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Technical Bulletins: Good Service-Request Systems Keep Customers Happy

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A citizen calls your city hall about a pothole, a burned-out street light, or a rude sanitation worker. Who takes the call? Who follows up? Who ensures the customer=satisfaction? And is anyone keeping track?

Across the United States, cities use a variety of systems to handle daily service requests and yes, complaints from their customers. By learning some of the essential elements that are key to a successful system, you can plan such a system based on your city=s needs and resources.

Many towns still use manual systems, but the emphasis here is on computerization. Automated service-request systems are proven to be cost-effective, labor-saving devices that greatly enhance management efficiency. (There are a number of commercial software packages available that are both microcomputer-based and fairly inexpensive. Some of the leading software names are discussed in this report.)

For a service-request procedure to be effective, five key questions must be answered:

1. Who takes and records the calls? Or who takes down the information when a citizen drops by city hall?
2. How is each request assigned to the appropriate department, and who does it?
3. When and how does the city get back to the citizen concerning the request? How many times is the citizen contacted (for example, a letter to a citizen acknowledging the request, a status report, and a note upon completion)?
4. Does the citizen have an opportunity to assess city hall=s performance?
5. Who is responsible for monitoring the status of each request or complaint? Is a status report generated listing open concerns?

**Question No. 1**

Who takes and records the calls?

There are several methods for receiving and recording citizen service requests and complaints. One way is to give the job to the staff person who answers the phone. This could include anyone from the mayor or mayor=secretary to city council members or individual department heads.

If this method is chosen, any city worker who answers a phone must receive training on how to respond to citizen calls. The person taking the call would also be responsible for keying the information into the central computer.

Entering the request gives access to anyone who needs to check the status of unresolved requests. The request would also be automatically routed to the appropriate department for service. This method is
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runaround runaround runaround runaround and showcase the advantages of keeping the records on computer.

Many cities have had success with a hot line or central phone number staffed by trained employees whose sole responsibility is to receive and record calls on the computer. (Again, the computer can automatically alert the responsible department for service.)

Sometimes the central number is located in the mayor’s or city manager’s office where the calls are taken, recorded, and routed to the appropriate department by a secretary or the city manager. Elected officials and their staffs may be responsible for receiving and recording calls or receiving them and sending them to the city manager, who enters them into the computer.

A few cities have dispatchers taking service requests 24 hours a day, while others have answering machines to record requests and complaints after hours and on weekends. In some cities, officials are available in shopping malls one day a month, while other cities simply place easy-to-use computer terminals in the malls so citizens can enter the requests themselves.

Any time a central number or other centralized system is used, it must be well-publicized so callers won’t get the runaround. When someone answers the phone who has nothing to do with service requests, this person can only transfer callers to someone else. Even if the employee directly connects the citizen to the central number, the caller may still be forced to repeat the request from the top. And doesn’t that make you mad?

Ideally, a centralized system prepares individual departments to receive and document calls coming through to them. The departments should either take responsibility for the request or complaint themselves or refer the information to the appropriate department through the central number. In either case, the department should forward the information to the central office for filing.

Many cities have no centralized system and put the entire responsibility of calls on individual departments. Each department must take and document the call, track it, and get back to the citizen. There’s a real possibility for a request to fall through the cracks. And, to prevent runaround, each department must be prepared to take and record even those calls it can’t service, then forward all the information to the appropriate department. Although all information is centrally recorded on computer, nothing is channeled through a central office. For maximum efficiency, the city’s phone book listing should be revised to include descriptions of the type of service performed by each department.

**Question No. 2**

How is each request assigned to the right department?

Normally, if a commercial software package is used, the request is automatically assigned to the appropriate department at the time it’s keyed into the computer. This way, whoever takes the call simultaneously forwards it. Some software packages automatically generate a hard copy of the work
order for the appropriate department and will prioritize each request by giving it a code number.

Once the information is properly forwarded, the department must be accountable to someone else in city hall, thus ensuring follow-up. This can be done in two ways. In some cities with a centralized system, the department reports back when the request is handled to the community services office, the mayor’s or city manager’s office, or the location of the central number. In other cities, all information forwarded to the responsible department is also sent to the city councilmember serving that constituency. As actions are taken, notations are added to the original service request or complaint.

Ideally, everyone involved should have access to the service-request record and updates, thus maximizing status tracking. Several tracking software packages can produce a case list of unresolved requests and complaints to be investigated by each relevant department.

**Question No. 3**

How and when does the city get back to the citizen?

It is important to keep in touch with citizens who have asked for service or complained. If the request is made in person or on the phone, the first contact is to acknowledge receipt of the request and thank the citizen for the information. Some cities also contact the citizen upon completion of the work.

When acknowledging receipt of a service request by letter or phone, it is typical to give a date the request will be handled, and to name the department handling it. In a centralized system, it is a good practice to have the department give the citizen a call back the same day. It may be best, since many problems may be resolved before a letter is received.

Call-backs are significantly less expensive for towns with a lot of citizen service requests. Charlotte, N. C., aims for one-day call-back. The citizen is told when the work will be done, that the work is completed, or why it cannot be done at all. Most cities will track work progress for any citizen who asks.

Many cities only make contact with a citizen when the request is satisfied. Towns with smaller budgets, and those with a large amount of service requests, should remember a phone call is cheaper than postage. Another option is to leave a notice at the citizen’s door after the work is done.

**Question No. 4**

Are citizens given an opportunity to assess staff performance?

Many cities give citizens a chance to evaluate the service by providing pre-addressed, postage-paid response cards. These may be automatically mailed when a request or complaint is received, or mailed or left at the citizen’s door after the work is complete. Citizens are sometimes asked to return the cards to individual departments, but they are usually sent to the city administrator’s or mayor’s office. Some local governments send evaluation cards periodically to a set number of randomly selected
citizens to get a reading on community satisfaction.

Elk Grove, Ill., is an example of a town keeping up with the satisfaction of its citizens. Communication cards are sent to 20 percent of the community at a time, eventually covering the entire community. The town also puts communication cards in its quarterly newsletter.

**Question No. 5**

Who is responsible for monitoring the status of a service request? Is a status report produced?

Most cities run a routine status check to monitor progress on each request or complaint. A community service office or the central office that received the request usually is responsible for following up. When a department takes action and/or completes the work, this information must be entered into the computer so it won’t continue to register the request as open.

The software systems produce a variety of useful reports, including:

- the number of requests within a specific time period,
- action(s) taken and whether the problem is resolved,
- who handled each complaint,
- how long the work took,
- the number of calls per department,
- the number of particular types of calls within a department,
- the number of evaluation cards returned, and
- number of calls per city ward or district.

The number of calls per area can be useful in pinpointing geographic problems. Some software systems can match the locations of requests and complaints automatically against a citywide database and coordinate and merge multiple citizen reports in the same area into one entry. Analyzing data by geographical area, along with the type of service request and responsible department, is helpful to identify trends and managerial problems. This information also comes in handy when predicting where similar problems may occur in the future.

Area information is a useful tool in election years. It allows the city manager’s office to provide elected officials with a list of all requests and complaints from their constituency, the names of citizens, and the actions taken.

By using the chief components outlined in this report, your city can develop an efficient service-request tracking system. The internet is an excellent resource to locate software providers for customer-response software. Search engines on the Web can quickly locate these software providers home pages where a city can view software or request further information from the provider.