311/CRM Systems: Changing the Face of Local Government Customer Service

InFocus

The majority of the largest cities in North America provide 311/CRM (customer relationship management) services to answer questions and handle service requests from their residents. More and more local governments—both large and small—have begun to look at the feasibility of establishing some form of a centralized customer service system, using either 311 or a 7-digit number for phone calls.

While established primarily to take the burden off the number of calls being made to 911 and police departments, 311 has moved beyond its original focus on improving customer service. Local governments have found many innovative and value-added uses for this important technology and the wealth of data these systems generate. This InFocus report highlights how local governments are using their systems and what the steps are in determining if such a system makes sense for a local government and its citizens.

ICMA
PRESS

So what exactly is "311?"

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) introduced a series of abbreviated numbers in the 1990s to make it easier for citizens to get immediate assistance with certain critical issues. These are referred to as N11 codes. 911 quickly became the most used

---

Cory Fleming, Program Director, ICMA 311/CRM Technical Assistance Services
Cory Fleming served as the project director for the ICMA National Study of 311 and Customer Service Technology (icma.org/311) from 2006-2011, funded by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation. This national study, the first of its type, resulted in a wealth of new research, resources, and tools for local governments that are implementing or maintaining a centralized customer service system. She currently oversees ICMA's 311/CRM Technical Assistance Services providing contract support to local governments implementing 311/CRM systems.

Rose Minton, Founder and President, Heights Consulting
Prior to beginning her consulting career, Rose Minton managed a large customer service operation. She has over 20 years of leadership, consulting, and operations experience. She is recognized as an industry expert in customer services, and the software solutions and processes supporting customer services. Her third-party evaluator skills include software and services evaluation and selection, contract negotiations, and quality assurance management. Customer service key skill areas are customer information systems, business transformation, call center management including 311 call centers, training and development, human resources, benchmarking and process improvement.

Esther Tenenbaum, Division Manager, 311 Citizen Contact Center, City of Albuquerque, New Mexico
Esther Tenenbaum has more than 40 years of customer service background and worked at two Fortune 500 companies prior to joining the city of Albuquerque in January 2005 as the quality, training, and development manager. She helped build the 311 Citizen Contact Center from the bottom up, and was promoted to division manager of 311 in April 2007. In addition to 311, she manages special projects throughout the city for the mayor's office.

Demitra (Dee) Crayton, Operations Manager, CharMeck 311
As operations manager at CharMeck 311, Dee is responsible for the daily operation of the Center and leads a team of 102 customer service representatives, the assistant operations manager, and 9 supervisors. In 2012 the Center served over 1.7 million customers. CharMeck 311 is a center that has been a model for many call centers throughout the country.

Shannon L. Spivey, Customer Relationship Manager, Baldwin County Commission
Shannon has served as the customer relationship manager for the Baldwin, Alabama's, County Commission since 2006. Shannon has worked in federal, county, and municipal government. In her current position, she manages the Baldwin County Commission Call Center, which currently averages 28,000 calls per month from the citizens of unincorporated Baldwin County as well as those in the 14 municipalities within the county's borders.

Courtney Tolbert Etheridge, Customer Service Representative, Baldwin County Call Center
Courtney Tolbert Etheridge began her career with the Baldwin County Commission right out of high school. She began as a temporary worker hired to work with the emergency management agency in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. From there she spent time working in the county's personnel office, finance and accounting, planning and zoning, and administration. When the County Commission decided to create a consolidated call center, her past experience made her the perfect fit for one of the first two customer service representatives to be hired for the brand new Baldwin County Call Center.

of these numbers. It was such a huge success that citizens began using the number for any type of help they needed. Many of the calls to 911 legitimately need help from law enforcement or the local government but are considered nonemergency in that no one's life is in immediate danger. It became clear that citizens needed another number to call for nonemergency local government assistance, and the number *311* was designated to meet that need.

Some are stand-alone 311/CRM (customer relationship management) centers that report to the mayor, the public works department, or any number of departments depending on how the consolidated center is implemented in your organization. Others serve as a secondary number to 911: 911 employees are the first to answer the call and if it is determined to be nonemergency, they are transferred to the 311 call takers so that emergency calls can receive the immediate attention they need. Most cities and counties that identify themselves as having a 311 call center market to their citizens that "One call does it all." However, in and of itself, 311 is just a number to dial; it doesn't do anything if the processes behind the calls are not in place.

What if one call doesn't do it all? What if your contact center only services certain departments, issues, or areas? Using a seven-digit number has its advantages as well. Sometimes it is hard to educate citizens on the right number to call for a particular issue. If citizens are already familiar with a number to call to request service or answers, it may be more effective to continue using that number or several numbers and route callers to a consolidated contact center.

