Electronic System and Data Insights Increase Transparency and Efficiency

The City of Chicago, Illinois, is the third-largest city in the United States with more than 2.7 million residents living in approximately 100 neighborhoods. To meet the demands of the massive population, more than 7,300 restaurants are currently operating in the Windy City. Having an efficient system for health inspections and compliance is critical to keeping Chicago's many citizens healthy and happy while protecting the businesses that help support the city's economy.

To meet those inspection and compliance needs, Director of Food Protection Gerrin Butler vouched for Tyler Technologies' Digital Health Department™ (DHD) software along with the Socrata® Open Data Portal as a winning combination.

DHD's browser-based system has been trusted for more than 15 years to streamline processes in environmental health, agriculture, and hazmat/waste regulatory departments. It brings point-and-click simplicity to everyday tasks like issuing permits, performing inspections, running reports, and investigating complaints. Socrata's Open Data Portal enables governments to deliver on transparency, engage constituents, and create vibrant data ecosystems through cloud-hosted dashboards.

"Before DHD, we used paper," said Butler, adding, "I can't say we did any data analytics or predictions or even trend analysis while we were on paper."

Not only was the City of Chicago able to make a previously paper-based process digital with DHD, but by combining those digital processes with Socrata, the city is now able to view and analyze inspection-related data while simultaneously giving the same power to citizens.

Going Digital

Paper-based systems are quickly becoming a thing of the past as digital document storage and electronic systems become widely accessible, easy-to-use, and more practical. For the City of Chicago, the benefits of going digital with DHD were seen soon after its 2011 implementation.

"This electronic system allows our sanitarians to be in the field 90 percent of the time," said Butler. "When we had paper, they had to spend more time in the office.

- **Population:** 2.7 million

- **Location:** Chicago, Illinois

- **Tyler Solutions:** DHD, Socrata

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Gerrin Butler
Director of Food Protection

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This electronic system allows them to spend more time in the field, which leads to us getting more inspections done. That number [of completed inspections] increased about 25 percent from moving from paper to electronic when we initially went live."

Butler went on to explain that the number of completed inspections then increased to and was sustained at 33 percent overall, until recent food code and inspection report updates caused a slight decrease.

"We are operating more effectively and efficiently with the computer systems than we ever did on paper," she said.

Analyzing Data

It was important to the City of Chicago to not only have a more efficient, digital system for food inspections, but to also be able to analyze related data. This is why the city implemented Socrata alongside DHD.

"We can look at the data, we can analyze the data, we can use it to make heatmaps, we can use it to follow trends, we can use it to see if we have sanitarians who are writing more violations in one particular area versus other areas," explained Butler. "[Socrata] allows us to compare data much more easily than if we just had the single database (DHD). We can overlay them with heatmaps and share that data out with the public much easier."

These key insights and the ability to share them with the community are as important for governmental decision-making as they are for transparency and cultivating a trusting relationship between government and citizens.

Being Transparent

Making inspection information available to the public in real time is important to Chicago. Butler explained how in today's technology-driven culture, people expect to have information at their fingertips as soon as it's available, and the city is using DHD and Socrata to help meet that demand.

"We wanted transparency for our inspections," Butler said. "We were getting a lot of requests for copies of inspections and that took a lot of time, so we definitely wanted to have our inspections be something the public would have access to. This gives us the ability to meet that demand of having the information about an inspection … immediately available to citizens because that's what the expectation is now."

Citizens have been pleased with the ability to access information online, and the benefits extend to the city as well.

"The number of FOIA (Freedom of Information Act) requests for inspection reports has decreased about 90 percent," said Butler.

Butler explained that although residents do still call and ask for reports, staff now redirects them to the website where they can access the information themselves. The only true requests for paper copies come in when they're needed for lawsuits. The general public, however, is satisfied with the ability to access the city's database to view things like heatmaps of how often restaurants in their neighborhood are being inspected.

"We get a lot of positive feedback about having all this data available for people to look at for themselves," Butler said.

Connecting the Community

The City of Chicago has enjoyed many benefits as a result of implementing DHD and Socrata. It did take a little legwork to help staff adopt the new technology and processes, but the transition was smooth overall, and the city is pleased with the results.

"Overall, [the implementation] went pretty smoothly. It was actually less challenging than I expected it to be," said Butler, adding, "We don't get complaints about using technology. We don't get complaints about the fact that now we have everything and it's transparent for the public to see. DHD is a great inspection tool."

For more information on DHD, visit tylertech.com/dhd.
For more information on Socrata, visit tylertech.com/socrata.

To view Chicago's data portal, visit data.cityofchicago.org.

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