

Call 311

by Richard Bray

Changing the face of municipal non-emergency service

IN MUNICIPAL SERVICE delivery, the wave of the future is already a familiar part of everyday life – the telephone. Across Canada, municipal governments are planning to connect citizens with non-emergency services through a single telephone number – 311.

In early November, the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) approved a joint application from the City of Calgary, the City of Toronto, Halifax Regional Municipality, the Regional Municipality of Halton, la Ville de Gatineau and la Ville de Montréal to assign 311 for non-emergency municipal government services.

Citizens will dial 311 to report everything from dangerous road conditions and traffic light outages to abandoned vehicles and noise complaints; to ask about city services like water quality and public transit; and to handle routine business like property taxes and parking tickets.

Just looking at the numbers, 311 makes sense: nearly four out of five Canadians live in cities and in many areas, a shortage of telephone numbers means people will have to dial ten digits to reach local numbers. Cities with centralized call centres already know the benefits of single numbers. In Calgary, for example, 268-CITY proved its worth during a chemical fire near a school.

Noreen Rude, Calgary's Customer Services business manager says, "We had to evacuate the school and we used 268-CITY as the place to answer calls, because we're staffed. We have the ability to handle more calls per hour, so we actually used that as the dissemination point for parents to call

to find out where their children were evacuated to."

For immediacy, ease of use, universality and flexibility, telephone service is impossible to match. Surveys make it clear that for many people, it is their preferred means of communication with municipal government. The telephone has ease of use and availability – most people already own a telephone and know how to use it. At the municipal government, telephone service offers a human entry point to efficient, automated services. The real benefits of 311 service will emerge as municipalities streamline to take advantage of these 'back office' efficiencies.

In Toronto, municipal Councillor Brian Ashton represents Ward 36 (Scarborough Southwest) and chairs the economic development committee. "311 is this immediately understood, transparent, accountable point of access to city services where the city benefits in an enormous way," he says. "It is not only one-stop shopping, it is also a service entré given to the community and it becomes a very important organizational tool around which the city can organize itself in an efficient and effective way."

Will the technological tail wag the bureaucratic dog? "Exactly. You get to wag the dog from the inside out in a very efficient way," he says. "It's quite astounding what technology allows if it's used effectively. Fundamentally, you see a dead squirrel and you want it picked up, you dial 311; somebody brings up a template on a screen where your name, telephone and issue are entered and handled properly. It goes to the responsible department where

it becomes a work order, enters a database and becomes a management tool [to measure] how effectively services are provided."

311 service is not a 'one size fits all' proposition. In fact, a high degree of customization from city to city is inevitable. Rude explains. "Toronto for example has health as one of its departments, and transit is a stand-alone commission. In Calgary, it's the exact opposite. There are different levels of government – multi-tiered government in Ontario provides some of the same services that a single municipality in Alberta would, for example."

Because 311 is already used in some large US cities, Canadian planners have a useful body of information to study. For example, more than three quarters of all calls are requests for information. The rest are either service requests, or calls to check on previous requests. There is strong evidence that 311 service means less strain on emergency services: Baltimore reports a 42 percent decrease in 911 calls and Austin reports a 30 percent drop.

Ashton says Toronto was looking at its business processes long before the CRTC decision. "From a cost perspective, and I'm taking wild leaps here, we're into millions of dollars in the initial stages. The good thing is, and Baltimore is a great example, you can save money through effi-

ciencies,” he says, “but again that requires a great deal of discipline and rigour to make sure that you’re not just not letting technology be a front-end, cosmetic approach when it really does have a lot of organization efficiencies built in.”

Confronting the same challenges in Calgary, Rude says, “Part of it depends on what your service scope is, part of it depends on your current level of technical sophistication. Do you even have your business processes documented? If you don’t there is a real exercise to go through, because obviously you have a centralized group responding to calls about your service delivery, your turnaround, your standards of service timelines and so on.”

She believes 311 service will be a success in Canadian cities, because the real problem was an inability to communicate about services, not the services themselves. “In Calgary, and I think this holds true for most municipalities, when you got to the right place to deal with your issues, your service was actually pretty good,” she says. “It was the wading through that myriad of ‘blue pages roulette’ or whatever else the case might be, to get there.”

Rude says business processes are key. Once they are all in one place, the benefit goes back to internal operations. Managers will have the information they need to manage, and front line personnel will be able to meet customer expectations.

The future of 311 is probably limited only by the imagination of city staff. Once a service database has been built up, and staff have the tools to see what is really happening in their city, they can move from predicting to planning, and from guesswork to good management.

In the long list of uses for 311 service, someone had the foresight to add one final word – ‘compliments.’ Once a city gets 311 service right, applause will follow. ♫

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