

Application Title:

South Carolina Department of Consumer Affairs – Online Consumer Complaint Filing System

NASCIO Category:

Digital Government: Government to Citizens

Project Initiation Date: 2009

Project Completion Date: November 20, 2013

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Executive Summary

The Online Consumer Complaint Filing System is offered by the SC Department of Consumer Affairs. After creating a Complaint System account, consumers can submit, and businesses can respond to complaints electronically. The Consumer Complaint System also functions as a public information tool, allowing consumers, media and other interested parties to search complaints on businesses of interest. The Consumer Complaint Filing System replaced all of the current systems and processes and is used to process and track all new complaints.

The Complaint Filing System offers quick and easy submission, tracking, and searching. Users can:

- Expedite the complaint process through online submissions
- Submit comments to assigned DCA complaint analysts
- Monitor the status of a complaint with 24/7 system access
- Research complaints

The application incorporates responsive design, which means the application view conforms to any device – desktop, laptop and mobile devices.

“The complaint system provides consumers and businesses alike, with a more streamlined and expeditious complaint process,” said Donna Backwinkel, Director of Consumer Services and Education. “System features also allow for in depth “quality control” reviews, resulting in greater accountability and productivity.”

The improved online service was awarded a 2014 Digital Government Achievement Award for its innovation, functionality, and efficiency. More than 60 percent of consumer complaints are now submitted through the online system instead of the manual paper process from the past. Online submissions are resolved 50 percent faster. The delay normally experienced from having to mail in filings and communicate through paper-based systems is eliminated.

The Online Consumer Complaint Filing system replaced the existing paper-based system and complaint back-end system with a new Web-based system for managing new and existing complaint filings. Operational efficiencies gained include reduced staff time spent processing a complaint and responding to consumer and business inquiries and ease of access to information. The Services Division’s copier usage is down 33% and postage use is down 25%.

By providing this application through the SC.gov partnership, DCA benefited from a cost avoidance of \$404,000.

3. Business Problem and Solution

Problem Statement

The Department of Consumer Affairs had several objectives in mind when initiating this project.

1. Migrate paper functions to online
 - a. The paper based filing of complaints was slow and costly. On average, the agency processes nearly 5,000 complaints annually.
 - b. Consumers submitted complaints and agency analysts sent a postcard back to the consumer to acknowledge receipt of the complaint.
 - c. Complaints were handled by mail and fax correspondence between the consumers, the agency and the businesses.
 - d. Agency staff would have to copy, label and store filings.
2. Reduce total time to achieve resolution
 - a. Complaints took, on average, 45-55 days to resolve and close.
3. Provide increased transparency and improve the customer experience
 - a. It was necessary for consumers to call the agency office during business hours to inquire about the complaint status. The agency received nearly 25,000 calls annually.
 - b. Consumers did not have easy access to information about filed or resolved complaints against businesses. When the complaint is resolved or closed, the information is keyed into a database and the file is physically stored. Consumers and businesses did not have a way to search filed complaints. Consumers could contact DCA to inquire about a business.

The end goals of the project were simple and clear: 1) improve consumer interaction through convenience and enhance the communication process between involved parties leading to quicker resolution or closing times and 2) reduce the amount of paper-based complaints which would then reduce the manual labor involved in processing consumer complaints and reduce agency expenses related to processing complaints. DCA saw the need to have a responsively designed Web application that would allow citizens access to information and conveniently work with the agency and businesses to submit and resolve complaints.

Solution

The SC DCA Online Consumer Complaint System was implemented in November 2013. This solution is fully customized to meet the needs, processes and statutes related to consumer complaints handled by the DCA and therefore it is the best solution. The DCA/SC.gov partnership outlines joint responsibility for the project scope, oversight and outcomes.

The Complaint Filing System offers quick and easy submission, tracking, and searching.

Users can now:

- Expedite the complaint process through online submissions
- Submit comments to assigned SCDCA complaint analysts
- Monitor the status of a complaint with 24/7 system access

- Research complaints

The agency goals were realized when the Department of Consumer Affairs in partnership with SC.gov launched the Complaint Filing system by replacing the existing paper-based system and complaint back-end system with a new Web-based system for managing new and existing complaint filings. The new Web-based application is available 24/7 and designed responsively. It allows the consumer to submit a complaint filing online, the business to respond and interact with the consumer and a public interface to view and search complaints and information about businesses.

