

Community Hotlines

Community hotlines provide a means for concerned citizens and agencies to contact the appropriate authority when they see stormwater problems, or have ideas about water quality issues. A hotline can be in the form of a toll-free telephone number or an email. In addition, it could be an online forum. A typical call might report a leaking truck, concrete wash-out dumped on the street, paint in a creek, or sediment running off of a construction site. A hotline can serve as a link between the citizens and their government. It also can be a great way to catch illegal polluters or to stop accidental spills that might otherwise go unnoticed. Certain hotline calls may require a site visit. The caller may also want to be notified of what action is being taken regarding the call, so a report back procedure may be necessary.

Determine whether a hotline is needed

Some questions to help you decide if a hotline would help your community include:

- Does the city receive frequent phone calls for information about water issues?
- Are there frequent complaints?
- Are there any new ordinances or regulations?
- Does the city currently use a "hit or miss approach?" (whoever picks up the phone deals it)
- Can the city allocate resources to respond to complaints?

Conduct Cost comparisons

Conduct a cost comparison between a person, a message, or an e-mail presence for the hotline. Cost estimates can be obtained by comparing the costs of training city staff and using a professional hotline service. Municipalities can obtain specific information about establishing and running a hotline by interviewing contractors who specialize in operating hotlines. In addition, most long distance telephone companies may be able to help you with an answering system.

Choose type of hotline

We suggest a phone hotline to start. An email hotline will not be as accessible. If resources do not allow for a phone, then an email hotline is better than nothing at all. You may try both for time. You may need to only staff a telephone line certain hours of the day – these must be well advertised, and a recording must be available on off hours, with the opportunity for the caller to leave a message.

Identify the appropriate department and the training needed

Identify the agency responsible for receiving calls. Staff will require training in communication, dealing with the public/media, and dealing with hot-button issues. The responsiveness of the hotline is its the most important component. If a citizen reports an illegal dumping but no action is taken by the appropriate authority, that citizen could lose faith in the hotline and might not call back with future information.

Keep excellent records

Excellent records need to be kept to track reports and results, for both the municipality and the public.

Advertise the hotline

All distributed materials should include the hotline information. Advertise on flyers, door hangers, brochures, bill mailings, refrigerator magnets, and bumper stickers. Also, add the hotline to the side of municipal vehicles. A storm water hotline is effective when its number is easily remembered (i.e., has a catchy name) or easily accessible.

Anticipate information needs

Hotline costs can be minimized by staying a step ahead of questions and anticipating information needs. A FAQ (frequently asked questions) may be included on a website or simply developed for staff to use in answering questions.

For more information, see EPA's Community Hotline website at [http://cfpub.epa.gov/npdcs/stormwater/menuofbmps/invol_3.cfm]