



Palo Alto Among First Cities to Connect 311 and Open Data Platforms

By [Justine Brown](#) posted on May 28, 2014

Near real-time data collected through the 311 app is available to the public 24 hours a day and is presented in visual format, so the public can quickly see what types of requests are coming in and where.

Last summer, Palo Alto, Calif., deployed a 311 app allowing citizens to report anything — from a pothole to graffiti to illegal dumping — to the city from their mobile phones. Now the city has taken that one step further, connecting their open data platform and the 311 app to produce a [visual dashboard of 311 data](#) for public viewing and use.

“We already had a good variety of data available to the public via our open data platform – from financial data to demographics and geospatial information,” said Palo Alto CIO Jonathan Reichental. “As we looked through our data sets, we realized adding 311 data to that could be valuable to the community as well.”

The city used an API to connect its 311 app, provided by PublicStuff, to the open data platform, provided by Junar. As a result, near real-time data collected through the 311 app is available to the public 24 hours a day. Data is presented in visual format, so the public can quickly see what types of requests are coming in and where, and how the city is performing in responding to those requests.

Reichental said the site also includes a heat map that visually displays the volume of issues reported in various neighborhoods around the city. The heat map may eventually help the city determine how best to deploy or re-deploy resources.

“As more and more data comes in, you can start to see certain trends developing,” Reichental said. “For the first time, we have real data supporting various incidents, and we can explore what we need to do to address certain issues. For example, if there are a lot of reports of graffiti in a certain area, maybe we need to deploy more oversight in that area during certain times of the day.”

Reichental said he has not heard of any other cities doing this.

“Digital 311 is taking off, but it’s still not in every city, and open data platforms are rare,” he said. “To do this, you have to have digital 311, and you have to have an open data platform, and then you have to connect them. I believe we are one of the first cities to push the boundaries on this.”

Reichental said another benefit to the initiative is that it helps build trust between the city and the community.

“Palo Alto has made a commitment to be open, transparent and engaged with our community,” he said. “We believe that if we have access to data and it’s useful, the community should have that access too. This is one more way we are proving that.”

Reichental said the city has also emphasized the benefits of near real-time reporting for both the 311 app and the new site.

“There is a huge benefit in citizens being able to report something then and there when they see it, and to snap a photograph and send it to us immediately,” he said “That’s so much more powerful than having to remember to do it later and potentially forgetting or not bothering at all. And having that data available to the public almost immediately makes it much more valuable than just posting a bunch of data that is old.”

Reichental said the open data platform also includes a direct API for software developers so apps can be written against the data should someone be inclined to do so.

“I can envision notification apps or many other uses for this data,” he said. “We really are saying, ‘Let’s see what we can do with this,’ and I know it’s going to happen.”

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