

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



Thursday, 30 June 2022

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 technology, data, and design 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 technology, data, and design to the point where anyone can use these tools and participate in the decision making process. We help New York City community groups, journalists, community boards, and elected officials derive insight from open data — this form of tech support is called RADAR, research and data assistance requests.² Since launching in 2019, we’ve addressed 165 requests and 29 (16%) have worked with NYC 311 open data.

Since we started teaching our neighbors how to use open data, we have centered NYC 311 open data as “The People’s Dataset.” We have taught over 10,000 people (middle schoolers, high schoolers, CUNY students, non-profits, community board members, City Council staff, Borough Presidents and their staff, etc) how to sort, filter, group, count, and pivot this data.³ We have trained hundreds how to teach and incorporate NYC 311 data into their curriculum. Through 311’s open data, you can see and derive New York City’s tapestry, not only can you feel the cultural fabric, and you can see who is underserved or chooses not to access city services.

¹ <https://beta.nyc/about/>

² <https://www.beta.nyc/radar>

³ <https://beta.nyc/classes>

We see 311 services as a fundamental component of a modern democracy and are in general support of the bills presented today.⁴⁵⁶⁷⁸⁹ Sadly, this hearing is yet another annual reminder that Council must force EVERY Administration to respond to neighborhood needs through service design and modern technology.

What we have been asking for...

Chair Gutiérrez, thank you for reintroducing [Int 0240-2022](#) / Int 2303-2021.¹⁰ Last year, we supported this bill and have championed NYC 311 posting every service request and descriptor to the web. There is a great “dataset” on [NYC 311 web content services](#), but the data hasn’t been updated since 27 June 2019. If we could just get this dataset updated on a regular basis, we would have a better understanding of where service requests are going.

With insights from the COVID-19 pandemic, we outlined the following questions to steer NYC 311 toward an equitable and inclusive future.¹¹

- With unprecedented service requests, how is NYC 311 adapting/improving its interfaces – phone, web, and app? What type of metrics does 311 use to improve response times?
- Does NYC 311 perform public user experience testing? Btw, this is different than sending out a post-service request / call inquiry survey. Is NYC 311 talking directly to its users?
- 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?

⁴ <https://on.nyc.gov/3a0wmJb>

⁵ <https://on.nyc.gov/3nqQpn1>

⁶ <https://on.nyc.gov/3ugbOTT>

⁷ <https://on.nyc.gov/3uauF2n>

⁸ <https://on.nyc.gov/3Nzcsme>

⁹ <https://on.nyc.gov/3abyIES>

¹⁰ <https://on.nyc.gov/3npvgd3>

¹¹ <https://beta.nyc/2021/10/27/nyc-311-oversight-hearing-2021/>

After nearly 20 years of operation, we're seeing massive cracks in 311's utility and purpose. Today, we find NYC 311 and Agency integration at a fundamental crossroads. Is NYC 311 designed to "get stuff done" or is it a sorting hat for future affairs?

If this Administration does not invest in 311 and Agencies' ability to appropriately respond, it will be a blatant admission that they do not want the government to work effectively, efficiently, and intelligently.

What we need

- **We need NYCHA and other state authorities that operate in NYC, to tie into 311 or publish their service request data as transparently as NYC 311 publishes its data.** There is nothing stopping them from doing this today.
- **We need a comprehensive list of complaint types, descriptors, and how information is passed into these service requests.**
- **We need a single sign-on across all platforms.**¹² The public should have one login that shows the user all of their 311 service requests.
- **API access** — let us start with a small group of verified developers who can help make service requests more useful.¹³ There are existing plans and infrastructure in place. We've been talking about this since 2018.
- **ALL service requests must be easily accessible via the "311 Mobile" app,** we don't care if it is a native or responsive web app. No more 23 SRs accessible via the mobile app and the rest accessible via phone or website.
- Lastly, we would like NYC to **participate in a global conversation on setting service request standards and participate in the Open311 discussion.**¹⁴

Why?

- By not improving 311, you should be skeptical of any Mayor's Management Report.¹⁵ **How can you trust the data if it isn't open and verifiable?**
- There is natural tension between agencies setting their own agenda vs being responsive to neighborhood needs. Just look at any Community District statement of needs. Neighbors don't work for

¹² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Single_sign-on

¹³ <https://reportedly.weebly.com/>

¹⁴ <http://nycroadmap.us/#22>

¹⁵ <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/operations/performance/mmr.page>

agencies. Agencies MUST work for neighbors. **Making 311 work for everyone ensures public accountability.**

- **Every Borough President should leverage their Borough Service Cabinet meeting for a complete rundown on agency service trends and service issues.**
- Lastly, agencies need resources to better manage reporting systems and that ties directly into being an API driven system. **We need continued investment into ticket tracking / service request systems.**

Conclusion

Not properly resourcing 311, everyone fails — by continuing to hold 311 back, every Administration is telling you they are not interested in building modern tools to help neighbors address local issues. Also, it is the largest admission that they do not want public oversight of public services.

If we want to be a smart, compassionate, progressive city, we must be a responsive city. If we don't focus on service design practices in 311 and corresponding agencies, the flood waters of climate change and fiscal irresponsibility will wash over us and drag us out into The Narrows.

Twenty years into NYC 311, we are at an existential crossroads. If this Administration does not center 311 services and integration, it is not centering our ability to address the needs of the neediest, and it is dooming this city to failure.