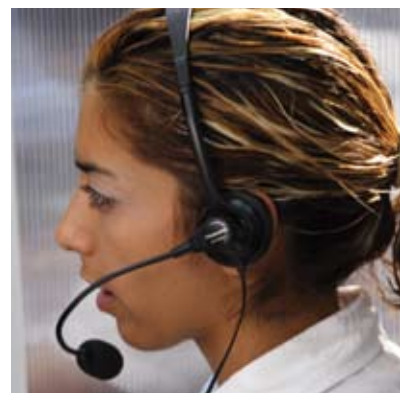


ICMA

Call 311:

Connecting Citizens to Local Government
Data Report



ICMA's Local Government Customer Service Systems Survey, 2007

By Evelina Moulder

Leaders at the Core of Better Communities

In This Report

- Local Government Use of Customer Service Systems
- Survey Methodology
- Local Government Implementation
- Customer Use of Centralized Service Systems
- Management Uses
- System Cost
- Summary



ICMA is the premier local government leadership and management organization. Its mission is to create excellence in local governance by developing and advocating professional management of local government worldwide. ICMA provides member support; publications, data, and information; peer and results-oriented assistance; and training and professional development to more than 8,200 city, town, and county experts and other individuals throughout the world.

Copyright © 2007 by the International City/County Management Association. All rights reserved, including rights of reproduction and use in any form or by any means, including the making of copies by any photographic process, or by any electrical or mechanical device, printed, written, or oral or recording for sound or visual reproduction, or for use in any knowledge or retrieval system or device, unless permission in writing is obtained from the copyright proprietor.

311 Service

Non-emergency 311 service is a local telephone exchange communications system that allows telephone customers (and cell phone customers, depending on the community) to access non-emergency local government information and services by dialing an abbreviated telephone number. A public switched network routes 311 traffic to a call center designated by the local government customer. In 1997, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) reserved the number "311" nationwide for non-emergency access to local government services in all U.S. jurisdictions.

311 service is optional and may be purchased by a local municipality, a council of governments, a communication district, another state or local governmental unit, or an authorized agent of one of the above to whom authority has been lawfully delegated. 311 service is subject to the availability of facilities in the jurisdiction.

Local Government Use of Customer Service Systems

For local governments, interaction with the public they serve is critical to engaging citizens in the community. Typically, local government services are provided as residents expect: trash is picked up, streetlights function, and potholes are filled, so residents have no need to contact their local government regarding these services. But if something goes wrong, they will make contact. If this contact produces a negative experience, it can create an impression that is difficult for the local government to overcome. A satisfying customer service experience, however, can engender positive feelings about the local government and encourage further citizen involvement with the community.

To this end, a centralized customer service system provides a vehicle through which residents can make their specific needs known to their local government and receive information back about the status of their requests. The ongoing information feedback from the customer to the local government and back to the customer can produce a positive experience that leads to engagement in the community and with the local government at a broader level.

Centralized customer service systems also enable local governments to access the information they need to inform their performance management, identify problems specific to a neighborhood, and provide direction for the capital budget.

ICMA conducted a national Local Government Customer Service Systems (311) survey to explore the successful implementation of these systems and examine how they are being used to respond to citizen needs and strengthen local government-constituent relationships. ICMA will use the results of this survey to develop case studies, reports, conference sessions, and workshops that will benefit local governments as they explore implementing a 311 system.

Table 1 Survey Response

Classification	No. of cities/counties surveyed (A)	Respondents	
		No.	% of (A)
Total	2,287	710	31
Population group			
500,000 and over	99	24	24
100,000-499,999	450	160	36
25,000-99,999	1,498	456	30
2,500-24,999	240	70	29
Geographic region			
Northeast	394	88	22
North-Central	556	165	30
South	795	242	30
West	542	215	40

*For a definition of terms, please see "Inside the Year Book," x.

Survey Methodology

A paper survey was mailed to city managers and chief administrative officers (CAOs) in municipalities with a population 25,000 and over and to all counties with a CAO or a chief elected executive. The survey was also available for completion online. Of the 2,287 jurisdictions contacted, 710 responded for a survey response rate of 31 percent (Table 1).

