

Centralized Call Centers: Serving Customers, Serving Local Government

by **Evelina Moulder**

When residents in the city of Miami, Florida, need a public service, they don't have to figure out whether the city or the county provides the service. When they dial 311, they reach a call center shared by the city and Miami-Dade County. Using the caller's address, the 311 center staff can determine which local government delivers the service. The 311 representative answers the caller's question or submits an electronic service request.¹ Residents using the 311 system save valuable time by calling one number, and local government staff don't have to spend time transferring calls. A centralized system is a win-win from the start. But the advantages are much farther reaching.

For local governments, interaction with the public is critical to successful service delivery. Local government services are usually provided as residents expect—trash is picked up and streetlights function—and residents have no interaction related to these services. But if something goes wrong, customers need to be able to contact the local government service provider without having to spend time figuring out which department to call, and they should be able to find out when the problem will be resolved. A centralized customer service system can be the answer.

Customer service systems not only benefit the customer, they benefit the local government. They offer local governments the opportunity to use the centralized information to identify problems specific to a neighborhood, inform their performance management activity, and provide direction for the capital budget.

ICMA recently conducted a national Local Government Customer Service Systems (311) survey. Funded by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, the survey explored successful implementation of these systems and how they are being used to respond to citizen needs and strengthen local government–constituent relationships.

The mail survey was sent to city managers and chief administrative officers in all local governments with populations 25,000 and over and to all counties with a chief administrative officer or a chief elected executive—a total of 2,287 local governments. The survey was also available for completion online. The survey response rate was 31 percent.

USE OF CENTRALIZED CUSTOMER SERVICE SYSTEMS

Although only 104 of the 710 respondents reported use of a centralized system, the results show that it is not just large cities and counties that are using them (Figure 1). Thirty-two local governments using a centralized system are under 30,000 population.

Although the number of localities with systems in place now seems low, twice as many local governments are considering implementing one, with a somewhat higher proportion of cities and counties in the West indicating plans for a centralized customer service system (Figure 2).

Local governments that do not have systems identified the cost and the process of obtaining a 311 designation as the primary reasons why they don't. Clearly, cost is a major concern although implementation leads to demonstrable savings, such as reduction in calls to 911 and improved customer service, information, reporting, and management. There are also alternatives to a 311 designation, like an easy-to-remember seven-digit number.

DRIVING FORCE BEHIND IMPLEMENTATION

The highest percentage of respondents (43 percent) cited improvements in service, despite increased cost, as the

Figure 1. Local Government Use of a Centralized Customer Service System.

Classification	No. reporting (A)	Have system		Do not have system	
		No.	Percent of (A)	No.	Percent of (A)
	710	104	14.6	606	85.4
Population group					
500,000 and over	24	2	8.3	22	91.7
100,000–499,999	160	37	23.1	123	76.9
25,000–99,999	456	63	13.8	393	86.2
2,500–24,999	70	2	2.9	68	97.1
Geographic region					
Northeast	88	12	13.6	76	86.4
North Central	165	22	13.3	143	86.7
South	242	41	16.9	201	83.1
West	215	29	13.5	186	86.5

driving force behind implementation of the system. None of the respondents reported inspiration from another agency (Figure 3).

Eight percent of local governments attributed implementation to pressure from elected officials, which is pos-

sibly related to public pressure and expectations for customer service. Citizens make an investment when they become residents of a city. They want demonstrable value for their tax dollar. Centralized customer service systems can show results.

Figure 2. Percentage of Respondents Contemplating a Centralized Customer Service System.

