

Audit Report

311 Customer Service Audit

September 2020



Austin's Annual Community Survey consistently finds that the community is generally satisfied with 311, and it is consistently one of the highest rated City services. Quarterly surveys also show that people are mostly satisfied with their 311 experience. However, the quarterly survey is only for people who call 311 from Austin area codes, which excludes some 311 users.

Dissatisfaction with 311 appears mostly related to issues outside of 311's control. That is because 311 is not directly responsible for addressing many of the concerns that prompt people to contact 311. For example, 311 staff do not fix potholes or investigate potential code violations. However, 311 can improve how the activities of other departments are communicated to users.

Lastly, it appears that 311 was able to effectively respond to the City's needs during the COVID-19 pandemic by updating their systems so information was available to the public.

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Cover: 311 operations center, City of Austin website

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 Energy manages 311 operations as part of the City’s Utility Contact Center back-up and after-hour services. The costs to operate the call centers are allocated to City departments through the annual budgeting process based on a cost of service model.

Austin residents and visitors can 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 have reported. In fiscal year 2019, people contacted 311 over 1 million times to get information or report issues.

What We Found

Summary

Austin's Annual Community Survey consistently finds that the community is generally satisfied with 311, and it is consistently one of the highest rated City services. Quarterly surveys also show that people are mostly satisfied with their 311 experience. However, the quarterly survey is only for people who call 311 from Austin area codes, which excludes some 311 users.

Dissatisfaction with 311 appears mostly related to issues outside of 311's control. That is because 311 is not directly responsible for addressing many of the concerns that prompt people to contact 311. For example, 311 staff do not fix potholes or investigate potential code violations. However, 311 can improve how the activities of other departments are communicated to users.

Lastly, it appears that 311 was able to effectively respond to the City's needs during the COVID-19 pandemic by updating their systems so information was available to the public.

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.

The community's satisfaction with 311 is one of the performance measures identified in Austin's strategic plan, and the City's Annual Community Survey shows users are generally satisfied with 311. In fact, 311 is consistently one of the highest rated elements of City government. 311 also conducts quarterly surveys of people who called 311, and these surveys have similar results.

Between 2016 and 2019, about 70% of respondents on the Annual Community Survey said they were satisfied with 311. On the 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, 311 has not updated the survey methodology to reflect the current operating environment, which has created some issues with the survey results. First, the survey only includes people who called 311. While most people contact 311 by phone, some people use the website or app. Since the survey only includes people who call, 311 is not getting feedback from other types of users. For example, people with speaking or hearing impairments may prefer to contact 311 through the app or the website. These users would not be included in the survey.

Another issue is that 311 only surveys callers with Austin area codes. Residents who do not have an Austin phone number, as well as anyone who visits Austin and calls 311, are not surveyed. Based on limited data, it appears that about 30% of the people who call 311 each month do not have an Austin area code. These users are not surveyed about their experience.

Quarterly surveys found between 80% and 90% of users were satisfied with 311 Ambassadors.

These issues mean that 311 does not have the best information about people's experience with 311. For example, the survey asks about the 311 website even though only the people who call 311 can participate in the survey. People who have a bad experience with the website may be more likely to call 311 instead, so satisfaction with the website may be skewed lower in the survey results.

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.

311's quarterly surveys identify reasons why people who call 311 are not satisfied with their experience. A common reason is that 311 did not fix the caller's problem. In each of the four surveys conducted in fiscal year 2019, around 35% of respondents reported calling 311 multiple times for the same problem. Having to report the same issue multiple times could be frustrating and could lead to more dissatisfaction.

