



E-GOV SPOTLIGHT

311

to the Rescue:

When 911 needs help, 311 gets the call

BECAUSE SOME PEOPLE don't take it seriously enough, 911 is in serious trouble.

"People call 911 for a date," says Liza Lowery, chief information officer for Los Angeles.

Designed for emergency-only calls, the nationwide number gets swamped by inappropriate calls that clog the system and prevent first-responders from getting to true emergencies. To ease the 911 call burden, numerous cities have adopted 311, an easy-to-remember alternative number for non-emergency calls and one-stop-shop for citywide services and other information.

All Eyes on Chicago

Several years ago, Y2K issues and an impending new area code forced

Chicago to take a hard look at its antiquated phone system and consider implementing 311. Certainly, 911 needed help, but so did the city's 550 services. After a year of research, the city dumped its mainframe for a PC-based phone system in 1999 to serve as the foundation of a new Customer Service Request (CSR) 311 call center and work order system.

The \$8 million system—inclusive of training and maintenance costs—allows Chicago to track the effectiveness of the 311 service in responding to non-emergency requests. "We've saved more than we've invested over the five years that we've had the service,"

Ted O'Keefe, director of Chicago's 311 system. As a result, "311 has become part of the landscape of the city."

To get the project started, each city department needed to map the process for every service it delivers. O'Keefe asked each city department to "tell us what information you need on the front end so that we can ask the right questions." Every city service has a customer service goal.

Now, for example, when someone calls to report an abandoned vehicle, the 311 operator calls up the abandoned-vehicle questionnaire and knows what questions to ask. The operator also assigns a tracking number to each request. From call initiation to issue resolution, anyone can check the progress of the request via its tracking number.

The city collects and uses data on these incidents to produce performance

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reports for each department and department manager.

Removal of an abandoned vehicle can take 35 to 40 days. Are any such requests still open? Are any past due? Results can be broken down by department, or even a particular work crew within a department. The reports give managers the tools they need to measure performance and establish benchmarks. The mayor and aldermen also review the reports to get data they need to make informed budget decisions.



Liza Lowery
Chief Information Officer,
Los Angeles

The success of 311 depends on public education. Lack of it, as seen in test cases in San Diego and San Jose, Calif., leave 311's value inconclusive. Eager to avoid a similar mistake, O'Keefe produced simple and engaging outdoor ads highlighting the differences between 911 and 311. "Burning building call 911, Burning question call 311." "Escaped convict call 911. Escaped poodle call 311." The campaign, which also included a few radio spots, enjoyed the full support of local media.

The \$8 million investment that the city made in its CSR system is yielding citywide benefits, says O'Keefe. The time it takes to remove graffiti has dropped from an average of 7.7 days to 4.6 days. The city now knows which fire hydrants have a history of being opened on hot summer days. By placing locking caps on those hydrants, the city had 25 percent fewer reports of open hydrants in 2002 versus the previous year, saving millions of gallons of water.

A duplicate-check feature in the CSR system also prevents multiple crews from responding when several people call to complain about the same non-functioning traffic light. O'Keefe estimates that within the past year, the duplicate-check feature alone has saved the city more than \$6.9 million.

Learning from Chicago

Chicago's 311 success has become a model for other cities. Representatives from more than 50 cities, including Los Angeles, have toured Chicago's call center.

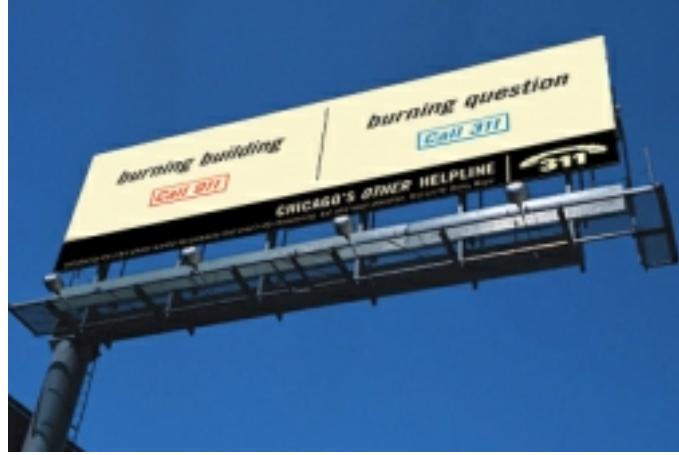
Reaching the right LA city employee for a city service used to be like a game of hide and seek for many citizens. The Los

Angeles city government operates over 800 phone numbers, organized by department rather than by service. Before the city implemented a 311 system, all calls required at least two handoffs before the caller reached the appropriate person. Not that all calls required a service. Almost half of the callers just wanted information.

Although eager to achieve Chicago's levels of productivity, LA officials realized a 311 implementation would have to be done in stages. Liza Lowery, CIO for Los Angeles says, "They decided upfront that 311 was going to focus on information and then a connection to services versus putting in the service request through CRM systems in the beginning because it really is a step-wise implementation of 311." The stages have already been branded. Since November 2002, 311 has meant "One Call to City Hall." Call 311 for information or a single handoff to the right city employee.