The ultimate goal is to provide efficient, consistent, and timely information and services to citizens. Many local government managers "put the cart before the horse" by obtaining the 311 number, setting up an office and staffing it, but then don't give that staff the tools needed to reach the goal of efficient, consistent, timely assistance and information. You need to have all the tools in place for your staff to achieve that goal, and the 311 number may be one of your tools but it is definitely not the only one.

Many factors go into whether or not you can successfully manage a local government contact center that meets the needs of your citizens. The actual number citizens dial is just one part of an entire equation, and in many cases you only have one chance to get it right. 311/CRM contact centers have made amazing strides around the country at improving the impression citizens have about their local government's responsiveness to their needs. However, if you launch a "311—One call does it all" campaign in your area and citizens' needs aren't met, they will quickly lose confidence in the entire concept of 311/CRM systems and consolidated call centers. It will be much harder to win back their trust than it was to lose it. Citizens will call the number they are most accustomed to calling that provides the most assistance, even if it is a longer number to dial.

Where 311 started in the United States

In 1996, the city of Baltimore, Maryland, became the first municipality in the nation to implement a 311 number. Shortly after Baltimore began its 311 center, the Federal Communications Commission approved the use of the number nationwide. Initially, Baltimore used its 311 number only for nonemergency police matters. Prior to the 311 number, Baltimore did not have a central seven-digit phone number for police, so citizens called 911 for both emergency and nonemergency police matters. The volume of nonemergency calls to 911 caused a delay in emergency calls being answered and potentially delayed emergency services for life-threatening situations.

Trends in use of 311/CRM systems

Customer service

Centralized customer service systems are designed first and foremost to enhance a citizen's customer service experience with local government. Centralized systems save citizens time and make local government services easy to access. Don Samuels, councilor for Minneapolis's Ward 5, initially had been concerned about whether residents would use Minneapolis 311 when it was first proposed. Reports from Minneapolis 311, however, have shown that residents of Councilor Samuels's community actually use the system the most. "That was very heartening to me," said Samuels. 311 has made the city accessible to every citizen. I think people are feeling more comfortable connecting with the city."[i]

A 2007 ICMA national survey on local government customer service asked about the driving force for supporting implementation of a 311/CRM (customer relationship management) system. The highest percentage of respondents to the question (43 percent) indicated that their local government had a goal to improve service despite increased costs. Public pressure and expectations for customer service represented the next highest response with 18 percent of respondents indicating it as the primary reason.

While improved customer service will always be the primary reason for establishing a 311/CRM system, local governments are finding new and innovative ways to use these systems for a variety of other purposes, giving added value at little extra cost.

Citizen engagement

Most 311/CRM systems provide multiple ways for citizens to connect with their local government (see CharMeck 311 case study described in the "Thinking through communication channels" sidebar). Table 1 highlights some of the more common communication methods currently available. Simply being easily accessible is an important starting point for encouraging greater citizen involvement.

Figure 1 Common communication methods

• Walk-in traffic • Phone self-service • Phone calls	• Web self-service • Web chats • Mobile applications	• E-mail • Social media (Facebook, Twitter, etc.). • Text messages.

True citizen engagement goes much deeper than providing multiple ways for residents to contact their local government. In Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, for example, city leaders wanted greater input from residents in decisions about the budget. Like many other local governments, Philadelphia was hard hit by the Great Recession. Officials needed to know what the public valued most in terms of service delivery when making decisions about how to address the budget deficit. Using input from Philly311's customer feedback tool helped determine which city services were considered particularly critical to residents.[ii]

Cupertino, California, uses its CRM system, Access Cupertino, to train neighborhood leaders about the processes and procedures involved in providing city services. The city's Block Leaders Program encourages residents to engage in the type of routine, face-to-face communication that creates a more tangible sense of neighborhood.[iii]

As 311/CRM systems have gotten more sophisticated, many local governments are exploring how they can better receive information from citizens as well as provide information back to citizens. In today's fast-paced world of instant access to information, local government leaders need to consider both the push and the pull of how information

is being gathered from and disseminated to citizens. 311/CRM systems can provide an important tool to ensure that citizens' needs are met.

Performance measurement and management

Today's 311/CRM centers are the centerpiece of advanced systems of people, technology, and business processes. One of the most important successes of 311/CRM centers is in the area of performance measurement and management. Baltimore, Maryland, was one of the first 311/CRM systems in the country to use their service level agreements as a basis for CitiStat, a small performance-based management group responsible for continually improving the quality of services provided to the citizens of Baltimore City. CitiStat evaluates policies and procedures practiced by city departments for delivering all manners of urban services from criminal investigation to pothole repair. Staff analysts examine data and perform investigations in order to identify areas in need of improvement. City agencies are required to participate in a highly particularized presentation format designed to maximize accountability. Agencies must be prepared to answer any question raised by the mayor or her cabinet at CitiStat sessions which are held every four weeks. As a result of its success, the CitiStat model has been adopted by local governments across the United States and around the world. This has been one of the primary ways local governments have made use of their 311/CRM data.

