



The Quest for Success in Establishing a 311 Government Call Center

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About QAlert

QAlert is Web-based software that allows local and county governments to track, manage, and resolve citizen service requests, and to maintain records based on property, submitter, issue type, and more. QAlert includes a powerful reporting tool for CitiStat-type information sharing, a self-serve area where citizens can review knowledge base articles, log-in to check their request history, and interact with staff working on an issue, and six different intake channels. Municipalities can opt to add a smartphone app for request submissions and an iPad app for mobile request management.

QAlert is the most robust, cost-effective CRM solution on the market. It is used around the country as the backbone for call centers and decentralized citizen service initiatives in towns with populations of less than 8,000, in cities small (15K) to large (300K), and in counties of varying populations, from 400,000 to nearly 2 million.

About QScend Technologies

QScend Technologies (www.qscend.com) is an industry leader in Web-based software, including its flagship product, QAlert, and services for counties and municipalities. Located in Waterbury, Connecticut, QScend Technologies was the first company to relocate into the city's Information Technology Zone.



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INTRODUCTION

“Citizens are mobilizing entire governments for the first time with a web click or free call to 311...”

*Zachary Tumin, Harvard University, and
Robert Wasserman, Strategic Policy Partnership*

Since the early days of the republic, there has been debate about how much citizens need to be involved in government. The Hamiltonians argued that a well-run organization didn't need the public engaged, while the Jeffersonians thought the public's participation was crucial. But what does public participation mean, exactly? Digital engagement consultant Intellitics claims that it's a two-way process in which an organization consults with those affected before reaching a decision with the hope that the decision made is better and more acceptable to everyone.¹

If we accept that as true, then we can accept the need for 311 government call centers. All centers are powered by software that allows an organization to collect data. It's that data that helps the organization grow and improve. Data inspires change and progress. That's how the 311 initiative began, after all.

In 1996, when President Bill Clinton issued a directive to find a way to reduce the burden of non-emergency calls to 911, and the Federal Communications Commission reserved 311 as the national standard for access to government services, call centers opened in cities large and small across the country in every shape, size, and scope. Their missions were the same, though: to make things easier on their citizens by creating an environment that would produce better communication and enhance citizen engagement.

With President Barack Obama's open government initiative of 2013, designed to make government operations more available and useful, thereby creating more efficient and transparent government, the trend continued. His executive order on the Open Data Policy states that, “Managing government information as an asset will increase operational efficiencies, reduce costs, improve services, support mission needs, safeguard personal information, and increase public access to valuable government information.”²

¹ O'Byrne, John Christopher. “The Diffusion and Evolution of 311 Citizen Service Centers in American Cities from 1996 to 2012.” Virginia Polytechnic Institute, 2015.

² Executive Order. No. M-13-13, 2013.

Cities and counties have been steadily examining how to improve access to services and build better trust and confidence in government through 311 initiatives. Many who implement their initiatives today cite the need for data as one of the biggest reasons. In addition to meeting Clinton- and Obama-era goals, governments are also trying to do more with less and re-engineer processes to save time and money.

“Anyone who's ever needed assistance from their local government knows that it's sometimes hard to find the right person or department, and in counties it can be much harder.”

*Keith Lebeau,
President and CEO of QScend Technologies*

In a 2014 article by Michael Ahn, the Brookings Institute's TechTank trumpeted the future of the government call center as a hub for information and service. Included among the reasons why was this: “We live in an age of information overload. There are too many uncoordinated government efforts to provide information on services and programs. Government itself does not always know what services and information it is providing as a whole (as [it tends] to operate in silos).”³

“Anyone who’s ever needed assistance from a local government knows that it’s sometimes hard to find the right person or department, and in counties it can be much harder,” said Keith LeBeau, president of QScend Technologies, a veteran of more than 200 successful citizen service implementations.

“311 initiatives can most definitely aid citizens, especially when it comes to them having to distinguish whether they need to work with the county or the city,” added LeBeau. “But they can also help make government more effective and efficient. We’ve seen it happen all around the country.”

While 311 initiatives can also be decentralized, or integrated with a 911 response center, the main focus of this paper is on centralized citizen service centers that are, essentially, their own department in their own space with dedicated staff. This white paper was written based on research, but also based on the experience of the QScend Technologies staff and its customers. All of the call center professionals interviewed, and stories referenced, are in cities and counties in which QScend’s QAlert citizen request management software (see page 1 for description) is in use.

³ Ahn, Michael J. “The Future of the Government Call Center as a Hub for Public Information and Service.” Brookings, 29 July 2016, www.brookings.edu/blog/techtank/2014/07/02/the-future-of-the-government-call-center-as-a-hub-for-public-information-and-service/.

