

311 + 3 : Adding Social Services

by Marcus Banks

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When three years ago this month, Mayor Michael Bloomberg [launched 311](#) , which consolidated 40 different city hotlines into one, he said he expected it to be more than just a non-emergency alternative to the 911 phone line. He hoped it would be his legacy to the city.

“It will be a one-stop center for questions about any city service or program, 24 hours a day, seven days a week,” he announced in his [2003 State of the City](#) address. “More than that, it’ll be a 21st century management tool that lets us track and quantify just how well we’re serving the people of New York.”

A year later, he declared [himself delighted](#) with the results “and so, he said, was everybody else: “New Yorkers have treated it like the greatest thing since egg creams”! It’s made city government accessible and answerable to the people of New York -- 24 hours a day, seven days a week.”

Over the past three years, [311 has handled over 26 million calls](#) , each one reaching a live operator, and the option of immediate translation services in 170 languages.

311 has had its critics, with complaints that were enumerated in a Gotham Gazette Issue of the Week last year, [311’s Growing Pains](#) . Some of the criticism has been directed toward the pace of the system’s expansion to meet its growing popularity. Some say that [community boards](#) have been insufficiently integrated into the system, making it [more difficult to tackle such localized issues as noise](#) . Others complain of a rise in false complaints, or insufficient use of 311 data as a management tool, or too long a wait time to get an operator, or to get results.

The Bloomberg administration [reports](#) that in January, 2006, with some 1.2 million calls to 311, the average wait time for an operator was actually just five seconds.

And the third anniversary marks the beginning stages of an expansion that takes 311 in a new direction. Rather than just a center for referral to city government services, 311 will now include [referrals to private, non-profit social service agencies](#)

211 Elsewhere, 311 Here

Nationally, such information is usually disseminated through a "[211](#)" telephone number. But 311 has proven so successful in New York City that City Hall has opted to offer both services by calling 311.

There are an estimated 27,000 non-profit agencies that serve at least two million New Yorkers daily. But the initial effort, a collaboration between the city's [Department of Information Technology and Communications](#), which manages the 311 program, and the [United Way of New York City](#), will rely on the United Way's database, which includes only about 2,500 such agencies.

Social Service Expansion

311 currently does provide some social service information, but only when the city itself is the service provider or has a formal relationship with a non-profit organization. Gary Wartels, a consultant for United Way on the 311 expansion project, clarifies how this works. If a 311 caller today requests information about after school programs, they are referred to the New York City [Department of Youth and Family Development](#). With the expansion of 311, the caller interested in after-school programs would also learn about the offerings of the [Partnership for After School Education](#).

If a caller today reports living under threat of domestic violence, 311 would refer them to the non-profit [Safe Horizon](#), which has a contract with the city government. With the expansion of 311, such a caller, depending on her circumstances, could receive information about child care and job training as well.

When, How Much, Who Pays

The city plans for a partial roll-out of the expanded 311 this year, with a complete roll-out by July 2007. The United Way's business plan estimates that the cost of the initial phase is approximately \$14 million, with total costs approaching \$60 million for maintenance of the service for three years after it is launched. The balance between the city and state share of these costs remains unclear. (According to Wartels of United Way, the State Senate has approved \$3.9 million in the next budget to expand 311; there is no Assembly action yet.) The

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city's capital budget for fiscal year 2007 includes \$15 million for upgrading the 311 system, which indicates a commitment to this expansion. The business plan also assumes that private sector support will be available for maintenance and enhancement of this service .

Technological And Other Challenges

The technological challenges in enhancing 311 are significant. The phone system needs to be scaled up to handle a new influx of calls; current plans call for construction or rental of another 311 call center. The United Way's database of non-profit organizations must be significantly expanded. Another step would be integration of the database into the resources already available to 311 operators. In addition, 311 currently uses visual mapping technology to pinpoint clusters of similar calls by neighborhood. This capability would also be necessary for these social service or 211-type calls.

The City Council's Committee on Technology in Government held the first public hearing last month to [answer questions about the proposed expansion of 311](#) . While everyone supported the goal of increased access to social service information, one concern that arose was about the ability of 311 operators to handle highly sensitive calls for assistance. Obviously, a city resident who calls looking for somewhere to sleep has different needs than someone who calls to report a pothole.

Although staffing concerns for handling such sensitive calls are legitimate, those in charge of 311 maintain, they are not insurmountable.

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