In Senator Blah’s office, mail consumes the full-time attention of 43 out of 68 staff members, and some attention from everyone. The incoming mail load varies from 1000-5000 letters per day and 300-2000 e-mails per day. About 2% of the e-mails have complex documents attached. The senator wants the office to respond to all mail within a week.

All paper mail is opened in the mailroom, dated, and read for a first sort. “Non-issue” letters are relatively constant in volume -- about 300 letters and 100 e-mails daily. Of the rest, 98% are “issue letters”, and 2% junk. An “issue letter” is anything that advocates a position, and 90% of these are routine forms sent by orchestrated campaigns on various subjects. “First sort” sends the issue letters to the response room, non-issue letters to Mary Packard, and the junk into the trash. E-mail is similarly screened in the response room, with the non-issue messages sent to Mary Packard’s computer by LAN.

The response room has 21 computers used on two shifts. The response staffers scan each paper letter into the system (this is, of course, not necessary for emails). If a return address is given (22% of cases) and the writer’s name and address isn’t on file, a file is created. The writer’s position is entered pro or con into an issues database. (If there is no return address, then a file cannot be created but the position is still entered into the issues database.) A standard-menu response is sufficient for 92% of the letters.

Both standard and composed letters are sent by LAN to the print room. Response staffers reply to each e-mail on-line, plus send the same message to the print room in letter form. In the print room, letters are queued into separate printers for stationary and envelopes, which must then be matched for folding/insertion. The “stuffed” envelopes are then presorted and postage is applied; both of these steps use automated machinery. The completed mail is then sent to mail pick up.

Mary Packard’s job is to be sure that the various “non-issue” caseworker aides and the senator himself promptly and correctly receive all mail for cases and special issues of interest. Most cases are intercessions by the Senator’s office with various agencies on some constituent’s behalf. Some are requests for visits and special favors. All campaign mail must be handled by party activists or by the Senator away from the office. Campaign mail must be paid for privately; the government pays for the rest. Mixing the two is scandal bait. Sen. Blah himself seldom writes more than one letter a day. All “non-issue” outgoing mail is completed without use of the print room and is taken to mail pick up.

1. Since the vast majority of the mail is “issue” mail, the office manager is quite concerned about how well the issue mail process is working. To evaluate this, one hundred constituents, who had been sent response letters last month, were surveyed by telephone. Two constituents could not remember getting a response. Eight said that the response arrived more than three weeks after they had sent their letter. Fourteen said that the response seemed to address a different issue than the one on which they had written. The results were not encouraging. A process improvement study is obviously called for. To get started, draw a Pareto chart based upon the results of the
survey. Which of the three types of errors should be targeted first? (HINT: Only compare the errors on the Pareto chart; do not include the 76 respondents who indicated “no problem”.)

2. To begin any process improvement effort, it is usually a good idea to draw a flow chart of the process in question. From the description given above, sketch a flow diagram of the “issue” mail process in Senator Blah’s office. This chart should show each activity (like scanning paper mail), storage location (mail waiting to be processed), and decision point (like deciding on a response), which is described or implied by the above description, as a separate step (using a rectangle, triangle, or diamond, as appropriate).

3. Given your flow chart, briefly discuss how you would go about using the rest of the tools of process improvement (text pages 321-325) to find and correct the root causes of these apparent problems. **DO NOT** attempt to state possible solutions; **you cannot propose possible solutions** because the exercise does not give you enough information to do so. Instead, describe how you would use the tools in order to develop the needed, detailed information, from which possible solutions could be developed and tested. As a first step, look at your flow chart and decide at which points in this process it is possible to make a mistake that could result in the most frequently occurring type of error (that you identified in question 1); this would be a combination of the **open** and **narrow phases**. You can now create a cause and effect diagram, with the effect being the type of error and the possible causes (the points in the process that you have selected) being the primary branches. Next, describe how you would determine which of these points in the process (primary branches) accounts for most of the errors. Then describe how you would go about identifying and eliminating the root cause of the errors at that point in the process. When doing this, you can now use the generic cause-and-effect diagram, shown in figure 4.3, as the basis for analyzing the selected primary branch. This will provide a start on the **closed phase**.