The Consumer Complaint Filing System replaced all of the current systems and processes. After creating a Complaint System account, consumers can submit, and businesses can respond to complaints electronically. The Consumer Complaint System also functions as a public information tool, allowing consumers, media and other interested parties to search complaints on businesses of interest.

The application incorporates responsive design, which means the application view conforms to any device – desktop, laptop and mobile devices. The new system provides an in-house filing and reporting system as well as document management.

Since the user base for this application is very broad, all technology used in this application is focused on enhancing the user experience.

The SC DCA applications are supported by two (2) servers. The current environment uses one of the servers to serve the applications, while the other is a dedicated SQL server. Microsoft's Active Directory is used to manage SC DCA, consumer, and business user accounts. The application was written in C#, utilizing the Microsoft .NET framework.

To aid with responsive design and general user experience, plugins such as Modernizr were used, in addition to custom-written plugins for auto-tab, expand-on-click, and word counting features.

The database is maintained by SC.gov, and SC DCA has been provided with many productivity and status reports in order to view relevant data in order to streamline their processes.

Security, Accessibility and Privacy:

1. All applications within which sensitive data is transmitted are performed using the Secure Socket Layer (SSL) protocol using the registered SSL certificate. This application does not require sensitive data/PII to process a complaint therefore, this data is not collected.
2. All web pages and applications reside on internal servers behind firewalls and appropriate security systems.
3. Data for this application is stored using a secured SQL database.

4. Each page has a time limit placed upon it, watching for inactivity. When the time limit is exceeded without any activity occurring, the page will force the user to log out automatically in order to protect data.
5. The cross-browser compatible coding and responsive design allows the application to be accessible from multiple devices and browsers.
6. All pages meet Section 508 accessibility, W3C and HTML 4.01 standards.
7. Users are able to create a personal account, which allows them to have direct access to their complaint providing privacy.
8. Information made available to the public is summarized and does not display personal information of the parties involved in the complaint.

DCA along with SC.gov collaboratively worked to promote the application. DCA actively announced for several months that a new online complaint filing system was going to be implemented and communicated the application and process enhancement to their consumers and businesses. The DCA web site was used to assist in increasing public awareness of the availability for the complaint filing system when the application was launched and is prominently featured on the agency web site.

DCA and SC.gov issued a national press release in January 2014 announcing the new online service and its benefits and features. DCA held a press conference that included a live demonstration of the online complaint filing system. The conference and demonstration was televised on many local news segments and local morning shows in early January. SC.gov actively promoted the availability of the new online service through SC.gov's social media channels. DCA engaged in outreach to make other state agencies that refer complaints to DCA aware of the new system.

4. Significance

Beneficiaries: Citizens, Business and Government

Consumers and businesses benefit from a publicly accessible automated filing system that allows for increased transparency. This unique application provides consumers and businesses an opportunity to open a dialogue about a complaint in an online system that is accessible 24/7 and to receive email notification when updates are made to the complaint. DCA receives approximately 25,000 calls each year and these calls have been reduced now that the online system allows consumers to view the status of their complaint and to message their complaint analyst through the system.

There was no way to do a public search on previously filed complaints. The public information tool now allows users to search filed complaints by business name and increases transparency to consumers. In addition, through the use of responsive design, the application is mobile friendly for all users. Complaints can be viewed, filed, and responded to as easily from a smart phone as from a desktop.

The online system is now the centralized database for storing complaints and responses thus replacing the paper-based system. This has allowed DCA to better utilize resources within their office and the complaint filing processing and resolution has been more rapid. DCA staff has been able to reduce the time spent copying,

labeling and following up with consumers and businesses to resolve complaints as a result of the new online system. The online system has increased the ease of access to information available to DCA analysts. If DCA is unable to handle a complaint, they are also given an opportunity to refer the complaint to any agency that is configured in the system.

