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Gale A. Brewer, Borough President

**Testimony of Gale A. Brewer, Manhattan Borough President
Regarding New York City 311 Data Use and Collection New York City
Council Committee on Technology
November 18, 2014**

My name is Lucille K. Songhai; I am Director of Community Affairs for the Manhattan Borough President Gale A. Brewer. I would like to thank Chairman Vacca and the members of the Committee on Technology for holding this hearing and allowing me the opportunity to speak about the ways our office is utilizing 311 data. The Borough President believes that using 311 is a great direct tool for citizens to engage with city departments and to accurately reflect the delivery of and problems related to city services. For many city residents, 311 is a direct line to city agencies working in conjunction with elected officials, local community boards and civic organizations to solve pressing needs.

A few weeks back, The Manhattan Borough President testified in front of this same committee on Local Law 11 of 2012, the Open Data Law. As part of her testimony, she explained her belief in Community Boards being the perfect incubator for teaching citizens how to engage with available data collected by 311. Community Boards play an important role in dealing with quality of life issues. They hear the direct complaints from neighborhood residents and are the first point of contact for citizens wanting to be active and make a difference. Our office sees the future of Community Board members using data from 311 to help shape and influence decisions that impact their neighborhoods, from development proposals to crime reduction strategies. Manhattan Borough President Gale Brewer, sees a need to equip Boards with the capacity to use city datasets for decision making. Just last week, our office hosted a leadership session with the Department of City Planning to teach Community Board members how to use community planning resources and mapping tools. It is

the Borough President's goal to train and provide technical assistance to give Boards the best platform to highlight the needs of their communities.

Currently, our office is training 14 CUNY Service Corps members on the use of the Open Data Portal and has been impressed by how quickly they have learned how to use the data. They have mapped everything from prevalence of heat complaints to excessive noise calls and have tracked complaints about non-functioning muni meters. They have mapped information that reflects many of the constituent service calls our office receives daily from residents in Lower Manhattan to Northern Manhattan. We are encouraged by how quickly they have learned the Portal and see them as budding civic technologists who can help to teach others. This opens up different paths as young people see the ability to solve our city's ills by first being able to identify what the needs are. As the Service Corps members begin working with Community Boards, we expect their fluency to continue to grow and to begin to see correlations between 311 data and the complaints they will encounter from residents contacting their Community Boards.

Many of our CUNY Service Corps were unaware of the Open Data Portal's existence before they began working for our office. Their fresh eyes have begun to point out ways to make 311 more user friendly and to accurately reflect problems being reported. The Manhattan Borough President believes that as we are moving forward and using available data to inform and shape policy, there needs to be an emphasis on ensuring collected data is comprehensive and accurate.

While exploring 311, Service Corps members have observed a large number of 311 requests that are in the system as *pending* but have been closed out by a city department after it has been referred to them. Yet the problem has not been resolved or the complaint's shelf life has had a long extension of a year or more. There should be consistency and clarity regarding how complaints are processed and the length of time needed to find a solution. Students also mentioned the lack of consistency in complaint names. While it can be valuable to have more detailed categories for certain violations like noise, it is essential that there be consistency in the naming so we can get an accurate sense of neighborhood issues. It all comes down to accuracy and consistency. Transparency plays an important role in making sure citizens continue to see the benefits of utilizing 311 services. Every piece of information collected from 311 online or via a phone call acts as public record and we should hold city agencies accountable for their response.

Another example includes a dataset attached to this testimony that is supposed to reflect complaints that have come out of Manhattan Community Board 1 from September to November 2014. When mapped, the complaints show points in Lower Manhattan but also show complaints in Northern Manhattan as well. This may be a small issue, one that can easily be solved by DoITT but continuing to work out the inconsistencies within the system bolsters the accountability of 311 and the trust people have when acquiring and using information from its datasets.

Another important observation from our Service Corps is about 311 not capturing NYCHA data. If NYCHA complaints are missing from 311, then this is a grave disservice to NYCHA residents whose concerns and issues are not being represented and fairly evaluated. While we know that NYCHA handles its complaints from residents using their own internal system, there can be greater opportunity for NYCHA and non-NYCHA residents alike to have a more complete picture of what is happening in their neighborhood. There potentially could be information that could even prove useful to other city departments to assist in closing open cases. A special code could be devised that allows for 311 agents to continue to send NYCHA complaints directly to the housing agency but still allow for it to be reflected in their system. As of right now, gathered datasets are not including NYCHA issues which means a large amount of data related to one of the city's largest departments is not transparent to the public.

As we continue to see data as a powerful ally to inform how we solve problems, there are now new applications that work alongside 311. Apps such as PublicStuff and See Click Fix offer new ways for citizens to make 311 type requests. We should be doing all we can within our power as local government to encourage access to 311's system for these engagement apps to make it much easier for everyone to communicate and get a response back when they see a local problem in need of a solution. The Manhattan Borough President is committed to working with City Council and the Administration to be responsive to the needs of New Yorkers and our office looks forward to future advances in the 311 system and beyond that can make this happen. Thank you for the opportunity to testify on the Manhattan Borough President's behalf.