The next step, "One Call Does it All," hopes to achieve processing uniformity among all city services. To prepare for the next stage, Lowery's group is handling building inspections, dead animal pickup and bulky item pickup directly through 311.

Project managers have greatly minimized growing pains for LA's 311 system by carefully managing the expectations of employees as well as the public. Before releasing the system to the public, managers asked city employees



Gino Menchini
Commissioner of
Information Technology
and Telecommunication
Department, New York

and their friends to give 311 a test drive.

In November 2002, the city launched its new 311 system with a Hollywood-style media event. Tommy Lasorda threw out the first 311 call (to find out when his local library was open) which was then answered by Mayor James Hahn who then handed it off to a 311 ambassador.

"People are making the connection that they can get really quick information or connection by calling 311

when there are these stories out there that are traditionally linked to some kind of city service," says Lowery.

On an As-Needed Basis

In March, New York became one of the latest members of the 311 club. Like its predecessors, New York's 311 system provides information and a universal directory for all city, state and federal services, and processes service requests. Unlike Chicago, not all of New York's 40 agencies are tied into the 311 system.

"We deploy it where it makes sense to deploy it," says Gino Menchini, commissioner of New York's Information Technology and Telecommunication Department. "We actually look at the most frequent calls that we get and those calls become candidates for us to address" with the system.

New York's 311 knowledge base includes 7,000 information and service items. An average of four service requests are added daily. The department evaluates the call traffic, the service requests, and then adapts the system as needed. Menchini noticed that the call center was getting lots of late-night complaints about violations of New York's no-smoking policy. They

couldn't hand off calls to the Health Department, which operates from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. on weekdays. To respond to these complaints, Menchini's team created a service request form to help the 24-hour call center handle smoking violation complaints. The Health Department accesses the forms during office hours and addresses the complaints.

To ensure the 311 system runs smoothly and efficiently, Menchini's staff

proactively identify potential trouble areas. In an effort to crack down on illegal social clubs, Menchini queried the 311 database for cases of public inebriation, public urination, dirty sidewalks, double parking and noise complaints on Saturdays from midnight to 4 a.m.

"Put that up on a map and we can start to identify locations that may very well be illegal social clubs or similar types of activities," says Menchini. "That's something we could never do before."

for example, 31 percent of 311 calls were for the municipal court regarding payment of traffic violations. As a result, the city collected an additional \$100,000 a month in traffic tickets.

A successful 311 deployment also depends on top-quality staffing. Training a 311 operator is different from training a 911 operator. Although 911 call-takers must calm people and get the necessary information, a 311 operator needs a much deeper knowledge of the city resources.



Ted O'Keefe
Director of 311, Chicago



often receives advanced notice to potential 311 call floods. For example, Michael Bloomberg, the mayor called Menchini the day before going on the radio to discuss the condition of school buildings. Bloomberg told Menchini that he planned to announce that anyone who had a problem with a school building, whether it's a broken window or leaky roof, should call 311 to get it fixed.

"We rapidly put up an e-form for the call agents to be able to take information regarding a school's problem," says Menchini. "We then routed those calls to the Division of School Facilities."

The 311 system also helps the city

Achieving Success with 311

According to Lisa Pierce, an analyst with Giga Information Group, winning with 311 depends on public awareness of the alternative service. Giga studied systems, such as Baltimore's 311 implementation, which debuted in March 2001. As city residents began calling 311 for non-emergency services, the city's 911 system improved its responsiveness. The call abandon rate for 911 calls dropped by 50 percent.

The Giga study turned up other unexpected results, such as 311's revenue-generating benefits. In Houston,

"They're probably going to require an even greater level of counseling skills," says Pierce, "if you've ever listened to people who are in need of something, it takes a while to figure out what they actually want."

What cities want from 311 is bureaucratic efficiency and relief for their overburdened 911 system. But that's just the beginning. As Chicago, Los Angeles and New York City have learned, deployment and management of a 311 system generates knowledge. It's the kind of knowledge government officials use to reduce costs and act proactively. ♦

You Wouldn't Believe Who Calls 311

Not all 311 calls report non-functioning traffic lights and the like. Here are a few unusual questions that 311 operators have received.

Chicago—After a morning news program had a story about a dog falling into the Chicago River, the switchboard lit up with people wanting to know the dog's name and whether they could adopt him.

Los Angeles—"What time is it?"

Hampton, Va.—An elderly woman wanted to know how long she could keep her dead dog in the freezer until the ASPCA came and picked him up.

New York—"There's a chicken in my hallway!"



Hampton, Va.—One woman complained that her backyard was covered in bodies. Turned out her house was built on a cemetery, and the rain caused some of the coffins to rise. No bodies, just the edges of slowly rising coffins.

Baltimore—A woman called in to complain that her Domino's pizza didn't have the number of pepperonis that were advertised on television.

New York—Someone called to complain that a man was luring pigeons into his van with breadcrumbs.

Hampton, Va.—"Which way does the wind blow?"