

▶ BUILDING CAPACITY



Darryl Booth, MBA

Three Health Departments Build Capacity by Leveraging Partners and Existing Datasets

Editor's Note: A need exists within environmental health agencies to increase their capacity to perform in an environment of diminishing resources. With limited resources and increasing demands, we need to seek new approaches to the business of environmental health.

Acutely aware of these challenges, NEHA has initiated a partnership with Accela (formerly Decade Software Company) called *Building Capacity*. *Building Capacity* is a joint effort to educate, reinforce, and build upon successes within the profession, using technology to improve efficiency and extend the impact of environmental health agencies.

The *Journal* is pleased to publish this bimonthly column from Accela that will provide readers with insight into the *Building Capacity* initiative, as well as be a conduit for fostering the capacity building of environmental health agencies across the country.

The conclusions of this column are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of NEHA.

Darryl Booth is senior vice president and general manager of environmental health at Accela and has been monitoring regulatory and data tracking needs of agencies across the U.S. for almost 20 years. He serves as technical advisor to NEHA's informatics and technology section.

I'd like to take this opportunity to laud three health departments leveraging data, technology, and their partners across the profession to build capacity.

Mutual Aid Agreements Help San Bernardino, California, Rebuild Capacity

As much as we may try, we are rarely ever completely prepared for disruptive, business altering events. Staff may leave for illness, accidents, pregnancy, vacation—these are events that can be managed. But what

about the unknowable, the unthinkable? We are all aware of the violent events that took place in San Bernardino on December 2, 2015. Roughly 35% of San Bernardino's environmental health services staff were injured or killed that day, leaving critical positions empty and domain knowledge lost. Those not injured were impacted in other ways. As of May 2016, nearly 50% of the staff are not yet back to work or working full time.

San Bernardino is utilizing mutual aid agreements with neighboring counties. About 27 people are on loan from Riverside,

Orange, Los Angeles, Contra Costa, Marin, Ventura, Madera, and San Luis Obispo counties, says Corwin Porter, assistant director for San Bernardino's Department of Public Health. The fact that all these agencies use the same data management system made onboarding the new agents easier.

Not only has the extra help been vital in getting critical department work done, it's also given the agency the breathing room to absorb and respond to the absences, and to carefully begin filling the open positions.

About 25 new health inspectors hired in the last six months have completed training and are ready to be put to work. "As a result, we're starting to stand up on our own again, which is really nice," said Porter. "We still have a lot of help, but it's positive. We're moving in the right direction."

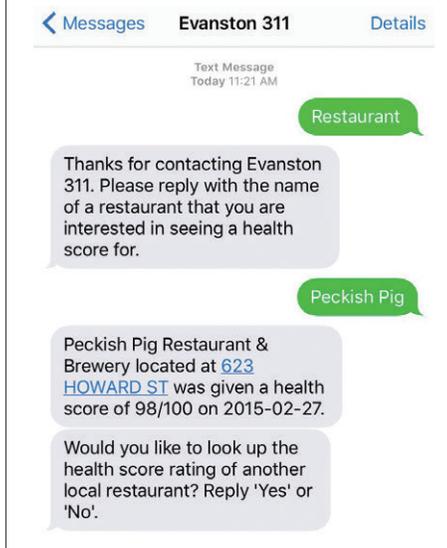
Obviously San Bernardino's circumstances are tremendous and upsetting. The concept of mutual aid agreements, however, is a useful and cost effective way for health departments, in the spirit of partnership and mutual benefit and support, to share resources and knowledge for improved efficiency.

Evanston, Illinois, Builds Capacity by Leveraging Yelp Data in 311 Texting Service

The city of Evanston didn't sit back and rest easy after completing a project to make their restaurant inspection data available to Yelp.com, the popular consumer review site. The city had just launched a 311 nonemergency texting app and began considering ways to integrate the restaurant scores more fluidly through the service. The 311 app, however, required staff on the other end to respond to those requests.

FIGURE 1

Phone Screenshot of Evanston's 311 Restaurant Score Texting Service



“So, that began the exploration of, ‘well, wouldn’t it be cool if we could text the restaurant name to 311 and automatically get the inspection score back?’” Erika Storlie, Evanston’s deputy manager, told GovTech.com. “It kind of came from the fact that we were using these two different types of technologies and we wanted to marry them.”

The resulting functionality is delightfully simple. Residents text “restaurant” or “food” to the city’s 311 number and an automated message asks them to name the restaurant. Seconds later, the restaurant location, score, and inspection date come back (Figure 1). As many health departments seek to further engage with their constituents, this effort

strikes me as a relatively simple and effective touchpoint for health departments to leverage. It also helps “fill out” the robustness of a locality’s 311 service.

“We obviously do inspections for compliance and to ensure safety,” Storlie said. “It just made sense to us to make that data available to people in a way that might be meaningful to them.”

“The service has been used hundreds of times. Citizens love this service because you can do it right from your phone and via SMS,” adds Luke Stowe, Evanston’s digital services manager. “The user doesn’t need to go digging on a city Web site. We’ve received positive feedback, but we want greater adoption and plan to promote it more heavily in coming months.”

Sacramento, California, Draws on External Sources of Data to Build Capacity

Sacramento County Environmental Management Department (EMD) has come up with a clever and low-effort way to identify businesses that may need to be permitted by the department by drawing on easily accessible and accurate external sources of data. In California, Certified Unified Program Agencies (CUPAs) work to manage hazardous materials. As the local CUPA, Sacramento EMD continuously works to identify all the new local facilities and businesses that may store hazardous materials.

“We are trying to leverage as many sources of data as we can,” says Ryan Bailey, deputy chief of the Environmental Compliance Division. “We used to give the Building Department a paper survey for them to pass on to building permit applicants so we could figure out what hazardous materials they’d have. The form said, ‘Do you or will you store haz-

ardous materials, or will you generate hazardous waste?’ We discovered, though, that when you ask people that question, they may not be fully educated that they are generating hazardous waste and unfortunately, if they marked no, then that record would not make it to us and we were unaware of this potentially dangerous situation.”

Now an automated report generated by the Building Department’s software vendor gives Bailey’s team a list for staff to go through. The department also purchases a list of new businesses from the local *Business Journal* to search for similar information. The *Business Journal*’s list contains information from all seven cities in the county, plus county unincorporated areas.

“The *Business Journal* list covers both the city and county, so there is a bit of overlap from the Building Department’s list,” notes Bailey. “We don’t mind because we want to be thorough. We know that the list is active and fresh, only new businesses.”

Once identified, department staff move into action, contacting or visiting the business to assess their need for a CUPA permit.

“We want to make the best use of our time. Both of these lists have helped us identify the right people, early. We get address, business type, name, phone number ... rather than spending staff time hunting and pecking for new businesses, or visiting our colleagues at each city and county department in Sacramento, we have a list that comes to us.”

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