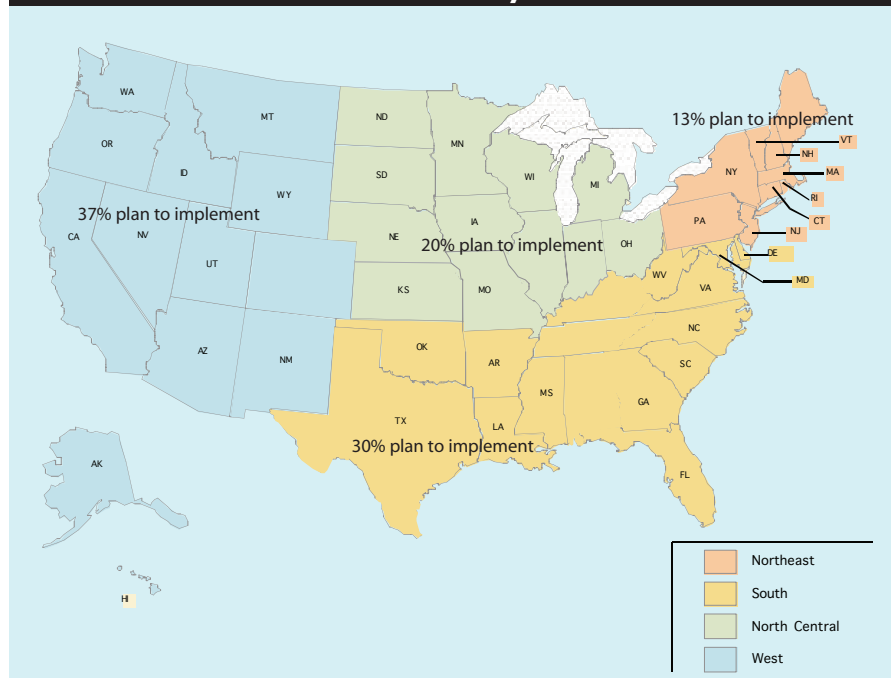
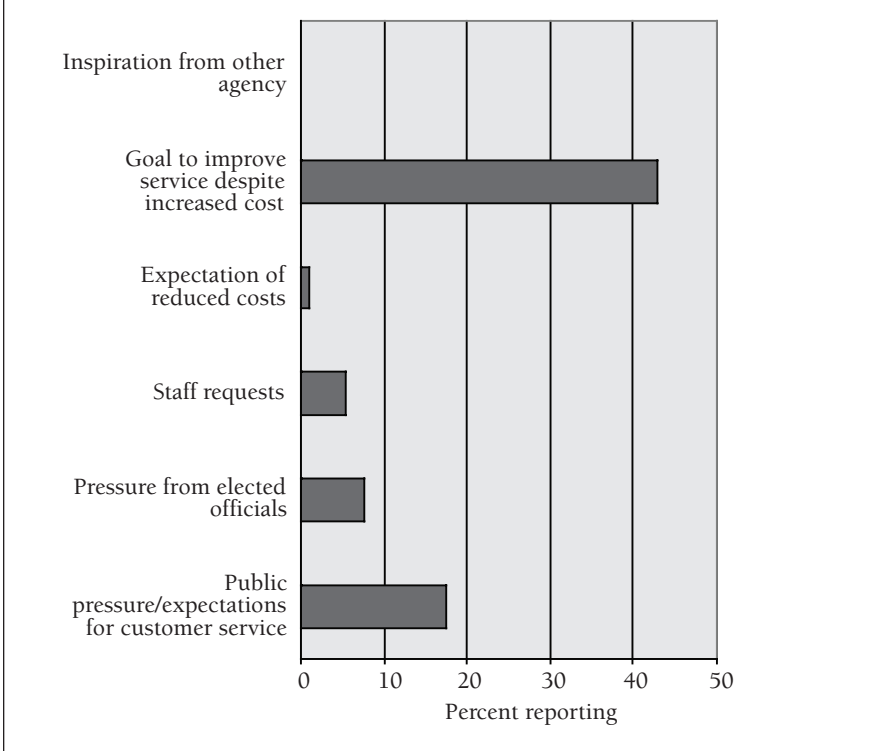


Figure 3. Driving Force Behind Implementation.



CALL INTAKE SOFTWARE TECHNOLOGY

A slight majority of local governments (52.2 percent) use some form of off-the-shelf call intake technology. Most have added modifications or customization to the package. A vendor interested in the market may be willing to work with a local government to make modifications in the product to meet local government needs.

WHO HANDLES THE CALLS?

Survey results show that there is not one consistent practice. Central call staff members are trained to handle

the calls in 38 percent of local governments reporting, and 28 percent report that central call staff make a record of the call and then put the caller in touch with the responsible department.

Thirty-five percent report “other” descriptions, which includes customers entering a “call” into a Web-based system, which then routes the information to the responsible department. The call can also be taken by the department and then entered into a centralized system. The responses in “other” reflect the fact that not all systems are centralized with call center staff.

DEPARTMENTAL INTEGRATION INTO THE CENTRALIZED SYSTEM

More than 80 percent of local governments that provided information on which departments are integrated into the system identify the following departments as recipients of call center requests:

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

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 county administrative office is often the first place that these calls are received, as are calls for general information.

It’s somewhat surprising that a higher percentage of local governments have not integrated the non-emergency police into the system because reducing the number of non-emergency calls to police dispatchers is often touted as a benefit. We have anecdotal information that the need for specially trained dispatch staff who can distinguish an emergency from a non-emergency makes integration of emergency services challenging.

