

Making the Call/Taking the Call

Making citizen-staff partnerships work better when a neighborhood problem isn't easy to solve

Across the nation, many neighborhood issues are routinely solved by neighbors without the need to contact city (or county) staffs. Equally, many single-issue concerns that are called into city or county government staff are routinely addressed without the need to call a second time.

There is, however, a third situation that can develop when a problem persists over time or involves a number of different issues that don't fit comfortably together into the responsibility of a single government department. Think, for example, of the chronic problem location where many minor violations — regular loud parties and shouting matches, petty vandalism and graffiti, junk and debris — combine to harm a neighborhood without any one violation being a top priority for any one department. Because most neighbors try forbearance first — tolerance and patience being part of how we often manage to get along — they don't typically call when small problems first start, but only call after some “last straw” event occurs, at which point they desire an immediate solution to a situation that, over time, has grown out of control.

It is these situations that can cause some of the greatest frustrations in the staff-citizen relationship and it is these situations, in particular, that the following grid is designed to help both address.

Citizens...	City/County Staff...
Describe the most significant observed problems, not just the most recent frustrating event that finally pushed you to call.	Listen for other problems behind the first one being described — many citizens don't call until problems become chronic.
Listen during each phone call to help you find the staff people for whom at least one of the issues you are facing is a high priority in their scope of work.	Evaluate the priority of the problem based on its impact <i>on the community</i> rather than its relevance to your particular area of enforceable code or law.
<i>Don't</i> blame the person who happens to answer the phone for every frustration you have with government. Remember: the mission is to find (or make) allies who will help solve a problem.	<i>Don't</i> treat citizens as inferior because you happen to know your job better than they do. You are both experts: You in your job, and they in what it is like to live on their block.
Write down the name, and date, of every staff person you speak with and keep the list available. Quote from it when speaking with staff to help them “connect the dots” as well.	Keep an “issue list” and note when multiple people contact you about the same issue or related issues. Ask about steps the citizen has taken and others have taken to date.
Respect the person's expertise and ask for help. Resist the temptation to be demanding, especially on the first calls you make.	Assume the best in callers, even when they don't seem respectful. (Per the training, use “when” and “what” more than “did” and “why.”)
Be as specific and factual as possible. Avoid generalizations such as “It happens all the time.” Remember: Actionable details make the difference.	Listen for the specifics among the broader statements and encourage callers with chronic problems to keep a log of events until the issues are solved.

Citizens...	City/County Staff...
Be a leader: Speak with more than one voice. Enroll other neighbors on the block in helping to solve the problem and make calls. (Move the conversation from one squeaking wheel to many concerned neighbors.) Remember: Leaders don't work alone.	Count the number of voices. When necessary, ask for <i>other</i> citizens to call and report as well. (While one caller might be one side of a mere personality dispute, three different neighbors from the same block calling about the same issue almost never are.)
At first, <i>don't</i> try to change the system; focus only on solving the specific problem at hand, <i>then</i> think about bigger change if you wish.	Focus on the issue at hand: Find a way to solve the specific problem or a referral to someone who can, even if it isn't a priority for your area of specialization.
Commit to doing much more than making one call. Commit to making all calls.	Explain honestly (disillusionment) and genuinely (empowerment), what it will really take to solve a tough problem.
For chronic problems, get other neighbors involved and ask for a meeting with staff to help problem solve.	Offer to attend a meeting with neighbors when, and only when, it is apparent that multiple neighbors are involved. Otherwise, ask insistent individuals to come to you.
At meetings do <i>not</i> : Get lost in generalities about how the whole system must change or stories about what happened many years ago.	At meetings do <i>not</i> : Explain why requested solutions won't work without also offering alternatives that do.
At meetings: <i>Never let responsibility leave the room</i> . Focus on what you and others in the room can do, not how someone else, somewhere else must change.	At meetings: <i>Never let responsibility leave the room</i> . Focus only on what the people in the room can do, including how you can help and what steps you can take.
Remember: It is easy to "prove" that government doesn't care, but it isn't very satisfying and accomplishes nothing. Instead, be the person who proves that solutions are possible.	Remember: It is easy to "prove" that citizens don't want to be involved, but it isn't very satisfying and accomplishes nothing. Instead, be the person who proves that solutions are possible.
Recognize good help: Tell managers and elected leaders about staff who helped.	Reward involvement: Help committed citizens become victorious.
Close the loop — let staff members know when success happens and thank them for their work.	Close the loop — find out if the problem is solved and thank the citizen for working to solve it.
Remember: In a democratic society, involved citizens are very important to keeping government responsive and communities livable. What you do matters. Thank you for getting involved.	Remember: In a democratic society, good governments encourage and welcome participation from involved citizens in making communities livable, and safer, for all. Thank you for representing good government values.