THE QUEST FOR SUCCESS

311 Initiative Definition and Benefits

*“Think of it this way. Burning building? Call 911. Burning question? Call 311.”
Luke Ravenstahl, mayor, City of Pittsburgh (2006-2014)*

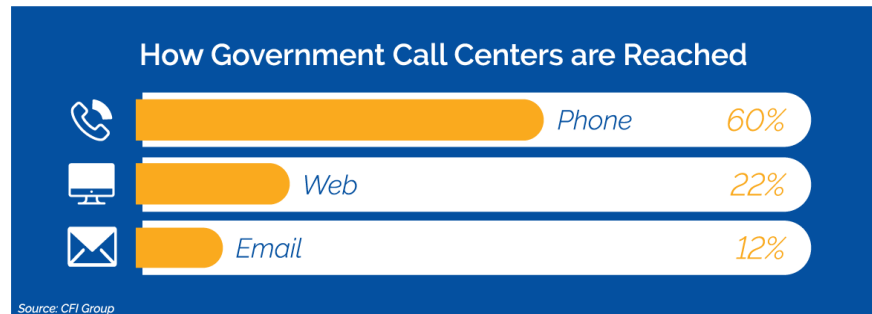
It’s fair to say that 311 call centers vary as much as the places in which they are located. There is no one-size-fits-all, cookie-cutter approach. Each place’s resources and needs are different, even though they are all trying to accomplish the same thing. Some organizations:

- Spend less than \$100K on staff and software, while others spend at least 10 times that on just software.
- Incorporate the digits 3-1-1 into their initiative and seek a related 10-digit number with that sequence included in some form.
- Open with a staff of one using only that person’s direct line as the main contact number.
- Employ 10 or more, and have staff who specialize in, for example, knowledge management or reporting.
- Invest in traditional call center technology, such as an interactive voice response (IVR) system and an automated call distributor (ACD), to manage call volume, wait time, and attendant availability.
- Launch with just a few departments taking part, while others include anyone and everyone who wants to take part, including their governing counties.
- Establish decentralized programs with staff in key places answering a main contact number (yes, even 311), or their own individual extensions.

Regardless of size and shape, the key function of a citizen-centric initiative is to enhance a citizen’s customer service experience by saving citizens time and allowing them easier access to

government services.⁴ While the industry often refers to 311 in terms of call centers, and intimates that the main point of contact is in fact phone, most organizations offer multiple ways of contact.

According to the CFI Group's 2018 research on citizen/government interactions, 60 percent of people make phone calls, 22 percent use the Web, and 12 percent use email. In addition, 79 percent of those who download government apps use them and rate their interactions 14 percent higher than those who have not.



The results of implementing a 311 initiative can be that citizens:

- Reach out to one central place to go to have their questions answered without having to figure out which department to contact.
- Discover resolutions to their concerns through a vast knowledge base without having to submit requests for service.
- Choose their preferred contact channel - phone call, smartphone app or text, Web, email, or social media.
- Talk to a staff member, either immediately, after being advised of a short wait time, or being offered the opportunity to receive a call back.
- Know that their concerns are being addressed through updates and closing notices.
- Notice positive changes in their community and an enhanced quality of life.

⁴ Kistler, Vicky, et al. "City of Allentown Citizen / Customer Relations Management 311 System Feasibility Study." Allentown, PA, Dec. 2016, www.allentownpa.gov/Portals/0/files/news/Allentown311.pdf?ver=2016-12-29-171536-813.

- Feel more connected to the local governing body, and more satisfied with the interaction.
- Gain a more transparent view about how government functions and how tax dollars are spent.
- Become more involved in local/county government.

In her 2004 book, *Building the Virtual State*, Jane Fountain writes that technology can change the way government and citizens interact. “The internet provides the potential to influence the structure of the state [government] as well as the relationship between state [government] and citizen.” She adds that the 1993 National Performance Review, undertaken to introduce government that works better, is more cost-efficient, and is modernized, “emphasized redesigning process flows, increasing customer service to citizens, and leveraging the potential of information technology (IT) to enhance the capacity of government.”

Thus it is no wonder that governments may be trying to enhance citizen trust and confidence by opening 311 centers. They stand to benefit, as well, by creating more effective workforces and process efficiencies. Potential benefits to cities and counties that launch 311 projects include:

- Fewer phone calls to departments and 911
- Staff free to better perform core functions
- Better information with which to schedule work and allocate resources
- More time for highly-skilled employees to do the jobs they were trained to do
- Tools to assess and measure personnel and department performance
- Availability of data for analysis and strategic decision-making and budgeting
- Cost-savings through process re-engineering
- Far less duplicity and wasted time and energy

Government officials reference many of those points in their public conversations and media interviews. For example, when Pittsburgh’s center opened its doors, then mayor Luke Ravenstahl told *Government Technology* magazine, “Through 311 we’re making government more focused, friendly and easier to use...The 311 system allows for increased efficiency- city departments can spend more time doing the work and less time answering the phones. It’s also a great way to track accountability within the departments. The database will allow us to see how quickly requests are resolved and gives the city better tracking capability.”⁵

⁵ “Pittsburgh Launches 311 System.” *Government Technology*.

