



**Information
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**DEPARTMENT OF INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY AND
TELECOMMUNICATIONS TESTIMONY BEFORE THE CITY COUNCIL
COMMITTEE ON TECHNOLOGY**

Oversight – NYC 311

Int 0101-2018: 311 transmitting image and video data for service requests or complaints.

Int 1356-2019: Reports of illegal towing to 311.

Int 2077-2020: Number of steps to submit service requests or complaints on the 311 website and mobile application.

Int 2303-2021: DoITT updating 311 complaint types and reporting on such updates.

OCTOBER 27, 2021

Good afternoon Chair Holden and members of the City Council Committee on Technology. My name is Jessica Tisch and I am the Commissioner of the Department of Information Technology and Telecommunications, also known as DoITT, and New York City's Chief Information Officer. Thank you for the opportunity to discuss our work on 311 and the legislation on the Committee's docket today.

As I have stated to the Committee earlier this year, I have really enjoyed leading 311 over the past year-plus because the Call Center Representatives who work there are so committed to serving New Yorkers. To give you an idea of the scope of the operation, 311 services are available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and 365 days a year. It is the one-stop-shop for fast and easy access to government services and information via a fully staffed call center, web portal, mobile application, social media, text messaging, and video relay service.

The 311 staff has done extraordinary work through the year and throughout this pandemic. By the end of 2020, 311 handled a record 23.5 million calls, which was the highest volume in 311's history – that's the equivalent of almost three calls for every New Yorker. The increased volume was driven in part by Covid-related inquiries, including vaccines, re-opening, and meals assistance. Higher demand has not slowed us down either – we have handled over 15 million calls year to date, which is an average of approximately 52,000 calls a day. Even with this volume, we are averaging 28 second wait times during peak hours and 10 seconds at off peak.

This excellent performance was supported by recent enhancements to the 311 system, many of which have been driven by the Council. As super-users of the platform, you provide invaluable feedback. I want to continue to work with you to make 311 the best it can be. With that, I will walk through each of today's introductions.

Int 0101-2018, sponsored by Council Member Koo, would require 311 to accept image and video data during the intake of service requests. I am pleased to report that over the past year, we have made great strides in enabling image and video submissions for 311 service requests,



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including: blocked driveways, park maintenance, illegal parking, dirty sidewalk and building graffiti. To date, we have pictures and videos enabled for over 50% of all service requests!

There are some notable exceptions, though, and, to my mind, valid reasons why certain service request types do not accept picture messages.

For instance, the Department of Finance does not accept photo and video attachments because the inquiries they handle typically relate to payment issues or rent exemption programs, where pictures would not be applicable.

HRA does not support photo or video messaging for service requests related to EBT card replacements, because these pictures would show personal information that would be inappropriate for 311 to collect.

And the Department of Homeless Services has privacy concerns with the public submitting photos associated with service requests for homeless persons in need of assistance.

I am pleased to report that the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene just notified us that they will be accepting photo and video attachments on some of their service requests, where useful and appropriate, for things like rodent complaints and unsanitary animals. We are aiming to enable that functionality for them by the end of the year.

The point is, we have aggressively enabled photo and video submissions on all service request types where that functionality would both be useful and appropriate.

Int 1356-2019, sponsored by Chair Holden, would require DoITT to create a new service request category to report tow trucks illegally towing vehicles immobilized due to an accident. Here too, I am pleased to report that 311 currently accepts complaints about tow truck companies, and these complaints are addressed by the Department of Consumer and Worker Protection (DCWP). I'd like to hear more from the Chair about the open issues that this legislation aims to solve so that we may work with DCWP and other agency partners to address it. If there is a way for us to make these complaints easier to file, that is something I want to explore.

Int 2077-2020, which is Chair Holden's other bill on the docket today, would require that the 311 system allow mobile or website users to submit a service request in no more than 4 steps. Today, all service requests taken in the 311 system itself follow a 4-step or less format: what, where, who, and review.

The issue arises when an agency has a service request that is not taken in the 311 system itself, but in the agency system of record. These service requests do not always follow the standard 311 four-step process. A good example of a service type that doesn't follow the standard four-step process is Notify NYC registration, which, understandably, requires user account setup.



