



Public Advocate for the City of New York

**DISTRICT MANAGERS RATE 311:
CITIZEN SERVICE CENTER NEEDS IMPROVEMENT**

A Report by Public Advocate for the City of New York

**PUBLIC ADVOCATE BETSY GOTBAUM
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Public Advocate finds that District Managers frequently field complaints from callers who do not get the assistance they need from 311, including:

- 311's complaint collection and tracking system inadequate
- 311 fails to identify trends that can be used to determine how City resources can be most efficiently allocated during the budget planning process.

While District Managers continue to advocate on behalf of New Yorkers, they no longer have the comprehensive information needed to do their jobs. With the introduction of 311, many callers who formerly turned to District Managers now turn to the new service; thus, Community Boards are not provided with information that enables them to track trends, advocate on behalf of constituents in their district, and maximize the use of City resources to resolve complaints.

INTRODUCTION

It is the Public Advocate's City Charter mandated responsibility to “monitor the operation of public information and service complaint programs, and review complaints of a recurring and multiborough or City-wide nature relating to services and programs; and make proposals to improve the City's response to such complaints.”¹

This responsibility includes monitoring the City's 311 Citizen Service Center. Prior to the creation of 311, the first respondents to citizen complaints were the District Managers' staffs at Community Boards. Community Boards are integral to New Yorkers' lives because they advocate for improved quality of life in their districts. In addition to other duties, Community Boards “play an advisory role in zoning and other land-use issues, in community planning, in the City budget process, and in the coordination of municipal services.”² District Managers, who are full-time City employees, have traditionally received complaints from residents of the districts and resolved them for individuals and the community. District Managers also:

- Work with local service chiefs from City agencies to resolve problems
- Identify problems involving more than one agency to coordinate a resolution
- Identify problem trends so that cause and effect can be determined and so the use of City resources can be consolidated and maximized
- Project community needs for the next fiscal year during the budget planning process so that City resources can be allocated appropriately

The Office of the Public Advocate for the City of New York surveyed the District Managers of the City's 59 Community Boards Districts during the month of August 2004 to gauge the impact of 311 on the City's ability to solve constituent problems.

This survey (Appendix A) evaluates how 311 affects Community Boards' ability to improve service delivery to their districts. We evaluate how often New Yorkers'

¹ New York City Charter §24 (f)

² New York City Green Book 2003-2004

problems can be solved by directly using 311 and how often District Managers need to get involved when 311 falls short. We also ask District Managers to rate the quality of the information 311 provides them and evaluate the following areas:

- Strengths and weaknesses of 311
- Constituent satisfaction with information provided by 311
- How 311 affects the ability of Community Boards to advocate for constituents
- How 311 can be improved to better serve New Yorkers

The results of this survey are especially important in light of New York City Councilwoman Gale Brewer's recent introduction of legislation intended to increase the level of reporting and complaint follow-up related to 311. Introduction 174-A would require the Department of Information Technology and Telecommunications to make available periodic reports regarding data collected from the 311 Citizen Service Center. The Public Advocate is a co-sponsor of the legislation, which requires the Bloomberg Administration to provide the Speaker of the Council, the Public Advocate, and Community Boards with electronic reports on requests for service made to 311 within 7 business days of the end of each month. Findings of our survey support the need for improved data collection and reporting.

311 COMPLAINT COLLECTION

Since its implementation, 311 has diverted complaint collection away from Community Boards and the District Managers they employ.³ Unlike Community Boards, 311 does not follow complaints through the whole process from collection to resolution. The system functions largely as a complaint referral service: operators transfer callers to the City agency that can resolve the problem, and cases are closed regardless of whether callers have success once reaching the agency. 311 does not take the next step to determine whether problems are actually solved by agencies once callers are referred, and callers do not receive tracking numbers for many types of complaints making it difficult or impossible to track resolution status.

THE PUBLIC ADVOCATE'S ROLE IN COMPLAINT RESOLUTION

Unlike Community Boards that consider the needs of their respective districts, the Public Advocate's Office plays a City-wide role in improving City services. Through its Ombudsman Services Hotline (212-669-7250), the Senior Action Hotline (212-669-7670), and a team of community liaisons, the office resolves close to 12,000 complaints per year, largely pertaining to services provided by City agencies. Data generated by the complaints are reviewed to identify trends and patterns and allows the Public Advocate to make proposals to improve agency responses to such complaints. Last year, for example, more than 1500 complaints were filed regarding the Department of Education. This data along with independent research prompted several Public Advocate reports and served as the underpinning for advocacy in this area.

