

Citizen Service Centers:
**Two Connecticut Municipalities Devise a Better Way
for Residents to Access Local Government Services**

By: Jim H. Smith*

Overview

Stamford and Manchester are two very different Connecticut municipalities, with very different assets and concerns. The two cities have something in common, though. Both have introduced “Citizen Service Centers” to make it easier for residents to interact with their local government and report problems. As a result, citizens in both cities have reported significant improvements in their ability to submit requests, report problems, and access information about government services. Government leaders report a range of benefits, as well.

The Stamford Program

Mayor Dannel P. Malloy remembers New England’s winter of 1995-96 vividly. That December, the National Weather Service recorded almost two feet of snow at Bradley Airport in Windsor Locks, and that was just the beginning. Forty-three inches fell in January, including a record 15.9 inches on January 9, and February saw another 20 inches accumulate. Not until the end of March, during which 17 more inches piled up, did winter finally give concede.

Malloy had been mayor of Stamford for less than a month when the first big storm of the year hit on Christmas Eve. “And it snowed for the next three months,” he remembers. Though the weather preoccupied the new mayor and his administration with extraordinary challenges, it also compelled him to take a hard look at the way municipal government communicated with citizens in Stamford. “We were constantly plowing snow and fielding calls from citizens who weren’t happy with the progress we were making,” he says. “Everyone seemed to think calling the mayor’s office was the best way to get things done, but I can tell you that doesn’t work. You can’t get anything done when you’re answering calls all the time.” Besides, the city didn’t have efficient tools for recording and tracking large numbers of calls, and Malloy knew this had to change.

Indeed, as the winter of 1995-96 dragged on, he thought a great deal about alternative ways to field calls from constituents – not just calls about snow removal, but about the whole range of municipal services. There had to be a better way, he thought, to track results and ensure quality service. Wasn’t that, in fact, the essence of good and efficient government? The new

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mayor decided to do something about it.

While it snowed and snowed, he and his team began looking for customer service models in both the public sector and private industry. They explored mechanisms to help citizens communicate with government – everything from telephone to the Internet – and ways to track citizens' complaints and requests in order to ensure those complaints and requests were addressed, sooner rather than later. In addition to meeting residents' needs, Malloy and his team also wanted to be able to regularly assess the kinds of requests being made. One goal was to evaluate resident's input in order to plan city service delivery more efficiently and also determine if policies needed to be changed. Another goal, says the mayor, was "to hold ourselves accountable;" to routinely evaluate how effectively the city departments were doing their jobs and consistently look for ways to improve.

A Clearinghouse

Stamford had just undergone a charter revision in 1995, and the entire city government had been reorganized under four principal offices: administration; public safety, health and welfare; legal affairs; and operations. It was under operations that, in

the summer of 1996, Malloy's vision became reality as a Citizen Service Center. Former journalist Frank Fedeli, who had public works and construction experience, was selected to head the new center.

"What we developed," says Fedeli "was a clearinghouse. We discovered that there was no single place for citizens to call for government services. People were calling every department. It was utterly inefficient. There was no way of effectively tracking the calls and the results of the calls. We needed a single point of direct contact." To create the clearinghouse, Fedeli met with the supervisors of all departments that fell under the operations umbrella – such as public works, land use, solid waste disposal, parks and recreation, traffic and water/sewer. These were all departments that had some sort of customer relations responsibility.

With their assistance, he developed a chart that cross-referenced all of the municipal services a citizen might potentially request (everything from filling a pothole on a street to repairing a broken water pipe). Then he fleshed out the grid with anticipated service times, the amount of time each supervisor estimated it would take to address each kind of citizen request.

When he had completed this initial research, Fedeli turned to Stamford Customer Relations Bureau Chief Moira McNulty for

Creating Your Own Citizen Service Center

As the Stamford and Manchester examples clearly demonstrate, a citizen Service Center can produce many benefits for citizens and municipal governments. Any town or city considering developing their own Center should keep in mind the counsel of those who've already created successful centers. Asked if they had tips for those who might try to replicate their successes, both Stamford's Frank Fedeli and Manchester's Doreen Petrozza were quick to respond affirmatively.

1. "If you build it, they will come."

"If you believe your municipality would benefit from a citizen Service Center, then find the money in your budget to start it," says Petrozza, "even if your introductory center is not what you want the program to ultimately be." As long as what you offer is managed as professionally and consistently, citizens will use the service. "Customer service is so necessary and so often lacking," says Petrozza. "Start a program and citizens will ensure its success."

assistance in computerizing the system. McNulty was the ideal person for the job. She knew that until Malloy initiated the Citizen Service Center, every Stamford municipal department had handled customer calls in its own unique way. There had been no standardization, let alone a system that covered all departments.

In her previous role with Stamford's traffic and parking department, however, McNulty had created a computer system that proved to be a template for the Citizen Service Center. "You simply cannot effectively manage a customer relations program like this without computers," she says. "You need to be able to efficiently record information – not only about problems that are reported, but about who reported the problems and when. A program like this relies upon citizen trust."

