

## **The 411 on 311**

### **by Dan Jacoby**

One of the signature achievements of the Bloomberg administration is the advent of 311. People who have complaints about a city agency, or a landlord, or a business, or who want information about a wide variety of items, can call one clearinghouse number and get everything taken care of.

Well ... not exactly.

In the past, if you had a problem with, for example, your landlord, you would call the Department of Buildings. If you wanted to report something wrong with the street you would call the Department of Transportation. If you had a noise complaint, you would call the local police precinct. Wherever you called, you would get a person who worked for that department, you could get that person's name, and you could follow up with the same person you originally contacted – and you could hold that person responsible for solving the problem.

Now, you get a generic 311 operator who takes your complaint information and passes it on to the city agency. You never get to speak to someone who can actually get something done, and you never get to hold anyone responsible for solving the problem.

What's worse, sometimes the 311 operator can't take down the information that you have to give. For example, if a building under construction is violating some code (not having a scaffold up to protect passersby, for instance), the 311 operator needs to get the building's address in order to list the complaint – but if the building is under construction there will be no way for you to know the address. Merely giving a location, say the corner of "X" street and "Y" avenue, is insufficient, because the 311 operator cannot have a place to enter that information. I know, because this exact situation happened to me.

The upside to 311 is twofold. First, it saves money, because instead of each separate city agency having its own phone banks and operators there is one central clearinghouse. Second, it allows the city to gather data on how many complaints are being made, what type of complaints, where in the city the problems are occurring, and whether the number of complaints is rising or falling.

This is all part of the mayor's claim to "do more with less."

The problem is that "more" is not what we're getting. Nobody is held responsible for getting something done. Sometimes nothing gets done because the 311 operator can't even take down the information. And even though the city "knows" how many complaints are being lodged, it doesn't necessarily mean that responses are any better than they were before 311 was implemented.

It may be costing less, but we're only getting what we're paying for.