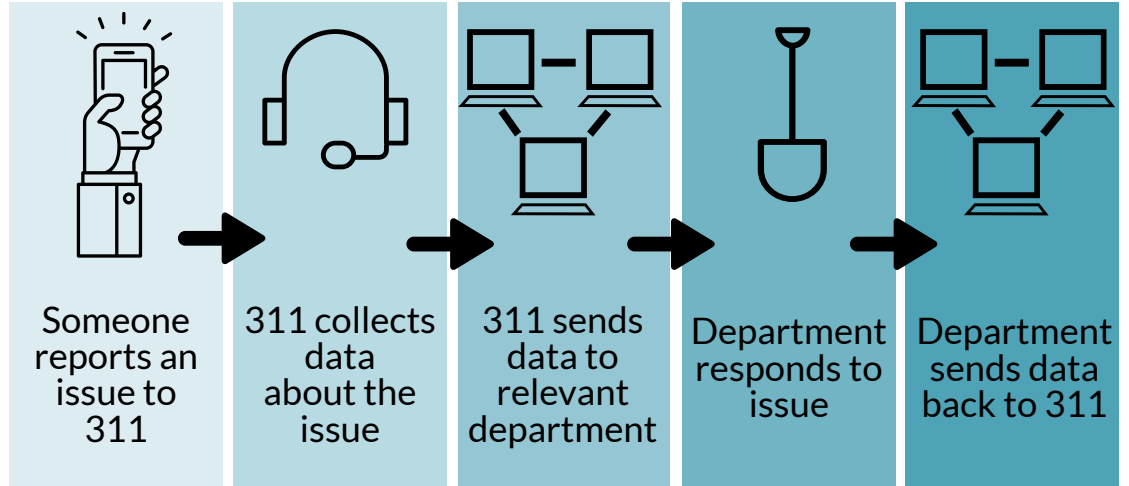
However, 311's mission is simply to provide access to City services and 311 staff are generally not responsible for resolving the issues people report. For example, when people report potholes to 311, it is the Public Works Department, not 311, that is responsible for repairing potholes. If potholes 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. One person contacted 311 to report that their three-year-old child tripped on uneven pavement after a road was repaired. 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. In another example, someone called 311 three times over 18 months to report an issue with a streetlight. Although it appears Austin Energy made repairs each time, the issue was not initially resolved.

Although 311 is not be able to control all aspects of a customer's experience, 311 may be able to improve the customer experience through more complete and consistent information-sharing between 311 and other City departments.

As shown in Exhibit 1, when someone reports an issue, 311 collects basic information about the problem and then sends that information to the relevant department. The departments then follow their own process to respond to the request. Many departments also use their own systems to manage their work. For example, 311 sends reports of potential code violations to Austin Code, which uses the AMANDA system to document their investigation. Reports about potholes are sent to the Public Works Department, which tracks their work in the Maximo system. Software allows the systems to communicate with each other, and agreements between 311 and the departments determine what specific information will be shared between the systems.

Exhibit 1
What happens when someone reports an issue to 311



SOURCE: Auditor analysis of 311 operations, August 2020

Departments such as Animal Services, Austin Code, and Austin Energy shared different amounts of information with 311.

However, there is not a standard for what information about the status and outcome of service requests should be communicated to 311’s system. Exhibit 2 shows how departments provide different information to 311 when they close service requests. Animal Services provided an outcome for reports about loose dogs. 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 noted the situation would be investigated within a few days but did not provide an outcome of that investigation. 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. Additionally, marking requests “closed” or “resolved” before the issue is actually resolved may frustrate 311 users.

Exhibit 2
Departments provide different information when closing service requests

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

SOURCE: Auditor analysis of a sample of service requests reported through the 311 app, August 2020

311 may also be able to improve the customer experience through better communication with the public. 311's system can be used to send emails to people who include their email address when they submit a service request. These emails confirm the request was submitted and can also be used to send updates when new information about the request is available. For example, a person who submits a code complaint receives one email confirming the request was made and then another email with the name and contact information of the assigned Code officer.

The system also appears to send an email whenever the Code officer updates information about the investigation in AMANDA. However, these emails do not specify what was updated or provide any additional information. In one of the service requests we reviewed, a customer received six separate emails, five of which were exactly the same, in a two-month period. While efforts to keep people informed about the status of their request are good, communication that does not add value may also frustrate users.

Finding 3

Austin 311 was able to effectively respond to the City's needs during the COVID-19 pandemic.

311's mission is to provide uncomplicated access to City services and information. This is especially critical during emergencies, such as the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Considering the confusion and ever-changing situation, it appears that 311 was able to effectively respond to the City's needs.

Since many 311 staff already teleworked as part of normal operations, 311 was able to maintain a consistent level of service at the start of the pandemic. 311 was also able to quickly add information about the City's response to the pandemic to the 311 platforms. For example, 311 added a way to report businesses that were violating capacity restrictions.

311 managers stated that in the early stages of the pandemic they were sometimes given updated information about City actions after that information had already been made public. As a result, 311 managers had to scramble to ensure 311 could effectively respond to questions and concerns. However, a 311 manager said that they are now being included earlier in the decision-making process to ensure they can be ready when updates are announced.

Additional Observation

There does not appear to be a consistent way to structure 311 operations among peer cities.

Austin's 311 operations are managed by Austin Energy, and Austin appears to be unique by including 311 within the City's electric utility. However, there does not appear to be a consistent way to structure 311 operations. We researched four other cities that had a 311 service as well as a City-owned electric utility. None of those four cities included the 311 service within the electric utility's organizational structure. We also reviewed eight other cities that did not have a City-owned electric utility and did not find any consistent organization structure with regards to a 311 service. Out of the 12 cities we researched, four had 311 as a part of the City Manager's Office, and three included it as part of their information technology department. The other five cities included 311 within another department, such as an emergency communications department.

