

311 Customer Service Audit



Objective

Does 311 adequately address questions, comments, and concerns from members of the community?

Background

Austin 311 (311) was established as a City service in 2001. It started as a way for people to contact the police about non-emergency situations, and the service was expanded in 2003 to offer the public a simple way to connect with other City departments. When Austin expanded the 311 service in 2003, the City included it in Austin Energy's customer care operations. Austin residents and visitors can now use 311 to get information about things such as library hours, watering days, and how to contact Council Members.

People can also use 311 to report issues such as potholes, broken streetlights, or loose dogs. 311 Ambassadors take these reports over the phone, as well as through a website and an app. The 311 Ambassadors then forward the relevant information to the appropriate department so it can be addressed. People can then track the status of issues they report.

What We Found

Finding 1: Surveys indicate that users are generally satisfied with 311. However, the survey does not provide a complete picture of 311 operations and excludes some users.

Between 2016 and 2019, about 70% of respondents on the Annual Community Survey said they were satisfied with 311. On quarterly surveys conducted during that same time, overall satisfaction with 311 was never below 75%. In most quarters, satisfaction with 311 Ambassadors was generally between 80% and 90%.

However, the quarterly survey only includes people who called 311 and excludes people who use the website or app. The survey also excludes people that called 311 from a non-Austin area code, which represents about 30% of callers. This means 311 is not getting feedback from all users. This could include people who only use the app or the website, visitors, or residents who do not have an Austin area code.

Finding 2: Although dissatisfaction with 311 appears mostly related to issues outside of 311's control, 311 could improve what information is available to users.

A common reason users are dissatisfied with 311 is that the user's reason for calling 311 was not addressed. However, 311 is generally not responsible for resolving the issues people call about. For example, when people report potholes to 311, it is the Public Works Department, not 311, who is responsible for repairing potholes. If potholes are not fixed in a reasonable time though, people may report they are dissatisfied with 311.

We reviewed a small sample of service requests made to 311 and saw multiple examples of how this could happen. In one example, someone contacted 311 to report that their three-year-old child tripped on uneven pavement. Public Works employees reviewed the intersection and reported that the pavement was uneven but "not unsafe," and it did not appear any repairs were made.

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What We Found, Continued

311 may be able to improve the customer experience through more complete and consistent information-sharing between 311 and other City departments. The table shows how departments provide different information to 311 when they close service requests. Animal Services updated a report about loose dogs to reflect whether the dogs were found. Austin Code provided the contact information for the investigator assigned to the case, but did not include any information about how the case was resolved. Austin Energy only noted that the situation will be investigated within a few days. Because of these differences, 311 Ambassadors, and the person who made the request, did not always have complete information about what each department was doing in response to the request.

| Responsible department | Reason for service request | Department response | |
|------------------------|----------------------------|---|--|
| Animal Services | Loose dogs | Completed: Unable to locate | Provides outcome |
| Austin Code | Tall weeds and grass | Transferred to alternate system: Inspector Name: John Doe Inspector Phone: (512) 974-XXXX | Provides contact information for the assigned investigator |
| Austin Energy | Streetlight not working | Completed: Site will be investigated within 3-5 business days | Provides date range for future work |

Finding 3: Austin 311 was able to effectively respond to the City’s needs during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Many 311 staff teleworked as part of normal operations, which made it easier for 311 to maintain a consistent level of service during the pandemic. 311 was also able to quickly add information about the virus, and the City’s response to their platforms.

Additional Observation:

Austin appears to be unique by including 311 within the City’s electric utility. We reviewed 12 other cities with a 311 service, four of which own their own electric utility, and none included 311 operations within the electric utility. Four cities included 311 as part of their City Manager’s Office, three had it within an Information Technology group, and the other five had 311 in various other departments.

What We Recommend

TBD