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The agencies with the bulk of non-standard service request types are the Department of Transportation and the Department of Finance. The reason is generally that taking complaints through their source systems promotes tighter integration of these complaints with operations.

For DOT, for example, 311 takes service requests on traffic or pedestrian signals through the DOT's signaling system; and for DOF, 311 takes service requests for property tax complaints through DOF's Property Tax system.

If there are specific complaint types that require more than 4 steps, I would be happy to take that back to our team to discuss with the agency in charge of addressing those service requests.

Finally, **Int 2303-2021**, sponsored by Council Member Dromm, would require DoITT to add a new complaint type to 311 by the local law's effective date. It also requires DoITT to semiannually report the list of local laws that required new service requests, the number of new complaint types added, and any challenges faced in timely updating those complaint types.

Our current process for creating new service requests on 311 is highly collaborative with the agency actioning those complaints to ensure the service requests synch up with the agency's internal systems and workflows. If a new service request is needed to comply with a local law, we work with the agency to prioritize it and ensure it is implemented within the effective date prescribed. We do not create service requests unilaterally.

Individual agencies are involved in the legislative process resulting in local laws that impact their operations and would be best equipped to determine what steps need to be taken in order to comply, which, in some cases, includes the creation of a new service request. However, this is not always explicit in the legislative text, and there could be cases where the agency needs to put in place staffing or other resources before they can determine the best course of action.

311's expertise is limited to technology and the intake portion of operations. If there are instances where a service request missed the mark, I want to know about it and will bring it back to that specific agency to fix.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today, and I look forward to our discussion. I will now take Council Members' questions.



To: New York City Council - Committee on Technology
From: Noel Hidalgo, Executive Director of BetaNYC
Re: NYC 311 Oversight Hearing



Wednesday, 27 October 2021

Dear Chairs and Council Members,

Introduction

BetaNYC is a civic organization dedicated to improving all lives in New York through civic design, technology, and data.¹ We envision an informed and empowered public that can leverage civic design, technology, and data to hold government accountable, and improve their economic opportunity.

We were founded in 2008 as a “meetup” to discuss open government in NYC. Our work empowers individuals and local communities to build a civically-engaged technology ecosystem and provide for an honest and inclusive government. We want New York’s governments to work for the people, by the people, for the 21st century.

BetaNYC demystifies design, technology, and data to the point where anyone can use it, create it, and participate in the decision making process. We host a number of online platforms that provide the general public a mechanism to share ideas and data.

The pandemic has reinforced the need for a single point of contact to government services. To improve NYC 311, there are some fundamental questions to ask:

- With unprecedented service requests, how is NYC 311 adapting its interfaces - phone, web, and app? What type of metrics does it use to improve response times?
- How does NYC 311 do end user testing of the website and mobile app?
- When will the mobile app be available in languages other than english?
- Many community members have requested a publicly accessible API and were promised an API years ago, when will the public have access to an API?

Thank you NYC 311 staff

Thank you 311 call operators and staff for being our municipal heroes. Through the pandemic you helped my neighbors through the toughest times. I want to make sure that you know that NYC’s civic tech community appreciates your dedication to serving all of our communities.

¹ <https://beta.nyc/about/>

We also want to thank the 311 team for making a successful platform migration. Over the last year, we've seen better open data and automatic geocoding. We absolutely appreciate that.

Concerns about the legislation:

- **Int 2303-2021** - DOITT updating 311 complaint types and reporting on such updates. - We support parts of the bill and wish that every service request and descriptor was openly posted to the website. As NYC 311 is about transparency and access, 311 should be transparent about their process. [There is a "dataset" on web content services](#) but the data hasn't been updated since 27 June 2019.
- **Int 0101-2018** - 311 transmitting image and video data for service requests or complaints. - We support the bill but with many concerns around privacy.
- **Int 1356-2019** - Reports of illegal towing to 311. - We shouldn't be legislating specific service requests, but the system should be adapting on a frequent basis.
- **Int 2077-2020** - Number of steps to submit service requests or complaints on the 311 website and mobile application. - Support with reservations. In general, we do not think user interfaces should be legislated. We wish that NYC 311 had a standard practice of testing the app with every day New Yorkers.