Getting Started

“A clear and concise strategic vision provides guidance throughout the project, communicates the intended objective..., and conveys the importance...to staff and external stakeholders.”
Spencer Stern, consultant, Virchow, Krause & Company,
and Huy T. Nguyen, consultant, GFOA

In order to operate a successful citizen service initiative, you must have a clear plan. Understand why you are undertaking the project, define what the initiative will be, articulate how departments will take part, and commit to using the data you’ll generate.

Before embarking on such a large project, do some basic operations research. Determine if departments are organized as efficiently as they might be:


- Are they doing what they should be doing?
- Are there too many responsibilities crammed into one agency?
- Are staffs not large enough to do what has to be done?

It may be that a change in business practices is all that is required for your citizen service to improve.⁶

If you think the solution is not that simple, then brainstorm about why your city or county needs a 311 service center. Some of the answers may come from your department evaluations. But there are other issues to consider, too.

- Are calls not getting through?
- Are your citizens frustrated trying to find answers?
- Are your departments overburdened with tasks that can be eliminated or streamlined?
- Is work not getting done?
- Is the work that gets done costing too much?
- Do you need better accountability among staff?
- Do you know what’s been done or not done?
- Are you trying to become a data-driven organization?
- Do you have processes you think can be improved, if only you had reliable data?

⁶ Peisner, Lynn. “Getting a Grip.” *American City & County*, 1 Aug. 2006, americancityandcounty.com/features/government_getting_grip



Once you decide that a 311 call center is right for your city or county, consider that you're not just talking about a hotline. You're talking about a service that can help you identify trouble spots and deal with those issues before they become too big.⁷

For many cities and counties, implementing a citizen service initiative can involve a cultural change. That change involves becoming more citizen centered and delivering services in such a way that citizens seamlessly and easily access services.⁸

When the town of Huntington, NY, launched its 311 initiative, "Huntington @ Your Service" employees were trained on how to more effectively interact with the public. In addition to learning how to use QAlert to enter not only their own department's service requests, but requests for others as well, staff was asked to answer the phone using that phrase - Huntington at your service, Public Works Department, for example. Employees were given Huntington @ Your Service pins and every town vehicle sported a bumper sticker with the same logo.

Keep the notes from your department evaluations and your brainstorming sessions. They will come in handy as you drive your project forward.

⁷ Newcome, Tod. "Is the Cost of 311 Systems Worth the Price of Knowing?" March 2014. governing.com/topics/urban/gov-311-systems-cost.html

⁸ Nam, Taewoo, and Theresa A Pardo. "Understanding Municipal Service Integration: An Exploratory Study of 311 Contact Centers." *Journal of Urban Technology*, vol. 21, no. 1, May 2014, pp. 55–76., doi:10.1080/10630732.2014.887933.

Considering Needs

“Constituent relationship management is a combination of people, processes, and technology used to deliver superior service to the constituent.”
Rita C. Scoggins, senior manager, Deloitte Consulting

Once your internal team is formed, the real work begins.

You may be able to decide on a location on your own, or you may need help. You may know what qualities and the types of personalities you want in your staff, or you may not have thought about that at this early point.

"Some municipalities complete the entire process themselves, and they do it very well when the internal leader is able to focus and manage this single project," said LeBeau. "Other times, it may be best to leverage the knowledge of an experienced consultant or software provider with extensive implementation experience."

Some things to consider:

- **The CRM software you'll need to be the backbone of your initiative.** If you're not careful, you could spend an extraordinary amount of money and not get what you need. There are affordable and effective systems on the market. Whatever choice you make, be sure that system can grow with your initiative, and that it includes a single-screen, consolidated view that puts a plethora of information at the fingertips of your call takers, multi-channel intake methods, routing, tracking, and management capabilities, knowledge base features, notification options, custom fields, geographic routing, reporting, and a variety of personalization options. Make sure it's comprehensive, but intuitive and easy to use for your call takers and your responding staff.

Tuscaloosa, AL, routinely hosts visitors from other cities looking to start a call center. The advice the staff gives its visitors is to watch everything closely. "We have software that works for us, but it may not work for you, and that's OK," said LaToya Harris, senior customer service representative. "Pick something that works for you."

- **The number of staff you'll need.** You'll at least need a supervisor to monitor performance and work with department and administrative staff throughout your

organization. But then, how many calls do you figure on having to answer each day? How many hours will you be open? Do you want full-time or part-time personnel? Do you want to hire externally or pull knowledgeable people from within? Using your own key people, from crucial departments, can be a huge plus in building out your initiative.

