



311 Customer Service Center: More Calls and a Growing Budget

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SUMMARY

BEFORE MAYOR MICHAEL BLOOMBERG ESTABLISHED THE 311 call center, the city relied on approximately 40 agency help lines as well as the Mayor's Action Center to handle complaints and questions from residents and visitors. Virtually all of these agency call lines and the action center have now been folded into 311. IBO's review of spending on the 311 call center and the growth of its functions finds:

- Since its inception in March 2003, the number of calls received each year has grown significantly, from 1.2 million in fiscal year 2003 to 14.3 million in 2007.
- The operating budget for the call center has nearly tripled over the same period, growing from \$16.9 million to \$46.6 million. The budget for 311 for this year is \$57.6 million.
- Since 2002, \$96.0 million in capital funds has been committed to 311. An additional \$8.0 million is expected to be committed this year, and another \$79.7 million through 2011 for expanding the call center's ability to provide information on accessing social services.

As the volume of calls to 311 surged in 2004 and 2005, the share of calls answered in 30 seconds or less fell from 99 percent in 2003 to 63 percent in 2005. As the annual increase in calls has leveled off, the share of calls answered promptly has risen and the call center aims to answer 90 percent of calls within 30 seconds this year.

Among the top 10 inquiries received by 311 last year were noise complaints, requests for bus or subway information, and assistance with tickets for parking violations. The Bloomberg Administration is now expanding the 311 system to include information and referrals for social service programs, beginning with services for seniors.

BACKGROUND

Last June, Mayor Bloomberg held a press conference to commemorate a milestone for the 311 Customer Service Center: it had received its 50 millionth call. To date the 311 Customer Service Center has handled nearly 61 million callers overall. New York City's 311 call center is the largest of its kind in the country. It was developed to make New York City government more accessible to its constituents; it is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and is able to translate calls in nearly 180 different languages.

The number of calls received each year by 311 has grown considerably from 1.2 million in fiscal year 2003 (covering roughly four months of operations) to 14.3 million in 2007. The operating budget for the 311 call center has nearly tripled over that same period, rising from \$16.9 million to \$46.6 million. The projected budget for 2008 has increased by \$11.0 million to \$57.6 million. Much of this growth in the volume of calls and spending is due to the continued shifting of responsibilities and services to the 311 center from other city agencies.

Prior to establishment of the 311 system, most nonemergency calls were handled by the Mayor's Action Center and over 40 help-lines operated by various city agencies, including 14 for public safety; eight for infrastructure, regulatory and community services; seven for business affairs and waste management; and 11 for health and human services, according to the Bloomberg Administration. Virtually all of these agency lines have now been folded into the 311 call center. In addition, the city's Community Board district offices and the Office of the Public Advocate have traditionally handled calls related to municipal service and continue to do so after the establishment of 311.

Going Live. The city's 311 phone line began taking calls in March 2003 and the Department of Information Technology and Telecommunications (DOITT), which is responsible for running 311, initially relied on existing city employees to staff the call center. Many of these employees had previously worked with agency call centers and hotlines. With continued growth in call volume, additional staff has been added.

The call center has been put to the test several times since inception. During the 2003 blackout it received more than 175,000 calls in only two days. In the snowstorm of 2006, 311 received more than 250,000 calls, and during the December 2005 bus and subway strike it handled more than 716,000 calls (more than 241,000 calls on the first day alone). Based on the ability of the call center to handle the stress of these events, city

officials have adopted the call center as a primary tool for the Mayor and public safety officials to provide constituents with instructions and information.

In 2004, 311 launched a facility finder to help callers locate facilities such as pools, parks, health clinics, and libraries in their neighborhoods, and an automated e-mail capability that delivers city agency documents and forms to customers on the same day, rather than waiting for them to arrive in the mail. In 2005, 311 also began handling intake for heavily used services such as scheduling appointments with building plan examiners and determining callers' eligibility for free quit-smoking nicotine patches. More recently, an effort has been underway to expand 311 to provide information and referral (I&R) services to human services programs ([see section on accessing services](#)).

