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IN SUPPORT OF SB 425: AAC MUNICIPAL TRANSPARENCY, EFFICIENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

To the Chairs Senator Cathy Osten and Representative Philip Miller and the honorable members of the Planning and Development Committee, I wish to submit this testimony in strong support of SB 425: AAC Municipal Transparency, Efficiency and Accountability.

I am a resident of New Haven, CT, where I founded a company that connects citizens to their government and government employees to one another. The grant program proposed in this bill is going to help towns in our state provide better service for their residents. CRM systems offer fantastic returns on investment, but small towns (and sometimes even big cities) lack the budget to afford the type of system that would lead to cost savings in the long run. As a result, they are forced to settle for lesser platforms that can increase the burden on employees or simply don't get used by either citizens or staff. They need a leg up from the state to help them upgrade to systems that can provide the savings, analytics and guidance they're searching for.

In 2008, I became incredibly frustrated after trying to report some graffiti in the city. After trying to report this issue I found that it was difficult to track an issue through the city and follow it to resolution. My neighbors wanted the same graffiti removed, but there was no way to leverage our collective voice. I built SeeClickFix as a way for neighbors to come together and discuss issues in our community so we could fix the place we called home.

It was only after trying to work with communities across the country to help them leverage SeeClickFix that we realized the problem was not only that citizens were having trouble communicating with their government, but that government was having trouble communicating internally. With every partner we spoke to, we learned that it was common for departments to silo themselves off from one another, focusing on their own tasks without the ability to come back together and manage larger issues.

So we added to our original concept and built an issue management platform that enables nearly all departments in a town to use the same tool to handle requests, report issues to one another, manage work orders, track progress and productivity, and ultimately save towns time and money by simplifying processes.

I understand that it is difficult to justify an expense during tight budget years, but this program will be a cost savings many times over the grant amount. Even for the most cautionary budget watchdog, voting against this is voting for a more expensive

government. A grant like this enables municipalities to afford software that helps determine where they can save, where there are inefficiencies and underperforming individuals or departments, how to prioritize issues (with citizen buy in!), when to repave a stretch of road rather than repair pothole after pothole. Platforms like ours can unify reporting for all departments and save time in creating those weekly, monthly or annual reports. SeeClickFix immediately reduces paperwork, saving printing costs and eliminating the frustration of losing work orders or requests. CRMs allow for combining duplicate requests, fast responses to citizens within the system with canned responses or custom responses so citizens feel heard and towns don't have to spend 25 minutes on the phone to elicit that feeling.

Above and beyond cash saved and time saved is residents saved. Being heard by your government renews trust in government. We've seen angry citizens turned into advocates for their community and productive actors. There are countless stories where the joy a resident has felt when an issue they considered a nuisance has been fixed transformed them from disillusioned constituent into involved and engaged community partner. When a citizen calls into city or town hall with a problem the conversation starts with "I have a problem, and who's fault is it?" But through SeeClickFix the reporting of an issue takes 30 seconds and the city gets more information than they would have through a longer phone call. Once an issue is reported on the mobile app, for example, the citizen is back on the home screen where a town can push out information like when taxes are due, what the pubic school calendar is, what are the upcoming council meetings, where to get free meals for children in the summer, what even is happening this weekend, and anything else they can imagine.

We've seen a grant program like the one outlined in SB 425 work in Massachusetts. The Metropolitan Area Planning Council in Massachusetts operates similarly to the Council of Governments system in Connecticut. The MAPC together with the City of Boston provided a grant to pay for half the cost of a CRM system for 20 towns in 2012. SeeClickFix won the RFP to provide the service for that program, called Commonwealth Connect. With nearly 80 towns presently using Commonwealth Connect, we've seen this platform work for cities and towns of all sizes, all the way down to municipalities with only a few hundred people.

One of the reasons this works in Massachusetts is that while citizen reporting is important, what the smallest towns need is the ability to report issues internally. To that end a small town may only receive one or two requests from the public a week, but use our system to manage routine maintenance, run departmental reports, and enable police and public works personnel to report issues they come across while in the field to the right person in a matter of seconds.

Another benefit in the Commonwealth Connect system is that people often live in one town but work in another. Having both towns use the same system means that the citizen only have to have one app on their phone. The app will know their location and identify the correct redirection of their issue.

In operating the Commonwealth Connect program, we've found that towns find significant value in being able to use the same platform as their neighboring towns. Connecticut has no county structure, so regionalization is challenging. The MORE Commission has been working diligently over the past few years to address regionalization and make it easier for towns, specifically small towns, to share resources or band together to buy in bulk as a means to save money. Similarly, COGs have been a great resource for small towns, helping them apply for grants, leverage resources, and modernize town hall offices and infrastructure. In the same way, COGs can contribute significantly to the success of this grant program.

There are, however, a few changes that should be made to this proposed bill to better serve all towns in our state:

- The application should leverage the federal open data standard (open 311) – this is the standard for government transparency.
- It should be required that the CRM supported by this grant program to be an open platform. Closed platforms disallow citizens to see what is going on in their neighborhoods. That lack of visibility leads to drastically more duplicate issues being reported. Open systems allow citizen to up-vote issues they feel are important, which tells the city what the priorities are without having to spend additional funds surveying resident or simply guess at what citizens feel is most important. Should be a transparent application where issues are publicly documented (values post on why feedback loops are important).
- Application should promote regionalism and work across city boundaries. This grant should be used for systems that allow for map layering of regional, private, campus, and/or state services over municipal service boundaries.
- Towns and cities can no longer exist on web forms. They need a modern CRM to ease redirection of issues and create an organized, data driven system instead of just clogging email inboxes with form submissions. Tracking issues, mapping data, tracking productivity of individuals and departments is key to making substantive changes and improving efficiency. Ultimately any product that a town uses should provide these functions.

This is a huge step forward for improving transparency, efficiency and accountability for towns in Connecticut. I know many towns will be excited to sign on once this program is available. I want to thank you for considering this testimony and hope you will also support SB 425.

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