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## **Project Outline**

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### **Statement of Need**

While the quality of and access to city services has improved, data from the Public Advocate's Ombudsman Hotline and 311 shows that New York City residents continue to experience problems with government services. Additionally, when service problems are resolved, it is usually on an individual basis, leaving countless other city residents to face the same problems.

One of the reasons this dilemma exists is because New York City does not have a system to comprehensively measure the quality and effectiveness of city services, identify root causes of service problems, and thereby achieve sustainable solutions. Also the city does not evaluate service satisfaction among residents, a fact that further impedes improvement in the delivery of services.

Some programs examine city services but are limited in their ability to diagnose problems and propose solutions. They include:

- Local officials from around the city coordinate advocacy groups and neighborhood activists, but none analyze city-wide service needs and the underlying causes of complaints.
- Borough Presidents call together community boards and non-profit groups for roundtable discussions of local issues. But, these groups are limited in scope and geography, and fail to identify long-term city-wide solutions.
- The mayor's Office of Operations collects data on street cleanliness and runs Capstat, which measure agency performance, but these programs are based on indicators or measurements the agencies define, not information reported by the public. No city programs examine root causes of problems.
- 311 has improved individual residents' ability to log complaints, but it is unable to measure the service needs or satisfaction of residents because information comes from a self-selecting group of complainants whose service problems do not fully represent the needs of the greater city population. Furthermore, 311 is not set up to identify root-cause solutions.

For example, if residents of several neighborhoods have a problem with dirty streets and call 311, the Department of Sanitation will clean their streets. However, the root cause of the dirty streets will not be addressed and the problem is likely to persist.

On the other hand, if a needs assessment is conducted, the city will learn that the problem in one neighborhood may be that the garbage cans are not big enough; in another the Department of Sanitation may need to change its pick-up schedule; in a third, small businesses may not have organized a commercial sanitation pick-up. This additional information would enable the city to understand the root causes of street cleanliness problems across neighborhoods and help tailor long-term solutions, like having the department of Small Business Services help businesses coordinate commercial pick-ups.

The Public Advocate is in the unique position to act as a true, impartial assessor of city services and is therefore the city-wide office best situated to analyze and measure city service needs and problems and identify long-term solutions.

## **The Public Advocacy Project Proposal**

The Public Advocate proposes to create the Public Advocacy Project to engage civic leaders and New York City residents in improving government's understanding of city service problems and thus increase its ability to develop long-term solutions. The Project, which consists of a Civic Leader Board and a Citizen Satisfaction Survey, is the first of its kind in New York City.

The Project will engage civic leaders and residents via focus groups, surveys, and flash-polls. A random sample of 3500 residents will participate in a city service satisfaction survey. Civic leaders from across the city will use their experience and expertise to determine the root-causes of problems identified by residents and propose solutions which will diminish chances for a recurrence.

The Office of the Public Advocate and the City University of New York Baruch College's Survey Research Unit, will conduct research on all city services to identify those most in need of improvement. For example, the project may identify that residents are dissatisfied with senior services. Residents and leaders will further identify whether the problems exist within senior centers, services for the homebound, and/or services to protect the elderly, and propose solutions based on their experiences and understandings of the service problems.

The Office of the Public Advocate will use the information generated from The Project to develop a research and advocacy agenda and will work collaboratively with The Administration and city agencies to address service problems. The Project will ensure that problems identified by civic leaders and residents receive the attention they deserve and that solutions are formulated accordingly.

The Project advances the Office of the Public Advocate's mandate to act as the city's quality assurance monitor over the delivery of public services. Data generated from surveys will help city agencies provide more effective and efficient services. In addition, this data will arm civic leaders with information they can use to better advocate for their constituencies.

## **Civic Leader Board**

The Public Advocate's Office will select 250 civic leaders with extensive experience serving communities throughout New York City. These leaders represent diverse geographic, demographic and socioeconomic communities. They also represent: civic, tenant and block associations, local business organizations, religious and community-based organizations, parent groups, social service agencies, cultural groups, and more. The Board provides The Project with a depth and breadth of experience that makes it uniquely capable of fulfilling its mission of analyzing and recommending improvements to city services.

Appointed Board members meet annually at a half-day conference, facilitated by Baruch College's School of Public Affairs. The meeting features interactive focus groups to identify common service problems and those not frequently discussed, opening up new dialogues in policy-making.