311 centralized customer services are typically supported by a CRM software system that provides a vast amount of data to use for performance management. While many individuals tend to think of 311/CRM implementation strictly as a technology initiative, technology is the easy piece. The more difficult issue is setting performance goals and tracking performance as it compares to those goals. This emphasis on performance measurement and management is an organizational culture shift that requires senior leadership in the municipality to implement and champion performance measurement.

Many jurisdictions already take 311/CRM beyond call centers, building on additional linkage from the report of an issue or complaint to workload tracking and performance management systems. They use the analytics to track citizen priorities, assess agency performance, and help drive city budget decisions. For example, agencies can see how long it is taking to respond to a request for service or how many calls they are getting for the zoo hours.

The data can be used to improve service delivery and overall performance. An example of this is in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Graffiti removal has always been a top priority in Albuquerque. Prior to 311, citizens would call a graffiti hotline and leave a voicemail message with graffiti information. Dedicated cleanup crews were assigned to various sections within the city to remove graffiti based on the calls to the hotline. Graffiti was responded to within twenty-four hours in most cases. As 311/CRM began to take the graffiti calls, the department was able to extract address information, plot the data on a city map, and see where graffiti was occurring most often. Doing this allowed them to

---

CPM and 311/CRM systems

The ICMA Center for Performance Measurement™ (CPM) collects data on calls to both 311 and 911 systems, along with call center staffing, expenditures, emergency dispatch and arrival times, and cycle times for specific tasks, such as to complete a pothole or traffic signal repair. Additional proxy measures relevant to 311 systems include the citizen satisfaction ratings for police, public works, code enforcement, and the jurisdiction as a whole. For more information on CPM and the measures being tracked, visit http://icma.org/performance.

reallocate the crews, become more proactive in removing graffiti, and decrease the over-time in hard hit areas. All of this has reduced the time of service delivery to fifteen to thirty minutes in higher hit neighborhoods, which also discourages graffiti "taggers."

Using performance measurement and management to improve operations within the 311 customer service center is critical as well. Customer service agents who are effective and efficient help keep the costs down and citizen satisfaction up. There are always ways to improve customer service, and continuous improvement requires performance measurement to understand where to begin.

The city of Chicago, Illinois, established the first 311 government-wide systems for handling citizen requests for services and information in 1999. Most cities that have implemented 311 find an increase of contacts from citizens requesting information or service. A victim of their own success, Chicago's wait times for traditional 311 callers presents an opportunity to manage resources to provide a quality customer experience.

Resource allocation and budgeting

Several local governments have taken the next step beyond performance measurement and management and have begun to use 311/CRM data to make decisions about resource allocation and budgeting. For example, the department of code enforcement used data from the mayor's action center in Indianapolis/Marion County to help develop a new fee structure for the department. The department's operations are funded entirely by fees charged for licenses, permits, and inspections as well as assessed penalties.

The department's director analyzed the list of top calls coming from the public for services including those for high weeds and grass and business licensing. These two issues—high weeds and grass and the licensing of businesses sensitive to quality of life—created a tremendous bottleneck for the new department because it didn't have sufficient resources to handle the volume of requests it received. As a result of the data analysis, the department completely rebuilt its fee structure to ensure that it had adequate staff in place to address these issues in a timely manner.[iv]

Emergency response and disaster recovery

311/CRM services were established to relieve the burden of nonemergency calls being made to 911, but 311/CRM systems have proven to be a valuable resource in delivering critical information to residents before, during, and after a disaster. Whether it's providing directions for an evacuation, offering information on area emergency shelters, coordinating donations and aid, or providing building permit information during recovery efforts, 311/CRM systems have an important role to play in helping a community get through a disaster and back to daily routines.

During an extreme heat wave in the summer of 2012, the city of Fort Wayne, Indiana, used its 311 contact center to distribute information on the location of shelters where residents without air-conditioning could escape the heat. Many 311/CRM systems along the East Coast—Washington, D.C., Philadelphia, Baltimore, New York, Boston, and others—went into overdrive in the fall of 2012 in response to record-breaking call volumes due to citizen inquiries on Superstorm Sandy. In Philadelphia, 311/CRM data on the location of downed trees around the city proved crucial for first responders in determining driving routes for emergency calls.

Weather-related emergencies are not the only instances where 311/CRM systems can be of service. In 2007, Minneapolis 311 became of vital service when the I-35W bridge collapsed during rush hour, killing 13 people and injuring hundreds more. The center offered information on how to find a loved one, provided street closure information, checked on personal property retrieved from the site, and coordinated offers of assistance from people wanting to help.[v]

With planning and cooperation among other members of the emergency operations center, 311/CRM systems can take on an expanded role during emergency response so that 911 centers can devote their resources to life-threatening situations.

