

## 6 Cities and a County Share 311 Data, Best Practices

Jason Shueh | October 30, 2014



With the rise of digital, cities are pressed to answer demand for high citizen engagement with minimal — or preferably no — face-to-face involvement. The typical tool for this kind of automation has been 311, the nationally established speed dial number for non-emergency service calls. Since it was officially designated in 1996, cities have employed 311 in the form of citizen call centers and more recently, mobile apps that can do everything from report potholes to facilitate chat sessions with city staff.

Now, officials seek to add a more formal structure to the budding service. In October, New York City, Chicago, Philadelphia, Denver, Baltimore and Charlotte, N.C., and Mecklenburg County, N.C., announced a partnership christened as the National 311 Executive Council. The seven-jurisdiction collaboration is positioned as a repository for 311 data, best practices, standards and policies.

As 311 program director at the International City/County Management Association ( [ICMA](#)), Cory Fleming is the group's facilitator. Fleming and the ICMA took a consulting role in the group largely for [research](#) on 311 best practices that analyzed hundreds

of customer service centers and 311 programs from 2006 to 2011. The partnership is expected to further similar research.

"This group represents some of the largest 311 centers in the country," Fleming said. "The reason they came together is because 311 doesn't have any kind of central repository for all of the information collected. So what they're wanting to do is set about creating some standards and develop some research that shows the return on investment and cost benefit analysis that's associated with 311 centers."

For its first year, four projects are pinned down. The first centers on metrics and is a run to scout 311 programs for comparative measurements of citizen service. The second — a hunt for new 311 offerings — weighs compatible customer service models that enable innovative new tools and functions. And the third project, a data repository, attempts to engineer a research database for 311 centers nationwide, emphasizing education and front-running practices.

"The intent is to finish the projects and have new material to release throughout the year," Fleming said. She added that additional funding may be required, which might delay progress.

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Should the partnership supercharge 311 initiatives nationally, insights and benefits are likely to be found in the process — especially through apps and government tech. In Chicago, for example, city officials have used analytics to take 311 requests for sanitation problems and turn them into one-week forecasts for rat infestations. Similarly Lue has said that just by looking at numbers, the city knows 80 percent of requests are informational and only 20 percent stem from quality of life issues (things like potholes, graffiti, abandoned cars and trash collection problems).

In the near future, such data-driven 311 systems are foreseeable as cities confront problems in population growth and outcries for expanded service. Philadelphia itself expects its 1.5 million calls to grow significantly — to about 5 million — in the next few years. To compensate, technology and innovative service delivery are likely to become the norm.

"You can either be proactive ... and join the conversation or stay on the sidelines," Lue said.

"We're finding that in a lot of the public sector they don't have that option of staying on the outside looking in. You want to help drive the conversation."

Fleming said the 311 council will continue to add projects gradually based on progress. She believes momentum will only increase, comparing the 311 movement to the emergence of 911 systems during the 70s and 80s.

"I think this group is particularly important," Fleming said, "because they're trying to take a big picture approach, looking at this from the industry standpoint and asking 'What does it take to make the industry grow?'"

<http://www.govtech.com/local/6-Cities-and-County-Share-311-Data-Best-Practices.html>