

# Philly311: The First 100 Days

*By: Patrick Morgan, Jeffrey Friedman, Rosetta Carrington Lue*



The City of Philadelphia was one of the last cities of its size to activate a 311 non-emergency number. With the election of Mayor Michael A. Nutter and his appointment of Managing Director Camille Cates Barnett, that was all about to change in a hurry. Both the Mayor and Managing Director announced in February 2008 that by December 31, 2008 the City of Philadelphia would have a 311 contact center. To date, no other city of Philadelphia's size has stood up a 24 hour/7 days a week/365 days a year 311 operation in such an aggressive timeline. This is the story of the City of Philadelphia doing just that and the first 100 days of Philly311.

What worked in Philadelphia might not work in other cities or counties but some major themes for why Philly311 worked were: (1) strong executive support throughout planning and implementation (2) a structured and dedicated project team (3) the ability to quickly adapt to changing circumstances (4) a commitment to customer service and accountability (5) appreciation of all types of feedback (good/bad) and quickly acting upon feedback (6) a bias for action and innovation. These themes are woven throughout the story of Philly311 and can hopefully be used by others for their own successful 311 implementations.

## **Building to the Public Launch**

The Mayor and Managing Director had a shared vision; they both thought the city government could be a national leader in customer service. They saw their roles as Chief Executive Officer and Chief Operating Officer of an approximately 27,500 employee enterprise with an annual budget of approximately \$4.8 billion, including employees from the municipally owned aviation and water enterprises (one of the nation's largest water utility and one of the world's fastest growing airports), and general fund employees from public safety, public health and welfare, administrative, and other departments.

To make this vision a reality, it was evident that the city government needed to improve management capacity and become more customer-service oriented. Philly311 would be integral to the achievement of this vision.

The Philly311 project began in earnest on March 18, 2008. This was the day that the Managing Director's Office convened a Performance Management Advisory Group. This group, comprised of private sector partners, members of academia, and city government employees, was tasked

with developing the vision for a performance management system, including Philly311, PhillyStat<sup>1</sup>, and other customer service and performance management initiatives. This vision for a performance management system formed the development of an implementation plan. Beginning in early April 2008, the Philly311 Project Team, led by Project Managers Jeffrey Friedman and Patrick Morgan, began working with a national consulting group to develop a



*Philly311 Contact Center June 2008*

detailed strategy and implementation plan. After many hours of meetings, interviews, discussions across the city government, the Project Team had a finalized plan, specifically for Philly311, which was vetted and approved by early June. At that point, and joined by the Philly311 Contact Center Director, Rosetta Carrington Lue, the Project Team worked to advance all elements of the project plan in terms of administration, staffing, technology, budget, and

facilities. Throughout the summer, the Philly311 Project Team worked on the civil service testing process to hire staff to handle the anticipated call volume of 1.5 to 2 million calls annually. In July, a group of over 30 Philly311 liaisons from various city departments began populating the Philly311 knowledgebase. These liaisons helped to populate over 2,000 knowledgebase articles using existing departmental knowledge, FAQs, literature, and brochures. Department Commissioners and Deputy Mayors even got into the action by playing frequent games of “stump the knowledgebase” where city leaders would ask the Philly311 knowledgebase random questions in an attempt to find missing information. This proved to be a fun and entertaining way to help ensure quality control over information in the knowledgebase.

As summer turned to fall, across the nation the housing crisis continued, financial institutions collapsed one by one, and the stock market dipped to record lows. The financial crisis caused a severe loss of revenues in the City of Philadelphia’s budget. With only a few months until the public launch of Philly311, Project Team leadership decided to delay hiring externally and hire

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<sup>1</sup> PhillyStat is a regular meeting, open to the public and replayed on the city’s government-access television station (as well as available for download on the city’s web site) organized around particular results and issues. Participants include the Managing Director, the relevant Deputy Mayors, representatives from the City Solicitor's Office, Office of Human Resources, and the relevant city agencies. The goal of these meetings is fostering data driven, real-time problem solving and continuous improvement within city service delivery.

only internal city government transfers, including city employees who would have otherwise been laid-off as part of the emergency budget. To date approximately 97% of Philly311 total staffing is internal transfers from other city departments.