The Department of Consumer Affairs was able to accomplish three strategic goals by providing this online service: reduce costs, improve communication between consumers and businesses and provide users with effective around the clock service.

Innovation resulting in improved government operations: Many states provide an online form for filing consumer complaints. This form can be submitted online, emailed, faxed or mailed to the governing agency. The South Carolina Consumer Complaint Filing System is the only known system that allows a consumer to file any type of complaint, a business to respond, the state agency to follow the entire process and act as a mediator electronically. Furthermore, the public can search and view past complaints for no fee.

The Consumer Complaint Filing System is a best of breed solution and a model for similar systems going forward. The agency has the ability to configure complaint categories, add referral agencies and modify letter templates. The system offers a multitude of agency reports as well as ad-hoc reporting functionality. The solution is based on business, policy, and technical challenges that were presented. This cutting-edge Complaint Filing System is a great example of DCA's efforts in leveraging resources to increase efficiency and productivity- saving time and money for the state. This solution is a model for other agencies that are responsible for intake and resolution of complaints and may be leveraged by other SC state agencies as well as government entities outside of SC.

The Online Consumer Complaint System is heavily used by the citizens, businesses and DCA. Since implementation, 5500 complaints have been processed. DCA is able to provide better customer self-service options and benefits from the operational efficiencies and cost savings.

5. Benefits of the Project

Benefit to Citizens and Businesses: DCA's online Complaint System offers quick and easy submission, tracking, and searching around the clock. Online adoption is 60%.

Consumers and businesses can file and respond to complaints at their convenience 24/7. Users who choose to file a complaint online are taken step-by-step through the filing process to ensure accurate and efficient filings. Help notes and examples are provided on-screen and users immediately receive confirmation of the complaint filing. Email notices are sent when the complaint is assigned and when another party makes any comments or changes, approval, rejection and when there is an update. Complaint parties are able to submit appropriate comments and/or questions to the opposing party. Previously, with the mail-in system complaint parties were at the discretion of DCA to become informed of the opposing party's response or concerns. This is a self-

service approach for data collection, validation, and back-end processing of complaint filings and searches.

Complaints that were averaging 45-55 days to resolve can now be completed much quicker. Complaints submitted online are now resolved on average 50% faster than before the online system. One of the first complaints submitted through the online system was resolved within a matter of hours.

Public Information: Users can search to see how many complaints have been filed against a business as well as the nature and closing status of the complaints.

Benefits to the State: DCA can better utilize resources within their office and the complaint filing processing and resolution has been more rapid. The streamlining of complaints allows staff to more thoroughly identify all potential issues underlying each complaint, including legal violations engaged in by a business. The ability to better focus on each complaint has also resulted in more personalized, attentive service to consumers and businesses.

The in-house filing tool allows DCA staff to quickly enter complaints submitted by paper. The complaint can then be responded to by the business electronically. The DCA operational benefits include the reduction of staff time spent processing complaints, copying, labeling and storing complaints. DCA staff has been better able to manage their caseload as communication is now handled electronically rather than by paper correspondence. The online system has increased the ease of access to information available to DCA analysts. DCA receives approximately 25,000 calls each year and these calls have been reduced now that the online system allows consumers to view the status of their complaint. The in-house system also provides the agency with user management functionality and various reporting functions.

DCA has experienced the following cost savings:

- 1. Copier costs have decreased by 33%**
- 2. Supplies-** Filings are now entered into the in-house system instead of creating a paper file to be labeled and stored. As a result of the new system, DCA no longer creates paper files. The Division's file room and cabinets will no longer be needed by 2017, after the exhaustion of the record retention period for paper complaints received prior to the launch of the new online system.
- 3. Postage usage has decreased 25%-** the agency is sending fewer postcards and letter correspondence as a result of the online system

Financial: This web-based application was built and is maintained at no cost to taxpayers through a partnership between the Department of Consumer Affairs and South Carolina Interactive, doing business as SC.gov. By providing this application through the SC.gov partnership, DCA benefited from a cost avoidance of \$404,000 for initial development. The cost avoidance will continue to grow as ongoing maintenance and any future enhancements will continue to be provided through the SC.gov partnership.