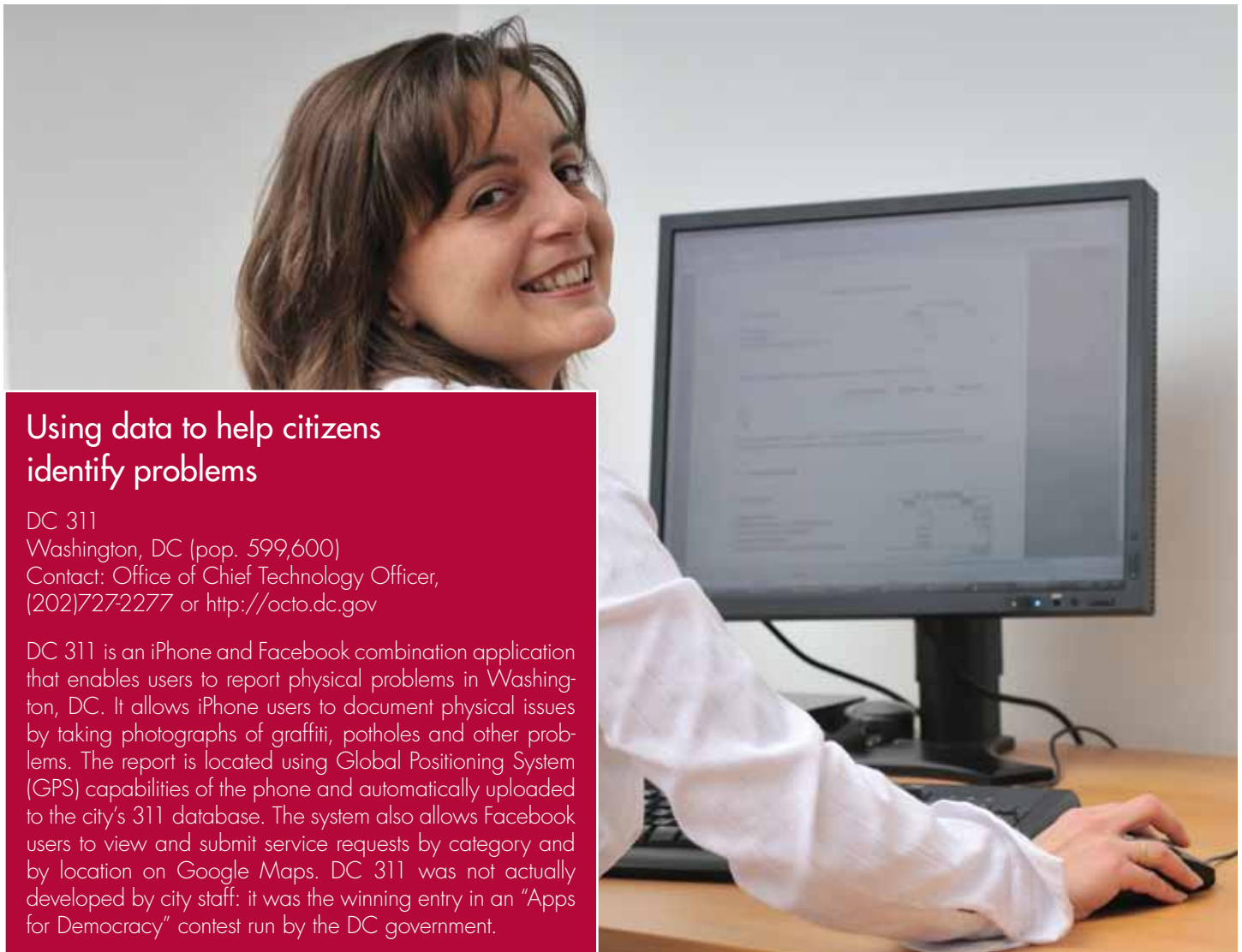


Is local government data available online, and how effectively does it complement and inform public engagement?

Key Questions to Ask about How to Engage the Public **QUESTION 10 OF 14**



Using data to help citizens identify problems

DC 311
Washington, DC (pop. 599,600)
Contact: Office of Chief Technology Officer,
(202)727-2277 or <http://octo.dc.gov>

DC 311 is an iPhone and Facebook combination application that enables users to report physical problems in Washington, DC. It allows iPhone users to document physical issues by taking photographs of graffiti, potholes and other problems. The report is located using Global Positioning System (GPS) capabilities of the phone and automatically uploaded to the city's 311 database. The system also allows Facebook users to view and submit service requests by category and by location on Google Maps. DC 311 was not actually developed by city staff: it was the winning entry in an "Apps for Democracy" contest run by the DC government.

Local officials all over the country are working hard to provide more information to citizens. To some critics, the pace of this transparency movement seems slow, but it is a trend with significant momentum. Transparency advocates inside and outside government argue that making more information publicly available is an empowering act that will help rebuild trust between citizens and government.

Cities are making many different kinds of data available, including crime statistics, city budgets, schedules for public works improvements, environmental indicators and information on public facilities. Some of these data streams have been combined with geo-location technologies (either by city staff or by tech-savvy citizens) to create interactive maps – showing where certain types of crime are occurring, for example, or which streets have the most potholes.

Many of these transparency efforts have succeeded in appealing to, and tapping into the talents of, increasingly tech-savvy citizens. It is often less clear how they fit as part of a broader engagement strategy. Transparency can also bring new challenges for local officials, since it is likely to expose government mistakes or inefficiencies. To use the data effectively, citizens and local officials need engagement activities or structures that will help them absorb, analyze and interpret it.

This is not a task to be left to the 'techies' in local government. "This is not just a technical matter for the tech support people," says Steve Clift of e-democracy.org. For improving local online support for democracy, Clift recommends "a community approach coordinated by a community leader."

MORE SPECIFIC QUESTIONS TO ASK ABOUT ONLINE TRANSPARENCY:

- What work has already been done to make local government more transparent?
- Are citizens using other online sources to get data and information about local issues and local government?
- Does the format of the data make it easy for people to see how government services and policies affect people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds, neighborhoods, age groups other demographic or geographic categories? (In other words, can it be aggregated according to key variables?)
- Are there regular opportunities – either online or face-to-face – for citizens to come together to discuss and assess the data you are providing? Are these informal gatherings, or is there some level of structure and process to the meetings? What is the role of local officials or city staff in these settings?

POTENTIAL NEXT STEPS:

- Ask city staff: what kinds of information would help citizens understand city services and functions?
- Begin asking a range of community leaders: What kinds of information are citizens looking for?
- Convene local online transparency advocates, to hear from them how they are using government data, and what kinds of information they are looking for.
- Reach out to neighborhood associations and other grassroots groups to find out what kinds of data, and in what formats, would be helpful to them.