

Executive Summary of BetaNYC's research on Community Boards in NYC

Rationale for Research

BetaNYC is committed to supporting community boards advance their capacity to listen to their constituents at scale so that they can meaningfully represent their communities. For the past three years, BetaNYC has been conducting research on community board technical and data needs because we believe that such resources empower boards to meet the capabilities of other government agencies, companies, and firms. Technical and data resources upgrade a board's capacity to conduct community outreach and to represent the diverse and, at times, underrepresented needs in their communities. Technical and information infrastructure can also help make tedious community board tasks more efficient, allowing them to focus more on big picture issues.

BetaNYC has placed community boards at the center of our research because we believe that their experience living and working within their communities uniquely positions them to understand technical problems and to audit biases in data. BetaNYC recognizes the ways in which both technology and data have been leveraged as tools to disempower communities - accelerating automation, enabling surveillance and unjust profiling, and crafting narratives that distort community needs. We are committed to conducting research, producing recommendations, and designing tools that are responsive to these contexts - not assuming that technology fixes are always the most appropriate for addressing community needs or that numbers alone can represent complex problems. We are committed to advancing community boards' technical and data literacy skills, not only so that they can leverage these resources on their own, but also so that they can better anticipate and respond to the ways in which technology and data practices can be used to marginalize their neighborhoods and constituents. We believe that community boards should be enlisted as experts in civic technology initiatives - uniquely positioned to review and audit technologies that will affect their constituents and data purporting to represent their communities.

Methods

BetaNYC conducted 23 interviews with district managers and other district office staff in Manhattan and Brooklyn, seeking to better understand their workflows, frustrations, current technical capacity, and what they hoped to see improved. We also reviewed community board district needs statements, attended several community board and district service cabinet meetings, and conducted a city-wide survey to learn more about community board data success stories and needs. These two reports present the culmination of BetaNYC's research into community board technical and information infrastructure. They provide practical recommendations to community boards, civic technologists, city agencies, and elected officials for improving technical and data infrastructure, while remaining sensitive to the political and ethical contexts of technology and data use.

Summary of Needs

Technology Needs

Our research documents that community boards are not yet equipped to take advantage of modern technology to perform their responsibilities more smoothly. The following are a list of their more salient needs:

Communication Infrastructure	Hardware	Software	Services	Trainings
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● High speed, continuously functional internet with guest/public wifi capacity; ● Updated, modern phone systems. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Dual screen desktop computers & at least one laptop. ● Modern, well-functioning, high capacity multifunction printer/copier ● Tablets for community board members (to save reams of paper) ● Live-streaming & event kits to record public meetings. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Microsoft Office G-Suite for email, calendaring, spreadsheets, word processing, presentations; ● Mass emailing software subscription for communicating with the community at large about the CB calendar, events, and emergencies ● Constituent relationship management software (CRM) for tracking and resolving constituent issues and relationships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Dedicated technical support - a team, rather than one individual, is recommended - to help upkeep as needed their digital infrastructure, hardware, software, and websites or social media. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Professional development trainings tailored for community boards in: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Wordpress ○ Constituent Relationship Management (CRM) software ○ Microsoft Office tools: Excel, Access ○ G Suite ○ Open data - Socrata open data portal ○ BoardStat ○ Geographic Information Systems (GIS)

Data Needs

While many of the district managers we interviewed outlined specific use cases for which the board would like to leverage city and state data resources, they also acknowledged the challenges to doing so. Sometimes, the data they wish to leverage has not been published by the City, is not up-to-date, nor is categorized in a way that makes it irrelevant to addressing their issue. At other times, community boards and district offices do not have the time, skills, or technical infrastructure to work with data resources effectively. Boards and district offices are also concerned that ignoring biases in City datasets will lead them to overlook certain community issues, misrepresent marginalized populations, or propagate a culture of surveillance. With this in mind, BetaNYC has come to outline the following information infrastructure needs:

Training	Tools	Infrastructure	Staff and Support	Collaborative Design Practices	Improved Transparency
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data literacy training that teaches technical data skills, how to query data biases, and how to responsibly and ethically draw insights from data 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tools to synthesize datasets, designed from a community board’s perspective 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Technical data infrastructure for accessing, analyzing, and visualizing data; • Procedures for requesting information infrastructure in their district needs statements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • District office staff with skill in data access, analysis, and interpretation; • Procedures for eliciting data support from other government agencies and offices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Protocols for City data release and data tool design that are collaborative and user-centered 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased transparency, not just of data resources, but also around the production, management, and consumption of data resources across the City

Recommendations

The digital age and New York City’s commitment to using technology for public good create opportunities for community boards to operate more effectively than ever. Modern technological tools enable boards to dramatically extend outreach and bolster civic engagement in new and exciting ways. New York City’s Open Data Law, the availability of hundreds of pertinent datasets, and government-created mapping tools give boards a deep well of new relevant information. However, to successfully modernize and make use of all of these developments, boards need dedicated help, technical assistance, and funding. BetaNYC recommends the following:

Community Boards	Civic Tech Community	City Agencies	Elected Officials
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Submit data requests to the open data portal for datasets that would be useful to you; ● Request more technical, mandatory trainings from your Borough President; ● Leverage free software; ● Solicit diverse staff skill sets; ● Communicate need for improved information infrastructure to Borough Presidents and Council members. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Engage with community boards by attending meetings and reading district needs statements; ● Participate in technology hearings and participatory budgeting processes; ● Get involved in the City’s Charter Revision Process; ● Research how the City produces and consumes information; ● Get involved in civic tech activities based in real use cases 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Focus on user centered data release and design; ● Provide robust documentation of data production and practices; ● Probe and document the limits and biases of data; ● Elicit diverse community input and auditing; ● Implement tech and data leadership 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Invest in technology and information infrastructure improvements for community boards based on researched and documented needs; ● Prioritize digital and data resources that enhance and support civic engagement; ● Demand that agencies improve technology support and release pertinent data; ● Sponsor digital and data literacy training for community boards and the public