Local Government Implementation

While only 104 of the 710 survey respondents reported use of a centralized customer service system, the results also show that 34 percent (190) are considering implementing one (not shown). All these local governments have populations of 25,000 and over. A somewhat higher percentage of local governments in the West region (41 percent) indicated plans to implement

a system than did those in the other three regions. Figure 1 shows the reasons that respondents gave for not implementing a centralized system.

These reasons point to several areas in which local governments need assistance—notably, implementing the application process and obtaining a 311 designation, demonstrating the necessity of such a system, and making elected officials aware of the benefits that a customer service system can bring. Clearly cost is a major concern, and there are demonstrable savings to be achieved from implementation, such as a reduction in calls to 911 and improved customer service, information, reporting, and management. The results of this survey also show that the difficulty in obtaining a 311 designation is across the board (between 31 percent and 38 percent in all four regions) and not limited to a few states (not shown).

Driving Force Supporting Implementation

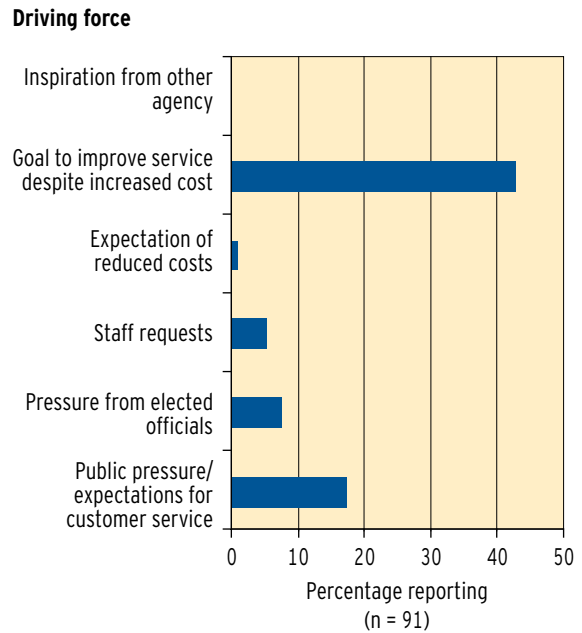
Improving service despite increased cost was cited by the highest percentage of respondents (43 percent) who identified the driving force behind implementation of the system (Figure 2). Seven local governments attributed implementation primarily to pressure from elected officials, which is possibly related to public pressure and expectations for customer service. None of the respondents reported inspiration from another agency.

Figure 1 Reasons for not implementing a centralized customer service system



Note: Percentages exceed 100 percent because of multiple responses.

Figure 2 Driving force behind implementation of a centralized customer service system



Note: Percentages exceed 100 percent because of rounding.

Coverage

Only seven local governments reported that their systems cover more than one jurisdiction (not shown). Of these, four are county governments.

Call Intake Software Technology

A slight majority of local government respondents (52 percent) use some form of off-the-shelf call intake technology (not shown). Most have added modifications to or customized the package. Of the 90 local governments reporting, 16 have systems developed by in-house staff without the use of consultants.

Departmental Integration into the Centralized System

Of the local governments that provided information on which departments are integrated into their centralized customer service system (Table 2), more than 80 percent identified:

- Public works (95 percent)
- Code enforcement (88 percent)
- City/county management/administration (84 percent)
- Parks and recreation (81 percent).

Table 2 Departmental Integration Into Centralized System

Department	No. reporting (A)	Departments are integrated	
		No.	% of (A)
City/county management/administration	82	69	84
Elected officials' offices	79	46	58
Parks and recreation	78	63	81
Code enforcement	80	70	88
Refuse collection and disposal	76	59	78
Public works	81	77	95
Animal control	78	42	54
Health/social services	71	19	27
Water	75	50	67
Nonemergency police	74	42	57

Note: Not all respondents answered each question about integration, so the base used to calculate the percentages is different for each department.

