

The background of the top half of the page is a photograph of the Kansas State Capitol building in Topeka, Kansas, taken at sunset. The sky is filled with vibrant orange, red, and blue clouds. In the foreground, there is a large, dark rock formation with a wooden door-like opening at its base. A river or stream flows through the rocks.

State of Kansas Enables Resident Access to COVID-19 Information and Vital Services with Cloud-based Contact Center Solution

Agencies Stand Up Solution for Department of Health and Environment and Department of Labor in Record Time

The State of Kansas's motto "ad astra per aspera" translates as "to the stars through difficulty," aligns perfectly with the realities of the COVID-19 era. And, there are many opportunities for state government to lead the way. True to its motto, Kansas is rising to the challenge brilliantly—thanks to the commitment of dedicated state employees and technology innovation.

In times of crisis, the ability to deliver accurate information efficiently to residents is essential to allaying fears, ensuring public safety, and expediting the delivery of critical services. Kansas Governor Laura Kelly and her team understood this inherent need and took swift action to modernize critical contact center operations in a matter of weeks to make sure that citizens could more reliably and efficiently access information they need as demand rose quickly. The state turned to [Amazon Web Services \(AWS\)](#) and its cloud-based [Amazon Connect](#) solution to move quickly.

COVID-19 Facts-On-Demand

When the COVID-19 pandemic began to emerge, Kansans, like citizens everywhere, had many questions about symptoms, testing, resources, and more. The Kansas Department of Health and Environment (KDHE) stood up a COVID-19 information line to provide critical information. Prior to using Amazon Connect, KDHE set up a hunt-group line, which assigns multiple office lines to a single phone number. They routed calls across the lines until a staff member answered. If no agents were available, the call would drop. With more than 1,700 calls a day coming into the number, agents and infrastructure were soon overwhelmed. The department needed to scale its call center operations to not only accommodate higher call volumes but to succeed in delivering information to more citizens. The department also wanted to give employees the flexibility to work remotely for their safety.

KDHE selected Amazon Connect to rapidly address its new requirements. "Amazon Connect was the optimal technology for our needs," said Kate Davis, legislative liaison for the governor's office. Davis, who has experience in call center operations, was tapped to manage the implementation.

Today, callers can access information immediately, even if a live agent isn't available. For topics the COVID-19 information line cannot address, such as unemployment claims or small business loans, an automated message directs customers to the proper agencies for services. Residents requiring additional information not available via self-service can speak to an agent. Overflow calls route to a queue until an agent is available. Dropped calls are low, averaging just a few calls a day.

In addition, staff members can work remotely. Today a team of about 50 employees staff the line, with approximately 12 agents on duty at any time.

Delivering Assistance in a Time of Economic Crisis

In addition to its direct impact on human health, COVID-19 is slowing state economies. Kansas is no exception, unemployment claims have risen rapidly. The Kansas Department of Labor (KDOL) is on the front line of helping residents to apply for and receive vital unemployment benefits.

The KDOL unemployment claims department was receiving 1.6 million calls a day—compared to the norm of 1,700 calls daily. Importantly, the calls were coming from approximately 40,000 unique numbers, meaning that many Kansans could not get through and were calling multiple times. Call queues filled up within the first 15 minutes of the business day. For the rest of the day, callers received a busy signal.

KDOL faced a unique challenge. The claims system and legacy call center solution read and write from the unemployment mainframe, prohibiting rapid install of a new primary contact center system. The legacy systems also required highly trained agents.

With no time to lose, the team had to innovate. Using Amazon Connect, KDOL created an overlay triage contact center, which went live in less than two days. The system automatically sorts calls coming into the unemployment help line and routes them to the correct resources (live or self-service) based on the specific inquiry. The team also created a technical assistance queue to help with password resets. When no agents are available, callers now have the option to request a return call, so they do not need to remain on hold. Residents get answers to questions faster, and highly trained agents spend more of their time helping residents to file claims, instead of providing basic information.

While residents are still experiencing wait times and delays, in part due to historically high volumes and limited numbers of specialized unemployment claims agents, the team is advancing its goal of serving more Kansans every day.

KDOL now serves up to 300,000 minutes a day of calls. Davis also noted while the total number of calls is going down—from 1.6 million calls just prior to launch to 1.15 million calls three days after the system launched to 400,000 calls just a few days later—the number of unique phone numbers has remained stable. This indicates that callers are getting the information they need in fewer attempts.

The impact goes far beyond these numbers and can be heard in the voices of callers who are expressing spontaneous gratitude to be receiving assistance and connecting with an agent. “We’ve had reports of callers jumping with joy and crying of happiness when they realize they’ve been able to connect with a person,” Davis said. “With the additional staffing from other state agencies and added capacity through Amazon Connect, we have been able to deliver results quickly.”

Today, there are approximately 150 staff members supporting the unemployment call center triage line. Davis and the KDOL team were overwhelmed by how many employees from various departments and teams volunteered to help staff the triage call center. “Their willingness to pitch in demonstrates Kansas state employees’ outstanding commitment to public service, even in a crisis,” Davis said.

Ready to Roll

Time was of the essence for the KDHE and KDOL. The new contact center solution had to provide extreme agility. It had to install rapidly and be simple to use, learn, and manage. Amazon Connect met all of these requirements, according to Davis, including the ability to launch within a week-and-a-half of engaging with AWS.

Davis shared a similar speed-to-market experience with the earlier Amazon Connect implementation in the governor’s office that now supports its constituent information line. The stakeholders asked how long it would take to get the system up and running. Davis explained all that was needed was to define the contact flow and from there she could drag and drop to configure the system.

To the Stars Through Difficulty

“Our goal was to serve more Kansans every day, and we are doing that. While there are still difficulties connecting with the KDOL claims system, we are helping more people and delivering important information faster,” Davis said. “Our agents can hear the relief in callers’ voices when they are finally able to speak to a person after they had been calling without success in previous weeks. It is highly fulfilling for them to help residents in need at this time.”

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