

311 CAPACITY REVIEW

Date:	September 27, 2013
To:	Government Management Committee
From:	Neil Evans, Director, 311 Toronto
Wards:	All
Reference Number:	P:\2013\Internal Services\311\Gm13004-311(AFS 17613)

SUMMARY

This report provides a review of the capacity of 311 Toronto to handle an increase in the volume of calls during very busy periods.

Heavy snowfalls and other unplanned events (heavy rain, high winds, etc) that create high volume demand on 311 resources and longer-than-normal wait times can lead to frustrated customers. It is during these unplanned events that customers expect prompt and reliable service and expect that measures are in place to manage the increased demand.

As 311 Toronto continues to develop and gain experience with unplanned events, its response to managing these events continues to improve. In working with its divisional partners to better manage relevant event driven information and services, 311 Toronto has implemented a variety of changes that will enable it to provide improved levels of service in the future. These changes include:

- Expansion of self-service options
- Use of social media for outbound messaging
- Courtesy call backs on problematic service requests
- Alternate working locations to better respond to unplanned events
- Expanding staff availability

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Director, 311 Toronto recommends that:

1. The Government Management Committee receive this report for information.

Financial Impact

There are no financial implications arising from this report.

The Deputy City Manager and Chief Financial Officer has reviewed this report and agrees with the financial impact information.

DECISION HISTORY

At its meeting on April 8, 2013, Government Management Committee adopted the motion on "311 Capacity Review". In considering the motion, Government Management Committee requested that the Director, 311 Toronto review the capacity of 311 to handle increased volume of calls during heavy periods such as a recent winter storm and report back to the Government Management Committee on appropriate measures to ensure residents inquiries are dealt with in a timely manner.

<http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2013.GM21.17#>

ISSUE BACKGROUND

During unplanned events such as snowstorms, heavy rainfalls or high winds, the calls to 311 Toronto spike dramatically in a very short period of time. The sharp spike in calls can lead to longer than normal wait times. During these periods of longer wait times for service, callers can become frustrated, leading to dissatisfaction with the 311 service. This frustration can, in some incidents, result in constituents calling their Councillor's office to voice their concerns.

For residents that do not contact 311 regularly, these rare periods of long wait times may create the basis in which 311 Toronto is perceived negatively, potentially resulting in their reluctance to use the service in the future.

COMMENTS

Unplanned Events

There are two categories of events that contribute to periodic spikes in calls to 311: planned events and unplanned events. Planned events are activities that are organized in advance and are usually part of the City's "programming". 311 has participated in such activities in the past and provided a high level of customer service. Examples of such activities are:

- The October 25, 2010 Municipal Election (on this day, 311 handled over 11,000 calls- three times the usual daily volume- with a 98% service level), and
- Recreation Registration Days (on the December 8, 2012 registration day, 311 handled 2.5 times more calls with a 97% service level).

311 Toronto is able to better manage the impact of spikes in calls during City planned events as it is able to predict the spike in calls and make plans in advance accordingly.

Unplanned events that contribute to periodic spikes in calls to 311 are activities that are not part of the City's "programming" and are the focus of this report. Unplanned events that have an impact on the 311 service are usually weather related such as snowstorms, heavy rain or high winds, but can also be unrelated to weather such as emergencies (fire, earthquakes, etc). Unplanned events, by their nature, are much more unpredictable.

Predictability

The predictability of an unplanned event greatly impacts 311's ability to manage its service level. (The 311 Toronto "service level" is to answer 80% of calls in 75 seconds or less.) In the hot summer months, intense wind and rain storms can be unexpected, along with flooding basements and bringing down trees. These events can be geographically specific (isolated to two or more Wards) and short lived (3 to 4 hours). The inability to predict when or if the event will occur, where it will occur, and for how long it will last, contributes to the difficulty 311 and other City services have in responding. For example, on July 15, 2012, parts of the east end of the city were hit with up to 75mm of rain in a very short time frame. On that day, 311 received more calls in 3.5 hours than it usually receives in a 24 hour period. On that day, despite receiving 2.5 times more calls than usual, 311 still managed to answer 46% of the calls in 75 seconds or less. A similar situation occurred in both the May and July 2013 rainfalls.

Snowstorms offer the 311 services the most challenge. On the positive side, snowstorms are more predictable than the summer winds and rain as weather forecasting helps with the preparation. Usually, forecasting will provide a general prediction 3 days ahead of the event, with more accurate information being provided as the storm approaches. But forecasting is less than 100% accurate. For example, trying to predict the impact of the February 26 and 27 snow/ice storms was very difficult as the temperatures hovered around the freezing mark with no firm indication of whether the precipitation would be snow, rain, freezing rain or all three. This provided a particular challenge because the impact on 311 could be a spike in calls about snow clearing, roads flooding, tree damage or no increase in calls at all. On the days affected by that particular storm, 311 managed twice the call volume and provided a 60% service level.