HOW IT WORKS

The 311 call center runs on a knowledge database containing over 7,000 pieces of information about government services and other related organizations. Using the Customer Service Management System (CSMS) the call takers can search the database and identify the correct information by using keywords, according to DOITT. Once the caller's need has been identified the operator can do one of three things: take an information request, take a service request, or provide directory assistance.

For an information request, the call taker answers questions and provides information about policies and procedures, city government events, and operations information. If the call is a service request, the call taker processes a request for service or informs the caller of the status of an existing request (callers are given a number that they can use to track the status of a complaint). In the directory assistance scenario, the call taker may provide the telephone number, address, and office hours for an agency or service. If the office is open, the caller is transferred directly, according to DOITT.

As of January 2008, customers can now visit NYC.gov to enter the service request number of a previously filed 311 complaint, where they will be provided with the status of that service request, including the date created, type of request, request details, the borough and address of the incident, and the last time the request was updated by the servicing agency.

Just a Referral Service? As 311 has evolved, its scope increasingly overlaps the work of other city offices that handle constituent complaints such as the Public Advocate and community boards. For example, as the number of complaints to community boards has decreased in recent years, some

Top 10 Citywide 311 Inquiries, 2007	
Inquiry	Total
Noise Complaints (all inquiries)	374,351
Bus or Subway Information	262,583
Parking Violation Ticket Assistance	249,624
Heat Complaint Residential Building - Inadequate Heat	245,135
Landlord Complaint - Maintenance	227,147
Missing Vehicle - Towed	212,860
Chlorofluorocarbon and Freon Removal	201,672
Find a Police Precinct or Police Service Area	135,659
Garbage Pickup	134,705
Alternate Side Parking Information	131,534

SOURCES: IBO; Mayor's Management Report.

district managers and community board members across the city criticized the Bloomberg Administration for not sufficiently integrating the community boards into its new system. In a 2004 report, *District Managers Rate 311: Citizens Service Center Needs Improvement*, Public Advocate Betsy Gotbaum argued that although the city knows how many calls the 311 call center receives, it does not know how satisfied each caller is with the end result. In her report, the Public Advocate claimed that the call center needed much improvement and referred to the call center as, “a referral service.” She went on to say that, “311 does not solve constituent complaints; others like my office, like District Managers, like City Council do that.”¹

In response to such concerns, City Council Member Gale Brewer, chair of the Committee on Technology in Government, with the support of other members of the City Council, as well as the Public Advocate, introduced Intro174-A to make more outcome and performance information from 311 available to the public. The legislation required the Department of Information Technology and Telecommunications to make available periodic reports on data collected from the 311 Customer Service Center. In May 2005, this legislation was passed as Local Law 47 and signed by the Mayor. The first report was released in the summer of 2006.

The [Local Law 47 Reports](#), which are produced monthly, provide the public with data on calls made to the 311 call center while protecting the privacy of callers. These reports can be found on DOITT’s Web site. DOITT provides two reports: a request for service summary and a service by frequency summary. The request for service reports are grouped by the agency responding to the service request and the request type, and include information on the number of requests closed and the time it took to

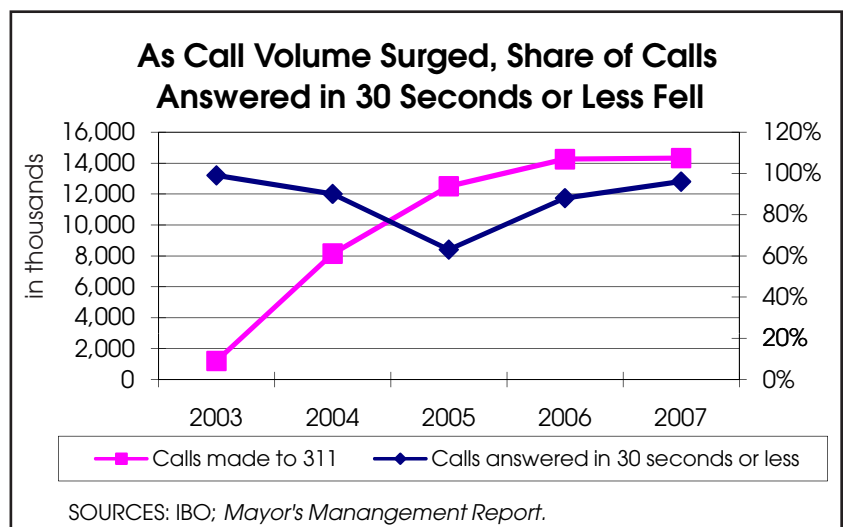
close them. The service requests are also grouped geographically, at the citywide, Borough, community board, city council district, and zip code levels. The service by frequency summary report is a citywide summary of the types of inquiries 311 received for each of the Mayoral agencies.

