7226).

General's economic crimes unit. However, some of the calls that come into the center are more general consumer inquiries or complaints and may relate to the jurisdiction of another state agency.

To facilitate the processing of complaints and interagency referrals, the office utilizes a database that analysts can search by subject and obtain contact information for a variety of local, state, and federal agencies, as well as contacts at some businesses that have established a complaint-resolution relationship with the Office of the Attorney General. In addition to providing consumers with contact information for another agency, the Office of Citizen Services in some instances will download forms from the other agency and provide them to the consumer or send a complaint for the consumer directly to the appropriate agency. The Office of the Attorney General also maintains topic-specific databases that can be used, for example, to determine if a consumer's call relates to an active investigation of the economic crimes unit.

State Information and Directory Services

The state information and directory services functions of the State Technology Office (STO) play a critical role in how Floridians access consumer services of state government, as well as in how agencies refer consumer complaints and inquiries to one another. Among these functions are: 1) the provision of directory assistance through a state operator ("State Information Center"); 2) the maintenance of telephone data for participants in the SunCom system ("SunCom Directory Services"); and 3) the provision of data for publication in commercial telephone directories ("Commercial Directory Records").

State Information Center – This center, which handles calls from throughout the state, is operated from Tallahassee with seven positions under a contract with Respect of Florida.²⁰ A caller is greeted by an interactive voice response (IVR) system. In addition to seven subject-specific options provided through the IVR (e.g., scheduling SunCom video conferencing or reporting SunCom dataline problems), a caller may select "zero" to reach a state operator for directory assistance. When assisting callers, operators can access the same database that supports the "411" feature on the myflorida.com portal. (See the discussion of the **Official State Portal**, above.) A caller may elect to be transferred by the state operator to the requested

agency. There are approximately 17,000 calls per month to the State Information Center and approximately 400,000 "hits" per month on the "411" directory on the myflorida.com portal.

SunCom Directory Records – This function survives the *State of Florida Telephone Directory*, which was last published in a bound version in 1996. Initially, this database, which supports the "411" feature on myflorida.com, included traditional SunCom subscribers, including state, county, and municipal agencies, as well as state universities and community colleges. The database now also includes certain private entities affiliated with state government (e.g., PRIDE, Enterprise Florida, Inc., and Visit Florida). The State Technology Office maintains the database through a network of contacts with listed organizations. The agencies notify STO when information changes are needed. Three individuals perform the SunCom directory records functions, as well as the commercial directory records functions discussed below.

Commercial Directory Records – Through this operation, the STO endeavors to standardize the information the state publishes about its agencies in private telephone directories. STO updates 114 commercial directories on a yearly basis – providing the information to state agencies for verification prior to submitting the information to telephone companies. The telephone companies in turn supply the data to their contract publishers and to phone company database administrators, who maintain the data for use by "411" or "555-1212" operators.

The STO estimates that expenditures related to these key functions total approximately \$841,163 per year. The STO reports that its goal is to enhance this communication system by giving state agencies greater ability to participate in managing their data in the system and thereby greater control in how those agencies manage their communications with the public. Currently, a few agencies have been given access to update their information directly in the "411" system.

Consumer Roundtable

In an example of interagency coordination in the consumer-protection area, consumer-service staff from multiple state agencies on their own initiative formed in 2003 a Consumer Roundtable. The initial purpose of the roundtable was to exchange information on agency services, with the goal of improving the referral of consumers among agencies and avoiding misdirected referrals. In June 2004, the roundtable formed a

²⁰ The number for the State Information Center varies by county.

steering committee to lead the organization and meet on at least a quarterly basis.²¹ The roundtable is not currently codified in the Florida Statutes.

Among the current undertakings of the roundtable is updating and ensuring the accuracy of the “A to Z Resource Guide” maintained by the Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services. A roundtable working group formed for this purpose suggested that the guide be prominently displayed on the myflorida.com portal and suggested marketing efforts to heighten consumer awareness of the guide.

The roundtable also discussed forming a technology working group. The purpose of the group would be for agency consumer-service staff to share information and experiences on the technology systems they use to assist consumers and to offer advice to agencies that may be considering changes to the technology that supports their consumer-service activities. The working group ultimately might discuss the feasibility of sharing consumer-protection information among the agencies. To date the roundtable participants have not formed the technology working group.

One option being explored by the Consumer Roundtable is the concept of establishing a omnibus consumer website. As explained by one of the agencies participating in the roundtable, the envisioned website would include a public portion that would contain, in a centralized fashion, a variety of information and resources for consumers to protect themselves. In addition, the website would feature a portion accessible exclusively through a password system by participating state agencies. This latter portion would include a “list serve” or similar mechanism for consumer-service staff from these state agencies to exchange information continuously. For example, the agencies could post alerts on scams or other activities against consumers; share information on observed trends in consumer protection; notify one another of changes in agency contacts, jurisdiction, or organization; and ensure

²¹ The steering committee is comprised of staff from the Agency for Health Care Administration and the following departments: Business and Professional Regulation, Children and Family Services, Agriculture and Consumer Services, Financial Services, Legal Affairs, Elder Affairs, Health, Revenue, and Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles. At its first meeting, the steering committee decided it would meet monthly. However, increased agency workloads associated with the hurricanes that made landfall in the state during the summer of 2004 disrupted the meeting schedule.

greater accuracy in interagency referral of consumer complaints or inquiries.