And that means fixing problems – fast! "If you want residents to call a single government office, then they must believe that when they call that office and report a problem, action will be taken, and quickly," says McNulty. "You simply cannot offer them that sort of assurance unless you are computerized. Computers allow you to conveniently record data and efficiently send reports to the supervisors of the departments charged with addressing problems. They also make it easy for you to produce regular reports, track progress and get back to the citizens who

reported the problems."

McNulty had a tight timeline and a lean budget to get the new Service Center off the ground, however. Consequently, she was obliged to use an outdated software package called Q & A. It was difficult to network across municipal departments and, "It was not the ideal software," she recalls. Nevertheless Q & A offered the basic services Fedeli required to launch the new Service Center.

When citizens called the center, the Q & A software allowed respondents to immediately access a standardized form for recording complaint information and print out a corresponding work order for each complaint or request. The system could also store request and complaint data so that a number of different reports could be routinely produced. The new program quickly became an administrative tool as well as a portal through which citizens accessed government services.

Two years later Stamford hired a new information technology director who replaced the old Q & A program with a new package, called Access. This allowed the Citizen Service Center to expand some services and operate much more efficiently.

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2. Enlist the support of municipal leaders.

Like any new government program, a citizen Service Center needs the support of government leaders to work. Expect some of your departmental leaders to have a natural resentment to the program if the calls they've been accustomed to receiving (and the autonomy to address those calls in their own fashion) are suddenly fielded by someone else. The key to "selling" the idea internally is the fact that an effective Service Center reduces work for everyone and actually makes life easier.

3. Provide a personal touch.

Both Fedeli and Petrozza say that making sure callers reach a real person – and quickly – is essential to the success of a citizen Service Center. "We've all become accustomed to calling businesses and encountering the anonymous voicemail," says Fedeli. "But people expect more from government, and they deserve it. One of the most important jobs of a citizen Service Center is helping citizens get swift response to their requests for government service. The integrity of the center starts when the caller gets to tell his or her problems to a real person, not a recording."

One Stop Shop

Stamford's Citizens Service Center was a hit with residents almost from the moment it debuted. Although Fedeli's Center has no physical location, residents can access the Center using both telephone (203) 977-4140 and the Internet (www.ci.stamford.ct.us/CitizensServiceCenter/Main.htm). And access it, they have. In its first five years, the Service Center's staff fielded more than 54,000 calls from residents, an average of nearly 11,000 per year. At the time of this writing, in November 2001, all but 350 of those requests had been cleared.

From 8:00 AM to 4:30 PM daily, callers are able to speak with one of the center's staff members. At any other time, they get a recording and are asked to leave a message concerning their problem or request. To help serve callers who are simply looking for general information, and to help reduce the call volume for Service Center staffers, Stamford introduced a related service – Dial Stamford – in the summer of 2001. With a limited marketing budget, Stamford trumpeted the new service using simple brochures mailed to residents with property tax bills. It was also widely promoted, and still is, to new residents through Stamford's welcome wagon service and local realtors.

Offered as an alternative to the Citizens

Service Center during evening and weekend hours, Dial Stamford is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, by calling (203) 977-6600. The fully automated, user-friendly system is based on frequently asked questions. A recorded message informs callers that the system features approximately 250 recorded answers to practically any question about municipal services.

Even with the addition of Dial Stamford, Fedeli says that residents and municipal government leaders have warmly received the Service Center. Citing a large folder of "thank you" notes he has received from satisfied users, he notes that the program has long since proven itself to managers of the municipal departments that address callers' requests. "Supervisors are busy people," says Fedeli. "They should be doing what people call up to request, not taking the calls in the first place. The Citizens Service Center frees them to do their jobs."

It also has enabled Stamford to better manage services. A popular spin-off program for neighborhood clean up illustrates this nicely. If several neighbors in a residential area wish to jointly clean up their neighborhood, the city will drop off a large dumpster for them to fill and later retrieve the dumpster at no cost. Ordinarily, Fedeli says, that service could cost as much as \$600.

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4. Select your staff carefully.

A citizen Service Center will typically receive far more calls from unhappy people than from happy people. To work in such an environment, fielding calls all day from citizens who have a wide range of complaints requires resilience and a positive outlook. Who is the ideal Service Center staffer? Someone who is gracious, articulate, adept at working with people, capable of thinking on his/her feet, and able to ask the right kinds of questions in a telephone interview to define precisely what the problem is and what's required to fix it.

