Across government, there have been dozens of intriguing initiatives to promote transparency and citizen engagement. One of the more intriguing trends is the boom in private sector companies creating mobile applications to assist government in their transparency and citizen engagement efforts.

This report will briefly highlight some of the trends related to mobile technology in government. GovLoop has partnered with CitySourced to produce this report, and had the opportunity to talk with Forrest Frizzell, Deputy Director at City and County of Honolulu about the City of Honolulu’s new app, Honolulu 311. CitySourced developed the app, and the mission of CitySourced is to transform citizen engagement. CitySourced is truly achieving their mission through the development of transformative mobile applications and web-based technology to improve citizen engagement.

There are many ways that citizens can now engage with government. With new and emerging technologies across the web, there is also now a demand for citizens to access information on the go. Although these new technologies present great opportunities for government, they also present challenges for the public sector. The use of mobile, social and emerging technologies has transformed the way government conducts business with citizens. With this kind of transformation occurring, government must adopt new strategies for outreach and proper metrics to measure success of initiatives.

There are complex questions that relate to government transparency - how can we measure transparency? How do we define transparency in a mobile environment? What level of transparency is appropriate? The answers to those questions likely are different across different levels of government, so being “open” can have different meanings to various levels of government and certainly to citizens.

Mobility also presents new opportunities for citizen engagement. Mobile allows citizens to participate in government on the move. With mobile applications, citizens can take charge of their community and work towards being agents of change. This model shifts the paradigm, and places the citizen at the center of the conversation.
In early 2012, the City of Honolulu released a new app, Honolulu 311. Honolulu 311 allows citizens to use personal smartphones to report abandoned vehicles, broken streetlights, illegal dumping and other issues.

GovLoop Research Analyst Pat Fiorenza had the opportunity to sit down with Forest Frizzell, Deputy Director at City and County of Honolulu to learn more about the history behind the app. Forest stated, “When our Mayor took office a year ago he said he wanted to work towards creating a ‘lean, clean and smart city’ that is looking towards the future.”

One of the challenges of implementing mobile is having support from management. With the call to be a ‘lean, clean and smart city’ from the highest-ranking public official in the city, Forest was able to run with the project. Forest continued, “We took Mayor Carlisle’s leadership as a challenge to create innovative ways for our citizens to get connected to government easier and hopefully become more involved in the process of making Honolulu the best city it can be.”

With support behind the initiative, Forest began considering what kind of services the mobile app should provide and the key needs of a citizen on a mobile platform. One observation from Forrest was that government does not have all the answers, and should be using existing technology to help leverage change within a city.

“Government can’t solve every problem, we need help form the community and through apps like City Sourced we can facilitate that happening,” stated Forrest. This kind of philosophy has not only driven innovation in the City of Honolulu, but also across all levels of government. By opening up more channels of engagement and tapping into and extracting knowledge from citizens, government can work to address some of its more critical and complex challenges.

When asked what the driving factors were behind the mobile app, Forest stated that the motivation
was not just to improve transparency; a key motivation for development was a desire to move towards improved citizen engagement. Forest states, “Transparency is a large factor, but citizen engagement is the ultimate goal. If we make it easier for people to take bigger leadership roles in their community then we all win.”

The Honolulu 311 App has some really interesting features, which in time have potential to transform citizen engagement for the community. Forest stated, “The combination of using GPS data, a picture, and overlaying that on a GIS map makes it a lot easier for staff to get the necessary information needed on what is being reported. We’ll be able to cut out redundant steps that intensive manual paperwork creates. The app itself is fairly intuitive once. We like the ability for a user to enter additional text as helps our staff better assign the report to the responding agency.”

A key part of a mobile strategy is making sure that the mobile strategy ties into an entire organization communication program. Forest mentioned that like many other local governments, the City of Honolulu is very cash strapped. Because of the tight fiscal environment, Honolulu can no longer afford a traditional 311 call center, which most cities provided.

Forest acknowledges the benefits of using a mobile 311 system, “Using technology like mobile apps and social media adds a layer of “real time” communication between the public and government. We’ve been working really hard the past year and half to facilitate change and give our citizens a voice in what is happening in their community. We want people to be more engaged and feel like their voice and concerns matter, but more importantly empower them to be part of the process.”

Forest’s comments show the real impact of mobile technology on government, the ability for the citizen to facilitate change and feel empowered by their actions. As citizens see the positive impacts of their engagement, they will be more likely to become engaged, trust government and play a larger role within their community. Forest continues, “Government can’t be everything to everybody, we also can’t be on every block, and we need help from our citizens to be apart the process.”