Community and economic development

Support for community services provided by 311/CRM call centers includes crime prevention information, senior affairs information and service requests, tourism information, bus schedules, and much more. 311/CRM systems can provide support for community services so that the departments can participate in planning, designing the service request process, and providing the call center or web services with up-to-date and accurate information.

In addition, many cities provided support (and received revenue) for special events such as the Super Bowl, political conventions, and local yearly events. For instance, Dallas 311 supported the Super Bowl, Denver and Charlotte 311/CRM centers supported the Democratic National Conventions, and the Minneapolis 311/CRM center supported the Republican National Convention. Some cities provide information for their school districts about school closings, school calendars, and other pertinent information.

Many 311 customer service centers support economic development by providing information. Types of information include descriptions of the city, lifestyle, businesses, events, data, and statistics. As with support of community service, the 311/CRM centers can issue service requests for the processes defined by the economic development department. While some cities do not support their visitors bureaus, many others promote 311 for tourism information. Cabs in New York City and Chicago encourage tourists to contact 311. Albuquerque 311 won an award for supporting the local visitor's bureau.

Determining if a centralized customer service system is right for your community

Readiness assessment

Just as consumers research products before making a significant equipment purchase—anything from a new smartphone to a new car—local governments should conduct a readiness assessment to determine if a 311/CRM system makes sense for their community, and if so, what features and functionalities the system should have. Steps involved in a readiness assessment include

- **Research.** Conducting background research to develop a better understanding of the complex nature of a 311/CRM system is always helpful. Site visits to similar-size communities with an established 311/CRM system will provide new insights on how to approach system selection and implementation.

- **Kickoff.** Once a decision to move forward on a system has been made, a kickoff meeting to introduce the project and educate service departments within the local government on the benefits of a 311/CRM system should be held. Securing buy-in from the service departments early on will ensure all phases of system selection and implementation go more smoothly; it also helps ensure the long-term success of the new system.

- **Data collection.** Service departments will need to develop an understanding of what their current call volumes are, how many information requests versus service requests they receive, how many people are needed to answer phone calls, and what their current processes and procedures are for responding to those calls. The data collection phase assists in developing a clear understanding of what the local government's "as is" picture looks like in terms of customer response.
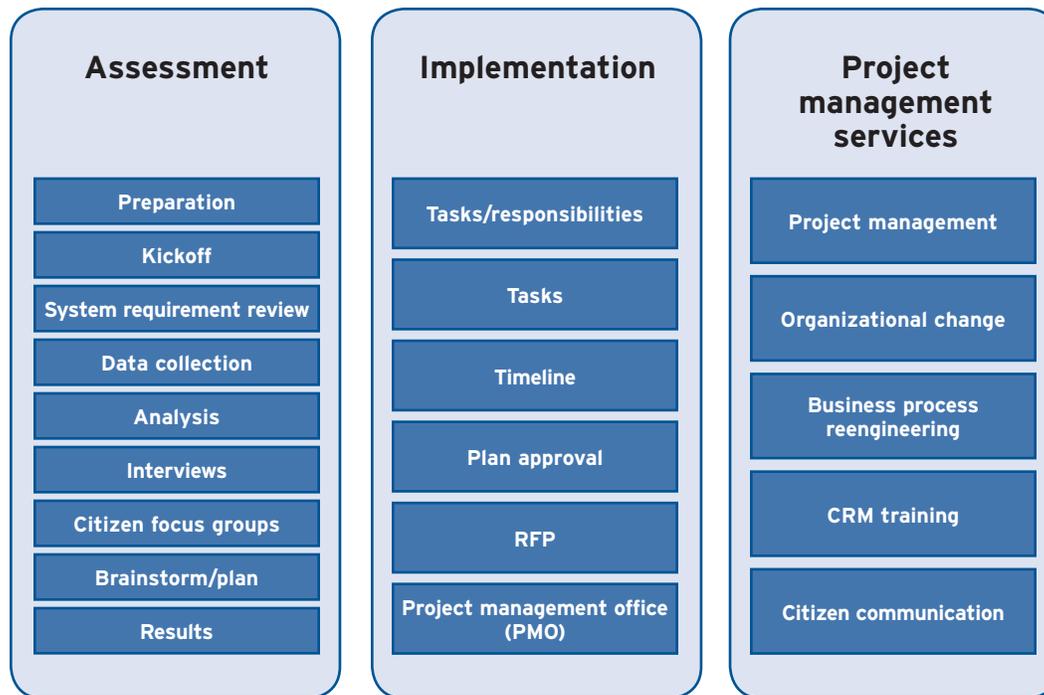
- **Interviews.** Interviews should be conducted with a significant number of employees—from department directors to frontline personnel—to assess the organizational culture and receptivity to a 311/CRM system. Such systems represent a fundamental change in the way business is conducted within a local government. Managing the human component of this change is probably the most difficult part of implementing a 311/CRM system. If you know what people's concerns and fears are, it's easier to address those upfront and work through the solutions before they become real problems.