Call Patterns

However, it is not just the size of the unplanned event (i.e. amount of snow or rain that falls or the speed of the winds) that is important in predicting call volumes but it is when the event occurs that can contribute to the impact it has on the 311 Contact Centre in terms of call patterns. For example, when the May 29, 2013 heavy rainfall occurred overnight, the spike in calls occurred the following morning when customers awoke to flooding conditions, not necessarily when the flooding occurred. Tracking call patterns is critical to 311's ability to manage an event because reviewing call patterns can help identify when calls will come in to the contact centre and when staff levels need to be increased. If the pattern changes, 311 can find itself over or under staffed.

Scheduling the accurate number of staff to best respond to the patterns of calls is an extremely important exercise. During a snow event, the majority of the calls 311 receives are for service requests related to snow clearing (streets, sidewalk and windrows). Firstly, the majority these calls do not come in overnight, even if that is the when the snow falls, as most customers are sleeping.

Secondly, as instructed by the Transportation division, 311 does not accept service requests for these types of calls until after the crews have been able to get out and complete their work (up to 72 hours after the snowfall ends). Ideally, call volumes should not be as high within these time intervals and staffing levels applied accordingly. However, in the case of the snow storm on February 9, 2013, as soon as the snow had ended and crews were beginning the clean up, the media started advising customers to call 311 to have their snow cleared. Customers started calling immediately, even though City crews had not had time to do their work, and 311 was not supposed to initiate service requests. 311 staffing levels were not prepared for this spike and wait times were high. Although staff called media outlets to inform them that it was premature to advise viewers/listeners to call 311 before crews had a chance to do ploughing, the damage was done and customers who called 311 waited unnecessarily. This point of frustration has been discussed with 311, Transportation and Strategic Communications and better messaging will be required for future events.

Managing Staff

311 Toronto's approach to any critical event – whether planned or unplanned is two-pronged: managing staff and managing the information. The 311 management team will attempt to get both the correct staffing level to manage the event and the necessary information to communicate to customers in order to manage customers' needs and expectations.

For an unplanned event, there are two responses that 311 Toronto can take: reactive and anticipated. In the case of the examples of the summer wind and rain related events, 311 Toronto can only take a reactive response because of the lack of notice of the impending event. In many cases it is only when customers call that 311 becomes aware that the event has occurred, given that it is often only in one part of the city. The most effective approach to manage an unplanned event with a reactive response is to manage the staff. The reactive response to unexpected high volumes of calls includes holding staff back at the end of their shift to work for longer periods of time, adjusting shifts and activities to maximize staff time on the phones (for example asking staff to work shorter lunches) and where possible calling in additional staff.

The second type of response to an unplanned event is to anticipate the impact on the 311 service. Unlike a reactive response, where management staff have no lead time (forecast) to prepare, the anticipated approach is a little more measured. For example, an anticipated response is used in leading up to a snowstorm. For a snowstorm, the forecasted weather conditions can assist 311 in anticipating the staff that may be required to manage that event and additional staff can be scheduled to work in advance (see Staffing Model, below).

Staffing Model

The 311 workforce management (WFM) software captures staffing levels on 30 minute increments for every day. The staffing levels are retained and used to assist 311 staff to predict daily staffing requirements. For example, 311 staff can look at the *staffing* levels for past December 25th (Christmas Day) and compare *service* levels on this day to estimate the staff requirement for an upcoming Christmas Day. Similarly, the WFM software can be used to predict staffing levels for a major event regardless of whether it is planned or unplanned. Staffing levels, are plotted against the weather condition (for example amount of snowfall) to create a staffing model. These models are used to help predict staffing levels and staffing patterns for an upcoming similar event.

In the case of the February 9, 2013 snowstorm, this was the largest snowfall that occurred in the city in the past 5 years, or, in other words, the largest since the launch of 311 Toronto four years ago. Accordingly, the 311 WFM did not have an appropriate staffing model available, in cases where a staffing model is not available, staff use best estimates.

In February 2013, 311 initiated a *Divisional Emergency* in response to the snowstorm. A Divisional Emergency is called by the division head in response to a situation that is deemed an emergency from a divisional perspective. One of the significant changes provided under this initiative is to make it mandatory for staff to report to work when requested (as opposed to when they are scheduled). Although rarely initiated, the mandatory reporting makes it much easier to quickly get staff into work to respond to an unplanned event. As an example, on Saturday February 9, 2013, 311 was able to have almost triple the number of staff (union and non-union) come to work in the Contact Centre compared to a normally scheduled for that day in order to manage the high call volumes.