In Albany, GA, when it first opened Answers 311 in 2009, the goal was to have 4 to 6 part-time staff members who not only knew a little of how the city and Dougherty County worked, but who also were grandmotherly, older citizens who wanted to be back out in the workforce for a few hours a day. For Albany, the calming, soothing voice of a grandma was going to be key in dealing with a sometimes upset public.

- **The hardware.** You'll need fast, reliable desktop computers with good audio and video cards. Plus, you'll want your call takers to have wide monitors. This will allow your CRM software to remain open one screen, and be fully visible, while companion software systems are also open for quick access. With multiple monitors, your call takers will always have two sets of important information right at their fingertips.

And don't forget, you'll also need fast, reliable, and redundant Internet connections for your cloud-based applications.

- **The office.** Will you have cubbies along the outside of a circle with a meeting area in the middle? Will you just have cubbies with one or two small rooms as meeting space? Will your supervisor's office be accessible right off the main call room, or very close by down a short hall?

If you're going to have a fully-operational 311 call center, you'll need space. It might seem as though any unused corner of any old building might work - an extra-large utility closet, a basement room, a converted break area - but the reality is, you should put a little more thought and effort into it than that.

As you're planning, think ahead. If people get used to calling 311 to solve their issues, they'll likely call during a severe storm or some other disaster. If you've randomly picked unused space to spruce up, can you get it up to standard with redundant power and other systems so it will be capable of functioning during trying times? You should consider the need for 311 to be a part of your emergency operations plan, and build it out with the proper back-ups and power supply necessary.

- **The phone equipment and contact numbers.** Maybe you already have a phone system that can handle routing calls to your 311 number. But do you have an IVR system or an automated call distributor? How fancy and technical do you need/want to get? Also, this may sound very basic, but don't overlook the phones and the equipment your call takers need. Be sure they have a choice to get the headphones that they prefer. One size does not fit all.

While we're on the subject of phones, you'll have to work with your local telephone service providers to see if the 311 number is available in your area. Then you'll have to get the cell phone providers to route calls pinging certain towers to your location.

Depending on your telephone equipment and the numbers already assigned to your organization, you may want to also explore having a 10-digit number that includes the 3-1-1 digit phrase.

- **Television monitors for news, weather, and other critical information.** In Revere, MA, a small call center, there is a single large monitor on the wall that uses the QAlert API to display all incoming calls so that in a glance, the entire staff can see trends and discuss responses. But the call takers there can also see the power grid, the weather, and local news. Maybe one monitor is enough. Maybe you want more. Maybe you want one on which you can cast another screen to have specific conversations about issues or group discussions.
- **Training.** Your call center staff will need training on your CRM software. The systems are generally easy to use. Even so, you'll want staff using whatever system you choose the right way. But what else will they need? How will you ensure call quality? How will you make sure everyone knows what's what in your city and county? You can't throw a newbie into the fire and expect positive feedback scores. If you don't help your frontline staff gain the specific skills they will need, your 311 reputation will suffer. Champion quality.⁹

⁹ Tumin, Zachary, and Robert Wasserman. Nine Imperative for Leadership of 311-Enabled Government. President and Fellows of Harvard, 2008.

The Road to Success

“Leadership is...about impact, influence, and inspiration. Impact involves Getting results, influence is about spreading the passion you have for your work, and you have to inspire teammates and customers.”
Robin S. Sharma, writer and motivational speaker

The road to success is paved with... Well, there are many ways to fill in that blank off the top of your head, or with a quick Google search. But in this case, the road to success is paved with the clout of a high-ranking leader.

Your chief executive, your mayor, or your city or county manager needs to be sure everyone in the organization knows of your 311 initiative, understands its benefits, and realizes that participation is required. The leader who drives the shift to 311 can direct resources to the initiative, including appointing a project manager to act on his/her behalf, and articulate the value of the initiative to your organization and your community.¹⁰

“Have a plan, that’s the best that I can say. Develop a plan and have buy-in from the leaders at the top. Those are the two things you need for a successful call center implementation.”


*Nancy Leuenhagen,
Communications Director of Washoe 311*

Each of the cities and counties included in this paper said the same thing: without the proper support, the project will flounder, never really gain traction, and ultimately fail. Success is directly tied to the commitment of a community’s leaders.

“Have a plan, that’s the best that I can say,” said Nancy Leuenhagen, communications director of Washoe County, NV, and Washoe 311. “Develop a plan and have buy-in from the leaders at the top. Those are the two things you need for a successful call center implementation.”

Walt Maddox had a plan. When he was elected mayor of the city of Tuscaloosa, AL, in 2007, one of his first initiatives was to create a 311 call center. As the project driver, he made sure that Tuscaloosa 311 opened in 2008. He did the work he needed to do, but he also picked a second in command who was known for getting things done, then city clerk Tracy Croom.

