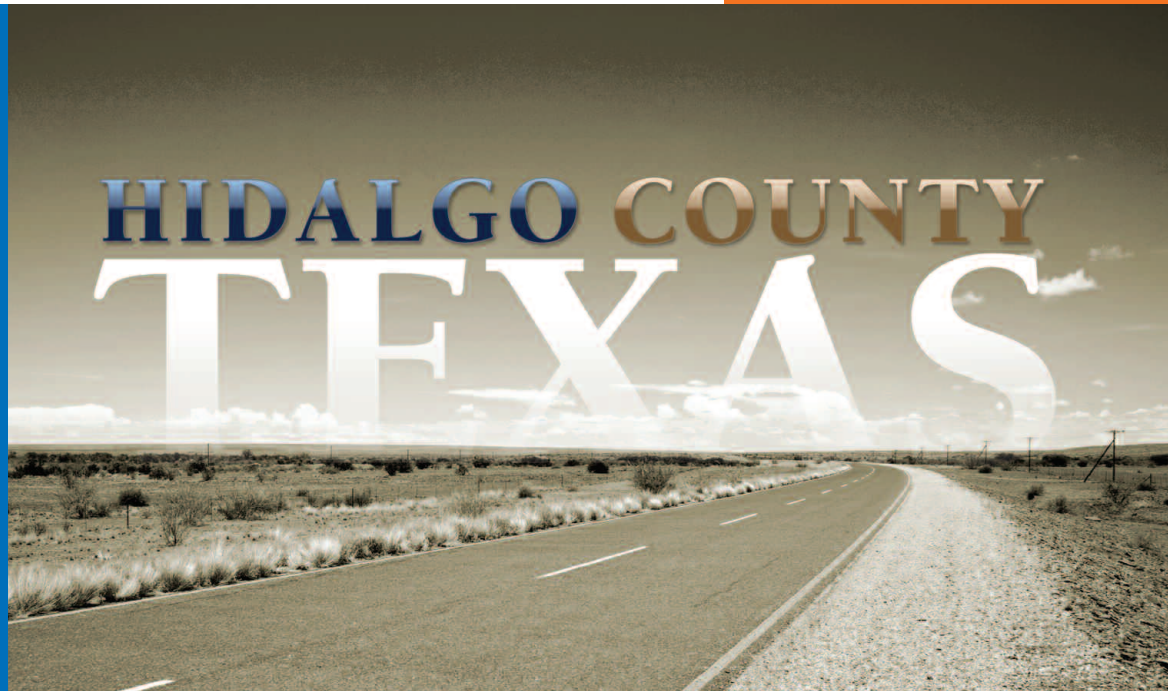


ShoreTel and Hidalgo County



Hidalgo County
shines with
Texas-sized savings
from ShoreTel



CHALLENGE

- Reduce skyrocketing communications costs and take control of a sprawling phone system that was costly and time-consuming to maintain, and did not offer modern features such as voicemail and call forwarding.

SOLUTION

- The ShoreTel UC system comprising about 1,500 ShorePhone™ IP 560 Telephones, 100 ShoreGear® Voice Switches, and four voicemail servers.

BENEFITS

- Massive cost savings—from \$900,000 a year down to about \$400,000.
- Centralized control and management saves money and time.
- Feature-rich capabilities, including voicemail, customizable call handling modes and workgroups help ensure all citizens' calls are answered promptly.
- Built-in redundancy and the reliability of a distributed architecture help keep communications running in the event of an emergency

Located in Southern Texas and with a population close to 750,000, Hidalgo County is one of the fastest growing counties in the nation and covers almost 1,600 square miles. County government is divided into four precincts, overseeing 20 cities and employing more than 2,800 government workers.

Just like its namesake, Miguel Hidalgo—widely considered the father of Mexico—Hidalgo County government in Texas is dedicated to looking out for the best interests of its citizens. Hidalgo is one of the fastest growing counties in the United States, yet it's also one of the poorest, challenging county leadership to provide an increasing number of excellent public services despite shrinking budgets.

This need for fiscal responsibility led Hidalgo County IT staff to examine possible cost savings by replacing its aging and costly communications system. Hidalgo government takes pride in its communications policy of accessibility and responsiveness, so deploying a platform that improves connectivity, streamlines collaboration and reduces expenditures was one of the IT group's key objectives.

In 2002, Hidalgo was paying about \$900,000 a year for a traditional phone service that offered

no centralized management features and lacked the ability to monitor or control additional lines. By 2004, with offices and departments throughout the large county, and a new office building almost ready to go live, only a lengthy and costly audit could help staff determine which lines were active and what they were costing.

Citizens deserved friendly response

Furthermore, the old system did not provide voicemail or transfer capabilities, and there was no central directory of staff telephone numbers.

"Operators did not know the phone numbers for transferring callers," explained Renán Ramirez, Chief Information Officer for Hidalgo County. "So if someone dialed the wrong department looking for license plate information, whoever answered the phone would not know where to transfer the call. This resulted in a lot of complaints from residents who felt they were getting the runaround."

At the same time, Ramirez's IT department team was in the process of streamlining the IT network, which had begun to sprawl after five years of unprecedented growth. Since they were already working with another provider, they decided to pilot a 26-phone voice-over-IP



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Chief Information Officer
Hidalgo County

(VoIP) solution, but were discouraged by that system’s complex management demands.

