

Background Information - 311 Campaign



What is the 311 campaign?

City Council has approved a plan to develop a 311 call centre for all City of Winnipeg services. Basically this would be one phone number for a centralized Information Processing Service, so that the public could access information about virtually all City services.

On the surface, the idea of a 311 service seems like a good idea, an innovation that will improve public access to public services. However, the mayor and some councillors seem to think a private company can provide this service, instead of public employees. If their attitude prevails, the 311 service could be further invasion of the privatization that is undermining city services.

According to Garry Swanson, President of Local 500, in a presentation to the Executive Policy Committee of Council, public employees should provide the new service, not a private company.

“The public deserves a system that answers their questions and guides them to city services they need – there is no valid reason to wait to do that. The public wants a system that gives them answers, not just an answering machine!”

Report to City Council

In November 2006, Councillors instructed City officials to study the 311 proposal and make recommendations on how to implement the service. A consulting company, atFocus was hired to do the research.

1. That the report by the consulting firm AtFocus Incorporated entitled, "City of Winnipeg Final Report 311 Project: 311 Business Plan" be received as information.
2. That the Administration be directed to prepare business cases for two consolidated service delivery options of 311 service, a City of Winnipeg internally operated service and one which is outsourced to the private sector.
3. That Council authorize expenditures in the amount of \$250,000.00 for the 311 project, including external expertise, prior to the adoption of the 2007 capital budget as a first call against the 2007 capital budget.

From the union's point of view, there are two problems in how the City is approaching the development of the service:

- a) the human resource aspect of the service has been undervalued, as a key element in the provision of a 311 service, and
- b) the private sector option for implementation is being promoted without sound justification.

The union therefore recommend to the EPC in February that there be consultations with the public, a planning process with city staff, and implementation of the internal consolidated model for the 311 service. According to Garry, "We do not believe the Administration needs to spend another quarter of a million dollars hiring private sector consultants to promote their position on using a private sector approach to implementing the 311 service."

Public Sector Staffing

For the 311 service to be effective, it must rely on the human interaction between citizen and city staff. An effective system does not rely solely on the machinery. The most important elements for the effectiveness of the system, is the customer service contact and knowledge level of those who respond. The public does not want an answering machine, they want answers.

We believe that existing staff are skilled in customer service responses, knowledgeable of city services, and most importantly, committed to the City of Winnipeg. They have demonstrated a range of qualities that not only provide service, but provide the City with quality service.

First, they know the public and the City and therefore can anticipate background information related to the callers questions. They can situate questions and caller needs within a social and physical context that helps city officials understand questions, complaint or comments. Second, they know what city departments do and importantly, they know where there are overlaps and related services, so they can provide immediate feedback that helps citizens who are calling, to clarify what they need. And third, city

staff have shown they are able to deal with difficult calls that involve complaints and caller aggression. These calls require a great deal more than customer service and knowledge skills, as they are often dealing with other unrelated personal issues of callers.

We believe, that existing staff (represented by CUPE, WPA, WAPSO) can contribute the most important element of a new 311 service, the human factor. Even though we know there will be some job loss from the development of a consolidated service for the city, we believe we can help enhance the delivery of city services to the public, which is a primary concern for our members. We are prepared to share our extensive experience and knowledge of how to respond to public calls. Cumulatively we have hundreds of years of experience that can contribute to the efficient and smooth adoption of 311 call system.

Private Sector is not an Option

The Administration recommendation to Council is to consider both internal and external means of providing the 311 service. But the Administration provides no explanation of how an external service could provide enhanced benefits and therefore why it should be considered.

We fear there is a subtle bias in favour of promoting privatization, on the part of the Administration. We believe that outsourcing or engaging so-called P3s are high risk options, as they tend to minimize the services provided while increasing long term costs for municipal governments.

When city governments talk about adopting a P3 approach to providing a public service, they usually justify their thinking on the basis of cost and efficiency. They say that they want to save tax money and/or improve the efficiency of providing a public service.

On both counts, P3s fail to perform. The evidence, from across Canada is that P3s are more costly and do not necessarily improve the quality of services. Even the TD CanadaTrust acknowledges that “P3s are more expensive than traditional public procurement.” (Mind the Gap, 2004, page iii.)

Union Plan of Action

Therefore the union support the creation of a 311 system within the City administration.

As representatives of city staff currently providing call services, and about 3,800 other city employees, we are willing to work with the Administration in planning and implementing the 311 service.

The Administration should work closely with frontline call responders to tap into their experience and knowledge. To enable a smooth transition to a new 311 service, we think it would be appropriate for the City to commit to its employees, that current staff will make up the staffing of a new 311 call centre. And for those employees who will not be

needed in the long term within the call centre, we think there should be a commitment to redeployment within the city administration.

Over the next few months, the union will;

- Inform CUPE members and other unions of what is taking place,
- Prepare a Brief to EPC and Council, promoting the public sector option,
- Educate the public about the benefits of the public sector option, and
- Lobby city Councilors on why it is important to keep the 311 service within the City Administration.