¹⁰ Stern, Spencer, and Huy T Nguyen. CRM and the Business Case. Revolutionizing Constituent Relationships: The Promise of CRM Systems for the Public Sector, pp. 25–31. Edited by Shayne Kavanaugh, Government Finance Officers Association.



“Have a great champion,” said Harris. “Our mayor came in and told everyone he was going to make it easier for them to get what they needed. He wanted [our citizens] to be able to make one call to city hall to get information instead of getting transferred to various departments where no one could give them the right answer. Everyone knew he was 100 percent 311.”

When administrators are behind the project, like a city or county manager to whom people directly report, there’s a much better chance of success, not only at the beginning, but also all along the way. If there are ever problems with the information available, such as a lack of updates by department staff, which limit the information your frontline employees can relay to the public, you’ll need someone who can shake things up a little.

“I cannot tell the head of DPW or the chief of police how to respond to requests in terms of using the system,” said Wendy Urbanic, manager of Pittsburgh’s call center since 2006. “That has to come from the top. You have to have buy-in. You have to have the city manager or whoever it is, looking at your numbers and looking at your response times.”

When “the top” features a dynamic leader, more good things than not tend to happen.

Steps to Successful Implementation

"The price of success is hard work, dedication to the job at hand, and the determination that whether we win or lose, we have applied the best of ourselves to the task at hand."
Vince Lombardi, coach, Green Bay Packers

- **Appoint a project leader.** This should be a ranking staff member with the ability, leadership, and leverage to drive the project to completion. The project leader needs to actively manage the implementation process. "Every organization has its movers and shakers," said LeBeau. "Appointing the correct person to oversee this project is key."
- **Build a team.** Be sure to include staff from the operational departments who will use your CRM system, not just department heads. Be sure they have a thorough understanding of the project and can discuss its benefits. This is the group that will work to set up your CRM system.
- **Set staff expectations.** Communicate how you expect your employees to use your CRM software and how it fits with existing applications and processes. "The more information you provide your staff about expectations, the more willingly they will buy-in," said LeBeau. "Without this information, the workflow and customer service changes you're hoping for may never fully take hold."
- **Deliver the proper training to your users.** Get off on the right foot. Skimping here on a few thousand dollars tells your employees you don't think this project is important. Your users will likely pick up how the CRM system works fairly easily and quickly," said LeBeau. "But the discussions generated in the sessions are invaluable."
- **Implement the project in phases.** As training is concluding, provide employees an opportunity to get used to the system and the new processes internally before rolling it out for public use. Along the way, the project leader should be available for feedback

"Your users will likely pick up how the CRM system works fairly easily and quickly. But the discussions generated in the learning sessions are invaluable."

*Keith Lebeau,
President and CEO of QScend Technologies*

and be prepared to make adjustments, if needed.

“As people are comfortable and they understand how the system works in everyday situations, then talk about integrating spreadsheets or other systems your departments may be using,” said LeBeau.

- **Market your new initiative.** If you have an existing 10-digit number that will also route calls to your 311 center, you’ll likely be receiving calls all along. Once you start promoting your new initiative, you’ll see an uptick, but nothing overly dramatic. “Nevertheless, be sure to always promote all the ways you can be reached - Web, text, app, social media,” said LeBeau. “The more people get familiar with the access channels earlier in the process, the easier it’ll be for your call takers years down the road, when your call center is thriving and 311 is clearly the go-to number.”
- **Continually measure outcomes.** The first selectman, mayor, council president, or town/city/county manager should hold monthly meetings to discuss the project’s status, and its goals, outstanding service requests, and successes so that staff knows it matters. “Stay on top of how you are performing, especially with those outlying issues that can be open for longer periods,” said LeBeau. “The constant discussion and feedback matters. That information will enable you to fine tune your processes, reports, and next steps.”
- **Celebrate your numbers.** When you reach key benchmarking numbers, when citizen service has measurably improved, acknowledge and share the success stories through department head meetings, your website, and the media. “Clinton Era government reforms have led to more transparency throughout government,” said LeBeau. “Sharing your data and your success stories will allow your citizens to see how your service initiative is making a difference in your community.”

There Are Always Challenges

“Accept the challenges so that you can feel the exhilaration of victory.”
Gen. George S. Patton, U.S. Army

Even with the right support from your administration or council, getting a project of this magnitude off the ground can be challenging. There are always a few bumps. No matter who the project leader is, not everyone is gung-ho at the beginning. Seeing is believing for those staffers. Among the hurdles you might face can be:

- **Budgetary.** If you look hard enough, there’s always a way. Maybe you have to start smaller than you wanted, in one room instead of a suite. Maybe you can’t get as many TVs or monitors. Maybe the supervisor has to answer calls as well as direct the center. Don’t let dollars be a project killer. “You can do this on a budget,” said Urbanic.

