

Measuring Constituent Complaints: Round One

by Courtney Gross

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A pillar of City Council Speaker Christine Quinn's last two state of the city addresses, the complaint measuring service, called [CouncilStat](#) (similar to the Police Department's Compstat), is supposed to catapult the council into the digital age, measuring what irks residents across the five boroughs.

As part of the service, the council committed to issue monthly reports detailing the types of complaints in council districts and citywide. The first of those reports was released [last week](#) not only four months late, but some constituents say, the stats in CouncilStat are disappointingly absent.

A New System

The council's new system, which received some criticism at its onset for being redundant of the mayor's 311 non-emergency hotline, tracks and registers constituent complaints across districts in one database.

Last year, Quinn has said, most district offices were still [pushing paper](#). Councilstat was not only meant to update offices' technology, but give districts a venue for intra and inter borough communication and make complaint records more accessible.

"I think it gives council members and their staff a temperature of what is happening in their respective districts," said Councilmember Letitia James. "It's also instrumental in assisting you in drafting and guiding policy decisions."

By pooling constituent data, council members could track what problems persisted beyond one's district and legislate possible solutions. All of the data would allow the council to see patterns throughout the city and enable them to enact better legislation, said Quinn in a prepared statement at the data's release last week.

After the initial announcement last November, the council slated the release of this data in March, along with every month thereafter. Delays persisted -- some attribute them to the budget scandal and fiscal negotiations in general -- and the first batch of statistics was released last week.

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The Data

According to the council, CouncilStat has lodged more than 24,000 complaints so far covering more than 280 district issues. The data it released last week covers only June -- or 2,500 calls that month.

According to the handful of graphs the council released, housing and buildings issues are the source of constituents' largest complaints citywide, about 29 percent. That category could span anything from an eviction to a search for affordable housing. A breakdown of what particular issues were included in each category -- categories range from transportation to public safety -- was not provided in the documents released by the council.

District by district snapshots also were not in the documents, though members said they had received detailed reports.

Housing and buildings accounted for 24 percent of complaints in [Brooklyn](#) , 32 percent in [Manhattan](#) , 24 percent in [Staten Island](#) and 16 percent in [Queens](#) . It was the top issue in every borough, except Queens where parks issues ran supreme at 17 percent of logged complaints.

Councilmember Maria del Carmen Arroyo of the Bronx, where housing issues comprised [29 percent](#) of constituent complaints in June, said the data did not tell her office anything it didn't already know: Housing is an issue in New York City.

"We understand the nuances of the issue surrounding housing," said Arroyo, who recognized the category could cover a vast array of topics. "It just confirms something we already knew. It helps us confirm it in a more formal way."

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Elsewhere, environmental issues came in second for both Staten Island and Queens, while transportation complaints were the runner-ups in the Bronx, Manhattan and Brooklyn.

Missing Pieces

While the council's data confirms that housing and buildings issues run paramount for New Yorkers, some remain disappointed by the data.

Arthur Springer, a resident of the Upper West Side, sees the release of CouncilStat data, or lack thereof, as a sign of diminishing constituent service in New York City. He has logged several complaints via CouncilStat and seen nothing more than an automated response -- not service improvement.

"Government responsiveness to constituents was assumed in my generation and it no longer is, because legislators at all levels tend to be responsive to their contributors and campaign supporters," said Springer.

Several council members said there was a "learning curve" and since the project was just started improvements will inevitably follow its first release.

A council spokesperson said the council is "proud" of the CouncilStat service, recognizes that it's still in its infancy and expects improvements every month. Â