



Receiving Citizen Requests

Dear Reader:

The following document was created from the MTAS website ([mtas.tennessee.edu](https://www.mtas.tennessee.edu)). This website is maintained daily by MTAS staff and seeks to represent the most current information regarding issues relative to Tennessee municipal government.

We hope this information will be useful to you; reference to it will assist you with many of the questions that will arise in your tenure with municipal government. However, the *Tennessee Code Annotated* and other relevant laws or regulations should always be consulted before any action is taken based upon the contents of this document.

Please feel free to contact us if you have questions or comments regarding this information or any other MTAS website material.

Sincerely,

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Receiving Citizen Requests

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There are several methods for receiving and recording citizen service requests and complaints. One way is to give the job to the staff person who answers the phone. This could include anyone from the mayor or mayor's secretary to city council members or individual department heads.

If this method is chosen, any city worker who ever answers a phone must receive training on how to respond to citizen calls. The person taking the call would also be responsible for keying the information into the automated request system (ARS).

Entering the request into the ARS gives access to anyone who needs to check the status of unresolved requests. The request would also be automatically routed to the appropriate department for service. This method is an excellent way to prevent citizens feeling as though they are getting the "runaround," and it showcases the advantages of keeping the records in an ARS.

Many cities have had success with a "hotline" or central phone number, staffed by trained employees whose sole responsibility is to receive and record calls on the ARS. (ARS can automatically alert the responsible department for service.)

Sometimes the central number is located in the mayor's or other city office where the calls are taken, recorded, and routed to the appropriate department by a secretary or the city manager. Elected officials and their staffs may be responsible for receiving and recording calls or for receiving them and sending them to the city manager, who enters them into the computer.

A few cities have dispatchers taking service requests 24 hours a day, while others have answering machines to record requests and complaints after hours and on weekends. In some cities, officials are available in shopping malls one day a month, while other cities simply place easy-to-use computer terminals in the malls so citizens can enter requests themselves.

Any time a central number or other centralized system is used, it must be well publicized and staffed with knowledgeable employees. When someone answers the phone who has nothing to do with service requests, this person can only transfer callers to someone else. Even if the employee connects the citizen directly to the central number, the caller may still be forced to repeat the request.

A centralized system prepares individual departments to receive and document calls coming through to them. The departments should either take responsibility for the request or refer the information to the appropriate department through the central number. In either case, the department should forward the information to the central office for filing.

Many cities have no centralized system and put the entire responsibility of calls on individual departments. Each department must take and document the calls they receive, track them, and respond to the citizen. This scenario increases the chance that a request might be lost or mishandled. Without a centralized system each department must be prepared to take and record even those calls it is not able to service, then forward all the information to the appropriate department. For maximum efficiency, the city's website and/or phone book listing should be revised to include descriptions of the type of service performed by each department.

How is each request assigned to the right department?

Most commercial software packages will automatically assign the request to the appropriate department when the entry is added to the software. Some software packages automatically generate a hard copy of the work order for the appropriate department and prioritize each request by giving it a code number.

Once the information is properly routed, the department must be accountable to someone in city hall, ensuring follow-up. This can be done in two ways. In some cities with a centralized system, the department reports how the request is handled to the community services office, the mayor, the city manager's office, or to the location of the central number. In other cities, all information forwarded to the responsible department is also sent to the city council member for that constituency. As actions are taken, notations are added to the original service request or complaint.

Everyone involved should have access to the service request record and updates, thus maximizing status tracking. Several ARS packages can produce a case list of unresolved requests and complaints to be investigated by the relevant departments.

DISCLAIMER: The letters and publications written by the MTAS consultants were written based upon the law at the time and/or a specific sets of facts. The laws referenced in the letters and publications may have changed and/or the technical advice provided may not be applicable to your city or circumstances. Always consult with your city attorney or an MTAS consultant before taking any action based on information contained in this website.

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