It was also decided at this time that Philly311 would utilize a web-based Citizen Request Management (CRM) system and tailor it using internal resources to meet the needs of a large municipal 311 system. This in place of a more comprehensive CRM system implementation which often includes software installation, purchase of licenses/hardware, and external integration services. The Philly311 Project Team, the Managing Director's Performance Management Team, and the city's Division of Technology worked together to configure the CRM system to be an easy to use tool to track calls, look up information using keyword searches, and send service alerts to the appropriate department. Specific city departmental work order systems were tied to Philly311 so service alerts could go directly into a department's system, representing similar functionality to that of a full CRM system at a fraction of the costs. In November 2008, the city implemented an emergency budget package to address a billion-dollar shortfall over the next five years, including a \$108 million deficit in the current year. Just two months before the public launch of Philly311, resources devoted to marketing/advertising for Philly311 were eliminated. All marketing/advertising would have to be done using internal city government resources and at a grassroots level.

***Philly311's adjustments due to the national recession:***

- *Hired internally, offered laid-off city employees positions*
- *Tailored a web-hosted CRM to meet the needs of Philly311 at a fraction of the costs*
- *No marketing/advertising budget*

**Philly311's First Day (December 31, 2008)**

"Hello, this is the City of Philadelphia, my name is Michael, how may I help you?" with that greeting Mayor Nutter officially opened Philly311 by taking the first call. Mayor Nutter was also the "first customer" in Philly311's Walk-In Center located in City Hall, asking how he could get a city recycling



*Mayor Nutter, with Managing Director Barnett and Philly311 Director Rosetta Carrington Lue, cutting the "red tape" to officially open Philly311 on December 31, 2008.*

bin. With the official opening of Philly311, Mayor Nutter delivered on a pledge to get Philly311 up and running by the end of his first year in office. “Philly311 will reassert customer service as the foundation of City Government. Now all Philadelphians can access information or City services day or night,” said Mayor Nutter during the Philly311 launch. “Residents, businesses, or visitors – no matter who you are, you can get help whenever you need it.”

*With press looking on, Mayor Nutter, along with a Philly311 Supervisor, takes the first call to officially open Philly311.*



Within Philly311’s first day of operation, 3,576 calls flooded into the contact center. From day one, Philly311 offered customers city government directory assistance, information on city government/events, and the ability to place service requests. The *Philadelphia Inquirer* cited the launch of Philly311 as a “major achievement for the Nutter administration, which views 311 as much more than just a customer-service tool.”<sup>2</sup>

As part of the Mayor’s and Managing Director’s shared vision, Philly311 is indeed more than just a customer-service tool; it is also seen as a way to help increase internal and external government accountability. From the start of Philly311, callers and walk-in customers receive a tracking number for service requests, allowing them to follow-up on their service requests either by calling back or visiting [www.phila.gov/311](http://www.phila.gov/311). Customers are also given a specific time frame in which to expect the service to be provided so that they have clear expectations of when and how their requests will be answered. Data collected from Philly311 is used in conjunction with the city’s PhillyStat process to track, evaluate, and if necessary correct service patterns in the departments.

### **Philly311’s First Month**

During the first week of Philly311’s launch daily call volume steadily increased, peaking at over 5,600 calls. Over 18,000 calls came into Philly311 during its first five-days of operation. Traffic to the Philly311 Walk-In Center was moderate, showing a preference to call or e-mail Philly311. Managing Director Barnett asked the public to provide feedback on Philly311 directly to her

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<sup>2</sup> Philadelphia Inquirer “Hello...this is the city’s 311 call center” Thursday, January 1, 2009

office or email Philly311. For the most part feedback was positive with customers sayings such things as:

*"It's was time for a change in the way our government has been providing service in the past. I called Philly311 myself as a skeptic but I can honestly say I was very happy (scarily SURPRISED) with the service I received. I had to wait for a couple minutes but the customer service rep was extremely nice and provided me with information I needed. Guess what? The abandoned car on my block was actually moved within 2 days after my call. It was sitting there for over one month before I called. WOW!"*