These departments are obvious candidates for inclusion because they handle problems that usually require a repair (public works and code enforcement) or specific information about programs, locations, and services (parks and recreation). The city or country administrative offices are often the first place that these calls are received, as are calls for general information.

It is somewhat surprising that a higher percentage of local governments have not integrated the nonemergency police into the system, because reducing the number of nonemergency calls to police dispatchers is often touted as a benefit. Twenty-eight local governments have measured nonemergency calls to 911 since the centralized system was implemented, and of these, 43 percent reported a decrease in calls to 911 (not shown). However, ICMA has anecdotal information that the need for specially trained dispatch staff who can distinguish an emergency from a nonemergency makes integration of emergency services into the centralized system challenging.

The survey collected information about the number of calls received for information or services specific to each of these departments, but the extreme variation in numbers and the few local governments that provided information make it unusable.

Routing and Tracking Requests Internally

According to 89 percent of the local government respondents, routing and tracking of requests is handled within the centralized system, and for the vast majority of those localities, departments are alerted when a request is submitted (not shown). Moreover, 92 percent of respondents reported that their centralized systems are updated to reflect job status. There is, however, some variation in *how* a system is updated. For 67 percent of the 79 local governments responding to this question, the system is updated directly. At least six local governments reported both direct system updates and updates to work orders, which are then updated in the centralized system.

Nine local governments reported that routing and tracking is handled by department-specific work order systems. Of those, six update the central customer service system with job status information.

Customer Use of Centralized Service Systems

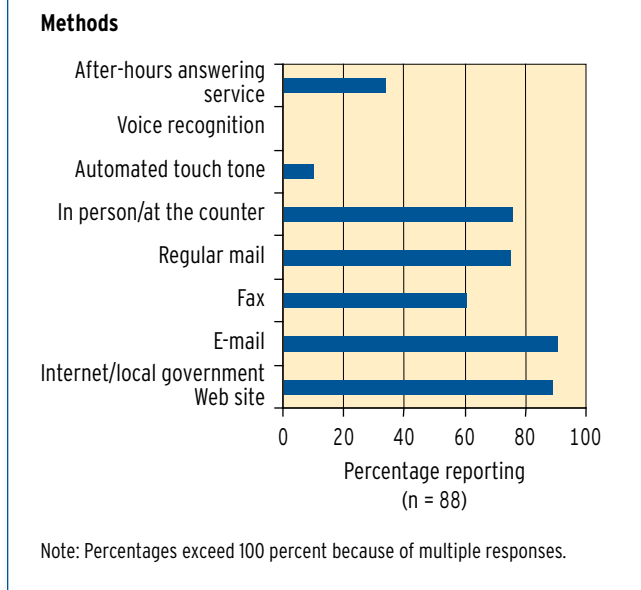
It almost goes without saying that whatever advantages such a system may provide will depend on the system's accessibility for its customers, its responsiveness to and efficiency in handling customer calls, and its ability to track and keep customers informed of its progress in handling the problem—all the things that add up to a positive and satisfying customer service experience.

Accessing the System

Customers often have different needs or preferences when it comes to communicating with a service provider. Each local government provides more than one way to access the system, with e-mail and Web access reported by the highest percentages (Figure 3). None of the local governments indicated the use of voice recognition.

Close to 44 percent of the 92 local governments reporting, including the two localities with a population of 500,000 and over, do not use a single access number (not shown). Of those that do, 9 percent use 311 and nearly 19 percent use a single access, or hotline, number *other than* 311. Local governments in the Northeast region, none of which reported using 311, show the highest percentage reporting the use of an alternative single hotline number. Date of implementation does not seem to have been influential in whether there is a single access number. As for the remaining respondents, 15 percent reported a Web-

Figure 3 Methods of contacting the system



based access system under “other,” so those responses were recoded as a distinct answer, and the remaining 14 percent who reported “other” described a system with multiple access points, such as phone, the Web, or contact with a person.

Who Handles the Calls?