Earlier this year DOITT conducted the first of three surveys planned for this calendar year on 311 customer service satisfaction. These surveys are aimed at assessing callers’ views on both the call center and the work performed by the responding city agency in fulfilling service requests. Results from the first survey are expected next month.

INQUIRIES

In 2007, 311 received over 15 million calls. Among the top 10 inquiries received last year were noise complaints, requests for bus or subway information, and parking violation ticket assistance (see table). Certain types of calls are seasonal. In the summer months there are more calls made about where senior citizens can go to escape the heat and the Summer Youth Employment Program. In the winter months the number of complaints about lack of heat or hot water is higher. Not surprisingly, quality-of-life complaints such as blocked driveways are year-round phenomena. Some inquiries are specific to a particular year; for example, inquiries related to the December 2005 transit strike topped the list for fiscal year 2006.

Call Waiting? Beginning this fiscal year, DOITT’s customer service target is to have 90 percent of all calls answered in 30 seconds or less (in previous years the target was 80 percent of calls). According to the Mayor’s Management Report, the percent of calls meeting that target has varied over time. In 2003, when the center was new and receiving fewer calls, the target was met for 99 percent of all calls. In 2005, with much higher call volume, the



percent of calls being answered within 30 seconds dropped to 63 percent. One explanation for this decline in the share of calls being answered promptly is the much higher call volume in 2005—12.5 million as compared with 1.2 million. In 2006, the percent of calls being answered in 30 seconds or less increased to 88 percent; in 2007 that mark improved to 96 percent.

CALL CENTER COSTS

Operating Costs. Before establishment of the 311 call center, the city relied upon approximately 40 agency help lines as well as the Mayor’s Action Center to handle complaints from residents. In fiscal year 2003, during phase one of the transfers, various city agencies transferred a total of 62 full-time and 133 part-time positions to DOITT. These transfers had a budgetary value of \$2.3 million in fiscal year 2003 and \$3.3 million annually, beginning in fiscal year 2004. The agencies involved in the first part of the transfer and the amount of funds were: Department of Housing Preservation and Development (\$374,000 tax-levy and \$636,000 federal community development funds), Department of Environmental Protection (\$410,000), Department of Transportation (\$297,000), Department of Buildings (\$179,000), Department of Sanitation (\$167,000), Mayor’s Action Center (\$117,000), Department of Consumer Affairs (\$80,000), and Department of Records and Information Services (\$18,000).

As the call center’s budget has grown, its staffing has also increased. In fiscal year 2003, DOITT’s 311 operating budget was \$16.9 million and had a staff of 193 as of June 30, 2003. In 2004 with additional transfers, DOITT’s budget for the 311 call center grew to \$27.1 million and had a staff of 215. By 2007 the 311 operating budget was \$46.6 million and the staff had increased to 461. In the current year the 311 operating budget is

\$57.6 million and staff is projected to grow to 544.