*"All in all, I have to say I love this service. It's the best thing to come along since the invention of ice cream!"*

*"The information I received from the operator was helpful and thorough, connecting me to a wealth of resources. 3-1-1 works and works well!"*

As an entirely new agent, supervisor, and management staff became acclimated to new surroundings, procedures, and technologies, while keeping up with the high call volume during the first month. Slippages in service resulted in longer than expected customer wait times. Due in large part to understaffing<sup>3</sup> and without the benefit of an Integrated Voice Response (IVR) system at time of launch, the average wait time during the first month was around 27 seconds with most calls being answered between 60 and 120 seconds. This was above Philly311's service level of picking up the phone by the third ring. More staff were brought into Philly311 to help keep up with the increasing call volume, however due to the city's financial crisis<sup>4</sup>, internal hiring slowed to a trickle.

By the end of January 2009, over 98,000 calls were answered by Philly311. To help combat hiring challenges and to keep up with an ever increasing call volume, Philly311 got creative. The Philly311 Project Team encouraged many of the same city department liaisons who helped to populate the knowledgebase to volunteer in the contact center. Philly311 liaisons were quickly trained to take customer calls and assist with other back-office functions. Also Philly311 partnered with Independence Blue Cross (IBC) to take on-loan call agents from IBC's private sector call center. After an initial training period, these on-loan call agents began taking calls side-by-side Philly311 agents. "Our Philly311 call agents can benefit from private sector best practices, the agents from IBC can benefit from learning more about how the city works, and there is a mentoring opportunity for our newer agents," said Rosetta Carrington Lue, Philly311 Contact Center Director. "It's a win-win-win situation."

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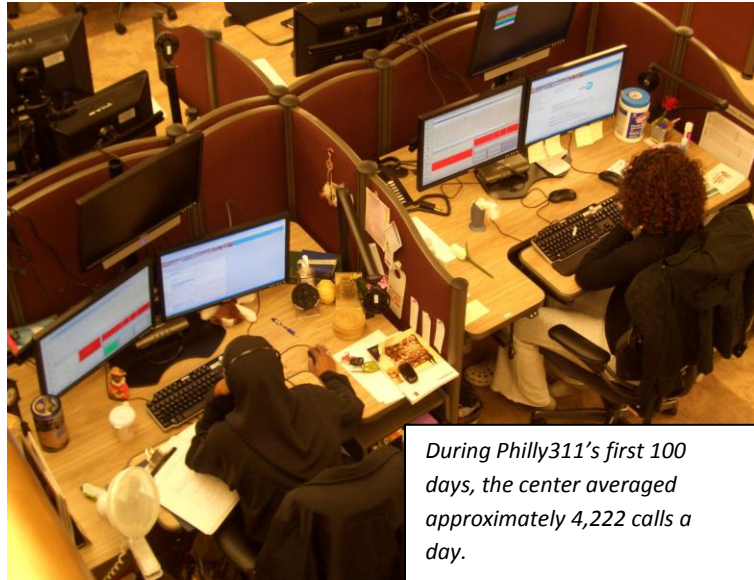
<sup>3</sup> Philly311 launched with approximately 51 hired, 6 agents short of the operational goal of 57 agents.

<sup>4</sup> In January 2009, the city faced another estimated one billion dollar shortfall over the city's five year plan.

Also during the first month of operation, compared to January 2008, January 2009 saw a decrease of approximately 4,000 calls to the city's 9-1-1 service. Philly311 will continue to coordinate with the 9-1-1 system to ensure future reductions of non-emergency calls to 9-1-1.