If a caller doesn’t recognize an event as an emergency and calls the central system, and staff members do not recognize the event as an emergency, the results can be serious, even deadly. Regardless of whether non-emergency policy calls are integrated into the system, 28 local governments have tracked the number of non-emergency calls to 911 since their centralized systems were implemented, and 43 percent report a decrease in calls to 911, which frees up valuable resources.

The survey collected information about the number of calls received for information or services specific to each of these departments, but so few

Figure 4. Types of Requests for Service.

Type of request	Number reporting request
Requests for such service as pothole repair, burned-out street lights.	84
Complaints about graffiti, vacant lots.	75
Requests for information about local government services, schedules, and so forth.	72
Suggestions, general feedback, or comments on a specific issue.	61

local governments reported and the variation in the number of calls was so great that the information wasn't usable.

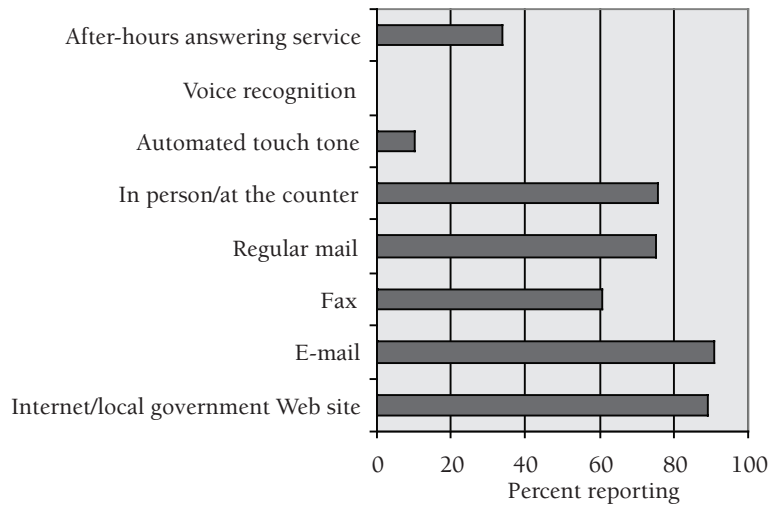
TYPES OF SERVICE REQUESTS

The survey included a question about the types of requests that are received by the centralized system. The objective of the question was to determine the proportion of calls that are for service, information, or general comments. Requests for service top the list (Figure 4), which indicates that the system is being used for the purpose it was designed to serve.

CONTACTING THE CENTRALIZED SERVICE SYSTEM

Customers often have different needs or preferences when it comes to communicating with a service provider. Each local government provides more than telephone access to the system, with e-mail and Web access reported

Figure 5. Methods of Contacting the Centralized Customer Service System (Other Than Telephone).



Note: Figure 5 is based on 88 local governments that answered this question.

by the highest percentages of governments (Figure 5). None of the local governments indicated use of voice recognition. By offering multiple ways

to access the system, local governments facilitate wider use because Web and e-mail allow customers to access the system at any time.

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CRM Data Can Drive Performance Measurements

The data that are entered into citizen request management (CRM) and 311 systems can range from the most basic information to a data set that captures increasingly more detailed and valuable information.

A basic system will at least report that a type of request was received from a person on a given date. As the data capturing becomes more sophisticated, each point of information creates an opportunity to use the data as part of a greater assessment to examine and use that information for expanded purposes.

As CRM systems become more sophisticated, the detailed information they capture can extend to a specific location address for the request type, as well as an address of the requestor (allowing for geographic information system [GIS] analysis); the method of request receipt (telephone, walk-in, online, and so forth); the staff member who entered the request (if not self-entered online); and per predefined business rules, the responsible department, staff member, and supervisor in the department designated to resolve the request.

More advanced CRM systems allow for further self-customization by local government departments to create performance measurement. For example, two days can be pre-set as the time expected for graffiti requests to be completed. If 48 hours pass and the request is not completed, an automatic e-mail can be sent to the responsible staff person as well as to that person's supervisor. This immediate-action capability is coupled with reports like "completion detail" that measure expected versus actual performance in a monthly or year-to-date time period.

Self-customization has become key in using CRM data for reporting, as it allows for creation of specific questions to ask during request intake. This greatly assists in guiding call operators, and it creates an opportunity to not only capture graffiti requests but also learn what type of surface the graffiti is on, the nature of the graffiti message, and the method of removal (if known).