In 38 percent of the local governments reporting, central call staff are trained to handle the calls, while another 28 percent reported that central call staff make a record of the call and then put the caller in touch with the responsible department (not shown). Thirty-five percent reported “other” descriptions, including customers entering the “call” into a Web-based system with information routed to the responsible department, or the department taking the call and then entering it into a centralized system. The responses in “other” reflect the fact that not all systems are centralized with call center staff.

Requests for Service Received

The survey included a question about the types of requests received by the centralized customer service system. The objective of this question was to determine the proportion of calls that come in for service, for information, for general comments, etc.

Requests for service top the list (Table 3). Whether this would be true in the absence of a centralized system is unknown, but centralized customer service systems are designed to manage service calls, so the

high percentage of calls suggests that a strong correlation exists between design and use.

When the responses are reviewed by population size, it is notable that of the 49 local governments reporting with a population of 25,000–99,999, 13 indicated that they receive no requests for *information* about local government services (not shown). Yet all 13 of them reported receiving requests for *service*, and all but one reported receiving complaints about graffiti and the like. It would be interesting to learn whether any characteristics of their system would explain the lack of requests for information received by the centralized system.

Tracking Methods

Quality customer service involves not only taking a call for service but also providing feedback to the customer about the status of the request. To facilitate such quality service, local governments need a system that includes customer tracking capability. When asked if they track contact and local information, however, only 63 of 71 local governments answering the question indicated that they track the street address of the issue, and only 58 reported tracking the street address of the caller (Figure 4).

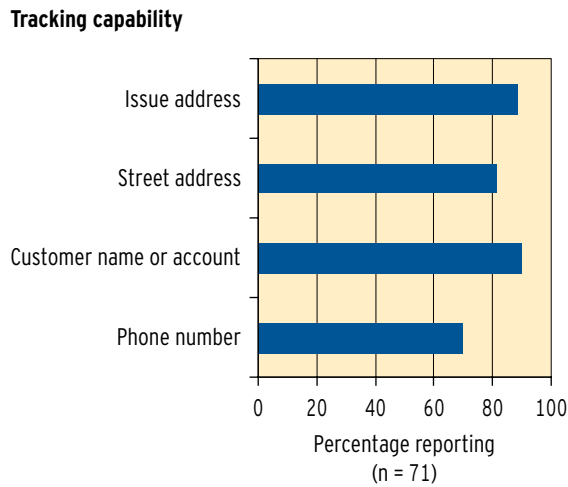
The survey also asked whether the local government uses geographic information system (GIS) technology. But the question did not specifically link the use of GIS to tracking, so some local governments may

Table 3 Types of Calls/Requests for Service

Type of call/request	No. reporting (A)	No. reporting on type of request	% of (A)
Requests for service such as pothole repair, burned-out streetlights	85	84	99
Requests for information about local government services, schedules, etc.	85	72	85
Complaints about graffiti, vacant lots	82	75	92
Suggestions, general feedback, or comments on a specific issue	75	61	81

Note: Not all respondents answered each question about types of calls or services requested, so the base used to calculate the percentages is different for each type shown.

Figure 4 Customer tracking capability of system



Note: Percentages exceed 100 percent because of multiple responses.

have answered it without relating it to their system's centralized customer service tracking capability. That said, 35 of the 79 local governments responding to the question (44 percent) reported that their system does use GIS (not shown).

Customer Response Mechanism

Eighty-two local governments reported that their system includes a customer response mechanism through which it can provide such information as estimated repair time or notification that the repair has been made. Of those, 62 reported the type of response mechanism they use (Figure 5). A majority of respondents (71 percent) issue a tracking number, which enables the customer to follow the progress of the issue resolution. Several local governments use multiple response mechanisms, such as providing issue-specific information (e.g., the estimated date of resolution) to the operator to pass along to the customer, sending out an automated e-mail with a copy of the request and additional information, and sending out an automated e-mail at different stages of issue resolution.