The City of Honolulu has already seen positive impacts from the app, especially in terms of engagement and the way people view the government. “We’ve seen a big change in the way people view the City and County of Honolulu the past year,” said Forest. Further, the City of Honolulu has received a lot of positive press and awards around the launch of Honolulu 311. Forest noted that the City received a Sunlight Award for government transparency and Honolulu was also named the number digital city by the Center of Digital Governance. Forest also identified that he has seen participation and citizen interest increase in events such as CityCamp Honolulu and Hackathons.

The City of Honolulu’s commitment to advancing digitally can also be seen as they applied for and were accepted as a Code for America City in 2012. Code for America is an organization that seeks to help American cities use web technology to do a better job of providing services to citizens. Cities are selected through a competitive application process. Once selected, Code for America identifies suitable projects that can leverage
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web-based solutions and places a Code for America Fellow to work closely with the City Manager.

Although the app is still fairly new, Forrest believes that some of the early successes of the app have been the positive press around the launch of the app. Numerous State Departments also have expressed interest in collaborating with the City of Honolulu. Forrest stated, “This collaboration shows a cultural shift of opening channels with the State to share resources, but also the media giving us accolades when they normally like to report on negative stories.”

Honolulu is not the first city to implement a mobile app. Across the country cities have been working to develop mobile applications to encourage transparency and citizen engagement, “We had been watching other large Cities like San Francisco and New York launch great 311 sites and wanted to do something similar,” said Forrest. Honolulu and New York are very different, so when asked how they arrived at a CitySourced for their app, Forrest stated, “We have a very small operating budget compared to those cities so we had to be smart and creative in our approach. City Sourced was a cost effective way to start the process, and it was fairly quick to set up and launch.”

One of the challenges with mobile technology for government is that by developing a mobile app, government may inadvertently perpetuating the challenge of closing the digital divide. Mobile apps are almost always associated with smart phone technology, but basic cell phones also have possibility for improved mobile technology for citizen engagement. “In Hawaii we have a large adoption of cell phones, especially smart phones. I think the national average is 60%, we’re at 70% and growing everyday. The low hanging fruit is people who are connected via social media or who love apps. The end goal however is to engage people who might not necessarily be into social media but do want to take a bigger role in making their community the best that it can be,” stated Forest.

The app was not developed without any challenges. Forrest commented, “The biggest challenge was the responding agencies being worried that there would be a flood of reports coming in via smart phones. Once we talked through the process, and they saw that the information getting is actually much better then what could come from a traditional phone call they were more accepting of the idea.”

Forest closed out the interview providing some insights to those seeking to implement a mobile app into their community, “The first thing is you have to build trust from within. You can’t launch an initiative like this without first working with the agencies that will be responding to the complaints. The next is to do lots of outreach to community groups, media, techies, so when you do launch, people are paying attention.”

Certainly, the City of Honolulu is well on the way to becoming one of America’s most technologically savvy and citizen friendly cities. Through the use of innovative and collaborative technology, Honolulu is empowering citizens and encouraging participation within the local community. “We know we still have a lot of work to do, but its great to see people paying attention and now wanting to be involved to help make Honolulu the best City it can be,” Forest stated.
CitySourced is a real time mobile civic engagement platform; by providing free mobile apps, CitySourced allows citizens to report non-emergency issues back to City Hall. By identifying these civic issues (public safety, quality of life, & environmental issues, etc.) with a smartphone, citizens are able to snap a photo, shoot video or record audio and easily report issues directly to the city’s appropriate department. In addition, our mobile reports provide additional data points about the problem, most specifically the GPS location. From these reports, the city can then respond direct to the user to keep citizens informed of all progress.

CitySourced mission is to transform citizen engagement.

GovLoop’s mission is simple, to connect government to improve government. We aim to inspire public sector professionals by acting as the knowledge network for government. GovLoop serves more than 55,000 members by helping foster collaboration, solve problems and advance their government careers.

GovLoop works with top industry partners, to provide resources and tools, such as guides, infographics, online training and educational events, all to help public sector professionals. This Industry Perspective has been underwritten by CitySourced, as part of their package as a member of the Communications Council on GovLoop.

Pat Fiorenza, GovLoop Research Analyst is the author of the CitySourced Industry Perspective. Pat also conducted the interview with Forest Frizzell, Deputy Director at City and County of Honolulu. Pat can be reached at pat@govloop.com.

GovLoop is headquartered in Washington D.C with a team of dedicated professionals who share a commitment to connect and improve government.