For example, several neighborhoods throughout the five boroughs flood every year. While the city provides clean-up services following the floods, it has failed to seek sustainable solutions to prevent the flooding. Civic Leader Board members would identify the causes of the flooding problem and help pinpoint potential solutions for each of the neighborhoods affected. Civic leaders might also highlight other hidden problems, such as cuts to services for children with special needs, or environmental concerns like water quality.

A Citizen Satisfaction Survey (see below) will be created using information on service problems identified by civic leaders at the annual meeting. Citizen Satisfaction Survey results will serve as a basis for quarterly in-depth surveys of civic leaders that further investigate specific service problems and potential solutions. For example, one in-depth survey could focus on sanitation and transportation issues, another in-depth survey could focus on youth and education services.

Civic Leader Board members will also engage in flash-polls, which are conducted to determine their opinions of changes to city services and policies. When the city announces a policy or program change, such as the recent cell phone ban in public schools, the Board will provide feedback through a flash-poll. The Public Advocate will thus gain greater insight into how the issues of the day are affecting New Yorkers, enabling the Public Advocate's office to advocate more effectively for constituents.

Findings from the in-depth surveys and flash-polls will be discussed with the Administration and appropriate city agencies and shared with Civic Leader Board members, who will be encouraged to use the data as an advocacy tool.

## **Citizen Satisfaction Survey**

The Office of the Public Advocate and Baruch College will design and implement a scientifically sound telephone survey of 3,500 randomly selected New York City residents. As mentioned above, the survey will be developed from information on city services gathered at the annual Civic Leader Board meeting.

The Citizen Satisfaction Survey should not be confused with the more common public opinion polling conducted by groups like Pace, Quinnipiac, and others that focus on quality of life, not city service issues. The significant sample size of the Citizen Satisfaction Survey will also allow for an in-depth analysis of effected subgroups such as public school parents, the elderly, racial and ethnic groups, and neighborhood clusters in a way that the more common opinion polls cannot.

Results from the survey will provide city government with a clear, comprehensive picture of how residents feel about services and what they need and want. No survey of this kind is currently being conducted by New York City government (this type of survey was previously conducted under City Council Speaker Vallone in 2000 and 2001. Municipalities that currently conduct resident surveys to evaluate the quality of services include Miami, Detroit, San Francisco, San Diego, and many more).

After the first year the annual Citizen Satisfaction Survey will track data changes, providing the Office with information on improvements/deterioration of services, as well as new concerns.

Findings from the Citizen Satisfaction Survey will be discussed with The Administration and appropriate city agencies and shared with Civic Leader Board members.

## Program Development

- Appoint Civic Leader Board participants using neighborhood information and organizations (August – September 2006)
- Arrange annual meeting at Baruch's School of Public Affairs (October 2006)  
The half-day session will feature
  - Instant response technology to track participant opinions of the most commonly used city services
  - Focus groups to identify other service delivery problems
  - Group discussion of service problems identified in focus groups
- Develop random sample citizen satisfaction survey and collect and analyze data (estimated January 2007)
- Develop In-depth quarterly survey for the Civic Leader Board working with CUNY's Baruch College to draft questions, distribute surveys, and analyze responses (estimated to start March 2007)
- Create and Distribute flash polls and analyze results (estimated to start November 2007)
- Produce materials including:
  - Project Web page design and copy in association with the Public Advocate's Website

### **About The Office of the Public Advocate**

According to the City Charter, the Public Advocate “shall review complaints of a recurring and multiborough or city-wide nature relating to services and programs, and make proposals to improve the city’s response to such complaints.”

The Office currently helps approximately 12,000 individuals each year access city services through its ombudsman hotline. The Office helps countless more New Yorkers by advocating for reform of policies and programs. Recent successes in citywide reforms include improving access to special education services and reducing enrollment barriers to the food stamp program.

The Office of the Public Advocate has the ability to make tangible differences in the lives of constituents by investigating and publicizing issues of concern, and sponsoring legislation to produce change.

### **About The Fund for Public Advocacy**

Betsy Gotbaum created the not-for-profit Fund for Public Advocacy (The Fund) to help support the mission of the Public Advocate, make city government more accessible, and support innovation in government. The Project is an initiative of The Fund.

### **About Baruch College Survey Research Unit**

Baruch College’s Survey Research Unit, housed in the School of Public Affairs, has a track record of conducting large-scale research for government agencies and nonprofit institutions on a wide range of public affairs topics. Combining a state-of-the-art telephone center with the expertise of Baruch faculty and graduate students, the Survey Research Unit specializes in careful, objective survey research on policy-relevant issues at both the local and national level.