- **Cost efficiencies.** Your organization always needs to push multiple intake methods. Steve Craig, director of constituent services for Somerville, MA, acknowledged in an interview with *Government Technology* magazine that the cost of having human call takers can be an issue for some cities. That makes other options important. “You need to be proactive about pushing the other channels as means for engagement,” said Craig.

“You need to be proactive about pushing the other channels as a means for engagement.”
Steve Craig,
Director of Constituent Services for Somerville, MA

“It’s in our favor to offer [other intake options] to the customer,” added Urbanic. “Calls cost more than anything else, so, with, other channels, we can add to our efficiency.”

- **Accountability.** It’s said that people don’t fear accountability, for being called out for anything they’ve done or not done, but instead, they fear success. The danger to some staff in being held accountable (positively) is that they’ll wonder what additional responsibilities will be added to their jobs because they perform so well.

But, we also all know, other people don’t like to be held accountable because they are not fully doing what they should be doing, and they don’t want to risk losing a paycheck.

“One mayor’s aide told staff that his city’s QAlert system could be used for accountability, that an employee entering 500 activities and routinely closing requests might be more likely, in tough budget times, to keep a job rather than the employee continually fighting the new system,” said Karen Kirk, a learning specialist at QScend. “But he followed that right up, saying the most important thing was for every request to get addressed in a timely manner, and that everyone was accountable for that.”

- **Change.** We’ve all heard these popular refrains: “That’s the way it’s always been done.” Or “That’s the way we’ve always done it.” Your 311 initiative can be full of these moments for many people who may, for example, have to use new software, learn how to navigate through the new situations presented by that software, record information they never before had to record, and join the team movement.
- **Worries of obsolescence.** Some staffers always worry that there will be less for them to do, especially if their task is answering the phones. “A lot of departments didn’t know what to expect, at first,” said Harris. “But once they got the hang of where the mayor was going, they understood that their jobs would change, and for the better, with us [in 311] actually helping them out.”
- **Full cooperation.** There may be times when, your call takers do not have the information they need to respond to people calling back to check progress on issues. It could be that the people responding to the calls are not yet in the habit of adding notes to the request record. “Everyone needs to understand that a CRM system is a team tool,” said LeBeau. “In order for it to be effective, everyone involved has to step outside their silos and take part.”
- **Unknown answers.** No matter how much research you do with your departments as you get ready to launch, you’ll miss something. Urbanic says that she sometimes, 10 years later, still has to get on the phone to find answers from departments. “You can’t predict all the inquiries that will come in,” she said. “Understand that there will always be a need to communicate with your departments.”

“Everyone needs to understand that a CRM system is a team tool. In order for it to be effective, everyone involved has to step outside their silos and take part.”

Keith Lebeau,
President and CEO of QScend Technologies

- **Knowledge base updates.** If there's a major reorganization, or a change in responsibilities, that could affect your knowledge base answers, your service request types, and your routes. The same could be said for any processes your organization changes as a result of the analysis of the data you're collecting through your system. Be on the lookout for these situations, and be ready to act fast. Updating is an ongoing process.
- **Elections.** In places where there is a strong mayoral form of government, but turnover during an election, a 311 initiative can get caught in the political crossfire. New players who like to leave their own marks for their own career aspirations may make changes for the sake of making changes, particularly where a citizen service initiative is not fully off the ground. Newly-elected officials could opt to reduce expenses, change software, or even abolish a service center. You may have to fight for your 311 life.

Return on Investment

“311 is now used for performance measurement, economic development, and community engagement. The technology has gone way beyond its original purpose, which was simply to offload non-emergency calls coming into 911.”
Cory Fleming, program director, ICMA

It doesn't take long for a 311 initiative to show a return on investment (ROI), particularly in data-driven organizations, such as Redmond, WA, if you know what you're looking for.

The city launched its customer service initiative in early 2018. Just a few weeks into its operation, staff noticed a trend - several requests related to a construction detour were coming in in various ways, all pointing to a problem in the same downtown area. The initial detour as designed was allowing motorists to cut through an alley, off of which was a church and preschool by which there was a good deal of pedestrian traffic every day. The “shortcut” that the city had not foreseen was creating a dangerous situation.


Acting on what it discovered through the number of service requests recorded in QAlert, the city, according to customer service manager Ryan Spencer, was able to re-route the detour and thereby avoid any significant and costly accidents to the members of the public or the city.