“Our telephone engineer suggested we take a look at the ShoreTel Unified Communications (UC) system, since it did not require specially certified experts to manage,” Mr. Ramirez said. “During the demonstration, the ShoreTel UC system came up very quickly and was obviously simple to manage. Having full control of the phone system was vital for our ability to quickly expand, and we were confident the simplified management of the ShoreTel system would help to reduce our skyrocketing phone costs.”

ShoreTel slashed costs by more than 60 percent

Hidalgo County began with an implementation of 800 ShorePhone™ IP 560 Telephones, expanding to more than 1500 phones, about 100 ShoreGear® Voice Switches, and four voicemail servers. A small number of users at remote locations are using ShoreTel Softphones from their PCs. The servers and voice switches are distributed for built-in redundancy, improving the reliability of the UC system in this hurricane-prone region.

“ShoreTel was very responsive and very agile,” Mr. Ramirez said. “The equipment arrived and was deployed very quickly—within a month it felt as though we had been running it for years.”

Even more impressive, Mr. Ramirez added, were the incredible cost savings: “The costs to Hidalgo County for the phone system went down from about \$900,000 a year in 2002, to about \$400,000 a year since deployment in 2006. These massive savings are because now we can handle changes in-house, and make calls through the network using ShoreTel’s least cost call routing feature, instead of having to go long distance across the county.”

The first deployment of the ShoreTel UC system was in the County Commissioner’s office of Precinct No. 1. At that time, staff had to write notes to each other because the precinct did not have voicemail, yet alone presence information. “With the ShoreTel UC system, the receptionist uses ShoreWare® Operator Call Manager and simply drags incoming calls into the right voicemail box,” Mr. Ramirez said. “This makes sure a message gets through, even if the user forgets to set their call handling modes.”

Four-digit dialing builds sense of community

Today, almost the entire county has been converted over to the ShoreTel UC system, with about 40 workgroups set up, each with a direct dial number and four-digit dialing. Furthermore, all directories are now accessed on the phone itself, eliminating the need for paper directories and giving staff instant access to up-to-date, accurate information. “Before ShoreTel, some internal departments had to dial the whole number and in some cases were calling long distance across the county to their own department,” Mr. Ramirez said. “Four-digit dialing is now part of the culture and has resulted in a much stronger sense of community. In some departments people refer to each other by their extension numbers.”

ShoreTel’s workgroup capabilities enable the county to establish, monitor and manage call queues, forecast peaks in traffic to ensure appropriate staffing levels, and ensure calls are answered in a timely manner. Auto-attendant scripts in both English and Spanish route calls to the correct department, and Eli Gracia, the county’s telecommunications manager, can log into any workgroup and monitor the queue or use Crystal Report Writer to generate reports from the Call Detail Reporting database on the ShoreTel server.

“I can see the number of calls coming into a workgroup and determine if more users need to be logged into the workgroup to handle the load,” Mr. Gracia said. “The system offers us unprecedented transparency, and it’s incredibly easy to use. For instance, I have set up hunt groups so that if no one answers from a workgroup, the call will route to a live person in a hunt group. I’ve also set up after-hours messages to help connect callers to the right departments for leaving messages after hours.”

ShoreTel reliability survives hurricane alley

For Hidalgo County CIO, Mr. Ramirez, one of the largest benefits of the ShoreTel UC system is the control his team now has over county communications. Since the system is easy to manage, he has only had to allocate one member of his seven-person team to manage the phone system, and any issues are diagnosed and resolved quickly and easily. This ability to address issues efficiently and



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Eli Gracia

*Telecommunications Manager
Hidalgo County*

make changes in real time has translated into real cost and time savings, he said.

The reliability of the ShoreTel UC system also is a huge benefit in this hurricane-prone county. Since the distributed architecture is not server-dependent but based on voice switches, and therefore not prone to the kinds of hardware failures inherent with servers, Mr. Ramirez said his team has seen exceptional, hands-free reliability. The county is expected to be the first line of defense in case of an emergency or natural disaster, and the ShoreTel UC system has enabled staff to develop a disaster plan for communications that enables them to publish an emergency number for citizens to call for information, quickly set up a command center if necessary, and create a custom auto-attendant with options in both English and Spanish to quickly route callers to the correct department.

Scalability is also important to help deal with the enormous growth the county has seen in the past few years, and to deal with the kinds of spikes in traffic that they receive at certain times, such as during an election or after a hurricane. “It is easy to set up a phone bank

and add say 20 extensions for one month, then remove them later,” Mr. Ramirez said. “We were able to relocate about 60 users in one day, and have been able to respond quickly after a hurricane caused devastating flood damage. ShoreTel has given us the flexibility and reliability we need to be both responsive to the citizens of Hidalgo County, and fiscally responsible.”

This flexibility means that as the county continues to grow, Ramirez’ staff can quickly get phone service to new sites, and convert existing sites. Working with their ShoreTel reseller, Lee Gonzalez from Lava Concepts and Consulting, Hidalgo plans to add another 26 sites throughout the county to the ShoreTel system, and expand its capabilities. “The responsiveness of ShoreTel has given us confidence to go after new features and enhancements,” Mr. Ramirez said. “We’re evaluating the potential benefits of implementing a fax server and switching to ShoreTel Converged Conferencing, which will help us drive down costs even further. The benefits of ShoreTel are truly Texas-sized.”