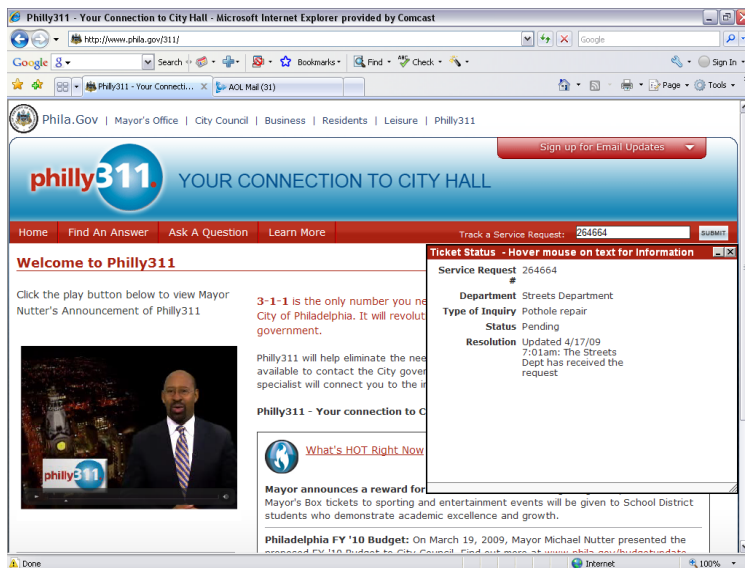
### Philly311's First 100 Days

During Philly311 first 100 days, daily call volume averaged approximately 4,222 calls or approximately 333,430 total calls. Of these calls the overwhelming majority are request for City information (approximately 60%), followed by department/agency referrals (approximately 30%), the service requests for City departments (approximately 7%).



Since Philly311 is a new service, it is expected that these percentages will fluctuate some as customers become more familiar with the services offered.

The Philly311 website ([www.phila.gov/311](http://www.phila.gov/311)) was revamped during the first 100 days to include the ability for customers to track the progress of their service requests, the Philly311



knowledgebase was made available online, and customers were able to sign up for email updates, all on one easy to use website. Also Philly311 was one of the first city departments to utilize social networking websites. Philly311 has active *facebook*, *twitter*, *myspace*, and *linkedin* pages. Social networking websites, such as these, allow Philly311 to directly communicate with customers, gather feedback, and quickly share

information. Such tools also come at no cost to Philly311. To educate the public about Philly311, members of the Philly311 Project Team met and spoke to hundreds of people

through community groups, civic organizations, and town watches across Philadelphia. During this time it was important to introduce Philly311 to the public, educate around the differences between calling 3-1-1 and 9-1-1, and directly seek feedback on the public's early experiences with Philly311.

Of crucial importance to help the city government improve service delivery and customer service were service level agreements (SLAs) made between Philly311 and various city departments. These SLAs were completed before the public launch of Philly311 and were agreements as to what the customer could expect when they called Philly311 to place a service request. They bind Philly311 to a particular city department. For example, if a city department agreed in their SLA to deal with an abandoned building in 20 days, this information is communicated to the customer and the department is held accountable to complete the service in that amount of time or provide information back to Philly311 as to why the service could not be completed in the agreed upon amount of time. During the first 100 days of Philly311, as new data flowed into the PhillyStat process, many SLAs were reviewed and revised. Also due to the city's financial crisis, many SLAs needed to be revised to reflect current budget constraints. The review/revision process allowed city departments to learn more about Philly311 operations and allowed Philly311 to learn more about the workings of city departments. The process also helped Philly311 to better communicate appropriate expectations to the customers, in terms of when services would be completed. At the same time the SLA review/revision process was underway, SLA data from Philly311 was being used to discuss city departmental performance at public PhillyStat meetings.

***During the first 100 days, the most frequent service requests placed through Philly311:***

- *Abandoned Auto*
- *Street Light Outage*
- *Vacant Houses*
- *Exterior Maintenance (over grown weeds, unkempt property)*
- *Rubbish/Trash Pick Up*

## **Closing**

With strong executive support, a dedicated project team, and a willingness to innovate, it is possible for a city of any size to launch a 311 system on an aggressive timeline and budgetary constraints. For any other city or county thinking about setting up a 311 system or in the planning stages, we hope Philadelphia's early lessons learned prove valuable to your own efforts.

For more information please visit [www.phila.gov/311](http://www.phila.gov/311) or email Jeffrey Friedman at [jeff.friedman@phila.gov](mailto:jeff.friedman@phila.gov), Patrick Morgan at [patrick.morgan@phila.gov](mailto:patrick.morgan@phila.gov), Rosetta Carrington Lue at [rosetta.c.lue@phila.gov](mailto:rosetta.c.lue@phila.gov).

*(Sample Report Included)*