This story begs the question: What kind of return on investment will there be for your 311 initiative? There are tangible and intangible benefits, and those benefits are likely to be seen in many areas of an organization.¹¹

If the main goals of your project are better citizen access to information and increased employee productivity, those would be tangible goals. The first would be tracked by the number of citizen contacts to the city or county website, which would be providing access to the Web form and knowledge base, and the number of calls received by the center, as examples. The second could be tracked by the decrease in non-emergency calls, the amount of time it takes to resolve issues, and how much other work gets done, to name a few.

You also have to factor in opportunity costs. What can't you do because your attention is focused elsewhere, and how much is it costing you not being able to get certain things done.

¹¹ Stern, Spencer, and Huy T Nguyen. CRM and the Business Case. Revolutionizing Constituent Relationships: The Promise of CRM Systems for the Public Sector, pp. 25–31. Edited by Shayne Kavanaugh, Government Finance Officers Association.



In Atoka, TN, the water utility and public works collaborated to develop a better process for water shut offs. The change freed up two employees every week.

“That process change helped with our efficiency and saved lots of money,” said Daniel Lovett, public works director. “With the manpower we saved, we could get more things done, and other things done faster. We lowered our response times and improved our service, all without having to hire any additional staff.”

Measuring intangible benefits are harder to measure, but they can be measured. For instance, conducting a survey of your citizens after a request has been resolved could demonstrate an increased level of satisfaction due to the service. Employees may also feel increased satisfaction through praise, increased salaries, and additional, or more substantial responsibilities. That, too, could be measured using an internal climate survey, or simply, performance evaluations.

Financial benefits that may result could include reduced absenteeism, less turnover, decreased overtime costs, and improved maintenance.

CUSTOMER STORIES

In Pittsburgh, PA

The 311 initiative in this community of 300,000 grew out of the mayor's service center. According to Urbanic, it was a natural progression to move to an independent call center.



Urbanic was told during her interview to become the call center's manager that she would likely have two staff members working for her. That was too little, she told city officials, and when she started in June of 2006, the 311 center opened with four people, including Urbanic.

After a slow start due to the terminal illness of mayor Bob O'Connor, who had started the initiative, the city moved forward under his successor, Luke Ravenstahl. "When I started, they just kind of stuck me in there and said, 'Go at it,'" Urbanic recalled. "So I had to find our internal customers and determine what their jobs were, what kind of requests we would be getting, and what kind of information would be needed for us to do our jobs."

With the support of O'Connor, until he left office, and then Ravenstahl, Urbanic had meeting after meeting with the department heads. To her surprise, there was little resistance. She says that is due in part to the cooperative approach they took.

FACT CHECK

311 Response Center *Pittsburgh, PA*

Official Launch: 2006
Staff Size: 10
Operating Hours: M-F 8 am - 6 pm
Avg. Daily Calls: 341
Population Served: 305,704
Geographic Area: 53.85 mi²

"We want to help you, and the more we understand what you do, the better we'll be able to do that," Urbanic said. "We told them that our role was more or less to handle their customers so they didn't have to, so please let us know what you need so that we can best serve you."

The success that Pittsburgh has had has been largely due to the solid communication channels that have developed between Urbanic and her staff and the department heads.

“Communication was key, especially early,” said Urbanic. “They had to know what we were talking about and what we needed, and we needed to know what they were talking about. I even went out in a couple of trucks and saw what certain things were. Getting the terminology right was so important.”

In the fall of 2006, the city decided to do a huge grand opening of the center that featured donated billboard space and wide press release distribution. “We had been quietly working in the background for a couple of months, getting used to taking calls and to what our jobs were, and then the media showed up,” said Urbanic. “As you can imagine, with just the four of us, we were completely obliterated with calls. So our reputation at the beginning wasn’t stellar.”

But it is now. Pittsburgh’s call center is acknowledged to be one of the best in the country. In addition to Urbanic, Pittsburgh now employs 10 with a mix of full and part-time positions. One person is dedicated to information management and several staff members help with creating and distributing targeted reports to department heads and other key staff.

“That’s one of the most important things we do,” said Urbanic. “Our Innovation and Technology team has built some great dashboard tools. While everyone gets used to those, we’re continuing to send reports via scheduled emails so they have paper, as well, to make decisions beneficial to the city.”

“Communication was key, especially early. They had to know what we were talking about and what we needed, and we needed to know what they were talking about. I even went out in a couple of trucks and saw what certain things were. Getting the terminology right was so important.”

*Wendy Urbanic,
311 Manager of Pittsburgh, PA*



In Tuscaloosa, AL

In April of 2011, disaster struck in Tuscaloosa, AL. Actually, it was a perfect storm.

As 62 tornadoes worked their way through the state, the one that became known as the Tuscaloosa-Birmingham tornado destroyed 12.5 percent of the city April 27 while wiping out entire neighborhoods. In Tuscaloosa County, 51 people died.