Recommendations and Management Response

1

The Director of Austin Energy should ensure that the methodology for the quarterly 311 survey is updated to ensure:

- everyone who contacts 311, regardless of the method used, can be included in the survey sample, and;
- survey questions are relevant to the method used by the respondent to contact 311.

Management Response: Agree

Proposed Implementation Plan: In Fiscal Year 2019, Austin 311 received more than 94% of all interactions by phone, which are included in the current survey methodology. The current survey captures the customer experience of the vast majority of users of our services through all channels. However, 311 will 1) include callers to the service survey regardless of the user's area code; and 2) expand access to additional survey options to ensure users of other customer channels are surveyed. This expansion includes, but is not limited to the following systems such as the Mobile application and Citizen Web Intake (CWI).

Proposed Implementation Date: December 31, 2020 (Quarterly survey results available after February 15, 2021.)

2

The Director of Austin Energy should work with other City departments to establish system entry guidelines to ensure that consistent, accurate, and up-to-date information is available to 311 Ambassadors and the public.

Management Response: Agree

Proposed Implementation Plan: Austin 311 will continue to coordinate with COA departmental partners to improve the customer experience by establishing documented, consistent guidelines for clear and timely communication of service request statuses in the 311 CRM system. This will require a thorough review of each department's interface connections to ensure visible service request statuses and outcomes are available to users.

Proposed Implementation Date: March 31, 2021 for assessment of interface connections. The date for implementing necessary changes identified through the assessment will be determined after the assessment is completed.

Management Response



City of Austin
Austin Energy

Town Lake Center • 721 Barton Springs Road • Austin, Texas 78704 - 1145

September 17, 2020

Dear Corrie Stokes, City Auditor,

Austin Energy is in receipt of the draft 311 Customer Service Audit Report. We appreciate the efforts of the Office of the City Auditor, and we are committed to providing quality customer service to the customers, visitors and residents of the City of Austin. The audit report highlights opportunities for improvement associated with expansion of our surveys beyond the local Austin area codes and to other channels of operation. It also recommends that we work with our city department partners to improve communications to customers on service request status and outcomes. We agree with the findings and recommendations. We have provided proposed timelines associated with the implementation of actions steps to address the recommendations.

Although a management response was not required regarding the auditor's office comments about Austin 311's effective response to the City's needs during the COVID-19 pandemic, we appreciate the acknowledgment that great care went into our plans to protect our employees and the public. During this unprecedented pandemic event, 311 was able to successfully work with other City Departments to gain access to the appropriate information to effectively respond to Citizen inquiries. The coordination with the various departments improved daily, allowing critical information to be provided to the public by the 311 Ambassadors as the pandemic unfolded.

Currently, 100% of the 311 staff is fully capable of working remotely. Remote work helped reduce the risk of COVID-19 exposure to our employees while the center was able to maintain a high-level of service to our customers and citizens. Our team will continue to improve our operation and provide a good customer experience for all users of the 311 service.

Thank you,

Jackie A. Sargent
Jackie A. Sargent, AE General Manager

cc: Andrew Keegan, Assistant City Auditor
Kerry Overton, DGM, Chief Customer Officer
Jerry Galvan, VP, Customer Care Services
Cindi Perez, Director, Austin 311

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Scope

311 operations from fiscal year 2016 through fiscal year 2019, plus 311's response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methodology

To complete this audit, we performed the following steps:

- interviewed 311 staff;
- reviewed quarterly 311 customer surveys;
- reviewed a sample of information in the 311 information database;
- compared information in 311's database with information in various department (Austin Code, Animal Services, Austin Transportation Department, and Public Works) databases for a sample of service requests;
- reviewed organizational structure of four cities that have a 311 service an own an electric utility (San Antonio, Columbus, Los Angeles, and San Jose) and eight cities that just have a 311 service (Chicago, Dallas, Denver, El Paso, Houston, Kansas City (MO), Miami, Philadelphia);
- evaluated risks related to fraud, waste, and abuse related to 311 operations; and
- evaluated internal controls related to 311 operations.

Audit Standards

We conducted this performance audit in accordance with Generally Accepted Government Auditing Standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

The Office of the City Auditor was created by the Austin City Charter as an independent office reporting to City Council to help establish accountability and improve City services. We conduct performance audits to review aspects of a City service or program and provide recommendations for improvement.

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