Now the data stored as part of the original request intake become valuable beyond resolution of the request at hand; the data also aid in the analysis of trends in overall graffiti activity as well as resource management, budgeting, and possible prevention of graffiti.

Information from calls received by a designated 311 or seven-digit hotline phone number is also entered into a "back-end" CRM system and further captures data about the number of attempts a phone call could take before a request is received, dropped calls, self-service touch-tone data entry, number of transfers, and length of time an employee spends on the phone completing a request intake.

Over time, with service request data from phone calls, online requests, observations from field staff, walk-in visits,

and the like housed in a central database, a repository of information about the local government's day-to-day and period-long activity is created; this includes information pointing to trends with regard to the community's service needs.

Imagine having not only basic request data available to view after years of use but also the answers to custom questions created for a specific issue. With thousands of responses to these select questions over time, managers are presented with powerful data-mining capabilities.

Although many agencies are capturing fairly advanced data, the challenge becomes finding user-friendly reporting mechanisms to access and read the data and then identifying useful ways to apply the information for performance measurement and informed decision making. Local governments that use their CRM systems only for day-to-day management of requests may not have the motivation for deeper data analysis if it is a time-intensive process with no direct or immediate application, or if limitations in their software system prevent such data analysis.

As technology becomes more powerful, the trend in CRM is toward making it easier for managers to create custom views of their data via powerful on-the-spot queries and to skip the report generation process altogether by having key data displayed in real time where it is most useful to them. With advancing technologies like Microsoft .NET, a manager can log into a CRM system and immediately be presented with a custom dashboard that includes information like the most frequently requested issues of the day. This is a good way for managers to know what has been happening at their agency while they have been tied up in meetings!

And with increasing self-customization capabilities, every department manager or staff member can customize this type of CRM dashboard so that they view information on what is important to them (all outstanding requests by department or by employee or the most frequently viewed FAQs [frequently asked questions]) for an idea of what is of concern to the community.

To date, use of CRM combined with 311 reporting capabilities has been largely underutilized. But as technology presents easier methods to capture, retrieve, and review information such as GIS maps linked to requests or self-presenting custom dashboards, it is expected that more local governments will use this expansive data to better analyze their performance and help identify trends in the communities' needs.

—*Gabriela Dow is vice president of communications for GovPartner, an ICMA Strategic Partner and a member of the Advisory Committee for ICMA's National Study on 311 and Customer Service Technology.*

RESPONDING TO CUSTOMERS IS KEY

Eighty-two local governments report that their systems include such customer response mechanisms as estimated repair time or notification that the repair has been made. Of those, 62 reported the type of response mechanism (Figure 6). Almost three-quarters (71 percent) give the caller a tracking number, which enables the customer to obtain status reports by phone or online.

Several local governments provide multiple updates, such as estimating the date of resolution, sending automated e-mail with the request and additional information, and sending an automated e-mail out at different stages of resolution. E-mail is typically used to communicate the response, although phone and regular mail can also be used, especially if requested by the customer.

INTERNAL ROUTING AND TRACKING

Almost 90 percent of local governments report that routing and tracking requests are handled within the centralized system, and the vast majority of those indicate that departments are alerted when a request is submitted. Centralized systems are updated to reflect job status, according to 92 percent of respondents.

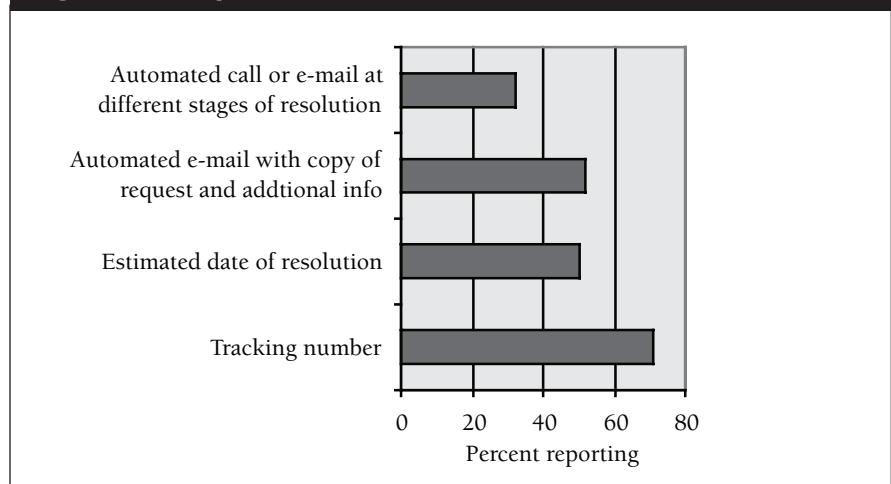
Some variation does exist in *how* a system is updated. In 67 percent of local governments, the system is updated directly. At least one local government reports both direct system updates and updates to work orders, which are then updated in the centralized system.

