Everyone complains about potholes, but how many people lift a finger to get them fixed? Not nearly enough, according to a survey of 2,006 citizens conducted by the Governing Institute in 2017. Forty-three percent of those respondents had complaints about the quality of their city or county’s infrastructure. But only 26 percent said they contact government agencies for help with potholes, graffiti, broken sidewalks, derelict buildings or other problems.¹

**BARRIERS TO ENGAGEMENT**

If the quality and timeliness of government services bother so many people, why do so few reach out to government officials to ask for help, suggest a solution or report a problem? Maybe it’s because they’ve had bad experiences in the past. Citizen survey respondents cited numerous obstacles that have kept them from engaging with government about local problems. The top five barriers were:

- **Lack of information:** The citizen didn’t know which agency to approach about a problem.
- **Reliance on others:** The person was sure that someone else — whether a neighbor or an employee at a government agency — would notice the problem and report or take care of it.
- **Lack of time:** Filling out a form to register a complaint takes too long for someone who is busy with work, family or other responsibilities.
- **Privacy concerns:** The citizen didn’t want to share personal information when registering the complaint.
- **Poor customer service:** The citizen had called 311 or a general government line, but the transaction was taking too long, or the person who answered the phone was unhelpful.

If citizens found it easier to engage with government, would more of them step up and provide the information that agencies need to improve quality of life in their communities? The Governing Institute’s survey findings point to yes.

Certainly, local government officials want citizens to become more involved. In 2016, when the Center for Digital Government surveyed a group of award-winning county technology leaders about the focus of their IT projects, citizen engagement ranked among their top 10 priorities.² When citizens are willing to interact, governments gain valuable allies — dozens, hundreds or even thousands of eyes and ears forming an early warning system about issues to address.

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**Engagement: The Citizen Perspective**

- **43%** of citizens have complaints about their city or county’s infrastructure, but only **26%** said they report these issues. This may be because only **22%** of service requests are answered promptly. If citizens desire a feedback loop, **41%** of citizens desire a feedback loop. If citizens want one-stop service from an engagement platform, **40%** want one-stop service from an engagement platform.
THE ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY

Forward-looking governments use technology to encourage greater citizen engagement. A government might create a 311 call center, develop web-based platforms for specific departments, build a platform for citizens to access all agencies through a centralized portal or follow some combination of those strategies.

Such efforts all move governments in the right direction. But governments that rely on those systems also face many challenges.

As the survey shows, in many communities citizens don’t utilize those platforms. They might not even realize those services exist. When the Governing Institute asked citizens whether their jurisdictions had any kind of platform for civic engagement, 61 percent said they didn’t know.

Even when citizens understand that their government offers an engagement platform, and even when they want to use it, one bad experience might discourage a user from trying the platform again. Perhaps the user has a hard time navigating an online platform. Perhaps a service representative in a call center leaves the caller on hold too long, or the caller can’t get past a wall of menus to speak with a human being.

Some citizen engagement strategies fail because the communications channels they offer don’t match citizens’ needs.

A web-based platform is often effective, but not for people who lack easy access to the internet. A call center might attract older citizens, but not Millennials who prefer to access information online through their smartphones. A service that operates only in English might be inadequate in a community with a large population of recent immigrants.

A citizen engagement strategy that relies on legacy systems such as traditional 311 call centers could also place new burdens on a government agency’s internal operations. For example, 311 call centers are extremely expensive to operate. According to a study by the Pew Charitable Trusts, answering just one call costs an average of $3.40. Depending on local labor costs, in some cities the price of one call can run as high as $5.3

When the platform doesn’t integrate with the government’s back-end systems, a citizen engagement initiative can also create extra work for agency employees. After all, the transaction doesn’t end when a citizen reports a problem. People want to know they’re not just tossing complaints into the void. When the Governing Institute asked citizens what features they wanted to see in a citizen engagement platform, the top feature — named by 41 percent of respondents — was a feedback loop. Citizens want to hear that their issue has been resolved, and if it cannot be resolved, they want to know why.

If the platform doesn’t receive automatic updates from systems at the highway department, the code enforcement bureau and other

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**Top 5 Barriers to Submitting Service Requests**

1. 18% didn’t know which agency to contact.
2. 8% thought someone else would take care of it eventually.
3. 7% said filling out a form takes too long.
4. 6% didn’t want to submit private information.
5. 5% called a 311 or general line but it took too long/person was unhelpful.

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**How Citizens Want to Submit Service Requests**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Visit a government website to fill out an online form</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phone the specific agency</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use a mobile device without the need to download a mobile app</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phone 311/call a single number</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use a mobile device with a mobile app</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visit the physical government office</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
agencies, then employees must take extra steps to update citizens about their service requests. That makes the citizen engagement process less efficient and more expensive than necessary.

Of course, the platform might have no feedback mechanism at all, leaving citizens entirely in the dark. Has anyone talked with the owner of that barking dog? How long did it take before the snow plows finally came through on Monday? In the absence of information, people will assume the issue they reported isn’t being addressed, which will make them less likely to use the system again.

Fortunately, governments can overcome these challenges when they take advantage of new and innovative citizen engagement solutions.

**A BETTER APPROACH TO CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT**

As governments seek more effective ways to enlist residents as partners in the community, advanced technologies such as cloud computing and artificial intelligence (AI) pose exciting opportunities. One particularly promising solution is the Accenture Citizen Engagement Solution, built on the Salesforce cloud platform, powered by Salesforce’s Einstein AI.