The Consumer Roundtable held its first meeting in May 2003. One year later, at least two participating agencies reported a decrease in the receipt of misdirected referrals due to the networking and educational activities of the group. However, participation in meetings of the Consumer Roundtable has ebbed and flowed. Although the group has reflected on what its future role should be, participating agencies express differing opinions on whether the Legislature should codify the roundtable. The eight state agencies responding to a survey in connection with this report generally supported the following potential roles for the roundtable:

- Exchange of general information among the consumer-service units of state agencies;²²
- Identification and exchange of best practices employed by the consumer-service units of state agencies; and
- Identification of opportunities to complement and coordinate activities among the consumer-service units of state agencies.

Some of the responding agencies supported the following additional potential roles for the roundtable:

- Identification of, and exchange of information on, trends (e.g., trends in consumer fraud; patterns of fraudulent behavior; etc.), which may lead to coordinated enforcement against violators of consumer laws;
- Developing and implementing plans to share and exchange data among consumer-service units of state agencies;
- Addressing inter-agency problems that may occur when referring complaints or inquiries from one state agency to another state agency; and
- Identification, and submission to the Legislature, of policy options or ideas for enhancing consumer services provided by state agencies.

Commonality Among Consumer-Service Units

The consumer-service units of state agencies studied for this interim project generally had certain practices and procedures in common, such as:

- Referring callers who contacted them incorrectly to

²² One of the eight responding agencies did not specify its support of this specific role for the Consumer Roundtable.

another state agency by providing the telephone number, rather than transferring the caller;

- Forwarding misdirected written complaints or correspondence to the appropriate agency directly and notifying the consumer of the referral; and
- Maintaining databases related to the agency's jurisdiction which are used to facilitate the processing of consumer inquiries and complaints.

Although agencies may exchange information, research for this report has not identified situations in which agencies are integrating their databases or providing direct access to each other's databases.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This report recommends the following actions to enhance the ability of Floridians to access consumer services of state government:

Codify the Consumer Roundtable – The Legislature could codify the roundtable and direct the head of each agency to appoint a representative knowledgeable about the agency's consumer-service activities. Although the roundtable formed and has operated on the participants' own initiative, codification would give the imprimatur of being a statutorily recognized organization and perhaps help to ensure active involvement and cooperation. Statutorily prescribed duties of the roundtable could include, among others:

- Exchanging general information among the consumer service units of state agencies;
- Identifying best practices employed by the consumer service units;
- Coordinating activities among the consumer service units; and
- Exploring the feasibility of sharing data related to consumer-protection trends and complaints.

Engage the Consumer Roundtable in planning for myflorida.com – This report does not specifically explore the larger policy issue of establishing a governance structure, such as a portal authority, to design and direct all aspects of myflorida.com from a business/customer perspective. Regardless of whether such a governance structure ultimately is established, the State Technology Office could regularly engage the Consumer Roundtable to help design the consumer-related features of the portal. With the expertise of the agency staff who interact with consumers on a daily basis, the roundtable could offer STO valuable insights

on how to package consumer resources in a manner that is intuitive to consumers. Working with STO in this capacity could be one of the statutorily assigned functions of the roundtable.

Establish a comprehensive consumer "subportal" or similar feature on myflorida.com – STO, in cooperation with agency consumer-service units, could create a high-profile page or subportal that aggregates the wide variety of consumer-protection information and resources available from state agencies. This consumer subportal could be featured prominently on the myflorida.com home page, as a "one-stop" and readily accessible location for Floridians to go when they wish to get information on making a business inquiry or complaint. The page could feature useful tools, such as the *A to Z Resource Guide*, to help consumers identify which agencies have jurisdiction over specific subjects.

Such a consumer page on myflorida.com could include alerts for consumers on known scams or similar fraudulent practices. In addition to the publicly accessible portions, the page could have a password driven section accessible by agency consumer-service staff, featuring a "list serve" or similar mechanism for the agencies to exchange information and alerts on, among other things, developing complaint patterns or trends, cross-jurisdictional fraudulent activity, investigations, and enforcement actions.

Market Complaint Clearinghouse with "One Stop" Goal – To the extent resources are available, the Legislature could invest in additional marketing of the existing complaint clearinghouse at the Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services – specifically the department's toll-free telephone number – with the goal of eventually making the clearinghouse a "one-stop" source for initial consumer-complaint inquiries and then referral to the agency with subject-matter expertise. Research for this report indicates that, although the system is in place to receive and refer complaints and inquiries, the existence of the clearinghouse is not particularly well known. Until such time as greater familiarity with the clearinghouse is established, the Legislature may wish to retain the existing toll-free and other telephone numbers at state agencies so consumers familiar with those sources may continue to contact them directly. To facilitate movement toward a one-stop or one-number model, DACS could begin transferring callers to the appropriate agencies.