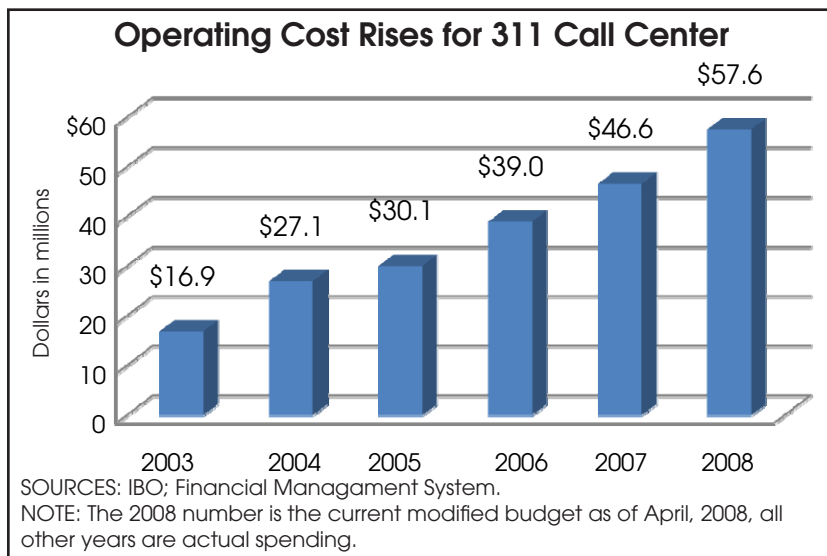
Capital Costs. The growth of 311 has also required capital investment. Since 2002 a total of \$96.0 million in capital dollars has been committed for the 311 call center. For example, \$39.5 million has been committed for the “City-wide 3-1-1 system,” as it is called in the city’s capital commitment plans, and \$1.5 million for the Customer Service Management System, which is the “knowledge management” database used by call takers. In addition, to enhance 311’s capacity to provide information on the availability of social services, the city is planning capital commitments of \$8.0 million in 2008 and \$79.7 million over 2009–2011.

Accessing Social Services. In addition to reserving the 311 number for local governments to provide constituent information (20 cities now have 311-type systems) the Federal Communications Commission has also reserved the 211 number for social service calls. Currently there are 171 active 211 systems for accessing social services operating in 32 states. The success and popularity of 211 continues to drive nationwide implementation of these systems. Though there are numerous efforts throughout New York State to implement 211, the Bloomberg Administration has decided to take a different approach: building on its 311 system to provide access to social services, thereby avoiding the confusion that could result from having multiple phone numbers for citywide constituent services.²

DOITT is working to enhance the 311 Customer Service Center to provide access to a more comprehensive human services information and referral system. An I&R Governance Committee has been organized to discuss the Enhanced 311 plans. The committee is comprised of DOITT, the Human Services Council, and United Way of New York City. Much of the cost of developing the Enhanced 311 system is carried in the city’s capital budget.

As one of the first steps taken towards implementing Enhanced 311, DOITT worked with the Department for the Aging to transfer its I&R hotline to 311. In 2007, \$831,000 in funds was transferred for this project, along with 26 full-time employees, and \$1.3 million is set to be transferred between 2008 and 2010.

DOITT is also collaborating with the Mayor’s Office of Immigrant Affairs and the Deputy Mayor of Health and Human Services to implement an advertising and marketing campaign aimed at reaching New Yorkers who speak limited English.



This initiative will focus primarily on health and human services, in conjunction with Enhanced 311, according to testimony presented by DOITT officials at a hearing on the agency's preliminary budget for 2009.

A Future in Pictures? In Mayor Bloomberg's January 2008 State of the City address, he announced that DOITT is planning a pilot this year to allow New Yorkers and visitors to submit pictures and video to 311 and NYC.gov for certain types of quality-of-life concerns. For example, callers will be able to

submit images of problems with street signs or deteriorated parks conditions by calling 311 and receiving a link that can be used to upload images through NYC.gov. This will provide visual evidence of their complaint or request for service.

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ENDNOTES

¹[Survey Finds 311 is Not a Panacea for Citizen Complaints 311 Impedes Ability to Assist Residents](#)

²Briefing paper of the Infrastructure Division "Oversight: Expanding 311 Service to Include Information on Social and Not-for-profit Services" February 14, 2006.

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