

# Thanks for calling 311; please stay on the line... if you have nothing else to do today

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*Call wait times for the 311 service surged to an average of 11 minutes and 42 seconds in 2021, up from 2:56 in 2019 and 5:27 in 2020, according to a new city report.*

Jon Reimann has figured out a way to avoid lengthy wait times for service from 311.

Don't bother.

The Mission Gardens resident said he's pretty much given up on the city's central phone access system after waiting 45 minutes on one 311 call and waiting three to five days per email response for the same issue. He began that quest in 2020 in the hopes of getting the city to prune a boulevard tree that was at risk of losing large limbs, which he feared might fall and damage private property.

The mission took about 13 months to complete.

He's taking a different approach now, and it involves waving a white flag.

"If I ever have a problem again with the tree I'm going to cut it myself, he said. "If, the odd time my garbage doesn't get picked up, I'll just take the couple bags and take it to work now instead of dealing with calling 311.

"I've given up on the 311 system. It's impractical."

The 311 service is meant to be a convenient first point of contact for residents to file complaints or request information about city services. But call wait times surged to an average of 11 minutes and 42 seconds in 2021, up from 2:56 in 2019 and 5:27 in 2020, according to a new city report. The average amount of time spent to handle each call also rose, from 5:13 in 2019 to 6:14 in 2021.

The lengthy wait times are linked to more complex calls, frequent staff turnover and an increased number of email and social media interactions that 311 agents must also answer, said Felicia Wiltshire, the city's communications director.

"Staff turnover is still high at 311 right now.... We're going to look at streamlining that hiring process so we can hire on a more regular basis," said Wiltshire.

For years, some councillors have complained about staff shortages at 311 and urged the city to enhance the service. There were 105 full-time 311 positions in 2019. That number has since fallen to 72.

While the report shares call data to the end of 2021, Coun. Shawn Nason said the wait may be even longer now.

"I had multiple contacts from residents saying (they) sat on the line for 45 minutes (or) two hours... and then they hung up and phoned me because they'd had enough," said Nason.

He said long waits for answers often lead councillors to serve as "de facto 311," which takes away time from other city council work.

Nason said the latest report shows the city is falling far short on customer service.

"These stats that were provided in the report show that the system is broken," he said.

Wiltshire noted that wait times can vary widely from the average. The longest wait thus far in 2022 was two hours and 21 minutes on March 19, and it can also take two weeks for 311 to respond to emails, she acknowledged.

Coun. Janice Lukes said technology upgrades are greatly needed to ensure 311 operators can quickly communicate with all city departments and access key information, which she expects would help reduce the wait.

"If the technology is not (in place) you can (hire) on as many people as you want but... it's not going to solve the problem," said Lukes. "We have amazing 311 operators but they're just going to get frustrated because they can't (quickly) produce the answers for the residents."

Wiltshire noted several steps are being taken to speed up the system, including the addition of more online request forms that can prevent residents from having to phone in their requests.

To better retain staff, the city is reviewing the starting wage for entry-level 311 positions and flexible work-from-home options. Staff could soon also be allowed to cut off communications after a warning when a caller uses abusive language.

Meanwhile, the 311@winnipeg.ca email address to file requests will likely be eliminated. The report notes online forms that outline the exact information needed to complete each type of request have proven to be more efficient by other cities.

"When someone emails us, they email us what they think we need but there's often a lot of back-and-forth because we need other information from them.... You cannot submit an online form without all the information completed, so it just makes it more expedient for everybody," said Wiltshire.

Winnipeg isn't currently considering a chatbot, she said; efforts to develop one over the past two years failed to work with the city's outdated website.

The city is also working on an online dashboard that would provide residents "real-time" 311 wait lengths, talk times and "call drivers." And a redevelopment of its website should also support more automated features.