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

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

Figure 6. Response Mechanism.



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 them.

The time taken to complete a system request is useful for establishing benchmarks and for evaluating processes and procedures involved in the response. Being able to access information on repeat requests allows a manager to look at why that problem recurs.

Figure 7 shows the reporting capability identified by local governments

with centralized customer service systems. Although 81 out of the 84 local governments show capacity to generate reports on the types of service requests, the reporting functionality seems to be underused. Reporting functionality depends on two things: the data necessary for the report must be in the system, and the reporting program must be written to pull the data into a report. It may be that the data are available in the systems, but the reporting programs have not been written.

Figure 7. Reporting Capability.

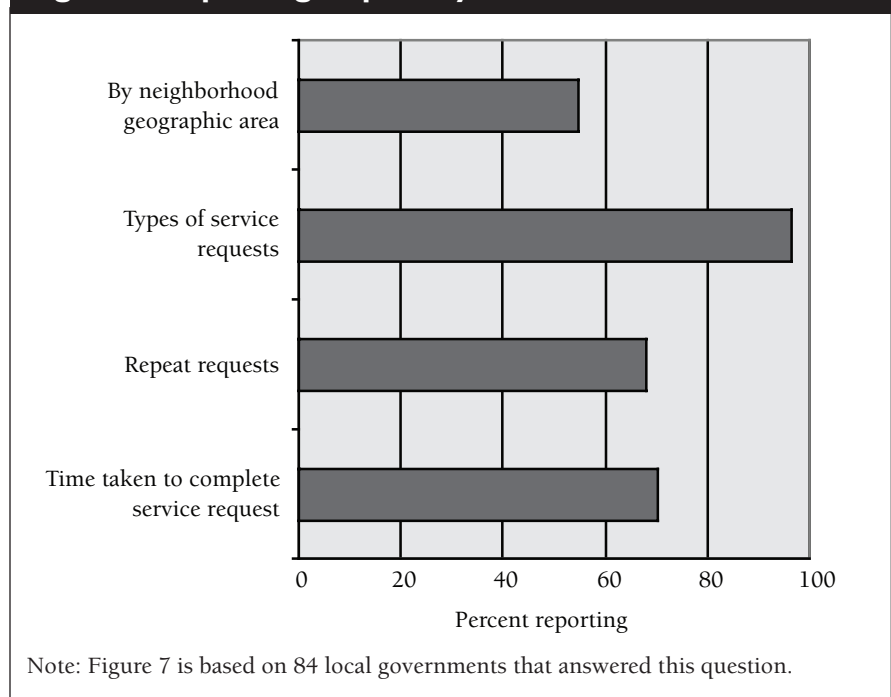
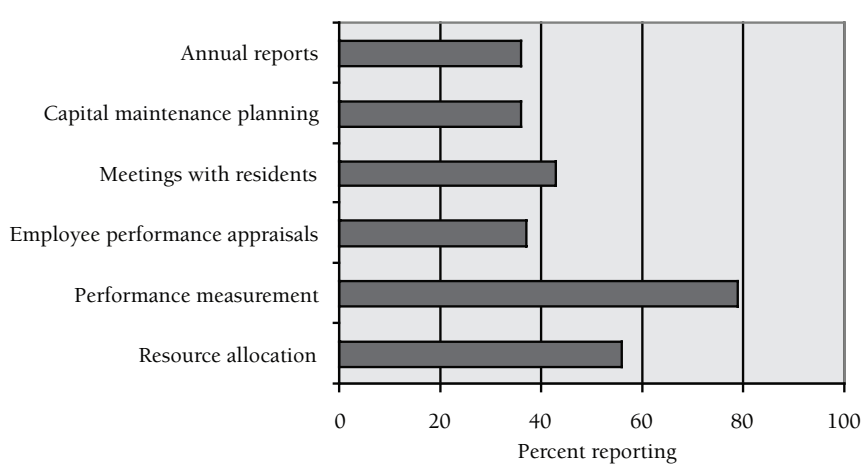


Figure 8. Use of System Reports.