- **Citizen focus groups.** Some communities are very tech savvy and others aren't. Before designing a 311/CRM system, knowing how citizens might want to use such a system can be useful. Do they want a robust online reporting system? Would they use a mobile app to submit service requests? Do they want reports back when a problem has been fixed?

- **Analysis.** Using the data and information gathered through the collection of interviews and focus groups, staff involved in the project should have a better understanding of what the external (citizens) and internal (staff and department) needs are from a 311/CRM system.

- **Brainstorming and planning.** Using the analysis, staff can begin to map out what a new system should look like in their jurisdiction. This step should consider not only what's needed from a technology standpoint, but also the people, processes, and physical facilities needed for the 311/CRM system. Where will the new system be located organizationally and physically? How will the new system be integrated with existing systems in service departments? Will service level agreement (SLAs) be developed? If SLAs are developed, who is responsible for establishing and reviewing them?

- **System requirements.** Once the plan for selecting and implementing the 311/CRM system has been developed, then discussion can begin on what's needed from a technology standpoint. Does the local government have an adequate telephone system to support a call center? Would an interactive voice response (IVR) system be beneficial? Can the new software work with existing programs in place, or will the local government's IT architecture need to be updated?

- **Results.** Just as the kickoff meeting introduced the concept of a 311/CRM system to the local government organization, the results of the readiness assessment should be reported back to staff. Communication and coordination are essential to the success of a 311/CRM system. The more people who have been involved in the development, the more likely they are to support the 311/CRM system.

311/CRM system implementation

There are many choices when designing your 311 customer service model. When planning and designing 311 customer services and infrastructure, consider the options based on stakeholder expectations. While most cities follow the same general model when planning for 311, many unique decisions are made in response to the city culture. Figure 1 highlights some typical tasks for planning and managing the implementation of a 311/CRM system.

Secure buy-in from service departments

One of the challenges that many cities face is securing the buy-in from the service departments. Remember to point out "What's in it?" for the departments and listen to their concerns and needs. Implementing centralized customer service, either 311 or a centralized ten-digit number, changes the way a city does business. Implemented correctly, the information flow to and from 311 centers improves customer service and efficiency. Departments begin to understand each other, what department processes involve, and how to solve a citizen request the first time it is made. The collaboration required for a successful implementation creates the foundation for this two-way communication.

Figure 1 Steps in implementing a 311/CRM system

Assessment	Implementation	Project management services
Preparation	Tasks/responsibilities	Project management
Kickoff	Tasks	Organizational change
System requirement review	Timeline	Business process reengineering
Data collection	Plan approval	CRM training
Analysis	RFP	Citizen communication
Interviews	Project management office (PMO)	
Citizen focus groups		
Brainstorm/plan		
Results		

Service departments need to be vested in the process of implementing a 311/CRM system and have ownership in the end product. Department involvement is critical from the planning stage all the way through the "go live" stage. A key person from each department can assist with planning and implementation and continue after "go live" to support two-way communications, that is, information from the department to 311 customer service and from 311 customer service to the departments. Process mapping and understanding what information the service departments will need in order to respond to a call is very important. Allowing departments to still own their processes, yet have access to more data, is another benefit. The goal should be to decrease not make additional work for service departments.

Another concern for the departments is the potential layoff of department employees because of the 311/CRM implementation. Good long-term planning with the initial emphasis on communicating how the departments can free up their employees to be able to deliver service more efficiently and effectively should be the starting point. Good performance measurement and use of CRM data will help drive resource allocation decisions over time.

Understanding how people behave and accept change will help with this transition. Many cities have utilized a role called "organizational change management" to work as a conduit between people, process, and technology. Building an ongoing relationship between service departments and the 311/CRM team helps create a cohesive team going forward.

Structuring 311/CRM systems

You can structure a 311/CRM system in many ways. Based on results of Minneapolis's 311 Comparative Survey in 2011[vi], it seems the most popular is to have the center report directly to the city/county executive. Thirty-eight percent of the respondents reported to the mayor or city manager. The majority of cities, 79.5 percent, solely supported city

operations. Of those jurisdictions surveyed, 20.5 percent combined city and county functions into one call center.

Of the 62 percent of cities that indicated they did not report to the mayor or city manager, they instead chose these organizational structuring options for 311/CRM:

- City clerk
- Public utilities
- Regulatory affairs
- General services
- Central operations.

The next question within local government functions usually is: Do you include calls to the public utilities? Assuming utility calls are included, how will your 311/CRM system handle and route these calls? And do you include billing questions or just frequently asked questions?

Some cities have combined 911 and 311 as another option, although the type of customer service skills required by 311 and 911 vary immensely. While 911 and 311 must work closely together, especially in the event of a natural disaster or emergency, clear demarcation of roles and responsibilities for the 2 systems needs to be carefully negotiated.