The next question on the survey asked how the response was communicated, which may have been confusing because the previous question asked whether the system has a response mechanism and gave automated e-mail as an example. As it happens, the highest percentage of respondents answer-

ing the question (46 percent) reported e-mail as the method of communicating a response to a user request (not shown). Close to 43 percent indicated that the response is communicated in accordance with customer preference, and 42 percent reported that the response is communicated in the same manner in which it was received. Responses by phone (34 percent) and regular mail (27 percent) were reported by the fewest local governments.

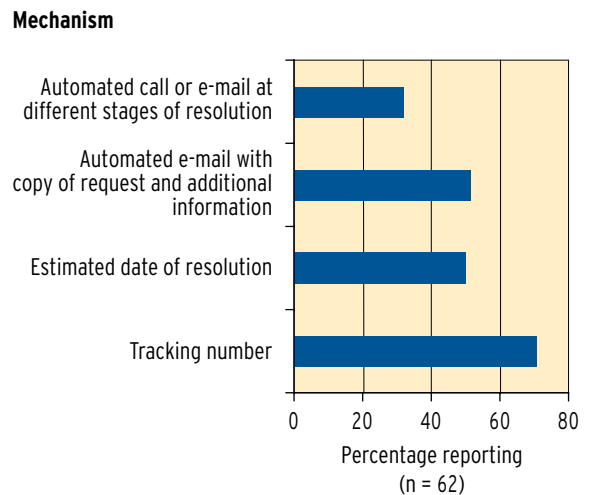
Management Uses

The use of a centralized customer service system brings several other issues into play, among them being the capabilities and value of the system beyond customer service, and financial considerations.

Reporting Capabilities and Use

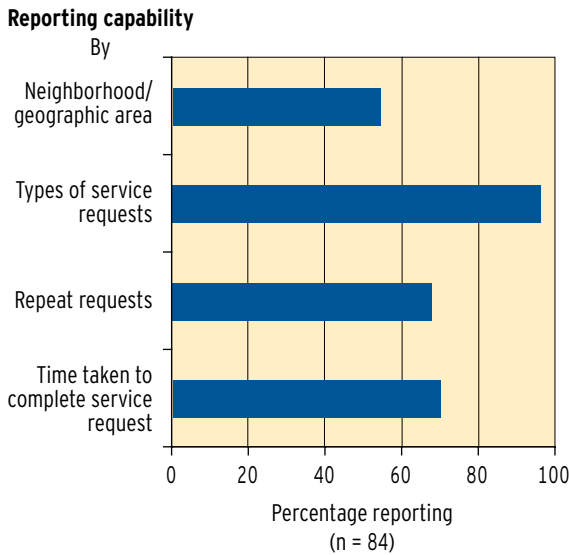
Centralized customer service systems can support management decisions, policies, and strategies. Reports generated from the system are a starting point for this support. If managers are able to receive information about service requests by geographic area, for example, they can identify patterns in problems that seem concentrated in a particular location and take steps to address those policies. The time taken to complete a system request is useful for establishing benchmarks and evaluating the processes and procedures involved in the response. Being able to access information on repeat requests allows a manager to look at why that problem reoccurs.

Figure 5 Response mechanism used



Note: Percentages exceed 100 percent because of multiple responses.

Figure 6 Reporting capability of system



Note: Percentages exceed 100 percent because of multiple responses.

Figure 6 shows the reporting capability identified by local governments with centralized customer service systems. Twenty-six of the localities that use reports for performance measurement indicated that they have all four of the reporting capabilities covered in the survey (not shown).

