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March 5, 2008, 4:24 pm

# A 'Call 311' Campaign to Help the Homeless

By JENNIFER 8. LEE

A 311 call reporting a homeless person will now result in the city's [Department of Homeless Services](#) calling back on the same day with an update about what happened as a result of the phone call.

"New Yorkers are compassionate," said Linda Bazerjian, a spokeswoman for the department. "We want to help people."

But not everyone feels comfortable giving out change to panhandlers, so this is another outlet for them to express their concern, she said, in a way that might actually help the homeless down the process of getting them into permanent lodging.

She added that the return phone call helps New Yorkers feel as if their call did not just enter the bureaucratic vortex. "It gives a sense of public accountability," Ms. Bazerjian said.

While the return call program started back in October, the city kicked off public awareness of the 311 campaign with a series of subway advertisements this week in a partnership between the department and the Metropolitan Transportation Authority. The ads feature black and white closeup portraits of homeless individuals telling riders to call 311. (The people in the ads are actually hired actors.)

The M.T.A. has long had "Give to Charity, Just Not Here" ads, but this is the first subway advertising campaign run with the department, and is the product of a partnership that started in May 2007 because homelessness on the subway was rising even as street homelessness across the [city was going down](#).



When a person calls 311 they will be routed to the Department of Homeless Services operations desk, which operates 24 hours a day and funnels reports to teams in the five boroughs who go out and try to find the homeless person.

Among the questions that the operations desk



An ad encouraging well-wishers to call 311 about the homeless. [Enlarge this image.](#)

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— Stu

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— Andy

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— UnfairLife

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The people in the ads are not homeless; they are hired actors. [Enlarge this image.](#)

poses to the caller: Where is the person? What type of belongings do they have, where have you seen the homeless person before?

Lastly, the callers are asked if they want a phone call back so they can know the results. A vast majority of people say yes.

The idea came in part because Robert V. Hess, the department commissioner, had used the program successfully in Philadelphia to get the public involved in fighting homelessness.

Among the types of reports a caller can get back: That the department showed up there, but the homeless individual wasn't there anymore. The individual wasn't interested in coming into the shelter that day.

Or, as Ms. Bazerjian said: "Sometimes it will be, "This person is known to outreach and we have been working with them for several months or several weeks and they are so close to coming into housing. Thank you for calling."

Ms. Bazerjian added that she has "seen someone on the street and called 311 for quality assurance," without mentioning to the operations desk that she works for the department. The response time has actually been quite rapid, she said.

"I've seen it be anywhere from about 30 minutes to an hour," Ms. Bazerjian said.

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16 comments so far...

1. March 5th, 2008 5:16 pm

i think that all people need to be needed, and since homeless people are out there, and they have ears and eyes they could easily get paid by the community for taking pictures on a camera phone for things they see that are suspicious they could have money for food and save enough for clothing and shelter, but the important part is that they feel needed they are important, and they could recharge these phones in the shelters till they get perminant housing. it might be a win win for all of us.

— Posted by faina silber

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2. March 5th, 2008 5:30 pm

This seems like a futile plan to me. I have to wonder of the calls made to 311, what percentage actually result in a homeless person going to a shelter or otherwise agreeing to some assistance? I'd imagine most homeless people know only too well where they can go, IF they want to. The problem is that they don't want to go to these places. As to "why?", that's a whole 'nother question...

— Posted by yippeee1999

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3. March 5th, 2008

I'm happy to see this service extended. I know that it is not always possible to get needy people the help they deserve, but involving the

5 comments

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March 6  
147 comments

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March 5  
62 comments

**Cafeteria Workers Protest on Wall Street**

At the urging of the union Unite Here, workers for Aramark, a giant food-services company, protested outside the offices of several Wall Street financial companies where union members serve in the cafeterias.

March 5  
1 comments

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March 5  
16 comments

**A 'Call 311' Campaign to Help the Homeless**

In a new campaign, the city will now return phone calls to New Yorkers who have made reports via 311 calls on homeless individuals to update them on the status of the person.