The bottom line on how to structure a 311/CRM system is that the structure should be based on the needs of constituents and local government goals. There is no one "right" way. Ensuring buy-in from all service-oriented stakeholders, departments, and divisions is the ultimate key to success. Your stakeholders do not want a system or process forced upon them. Service departments need to view the 311/CRM system as a resource and benefit in running daily operations more efficiently. Building strong relationships and rapport with departments, divisions, and entities allows or permits the stakeholders feedback and buy-in, therefore resulting in a more successful outcome.

How centralized customer service systems work

Centralized customer service systems, including 311 contact centers and customer relationship management systems, are changing the way local governments do business and how they interact with their constituents.

Originally developed to reduce the number of non-emergency calls being made to 911, 311/ CRM systems provide citizens with a one-stop shop to address their need for local government information and to make requests for service. Prior to the implementation of 311/ CRM systems, citizens often had to look through multiple listings in a telephone directory

Benefits of 311/CRM systems

Customer service benefits:

- Reduces abandoned calls
- Reduces misrouted contacts
- Offers both standard and extended hours of operation
- Reduces the number of listings in the blue-page directories of the telephone book
- Improves overall customer service to the citizen by simplified access
- Improves the quality of the citizen contact because the issue has been resolved by the correct department.

City productivity and efficiency benefits:

- Increases employee efficiency by reducing misdirected requests
- Improves internal communication
- Provides consistent information to citizens
- Consolidates some or all of the existing call centers.

to find the right number to call, causing frustration and taking considerable time. Many times, citizens simply gave up trying to reach the correct department.

311/CRM systems are often referred to as the front door to local government services because citizens can go there no matter what their need. Using a simple, easy-to-remember phone number—311—citizens can connect with their local government. Figure 2 models how 311/CRM systems generally operate. Typically, a 311/CRM system will include a call center, customer self-service through the web or a smartphone app, and in some cases, walk-in services. Managing a centralized customer service system involves tracking issues, improving service for local citizens, and creating a system for service delivery that is more efficient and productive.

Most of the largest cities in North America have established a 311/CRM system for their citizens, and many mid-size and smaller local governments also have implemented 311 (see Figure 3) or offer a centralized customer service system supported by a seven- or ten-digit phone number. Many more local governments are researching 311 as technology costs decrease and citizen demand for service increases.

Thinking through communication channels

CharMeck 311 is a customer contact center that provides general information, creates service requests, and directs calls to other departments and agencies for problem resolution for customers residing in the city of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County, North Carolina. In 2005, CharMeck 311's inaugural year, the center handled an annual volume of 1.3 million calls. It celebrated its seventh year anniversary in July 2012 with an annual volume of 1.7 million calls, a 30 percent increase in calls. The most effective strategy to manage growth without additional resources is through technology.