“2011 changed a lot of people’s minds about our job description [in the 311 call center]. It was amazing what we experienced, with all the heartache and pain,” said Harris. “We realized then just how much compassion we needed to have when dealing with the public.”

It was during this time of crisis that Tuscaloosa 311 came of age.

“Shortly after switching to our new software, we had a tornado, one in what they called a super outbreak,” Harris continued. “We had no choice but to get familiar with [QAlert] quickly. It was either sink or swim. We were open until 11 that night, and we worked longer days and weekends for a while. That’s when 311, and QAlert, truly became a vital part of our city.”

FACT CHECK


Tuscaloosa 311
Tuscaloosa, AL

Official Launch: 2007
Staff Size: 8
Operating Hours: M-F 7 am - 7 pm
Avg. Daily Calls: 330
Population Served: 100,287
Geographic Area: 71.7 mi²

With the mayor driving the project to fulfill a promise of easier access to city hall for the city’s residents, Tuscaloosa procured the use of 311 and established a 10-digit number quickly.

The city found space, outfitted an office and hired staff, which began gathering information about what all the departments were responsible for and clarifying work processes.

“A lot of departments didn’t know what to expect,” said Harris. “When you’re going from paper work orders to a computer, and you’ve never used a



computer... People thought that they were going to lose their jobs or that 311 would be telling the mayor about what they weren't doing. It was slow. We worked hard and we worked long."

And not just in the office. As staff members compiled and sorted through information, they also were acting as cheerleaders for the initiative, talking up how 311 would make a difference in each department's daily workload.

At the same time, they became the public faces of 311 through their community outreach efforts. They visited the city's schools and churches, participated in health fairs and other community events, and joined in university activities (Tuscaloosa is the home of the University of Alabama). "People would recognize us from those places and say, 'you're the lady from 311,'" said Harris.

In its first three years of existence, Tuscaloosa 311 experienced growing pains that a lot of early call centers did.

There were software problems and deficiencies in the office, there were hardware and infrastructure issues (staff around the city needed computers and email addresses), department silos had to continually be broken down, and skepticism as to the benefits of the office had to be overcome.

But then came the tipping point. and the payoff of all the time and effort put in. April 27, 2011.

"You have to have a passion for the public, and we do," said Harris. "Sometimes, like during the storm, it's hard. But our citizens came to realize that they have a voice, that we're going to hear them, and they know that we'll take care of them as best we can."

In Washoe County, NV

In the *Call 311: Connecting Citizen to Local Government* report, produced by the International City/County Management Association (ICMA), one of the recommendations for implementing 311/CRM is to do so in phases, particularly at the local government level.



That's the approach they took in Washoe County, NV, which covers more than 6,000 square miles and supports a population of more than 420,000. Washoe 311 opened quietly, having morphed out of calls that were directed to a citizen service line in the county manager's office. The small staff compiled issues based on the calls coming in. While Washoe 311 staff learned how to address those issues, the team also developed a plan to go and visit various departments to discuss how the 311 center could help even more.

"We actually built our service request types from the calls we were getting," said call center representative Cecilia Cortes. "We didn't want to go to the departments empty handed. We wanted to show our departments data from those calls to get buy-in and work as a team."

The team did a lot of relationship building, helping departments understand how 311 would help them, and in turn learning more about what everyone did.

FACT CHECK

Washoe311
Washoe County, NV

Official Launch: 2018

Staff Size: 2

Operating Hours: M-F 8 am - 5 pm

Avg. Daily Calls: 51

Population Served: 421,407

Geographic Area: 6,542 mi²

"It really helped us move forward through phase two," said call center representative Maria Alvarado. "We met, for example, with our engineering staff, and we weren't aware of exactly what they did. After we explained our processes and what QAlert could do, staff was more than happy to share what they do and what our citizens can expect."

"We're still learning," Alvarado added. "Going back to the relationship building, we're still doing that, and we're working to keep the communication channels open."

For communications director Nancy Leuenhagen, the pace at which the county has been moving is a key point. Washoe County didn't rush to market and promote its call center. That, perhaps, could have doomed it. Instead, it's flourishing.

"Counties are very complicated, you can't even really compare us to a city service," she said. "This takes time. That is one of the things I'm most proud of with this program because we didn't fast track it and just throw it out there and say here it is. The minute we did that, if people didn't have buy-in and understanding, it would have fallen flat, and that has not been the case."

In the spring of 2018, with a limited marketing push, Washoe 311 launched publicly, and as expected, the number of inquiries that it received ticked up.

Throughout the next two quarters, the promotional campaign will continue, culminating with the release of the county's smartphone apps. By the end of the year, the center should be fully launched.

"We actually built our service request types from the calls we were getting. We didn't want to go to the departments empty handed. We actually wanted to go with something and get buy-in and work as a team."

*Cecilia Cortes,
Call Center Representative for Washoe311*

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