As part of 311's resource assessment, 311 became aggressive in hiring. In May 2013, 311 completed a full and part time Customer Service Representative job call. This resulted in 12 part time staff promoted to full time as well as hiring three new full time staff. In addition, 30 part time Customer Service Representatives were hired as part of this call. This significantly supports 311 efforts to respond to unplanned events over the summer and well into next winter. Another full time and part time call will be completed in the fall of 2013.

Currently, 311 has 111 (FTE) Customer Service Representative, 91 full time and 20 part time. These 20 part time (FTE) position actually represent 100 employees, including another 30 part time employees as of January 2014.

Managing Information

Appropriate staffing levels are only part of the reactive response because without the appropriate information it is difficult to provide the customer with what they need and to manage customer expectations. When 311 staff are reacting to an unplanned event like a rain or wind storm, the on-duty supervisor notifies a manager to escalate the situation which will include getting in touch with affected service divisions to identify any temporary changes in procedures. A member of the 311 management team will connect with a Strategic Communications staff person to obtain approved information to provide to customers. The steps taken with Strategic Communications are in accordance with the 311/Strategic Communications Service Level Agreement.

Unlike the reactive response (e.g. unexpected summer wind and rain storms), the anticipated response (e.g. winter snowstorms because there is some ability to forecast the nature of a snowstorm) 311 can do some advanced preparations for managing information messages. These steps include meeting with the divisions ahead of time to develop scenarios leading to advance event related messaging (ie. Media releases or upfront messages that callers can hear when they call 311) and possible procedural changes such as the suspension of certain types of services requests.

Managing the Message and Expectations

Ensuring the public has accurate information, whether through the media or using upfront messages in the 311 Contact Centre, is a very good method of helping to manage caller's expectations and therefore call volumes. In the case of the February 9, 2013 snowfall,, 311 was able to work with the Transportation division to get the media to correct the message about calling 311 before crews had a chance to respond, however, it took hours to recover from the high call volumes that resulted from the erroneous information originally broadcasted.

Getting the accurate information to customers is extremely important in managing their expectations for what services they should expect and when they should expect them to be fulfilled.

Today, 311 is working much closer with the service divisions like Transportation, Toronto Water and Forestry prior to and during these unplanned events to get the accurate information out and to manage customer expectations. Strategic Communications is heavily involved with developing appropriate information scripts for 311 staff and to provide media relations services. When this is accomplished, call volumes have been manageable and customer service has been satisfactory.

The letter submitted to Government Management Committee reads "*It is during these unusual events that Torontonians need prompt, reliable service and rightfully expect that measures be put in place to handle the increased volume*". While it is certainly reasonable to expect prompt and reliable service from 311 at all times, it is equally reasonable to expect that wait times will be longer during an extremely busy period such as during a snow storm. The Council-approved service level for 311 is to respond to 80% of calls within 75 seconds. In 2012, 311's overall performance was that it met its service level 81% of the time. It is these unplanned events that contribute to the other 19% of the time.

If Council were to expect a service level of 80% at all times – even during unplanned weather events – then this would necessitate a review of 311's overall service level in terms of what is realistic to provide and what can be resourced accordingly.

Next Steps:

311 is continuing to introduce improvements to help manage unplanned events, especially with respect to the expansion of self service applications. Whether it is on-line service requests, mobile applications or the implementation of an Interactive Voice Response (IVR), all are important in reducing the service requests that the division manually processes.

The division is also exploring how to be more proactive with social media and online to broadcast information about service outages and other disruptions to potentially decrease calls to the Contact Centre about these issues.

During unplanned events there are always customers who have less-than-favourable experiences. 311 Toronto is investigating a process in which we can connect back with customers who called 311 and were unable to complete their service request as they wished or if they still had an outstanding issue following their contact with 311. This process of "closing the loop" has been implemented in other jurisdictions successfully.

We are currently investigating the possibility of having a subset of our customer service representatives work from home. Having CSRs able to log on to the 311 system from their home will reduce the downtime between when the CSRs are contacted to start work and the time they begin to take calls. Having CSRs log on from home will allow 311 to have more staff for critical incidents and allow them to log onto the phones within minutes. This capability can also allow 311 staff to be at home handling calls when public transit such as TTC and GO Transit have their service negatively impacted and are shut down as a result of storms and other unplanned events as was the case with the rainfall on July 8, 2013.

CONTACT

Neil Evans
Director, 311 Toronto
nevans@toronto.ca
416-338-7789

SIGNATURE

Neil Evans Director, 311 Toronto