CharMeck 311 doesn't just handle phone calls. As a major metropolitan area, residents have also been keen to make use of other communication channels to contact their local government. For CharMeck 311, this includes offering self-service options via an enhanced web presence, improved and expanded IVR, mobile applications for smartphones, and a simplified agent desktop. A critical consideration in the selection and deployment of new technology and processes is to understand the customer's channel preference by providing options for both self-service and agent assistance.
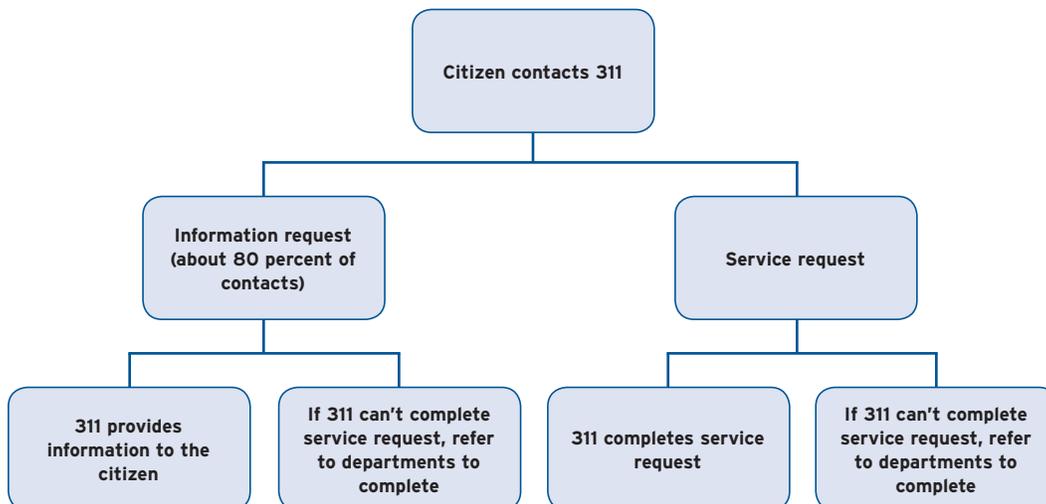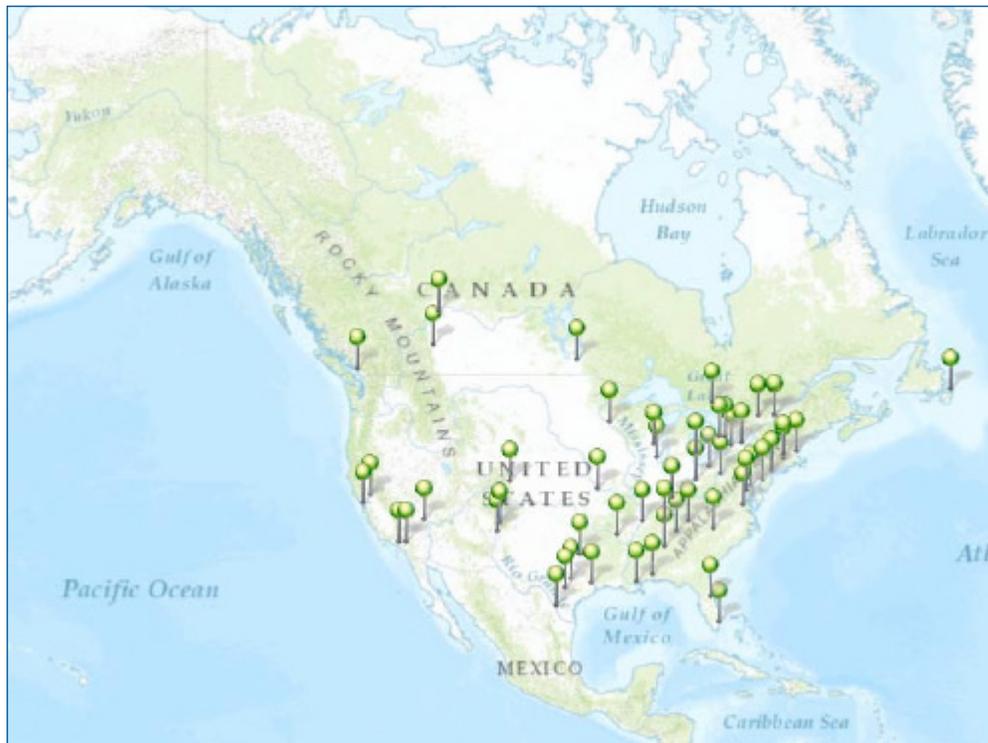
Figure 2 Contact flow in a 311/CRM system

Figure 3 Local governments with 311/CRM systems in North America[vii]

CharMeck 311 currently uses a mobile phone application called "My Charlotte" that allows citizens to request services and report community issues via smartphone technology. An automated IVR (interactive voice response) product provided by Get ABBY is also used. The IVR is primarily used to assist and manage Charlotte Mecklenburg's Utility Department with inbound calls. The voice response unit (VRU) within the IVR provides bill balances, payment options, and account detail and connects customers to Western Union for payments or to a live agent for further assistance.

Get ABBY's initial phase was estimated to manage 250,000 calls per year at a substantially lower cost than the calls handled by an agent. Since launching this service in June 2011, more than 600,000 customers were serviced with only 150,000 calls requiring assistance from a live agent. The VRU also makes outbound courtesy calls to utility customers in a delinquent payment status. Calls are spread across several hours, and customers are presented with options to transfer to an automated payment system or speak to an agent. CharMeck 311 is exploring avenues to enhance IVR self-service options for other service types. This will reduce cost per call and increase agent availability to handle more complex call types.

Evaluating service delivery is a key part of thinking through communication channels. CharMeck 311 is not only focused on agility and efficient call handling but also on enhancing the customer's experience with local government and assuring "front row" customer service. To realize this objective, it is essential to hear the voice of the customer as that feedback is the true measurement of success. This was achieved by conducting a variety of "How's Our Service" initiatives. Beginning with our in-house survey, approximately 100 customers monthly (1,200 for the year) were interviewed. On a 5-point scale, CharMeck 311 Contact Center received an average score of 4.5 and the agents received an average score of 4.5. To provide an independent review, an outside company

hosted the first series of a bi-annual survey by interviewing 457 customers, resulting in an 8.8 approval rating on a 10-point scale. Additionally, to guarantee callers receive accurate information, monthly internal monitoring is conducted by both the quality assurance (QA) department and operational supervisors.

CharMeck 311 is a recognized leader within the customer service contact center industry and a benchmark for current and planned 311/customer service call center operations. On September 27, 2012, CharMeck 311 was designated a "Citizen Engaged Community" by the Public Technology Institute.