Specific statements about NYC 311 Service

- Blanket 311 responses are sad. We know that 311 can't fix agencies, but we wish Agencies did a better job responding to requests with more detailed responses.
- We are very disappointed that publicly accessible APIs are no longer a priority.
- As 311 continues to be the best portal to government services, it is clear that there needs to be user interface testing with New Yorkers. The service must make sense to all users.
- We are very disappointed that NYC's website and digital tools are so convoluted that my neighbors and friends resort to calling 311 — therefore increasing call volumes. Throughout the pandemic and vaccine roll out, family, friends, and neighbors ended up calling 311 because the City's websites were not accessible in their language or via a screen reader.

Feedback on the website and app:

- **Not all agencies are on board with 311** — It is imperative that all agencies tie into the same interface. Personally, I still have a problem with a street lamp pouring light into my apartment that the DOT can't seem to fix. I have no way of tracking this service request.
- **Digital divide** — The digital language of 311 is still in english and is not mobile responsive. There is an inconsistent user experience on the web to mobile.

- **Inconsistent user experience, Mobile** — Lack of user accounts on mobile devices. I have to keep my own database to keep track of service requests I submit. Additionally, there are some requests that can only be done via website or phone. After pouring through the app or website, then being told to call someone beyond frustrating.
- **Inconsistent user experience, Language** — There is a lot of text to filter through on the website. It takes more time to find the specific complaint type relevant to each case, than it does to search.
 - Alternatively, the app groups similar complaint types, asking for the specific type in a short drop down on the request form making the process much more efficient. However, a number of (specific) complaint types can only be found on the website using online shortcuts from the app resulting in an inconsistent user experience.

Testimony
New York City Council Hearing
Committee on Technology
Wednesday, October 27, 2021
From Clerical Administrative Local 1549
By Ralph Palladino, 2nd Vice President

Good day,

If any of the proposals in question require additional duties to be performed by the Call Center Representatives (CCR) title please note that Local 1549 requested at Council hearings last Spring about the need for additional staffing **THAT WAS NEVER ADDRESSED BY THE COUNCIL OR THE CITY ADMINISTRATION** (Caps for emphasis). Please understand that the city cannot get blood from a stone. This title is already seeing massive turnover in personnel on a regular basis due to the low pay grade. We are seeking that this title be upgraded in pay so as to be able to retain badly needed staff and this will only enhance productivity and reduce errors. In addition more staff is needed. Please read below.
Thank you

**Need for Increased Staffing of CCR Title in DOITT 311
Need for Interpreters**

311-DOITT plays a critical role in the life of the city by providing information needed by the public. The usage of the system increased during the COVID Pandemic and remains high. Usage has increased over the past four years overall.

The current staffing levels have remained the same the last two years for Call Center Representatives (CCR). However, the number of calls has jumped by 15% since 2016 and 10% in 2020 from 2019 alone. Texting increased by 68% from 2019 to 2020. Yet staffing remains the same.

There are desks empty now at the main call center in Manhattan due to spacing for COVID. A satellite was set up in Brooklyn. However, without the COVID Pandemic there would be some empty cubicles.

The staff is burned out due to the volume of calls received. They have worked tirelessly throughout this crisis.

We are requesting increased staffing by 25 CCRs. This is a proportionate number to the increase in calls received.

Need for Interpreters

The city has a Civil Service Interpreter title that it does not use. Instead, they use a private, low wage phone line for interpretation servicing. Private contractor interpreter phoneline servicing at times leads to delays in ending calls and confusion in proper information dissemination to the public. It would be better to have Interpreters in place at the centers that would be city employees trained in city government and servicing information dissemination, verbiage, and terminology.

The number of Spanish speaking calls rose by 25% and 36% for calls from non-English and Spanish speaking people. We would expect that these numbers would either

stay the same or increase. But the time used for these calls are greater than English language ones.

We would like the City Council's support for increasing the 311 CCR titles staffing. THANK YOU.