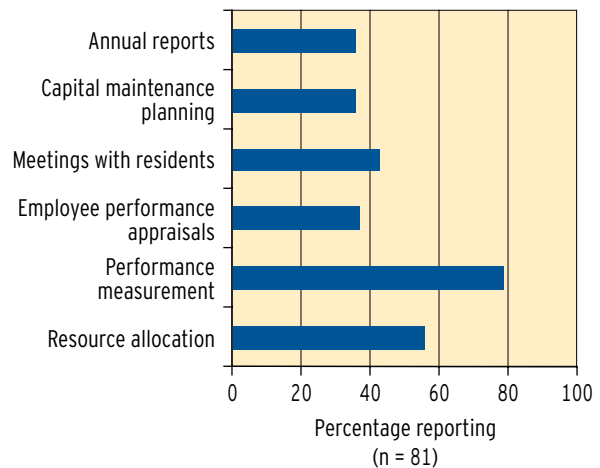
Reporting functionality depends on two things: (1) the data necessary for the report must be in the system, and (2) the reporting program must be written to pull the data into a report. But while 81 of the 84 respondents reported that their system is capable of generating reports on the types of service requests received, this reporting functionality seems to be underused (Figure 7). For example, although 79 percent (64) indicated that they use the information for performance measurement, only 45 of them said that they have the capability to generate reports on both the time it takes to complete a service request and the number of repeat requests received—two indicators that would seem to be inputs for performance measures. It may be that the data are available in the systems but the reporting programs have not yet been written.

The two least reported uses of the report information are for capital maintenance planning and annual reports. However, such reports could probably provide local governments with valuable information to use in the capital planning process.

Using the information with citizen groups is an essential step in the customer service feedback loop. If, for example, the public works staff know that a particular problem occurs with higher frequency in a particular neighborhood and can use the reports to show that the frequency has significantly decreased, they would have a great communication tool. Also, by using data on problems in a particular neighborhood, they may be able to engage the community residents in solving the problem themselves. And identifying problems *by* neighborhood enables comparisons to be made *across* neighborhoods that may show what is different and what works.

Without information about customer satisfaction, a local government is unable to determine the full value of its system. However, only 47 percent of those reporting said that they use customer satisfaction surveys to determine the level of satisfaction with the centralized customer service system (not shown). Some of the localities that do not conduct a customer satisfaction survey indicated that they use other means to evaluate customer satisfaction, but they did not describe those means. For those survey respondents who identified public pressure as the driving impetus for a centralized system, a citizen satisfaction survey is a good tool for measuring the public reaction to the system’s implementation, yet only 6 of the 16 that reported public pressure also reported conducting a citizen satisfaction survey.

Figure 7 Use of system reports



Note: Percentages exceed 100 percent because of multiple responses.

System Cost

The survey included questions about development, capital, and operating expenditures. Few respondents provided information on these issues, and among those that did, the expenditures in each category vary significantly. For this reason, the information is difficult to use.

The first category of expenditures, “development and implementation,” was defined as including “planning, design, consulting, and staff time,” not hardware and software costs. Twelve local governments provided amounts, which ranged from \$1,000 to over \$ 4 million (not shown). The next category, capital expenditures, includes software and hardware purchased to implement the system. Among the 30 respondents who provided amounts, the lowest amount reported was \$8,000, and the highest was \$525,000. Finally, annual operating expenditures were described as staffing, training, supplies, software, and noncapital hardware, and the 35 local governments who responded in this category reported a low of \$1,350 and a high of \$350,000.

Summary

The survey results show that although implementation of centralized customer service systems to date has been limited, local governments are interested in implementing them. In fact, the number interested in their implementation is greater than the number currently reporting their use. As more local governments launch these systems, we can anticipate more robust use of the functionality.



777 North Capitol Street, NE
Suite 500
Washington, DC 20002-4201

The mission of ICMA is to create excellence in local governance by developing and fostering professional local government management worldwide.

ICMA National Study of 311 and Customer Service Technology

With funding from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, ICMA is conducting the first ever national study on 311 and related customer service technology used by local governments in the United States. The study will explore the benefits of and barriers to local governments adopting integrated systems for customer service. A national survey of local governments, together with information collected from a series of in-depth case studies, will help create a portrait of how local governments are using such systems to respond to citizen needs and build the local government-constituent relationship. When viewed together, the survey results and findings from the case study research will present current practices and successful implementation of coordinated systems for customer service.

For more information about the study, contact...

Cory Fleming, project director
Phone: 207-854-1083
E-mail: cfleming@icma.org

Evelina Moulder, director of survey research
Phone: 202-962-3534
E-mail: emoulder@icma.org