Resources

ICMA (International City/County Management Association)

With funding from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, ICMA conducted the ICMA National Study of 311 and Customer Service Technology from 2006–2011. Through the study, ICMA released new research, resources, and tools for jurisdictions considering implementing a 311/CRM system. ICMA has established itself as a key research organization and national thought leader on the benefits of centralized customer service systems for local governments. Publications resulting from the study can be accessed free of charge at www.icma.org/311.

Drawing on the experience gained from the national study, ICMA began providing direct technical assistance to communities in 2009. ICMA has teamed with other independent consultants to provide unbiased advice and guidance on the public investment decisions required for 311/CRM technology. For more information on contracting for 311/CRM technical assistance services, see www.icma.org/311assistance.

CS Week 311 Synergy Group

The CS Week 311 Synergy Group provides a professional, unbiased environment for in-depth and on-going discussion of current issues and common interests among current and prospective 311 customer contact managers throughout North America. The objectives of the group include

- Educating membership on current issues related to 311
- Providing networking access to the knowledge base of other 311 members
- Creating year-round networking opportunities through web casts, blogs/Listservs, newsletters, face-to-face meetings, and other discussion forums
- Creating professional development opportunities that include networking with other 311 participants.

To learn more about the 311 Synergy Group or join its LinkedIn site, visit its website at www.csweek.org/311SynergyGroup/Index.htm.

Association of Government Contact Center Professionals

The Association of Government Contact Center Professionals (AGCCP) was established in 2003 by a small group of local government contact center managers who had met on several occasions to discuss issues such as hiring, training, motivation, and technology. Since that time, the AGCCP has grown to more than 40 member cities and counties across the U.S. and Canada. Members of the association meet annually to share best practices, explore new technology, network, and learn from each other's experiences. Representatives from local governments who are researching the feasibility of starting a contact center or who are at any stage of establishing their center also find the annual conference and year-round networking valuable tools. To learn more, visit the AGCCP website at http://governmentcallcenter.org/index.html.

Public Technology Institute

Public Technology Institute (PTI) actively supports local government executives and elected officials through research, education, executive-level consulting services, and national recognition programs.

As the only technology organization created by and for cities and counties, PTI works with a core network of leading local officials—the PTI membership—to identify research opportunities, share solutions, recognize member achievements, and address the many technology issues that impact local government. Among PTI's focus areas related to 311/ CRM systems are citizen engagement and responsive government, e-government, and mobile government. The institute

- Offers online training, publications and books, and conferences designed for the local government technologist.
- Creates partnerships between local government, private industry, and federal agencies to ensure that jurisdictions have access to the latest and most effective technology solutions.
- Recognizes local government innovators with awards and recognition programs.
- Serves as the national voice for technology development and dissemination within local government.
- Partners with leading national media and academic institutions to showcase local government technology issues.

To learn more about PTI, visit its website at http://www.pti.org/index.php.

Endnotes

i Fleming, Cory. "Minneapolis 311 System." One of the Call 311: Connecting Citizens to Local Government Case Study Series. ICMA: Washington, D.C. 2008.

ii Moulder, Evelina. "Philly311: Engaging Citizens, Serving Customers," One of the Call 311: Citizen Engagement and 311 Case Study Series. ICMA: Washington, D.C. 2009.

iii Phelan, Anne. "Access Cupertino: Citizen Engagement for the 21st Century." One of the Call 311: Citizen Engagement and 311 Case Study Series. ICMA: Washington, D.C. 2010.

iv Eichenthal, David and Cory Fleming. "Process Improvement, No Problem: 311/ CRM data can reengineer local service delivery." Public Management magazine. Pp. 16-19. ICMA: Washington, D.C., December 2011.

v Fleming, Cory. "Minneapolis 311 System." One of the Call 311: Connecting Citizens to Local Government Case Study Series. ICMA: Washington, D.C. 2008.

vi Minneapolis 311. 311 Comparative Survey. 2011.

vii No central registry for 311/CRM systems exists in North America. This map depicts known systems in North America, but should not be viewed as a comprehensive list of all systems.

Recent Reports

Publishing and Information Resources

Author's Contact Information

Cory Fleming

Program Director, ICMA 311/CRM Technical Assistance Services

(207) 854 1083

(202) 468 3253 (cell)

cfleming@icma.org

These reports are intended to provide timely information on subjects of practical interest to local government administrators, department heads, budget and research analysts, administrative assistants, and others responsible for and concerned with operational aspects of local government.

InFocus (formerly IQ Reports) is available as single copies or by subscription. **InFocus** annual subscriptions (six bimonthly issues) are $119 (members) and $149 (nonmembers). Single-copy online issues are $19.95 (members) and $24.95 (nonmembers). Some issues prior to 2007 are available in print, at $21.95 (members) and $26.95 (nonmembers).

To order, call toll free 1-800-745-8780, or 770-442-8631 ext. 377 if calling from outside the United States. Recent **InFocus** issues can be purchased and downloaded from the ICMA Bookstore at bookstore.icma.org.