Note: Figure 8 is based on 81 local governments that answered this question.

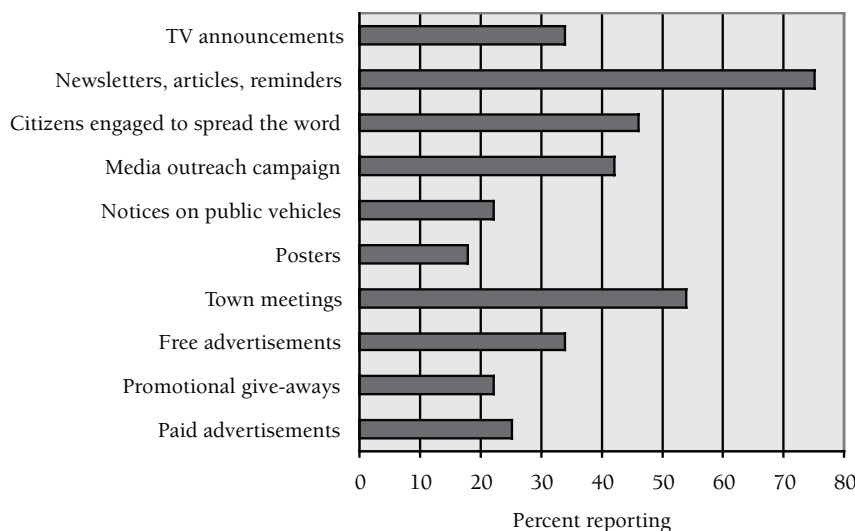
Survey results support the indication that the reporting capability is underused (Figure 8). Although 79 percent (64) indicate that they use the information for performance measurement, only 45 indicate that they have the capability to generate reports on how much time it takes to complete a service request and on repeat requests—both of which seem to be inputs for performance measures.

Twenty-six of the local governments that use reports for performance measurement show that they

use all four of the reporting capabilities covered in the survey. The two least-reported uses of the report information are for capital maintenance planning and annual reports. Local governments probably could gain valuable information from reports for 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, public works staff know that a particular problem occurs with higher frequency in a particular

Figure 9. Promotional Tools.



Note: Figure 9 is based on 76 local governments that answered this question.

neighborhood and can use the reports to show that the frequency has significantly decreased, it would be a great communication tool. Also, by using data on problems in a particular neighborhood, it may be possible to engage the residents in solving the problem. By identifying problems according to neighborhood, staff might be able to compare across neighborhoods and show what's different and what works.

Without information about customer satisfaction, a local government is unable to determine the full value of the system. Customer satisfaction surveys are used by only 47 percent of those reporting to determine the level of satisfaction with the centralized customer service system. Some of the local governments that do not conduct a customer satisfaction survey indicated that they use other means to evaluate customer satisfaction, but they did not describe them.

For those survey respondents that identified public pressure as the impetus for a centralized system, one good way to measure the public reaction to the implementation is by conducting a citizen satisfaction survey; yet only six of the 16 that reported public pressure also reported conducting a citizen satisfaction survey.

MARKETING TOOLS

Whether the customer service system is accessed through one phone number or the Web or both, its ultimate efficiency and effectiveness are dependent on use. Local governments use various marketing tools to promote the system to customers (Figure 9). Town meetings and media outreach campaigns are reported by the highest percentage of those providing information. Because media outreach campaigns presumably include some of the other marketing tools listed, they may be used more than they were reported by those who checked "media outreach campaign."

FINANCIAL INFORMATION

The survey included questions about development, capital, and operating expenditures. Few respondents

provided information, and the expenditures in each category vary significantly. For this reason, the information is difficult to use.

The first category of expenditures is "development and implementation," which was defined as including "planning, design, consulting, and staff time," not hardware and software costs. Ten local governments provided amounts, which ranged from \$1,000 to more than \$4 million.

The next category is capital expenditures, which includes software and hardware purchased to implement the system. The lowest amount reported is \$8,000, and the highest is \$525,000. Annual operating expenditures were described as staffing, training, supplies, software, and noncapital hardware. The amounts reported reflect a low of \$1,350 and a high of \$350,000.

SUMMARY

Survey results show that, although implementation of centralized customer service systems so far has been limited, local governments are interested in implementation. In fact, the number interested in implementation is greater than the number currently reporting having systems. As more local governments launch these systems, we can anticipate more robust use of the functionality. **PM**

¹"311 Information Hotline," City of Miami, Florida, www.miamigov.com/press/miami/311.asp.

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