5. Train your staff and take care of them.

A citizen Service Center is only as good as the people managing it, and there's no quicker way to burn out good employees than failing to give them the tools they need. "We average 70 calls a day, per staffer," says Fedeli. "It's a tough, stressful job." Knowing that, staff your center accordingly, so that workers are not overworked. Make sure they get the training needed to be as effective as possible on the job. It's probably the most significant investment you can make to ensure your center's immediate and long-term success.

waste pick-up service. Now, thanks to the Service Center, the program has been reinstated and is, "wildly popular," Fedeli says. Once a year, residents have an opportunity to have large, unwanted items picked up curbside at no cost. Because people who wish to use this service must make an appointment – through the Citizens Service Center – the city is able to plan bulky trash pick up efficiently. Trucks don't need to cover every street, only those where residents have made an appointment. Therefore, routes can be planned in advance to reduce time and fuel waste.

Similarly, says Fedeli, the Citizens Service Center helps managers determine the urgency of requests and consolidate the responses to an issue that may have been presented multiple times. For instance, several residents of the same neighborhood may call independently to complain about potholes on nearby streets. Instead of visiting the same neighborhood several times on different days in response to those calls, a road crew can be sent to the neighborhood once to repair all of the potholes.

Stamford's Citizens Service Center has been so effective that it has become a model for similar programs all over the nation. Fedeli has been contacted by representatives of cities as far away as Arizona, Virginia and Ohio, asking for advice on how to create a municipal Service Center. One of the towns that sought out his counsel was Manchester, Connecticut.

The Manchester Program

When the Town of Manchester began thinking about developing its own Citizen Service Center in 1997, their goals were similar to those of Stamford. Doreen Petrozza, who manages Manchester's successful center and previously spent 14 years with Manchester's daily *Journal-Inquirer* newspaper comments, "Like many municipalities, we have services housed in buildings all over town. Managers of the various services were fielding calls from residents and those requests were being handled in a variety of ways. Each department had its own protocol. There was no central system. That was what we set out to create – a way to communicate with residents more effectively, a one-stop shopping center for

municipal government services."

Manchester's center opened in May 1998. Like Stamford's center, it uses telephone (860) 647-5235 and the Internet (www.ci.manchester.ct.us) to communicate with residents. It fields a range of complaints and requests for service from Manchester residents but, unlike Stamford, it offers residents an opportunity to visit a physical facility, housed on the first floor of Manchester's town hall.

Manchester residents who visit the facility at town hall find a Center bustling with activity. The scope of services provided is extensive and includes all of the following:

- Free notary public service;
- Job applications and information about available municipal jobs;
- Merchandise (The center sells flags and flag decals, postage stamps, tee-shirts and Manchester memorabilia.);
- Information about town meetings and other events;
- Satellite tax payment service (Residents can also pay their water and sewer bills at the town hall facility, which is the only Manchester office to accept credit card payments.);
- State and federal tax documents;
- Election information and assistance with voting registration;
- Municipal recreation program information and registration;
- Information about public school programs and activities;
- Downtown parking permits;
- Access to an extensive database of real estate information; and
- Informational packets – sent to addresses provided by realtors – welcoming new residents and introducing them to Manchester and the Service Center.

Customer Service in Government

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Manchester Citizen Service
Center Manager

Mayor Steve Cassano. "Anything that helps us to service our internal and external customers in a more responsive way makes us all winners. The Customer Service Center is constantly seeking out new and better ways to provide enhanced access to information, services, and ways to streamline the business practices of local government. I anticipate bigger, better, bolder things for the future."

"Before this office was created, people had questions about municipal services, but they often had no idea where to turn for answers," says Petrozza. "People who have never visited our Center in the town hall are often astonished. Few have ever seen an office like this. Their reaction is, 'Wow! Customer service in government?'"

How popular is the Center? During Manchester's 2000-2001 fiscal year, Petrozza and her staff delivered approximately 34,000 services to more than 28,700 customers, an increase of 22 percent over the previous year. The Center records an average of 134 completed service requests everyday, double the number recorded in 1998.

In addition to its normal workload, the Center also plays an important role in emergencies, providing information to residents and communications support for municipal operations. During three crises –

a 48-hour snow-related closing in March 2001, the explosion and fire at Manchester's giant NAMCO store, and the September 11, 2001 tragedy – municipal leaders have turned to the Center's staff for assistance.

In 2001, the Center introduced an e-mail subscription service called *Manchester Matters* to help keep residents abreast of their services. Residents who subscribe are routinely sent automated e-mails advising them of new services or important upcoming dates of which they should be aware.

And, Petrozza says, the Center's scope of service continues to expand. In 2000, for instance, the Center took over management of a memorial tree program previously managed by the local chamber of commerce. The Center manages funds donated in honor of area residents and works with the Manchester Parks Department to plant trees throughout the city paying tribute to those people. Collaborating with the local public access television station, the Center also maintains Manchester's electronic bulletin board and updates information about upcoming meetings and events.

"There really are no limits to the scope of service that a Center like this can provide," says Petrozza. "Every case we handle is important. The Center has improved efficiency in all of our municipal operations. People here love it, and it has changed the way they view government." ■

Ask the Experts

All of the professionals quoted in this report welcome contact from people considering introducing a citizen Service Center in their own municipality.

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