



From Washington, a “311 for Cities”

By Neil Kleiman

The new National Resource Network aims to help local governments find the experts and information they need.

Consumers everywhere have a voracious demand for customized data. In just the past few years, local governments have gotten remarkably good at responding. The growing proliferation of local 311 systems and “Where is my bus?”-type apps allows citizens to quickly — if not immediately — get the information and guidance they need.

Remarkably, however, local governments do not have access to the same kinds of organizational tools, platforms, or information for their own use. Cities confronted with a range of persistent challenges — from pension liabilities to failing school systems — often lack the means to consult with the right experts or the time to identify the federal programs, best practices, or foundation initiatives that could help them.

In an effort to provide this kind of guidance for cities, the Obama administration recently announced the launch of the National Resource Network (at <http://www.nationalresourcenetwork.org/en/home>). A pilot program with an initial \$10 million award from the Department of Housing and Urban Development, the initiative aims to

be a one-stop resource for technical, policy and financial assistance for local governments.

The network will employ a distinct approach. Rather than starting with a bold new theory of urban change, it will be listening to what cities need first and then customizing the right action-based solution for them. The assistance will encompass three approaches:

On-the-Ground Assistance: Over a three-year period, the network will provide direct assistance to dozens of cities. Rather than a typical consultancy that is provided by one group, the network will form teams of assistance providers based on what cities truly need help with. Along with New York University and the International City/County Management Association, the leadership of the network includes non-profit and for-profit leaders with expertise across economic development, community development, and public budgeting. Network teams will tackle a broad range of challenges related to economic turnaround.

Policy Assistance: If the on-the-ground assistance is the retail strategy, there will also be a wholesale set of offerings that cities can easily tap into through the National Resource Network’s website. This will include a clearinghouse of federal technical assistance programs as well as a curat-

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ed library of toolkits and guidebooks that focus on the nuts and bolts of government reform and improvements.

311 for Cities: Perhaps the most exciting effort the network is developing is what it calls 311 for Cities. This will offer timely access to expertise and assistance. A city official will be able to log on to the network's secure site and ask for the best resources to meet a particular need, such as proven crime-reduction strategies, best practices in economic development, or model fiscal and operational plans. The network will review the inquiry and within three business days send an initial response, including an online package of annotated resources and referrals. As needed, the network will arrange follow-up action. 311 for Cities is now available for approximately 50 communities and will be available to hundreds more in the next three years.

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Creating a one-stop resource for city services is an ambitious agenda. But the National Resource Network is off to a good start to guide cities to the people, resources and ideas they need. ■

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