³ The Mayor's Office of Operations recently began compiling "My Neighborhood Statistics" on its website (http://www.nyc.gov/html/ops/html/mns/my_stats.shtml), however the statistics leave out the location and frequency of complaints.

311 utilizes the Public Advocate's office to resolve difficult and recurring complaints by forwarding callers directly to the Public Advocate's Ombudsman division when 311 operators cannot adequately meet callers' needs. A large percentage of these problems involve noise complaints. Other complaints forwarded to the Public Advocate's office relate to issues which 311 operators have not been trained to handle.

METHODOLOGY

The Office of the Public Advocate interviewed District Managers across the City to determine key issues facing communities since 311 began collecting complaints in March 2003. The Public Advocate's office distributed this survey to all 59 District Managers, asking them to evaluate 311 based on the sentiments of their constituents and their own experience using the system. Results below are based on 31 responses, a 53% response rate.

RESULTS

Overall Quality

- 79% of respondents believe 311 needs improvement in general.
- 83% state that 311 operators need better knowledge of City agencies.
- 34% of District Managers say 311 Operators make inaccurate referrals.
- Upon further questioning, 10% said referrals were not at all on target; 67% reported the information 311 provided them was only correct sometimes; 23% rated it as usually accurate.
- Only 13% of District Managers report a satisfactory experience interacting with 311 operators. The rest commented that operators provide minimal information and by no means obviate the need for District Managers to have direct access to City agencies.

Complaint Resolution

- 92% say there is need for great improvement in 311's complaint-referral-to-completion time.
- Only 7% deemed 311's complaint status and follow-up capabilities satisfactory.
- 89% say that some or much improvement to 311's complaint tracking system is needed.
- Respondents commend 311 for being open around the clock (Community Boards are not), but say that its major limitation is that it is an information collection and referral service rather than a complaint resolution service.

Impact on District Manager's Ability to Solve Problems

- Respondents state the top reason residents call them is that they have trouble getting complaints resolved through 311; 87% of calls received by District Managers come from residents unsatisfied with 311's reply.
- 74% of callers called District Managers to find out whether a claim they had made with 311 had been resolved.
- 83% of District Managers state that 311 handles complaints *less effectively* than when Community Boards communicate directly with agencies. 7% state they have the same level of efficacy as they did before, and 10% were unsure.
- Over half report having reduced access to City agencies when advocating for their district's constituents than before 311 was created.

Complaint Tracking

- To serve communities at the same level as before the creation of 311, District Managers overwhelmingly say they need access to the data 311 collects: 96% say having access to 311's system would better enable them to solve constituent problems and identify community trends.
- 72% say that the lack of this information makes it difficult to weigh in during the budget planning process and advocate for capital project funding in their districts.

Calls Placed on Hold

- 61% rated wait time for calls placed on hold as satisfactory or above average.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

While 311 has greatly increased the City's ability to receive citizen complaints, the system now needs to capitalize on the service and expertise of all City employees—311 operators, City agency Local Service Chiefs, and District Managers—by integrating the services they provide and making them available to each other as resources. 311 operators should be trained to better interface with Community Board staff and share their recommendations for complaint resolution, especially on complex problems involving several agencies.

Half of District Managers report having a reduced level of access to representatives from City agencies because they are told to call 311 instead. This unintended consequence of 311 can be resolved by ensuring that District Managers have the same level of information about complaints in their district as they did prior to the development of 311.

The findings of this analysis support the need for the City to adopt the reporting provisions required by Int. No. 174-A, which calls for the City Department of Information and Technology to report when, where, and how often complaints are made, and how and if those complaints are resolved. In addition, the Public Advocate recommends that the Bloomberg Administration provide additional training to 311

operators to increase the level of accuracy when referring callers to agencies for assistance.

Today the City provides funding for both 311 and the Community Board's District Managers. As the current system functions, the public calls 311 for a referral to a City agency, but many callers are never informed if or how the agency ultimately took action on their problem. For complaints that take longer to resolve, many are left without knowledge of the complaint resolution status. As a result, many New Yorkers call Community Boards or the Public Advocate for help.

Without access to 311's complaint database or a special liaison to 311, neither Community Boards nor the Public Advocate can give the caller a status report on a claim initiated with 311; in many cases, they must start at the beginning to resolve the problem. This both wastes City funds and delays the solution for the caller. Instead, the Bloomberg Administration should capitalize on the assistance Community Boards provide by sharing information with District Managers and enabling Managers to evaluate complaints received in their districts so they can recommend how best to use City resources throughout the year and during the annual budget planning process.