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5:30 pm public adds one more avenue to direct outreach efforts. Bravo!  
 - Posted by nicole

4. March 5th, 2008 6:16 pm To yippee1999, post # 2 - Though you qualify your opinion with words like 'seems like' and 'I'd imagine', it's clear that you fancy yourself an authority on the subject. How did you get to be so? What specific qualifications or experiences do you have which lend any weight (ANY weight) to your assertions that 'The problem is that they don't want to go...' Are you, or have you been, homeless? Know a lot of homeless intimately? Or are you GUESSING!?! Shall we form opinions about you in the same manner?

Or are you the person who steps over homeless with the smug assurance that 'they could help themselves if they wanted to, but they are happy where they are'. Do us all a favor and spend some time with the poeple who started programs like this one: they could educate you well past your 'seemingly' narrow-minded views of the homeless. You see, they actually HAVE credentials that we respect and they assert that you are DEAD WRONG in your half-baked, self-righteous and pompous opinion.

- Posted by Michael

5. March 5th, 2008 6:23 pm Perhaps I am ignorant, but I'm confused as to how the public can identify the location of a homeless person on a moving train, which, in most cases, has no cellphone service.

I see many homeless people on trains - some are asleep, some are panhandling as the work their way through the cars. Locating these people seems like an almost impossible task given the fact that describing to a 311 operator a lightpost with a lamp out in Central Park has proven to be challenging.

Still, I'm glad for the raising of public awareness overall - and I do think it will yield results for the homeless above ground. Definitely a step in the right direction. We need a better way (or perhaps just better publicized way) of dealing with homeless folks on trains.

- Posted by Steven Kopstein

6. March 5th, 2008 6:27 pm I wish I trusted the govt. enough to believe these people would really be helped. I wouldn't want anyone calling on me.

- Posted by Elizabeth

7. March 5th, 2008 6:40 pm Kudos to the city for having a heart and involving New Yorkers in the effort to help the homeless, many of them mentally ill.

This is a progressive idea, and I hope it is consistently used for the right reasons.

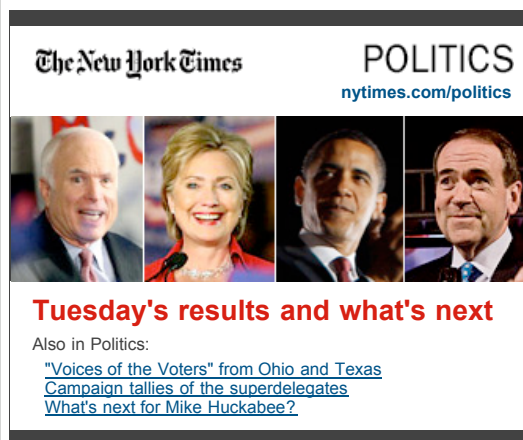
- Posted by Stacy G

8. March 5th, 2008 6:46 pm If 311 proves as efficient in helping the homeless as it does in solving other ingrained urban problems like noise the program will end up as a grand waste of time. Anyone who lives in Washington Heights and Inwood can speak volumes (pardon the pun) about the ineffectiveness of 311 calls in terms of silencing booming car stereos or an unruly bar. What makes one think they will take a call about a homeless person sleeping on a bench any more seriously?

- Posted by North of 200

9. March 5th, 2008 6:54 pm Cynical take on this: the city wants to sweep the homeless out of sight any way possible, and 311 callers get to be the eyes and ears that let them know where the inconveniently-placed indigent people are. I'd very much like to be wrong about this, but New York seems to be striving these days to be as corporate-friendly as it can - I find it hard to believe there isn't an impulse behind this to improve "quality of life" for all the yuppies moving into these luxe condos going up everywhere.

