

GETTING COUNTY CODE COMPLAINTS ON TRACK

SUMMARY

The Humboldt County Grand Jury began investigating the Humboldt County Code Compliance Unit of the Planning and Building Department as a result of allegations made in a formal citizen's complaint. The allegations described a lack of action towards specific code violations cited in the complaint, as well as, a lack of response from the Planning and Building Department.

Through the course of the committee's investigation, the Grand Jury determined that the County lacks a comprehensive beginning to end complaint resolution process for code violation complaints. The processes currently in place are not standardized throughout County departments. There is very little interdepartmental coordination for citizen complaints which span several departments. Lack of closure and/or follow-up with citizens creates frustration, confusion, and disappointment regarding County customer service to users. In addition, a citizen may not know which department should be the recipient of their complaint.

During the course of our investigation, the Planning and Building Department improved its procedures and shuffled staff to achieve better customer service results for code compliance complaints.

BACKGROUND

The Grand Jury received a citizen complaint regarding a code compliance complaint not being satisfactorily resolved. The complaint in question involved code violations for multiple County entities including the Planning and Building Department, Division of Environmental Health of the Department of Health and Human Services, Sheriff's Office, as well as the Humboldt Bay Fire District.

Through the course of its investigation, the Grand Jury determined there was a systemic failure by County departments to adequately address complaints spanning multiple departments. This failure stemmed from the County lacking a standardized method to track complaints, forwarding them on to other departments when required, with only a cursory system to follow-up with those departments to which the complaint may have been passed. Successful resolution of an interdepartmental issue relied upon a telephone call to the department, if a staff member remembered to check upon the matter. We discovered that frequently a department would "drop the ball" on code compliance complaints.

We conducted interviews with the Planning and Building Department, Division of Environmental Health, received information from the Sheriff's Department, and collected two weeks of complaints logged by the Public Works Department. We also interviewed a Humboldt Bay Fire District official and one County Supervisor, regarding a specific incident which occurred around Christmas Eve on Elk River Road, which contributed to the investigation.

APPROACH

We began our investigation with the Planning and Building Department. As a result of this interview, we decided to interview several other County departments which had responsibility for different elements in the complaint; in some cases the interviewees were supervisors and in other cases staff. Information obtained from the Sheriff's Department regarding this investigation was provided through e-mail only.

As information was obtained from each department, we would discuss new discoveries as well as verify facts already obtained through previous interviews. It was during these interviews that we learned more about the County's OnTrack system used for building permit application tracking. Because a few departments use this system already, it appeared to the jury that perhaps an automated system to pass information among departments already existed.

DISCUSSION

On at least two occasions known to the Jury, citizens have complained to the Planning and Building Department about perceived code violations. In both cases, the citizens did not realize that the problems concerned other county departments in addition to the Planning and Building Department. From our interviews with the Planning and Building Department staff, and with other departments, we learned that the Planning and Building Department staff did not communicate the citizens' concerns to the other departments involved.

We learned that the Division of Environmental Health, which was involved in both citizens' complaints, has the most comprehensive complaint investigation process, using a sophisticated database to track the complaints, including follow-up. When receiving a referred complaint from another department (referral), the Environmental Health Services Department staff also enters this information into the database.

The Planning and Building Department, however, uses primarily a paper system which relies entirely on staff remembering to follow through on matters. During the course of the investigation Planning and Building improved its procedures and reassigned staff to achieve better customer service results for code compliance complaints.

We learned that the Planning and Building Department also uses an electronic software system called OnTrack. OnTrack was originally developed to expedite the tracking of building permit applications. It is used primarily to track permitting, building inspections, billing, and time sheets.

We received specific information about the OnTrack system and learned of its current capabilities. We realized after this interview that the OnTrack system could be expanded by the County to provide a comprehensive, interdepartmental system of handling citizen code compliance complaints. A few other departments, including Public Works and Code Enforcement, also use OnTrack. The OnTrack system is modular, meaning that other departments can be added on with minimal expense. It can be accessed via the Internet. At

present, the public logs on via one portal, county departments log on via other portal(s). We learned that the confidentiality of a complaint could be maintained in OnTrack.

FINDINGS

- F1. While some county departments do a reasonably efficient job of following up on complaints that involve them directly, they do not have a consistent process of referring complaints to other county departments, nor of following up on referrals to those departments.
- F2. County departments could be more transparent and fair, save staff time and have better relations with the public if there were a more efficient and uniform way of handling complaints.
- F3. An automated system to pass information among departments already exists, called OnTrack. This system could be expanded by the County to provide a comprehensive, interdepartmental system of handling citizen code compliance complaints throughout multiple departments.
- F4. All county departments that deal with the public could link on to the OnTrack system, enabling interdepartmental communication, and giving the public access to information regarding the status of their complaints.
- F5. OnTrack currently has a citizen portal and an internal County portal.
- F6. Although the Planning and Building Department has made significant strides to improve their customer service throughout our investigation process, the department remains understaffed in its efforts to improve customer service to County citizens.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Humboldt County Civil Grand Jury makes the following recommendations to streamline citizen code violation complaints, improve interdepartmental handling of complaints when necessary, and expedite resolution of all such complaints:

- R1. The County's existing OnTrack system should be expanded to create a complaint resolution system capability. Because OnTrack is currently shared by multiple departments, the current capabilities should be expanded and the interdepartmental sharing of current data leveraged to enable sharing of citizen complaint information. (F3, F4)
- R2. The County Board of Supervisors should strongly encourage each of the departments currently using OnTrack to expand this system's capabilities to handle citizen complaints to those departments and also encourage those departments to reallocate resources to accomplish this. (F2, F3, F4)
- R3. The County Board of Supervisors should also approve funding or reallocate resources to expand OnTrack to departments which do not currently use OnTrack to allow them to

implement this system's capabilities. By moving to a more automated system of information sharing, cost savings could potentially be realized through savings of staff time. (F2, F3, F4)

- R4. OnTrack currently has a citizen portal and an internal County portal. This inherent capability can be expanded to allow citizens to check the status of their complaint. (F4, F5)
- R5. One staff member should be added to the Planning Department to assist in the handling of citizen complaints. Although the department has made significant strides to improve their customer service throughout the investigation process, the department remains understaffed in its efforts to improve customer service to County citizens. (F6)
- R6. The County Board of Supervisors should establish a policy mandating that the department receiving a citizen complaint immediately assumes ownership of the complaint on behalf of the County, regardless of department responsibility, and does not cede control of the complaint until a positive, verifiable hand-off to the appropriate department is achieved. (F1)

REQUEST FOR RESPONSES

Pursuant to Penal Code section 933.05, the following responses are required:

- The Humboldt County Board of Supervisors (R-1 through R-6)
- The Humboldt County Sheriff (R1, R4)

The Grand Jury invites the following individuals to respond:

- The Director of Humboldt County Planning and Building Department (R1, R4, R5)
- The Director of Humboldt County Department of Health and Human Services (R1)
- The Director of Humboldt County Public Works Department (R1)

Reports issued by the Grand Jury do not identify individuals interviewed. Penal Code § 929 requires that reports of the Grand Jury not contain the name of any person or facts leading to the identity of any person who provides information to the Grand Jury.
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