The Accenture Citizen Engagement Solution is an integrated, customer-centric system that makes communications between citizens and governments seamless. Whether a citizen wants to communicate via phone, the web, a mobile platform or social media, he or she can register a service request with very little effort, and with confidence the information will reach the right agency. The citizen can also receive updates on the government’s response to the problem.

**How It Works**

The use of AI, as well as geolocation, in the customer engagement solution makes user interaction simple and intuitive. Consider what happens when a resident spots offensive graffiti on the side of a building. She doesn’t need to search for the number of a government office. She doesn’t even need to call 311 to explain the problem and describe the location. All she has to do is snap a picture of the wall with her phone, access her city’s portal, click the “Report an Issue” button and upload the photo.

Thanks to the Accenture Citizen Engagement Solution’s geolocation capability, the application immediately captures the location of the graffiti, along with the date and time of the service request. The AI software determines that the image in the photo is graffiti that someone needs to remove. The system may also be trained to detect that the graffiti includes a racial slur, which moves the service request to the top of the city’s task list.

Once the citizen has uploaded the photo, the system asks her just one question: “Do you want to receive updates on your request?” She answers yes. A citizen using the system for the first time would then enter her contact information. Since she has reported problems before, the system already knows how to reach her. There’s nothing more she needs to do.

The Accenture Citizen Engagement Solution relays details about her complaint to the management system at the Department of Public Works, which creates a service ticket. In the course of the day, several other residents also transmit photos of the graffiti to the system. Because the software recognizes these reports refer to the same item, there’s no risk it will create redundant tickets.

The next morning, a worker removes the graffiti. To log in the completed task, he snaps a picture of the clean wall and uploads it, closing out the ticket. The department’s system transmits the information to the Accenture Citizen Engagement Solution, which emails the citizen, telling her the job is done. It also sends an email or text — whichever they prefer — to the other citizens who reported the graffiti and asked for updates. Everyone is pleased that the city took care of the problem so quickly.

**Additional Features**

For city governments that want to bring citizen engagement to new levels, the Accenture Citizen Engagement Solution offers an optional tool to transform civic pride into a friendly competition. With gamification software in place, citizens who report problems can win badges, points or virtual coins for their efforts. The city might create a leaderboard to display the scores of top contenders. Perhaps the mayor could announce the name of the winner for each quarter at a city council meeting and recognize the citizen with a press release.
Accenture can also design and implement a publicity campaign to ensure residents know about the citizen engagement platform. The next time a neighbor’s 2 a.m. drumming or an abandoned car in the street ruins somebody’s day, that person will know that help is just a few mouse clicks, screen taps or a phone call away.

**Benefits for Local Government**

Because the Accenture Citizen Engagement Solution is so easy to navigate, more citizens are likely to use it to report problems. This extends beyond issues of potholes and broken tree branches to things that impact the overall health and safety of a community such as opioid overdoses and crime. When residents contribute to reporting such issues, it helps governments spot trends, better allocate resources and facilitate early interventions.

Citizens appreciate that this kind of system meets them on their terms, providing access via the communication channel they like best. They also like receiving status updates about their service requests, whether those are notices stating when the work will be completed or confirmations as soon as the work is done. The Governing Institute survey found that citizens tend to overestimate the time it takes government agencies to resolve citizens’ complaints. By providing prompt, accurate status reports, the government fosters a greater sense of trust: Citizens know that agencies are paying attention and working hard on their behalf.

A citizen engagement platform with easy self-service options saves money for local governments by reducing traffic in the 311 call center and at agencies’ walk-up counters. A citizen who can register a service request through a web portal or mobile app, and then get automated status reports, will probably get the problem solved without ever speaking to an agency employee. That allows the 311 center and other offices to accomplish more work without adding extra staff.

Integration and automated features built into the Accenture Citizen Engagement Solution also reduce costs in other ways. For example, staff no longer need to spend time researching the status of individual service requests when anxious citizens call for information. And when staff in the 311 center capture data about a problem in the community, creating a service ticket requires no further data entry. The engagement platform relays the relevant information to the IT system of the agency in charge. This type of early detection also helps governments manage costs more effectively by resolving issues faster before they become more expensive to address.

Since Accenture and Salesforce are both experts in customer relationship management (CRM), the Accenture Citizen Engagement Solution is built on deep industry expertise on how to serve and communicate with citizens and other customers. By leveraging Salesforce multi-tenant cloud infrastructure, a local government gains all the benefits that come with software as a service (SaaS) — like the ability to set up quickly with no hardware or software to install or code to write. Utilizing pre-built components and agile out-of-the-box functionality, the citizen engagement platform allows governments to tailor the solution to their exact needs and make changes on their own in the future. As word gets out about the engagement platform, and more citizens start to use it, governments can easily scale up the system’s capacity to accommodate increased traffic.

**CONCLUSION**

If governments want to enlist citizens as partners in community improvement, those governments need to make citizen engagement as easy as buying something on Amazon or using a ride sharing app. New technology, like Accenture’s Citizen Engagement Solution, can make this a reality. Solutions built on the Salesforce platform are already in use in more than 10 cities across the country, taking citizen engagement and government service to a new level.

This piece was developed and written by the Governing Institute Content Studio, with information and input from Accenture.

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1. All research from “Civic Engagement Citizen Survey,” Governing Institute, May 2017, unless otherwise noted.