- Posted by Damian



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- 
10. March 5th, 2008 6:57 pm
- Interesting comments so far.  
 To yippee1999 - you are right that there are homeless people (not all) who know what resources are available to them. I also think it would be helpful to know what type of responses to the 311 calls are most common. The point of this program seems to be an effort to reach out and get someone in need a bed and a meal which is commendable. To Michael - stop the name calling, two of my family members have been in and off the streets for years and it's not a simple issue to understand.  
 The problem is the lack of knowledge regarding mental health and, or addiction issues and how to properly help those who are struggling. Thses are people and there is no one solution that will help everyone. But is a phone call to 311 will help someone it is a call worth making.
- Posted by Jenny
- 

11. March 5th, 2008 7:11 pm
- It's a terribly selfish way to think about this whole thing, but I would guess that there is a good amount to be said for the benefits to the caller.
- I know that when I lived in the NY/NJ area, seeing homeless people used to rip me up inside every day. There is pretty good evidence in psychological literature that a sense of control over circumstances is helpful to people in dealing with anxiety.
- Being able to call 311 and report these homeless people, and feel as if it had an effect to help them (reinforced by the later return phone call) will also be helping softies like me feel like they're not being completely callous by not doing everything in our power to help these people.
- Posted by Ted M
- 

12. March 5th, 2008 7:13 pm
- To Michael, post # 4:
- Your heavy-handed arrogance adds little to the discussion. Not only do you criticize another commenter for not establishing credentials that aren't required for having an opinion, you actually fail to establish your own.
- If you disagree with that post, you should feel free to express your views. But let's not pretend that this blog is reserved for social science policy experts.
- Posted by Josh
- 

13. March 5th, 2008 8:49 pm
- I was homeless from 1991-1997. I knew what services were available to me. Sometimes I went to a shelter, other times I didn't. It didn't matter if it was hot or cold outside. Usually I didn't like to go because I didn't want to be mugged or stabbed ( yes in a homeless shelter run by the city!!) or I just wanted to be alone on the streets. I was also homeless in other cities. New York has great services for the homeless, better than S.F. even which is reknowned for its services. I was able to pick myself up out of the gutter (literally) and clean myself up (alcoholic, drug addict) and turn my life around. Now I'm married and have a good life. But every time I see someone panhandling, I don't give them money, but I buy them a coffee and a sandwich since I know if it was me out there, I would probably use that money to buy drugs/alcohol.
- Posted by John
- 

14. March 5th, 2008 9:17 pm
- I agree with the above mentioned comments from North of 200 in regards to the fact that 311 can't and won't even properly much less efficiently handle noise complaints. Therefore, how in the world can they possibly face the issue of reports of homeless people (especially those who are mentally ill)? It sounds great on paper but putting in reality seems too far fetched.
- Posted by Victoria
- 

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15. March 5th, 2008 9:41 pm  
No matter what effort it takes, even a phone call, might be helpful. It's such a heartbreaking part of life in the city. Especially when there's so much abundance and so many able bodied men and women who want to drain the resources set aside to help people who really need it.  
— Posted by Kathleen

16. March 6th, 2008 1:55 am  
Living in a developing country like India and seeing scores of homeless people everyday to the point of numbing my social conscience, from an Indian's perspective, the whole "311" service seems so overwhelming, out of the world, almost like a piece of fiction so much so that its a little unsettling to find people critical of this service. Leaving aside the socio-cultural differences between the two countries, which I profess ignorance on and being cognisant of the dualism in very issue, despite detractors crying foul that "311" is clearing up "ugly blotches" from the NY streets and people might be homeless out of choice, in which case we have no right to report them, barring those few cases where the service might fall flat, I feel it would help to turn around a lot of people's lives and give them a better shot at life. Also its a little saddening to know from a homeless person's comment that he couldn't take shelter for fear of getting stabbed, that a service started with such noble intentions could falter on its implementation. Still I'm positive that in the eventual maturing of the service the rough edges would be ironed out and it truly benefits the homeless and the program becomes so much of a success that it would someday inspire the government in my country to replicate a similar service.  
Until then kudos to New York for having this service in place; proving yet again the maxim that a big metropolis has a place for everyone rich or poor, weak or strong. I fully appreciate the value of this service as I myself have tumbled upon scores of homeless women, children and men in despicable conditions with the canopy of the sky as the only roof above their heads and yet with gross apathy, I had to leave them resigned to their fate because of a lack of system in place to support them.  
— Posted by Adhikari

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