

Testimony by: Mayor Harp, Mayor, City of New Haven

Before the Planning and Development Committee

March 11, 2016

SUPPORT SB 425:

AAC MUNICIPAL TRANSPARENCY, EFFICIENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Chairs Senator Osten and Representative Miller and members of the Planning and Development Committee, it is a pleasure to provide testimony to a committee near and dear to my heart. My name is Toni Harp and I have the great distinction of serving as the Mayor of the City of New Haven. I wish to submit this testimony in support of SB 425: An Act Concerning Municipal Transparency, Efficiency and Accountability.

There are two things I will present in this testimony. The first is to briefly explain the experience New Haven has had in using a CRM platform like the one this grant program would help support with the intention of showing the value for towns and cities in Connecticut. The second is to talk about why this grant is important for moving our state forward.

In New Haven, we pride ourselves on having a transparent and open government that treats all citizens with respect and addresses issues and concerns reported to the city in a timely and responsible fashion. We are also extremely proud and lucky to be the hometown of SeeClickFix, a technology company built to allow residents to self-report issues to their government. The system started as a community messaging board and has grown into a sophisticated communication platform within a city that connects individuals with many departments from public works to parks and handles everything from broken sidewalks to larger quality of life issues that must be addressed by a team. Having a constituent request management (CRM) system has changed the conversation with residents and helped make community champions out of concerned citizens.

New Haven has been the testing ground for new uses of this kind of platform – we are proud to be the first Housing Authority in the country to use SeeClickFix to report issues with public housing, manage maintenance, and openly discuss how to improve neighborhoods and communities. Private companies in New Haven are using SeeClickFix to report private property issues and manage them internally. Our Department of Parks and Recreation is using sophisticated GIS mapping to establish trends for more than 100 individual open spaces and 30,000 trees maintained by the department. The capacity of this platform and programs like it are constantly evolving.

This grant would allow neighboring towns to use the same system, or a system like it, to promote an atmosphere of compassionate listening across our state. Regionalizing programs like this make issues on shared lands or on the borders between towns much easier to discuss and manage. For example, East Rock Park is located in the northern part of New Haven on the border with Hamden, CT. Much of the 427 acres of the park is physically located in Hamden, but New Haven has the responsibility of managing the land. We were thrilled to learn that Hamden was going to move to an open reporting platform that would let us pass requests back and forth between the towns to solve issues in this park together, to let them track issues or let us ask questions about ongoing concerns.

Regionalization like this saves time, it saves money, and it saves frustration on behalf of our residents. This reduces redundant reporting of issues and eliminates the confusion on behalf of citizens who want to report a pothole on English Drive (located in Hamden) but they don't know that the park road is managed by New Haven. Reporting through their mobile device eliminates the frustration a citizen feels by being told they instead must call a different town - the system redirects the issue to the responsible party without the citizen having to take any additional action.

There are many locations in our state where multiple organizations have overlapping responsibilities. We have state roads in our city, CT Transit bus lines, UI powered street lights, and other places where citizens could reasonably assume New Haven is responsible for an issue, when in fact those issues need to be redirected to other organizations. The time savings of a platform that does this seamlessly without taking staff time is just one way SeeClickFix pays for itself.

When citizens report issues, the city gets an exact geo-location for potholes, graffiti, down tree limbs, minor flooding, dark or flickering streetlights, illegal dumping, as well as a photo or video so we know exactly what the scope the problem is and what tools our crews are going to need. Our residents are having meaningful conversations about how they want to see our city grow and change - from advocating for dog parks to requesting bike parking and bike lanes, to addressing safety concerns. Citizens are communicating with one another and New Haven wants and needs to be included in those conversations. We'd prefer to have access to these discussions and correct misconception early on. Systems like this make cities a better place to live for all of us.

Having a program like this builds resiliency and capacity within communities and within city hall. The best example I can think of is in the winter of 2015 when we had record snowfalls and low temperatures. In many communities this was a true burden because big snowstorms are a shock to our system. But because of the capacity of the service we utilize and the ability to transform it into what we need in the moment we could, 1) alert the public about parking bans on downtown and neighborhood streets, 2) tap into the internal SnowCrew platform, and 3) free up phone lines for emergency calls because citizens were using the platform to report

non-emergency issues.

SnowCrew is built into the system we utilize; it leverages community assets during emergencies by connecting people who need non-emergency assistance with neighbors willing to help – in this case, lots of elderly and disabled community members who needed help digging out of over 2 feet of snow. In addition to people logging these requests themselves through the web and mobile platform, the city's emergency operations center logged calls from residents who needed this type of assistance directly onto SnowCrew to have neighbors help neighbors.

In this way, New Haven can be more resilient because of our ability to share the burden with neighbors who are willing to help, to volunteer to clean parks, to dig out storm drains or their disabled and elderly neighbors, who want to be involved and connected and engaged in our city, who just want a place to be heard and feel empowered.

Platforms like this are helpful for the 91% of adults who have a cell phone, and to those who still want to call into City hall or visit in person to report an issue. These programs bridge the digital divide and ensure that traditionally underserved communities can be served.

Every neighborhood in New Haven actively uses SeeClickFix. Over 40,000 issues have been reported to the city since 2008. We've addressed all of them in some way, and fixed 30,000. 12% of residents have used SeeClickFix directly. If we had to return to having to call into city hall, tying up phone lines during emergencies with non-emergency issues, and sending email after email to get a status report on a request – it would be unimaginable for our citizens and a hardship for our staff.

I am certain that any community in our state that is given the opportunity to use a platform like this because of the assistance this grant can provide would feel similarly, see the value, and never go back.

I greatly appreciate the opportunity to provide testimony on this proposed bill and look forward to providing any additional assistance the Committee may request.