



DATAVOICE HELPS UPDATE CITY OF SHELBY, NORTH CAROLINA

ABOUT:

The City of Shelby, North Carolina, serves approximately 15,000 metered utility customers. That number goes to 17,000 if you count unmetered stormwater and trash services. Shelby is a full-service utility community. It provides electricity, natural gas, water, sewage, trash pick-up, recycling and stormwater service. There is even municipally provided data and wi-fi coverage downtown.

CHALLENGES:

Prior to the dataVoice outage system, electrical outage management was a challenge for the City of Shelby due to the presence of too many manual legacy systems. For instance, outgoing phone messages during outages could only be recorded in person at city hall. The long menus of options presented to callers were cumbersome and user-unfriendly, which made the situation worse. City of Shelby Customer Service Manager Sam Clark recalled it this way:

“Citizens were just calling in and saying ‘Hey, I need to get this reported,’ ‘I couldn’t get anybody,’ ‘I was calling the wrong phone number,’ or ‘The number was caught in a loop.’”

Customers with power outages would all call the same office, clogging phone lines — after hours, the calls went through the 911 emergency dispatch center. Once in the office, utility staff would have to trace calls to determine where an outage had occurred. They directed line crews via radio.

With all this effort, the feedback from city councilmen and the city manager was negative. Utility staff were overworked, citizens were inconvenienced and upset, and it was clear there had to be a better way.

SOLUTION:

This is when Clark saw a presentation by dataVoice at a user group meeting for utility leaders. City of Shelby’s Director of Energy Services Julie McMurry then saw a demonstration and decided it was time to pursue the technology. As a Harris business unit, dataVoice could integrate smoothly with the NorthStar utilities management systems.

The city quickly converged on dataVoice’s Outage Management System as the right solution for its situation, alongside the lineman mobile app to assist field personnel in communicating with the office and pinpointing any problems during outages.



The dataVoice implementation was the smoothest the city has ever experienced. It was carried out on a three-month timeline. In fact, utility staff at Shelby were convinced this was far too short for such a far-reaching deployment. However, the dataVoice coordinator assigned to the project came into it with a full understanding of the city's requirements and technical information right from the start.

The city spent 1.5 months on Geographic Information System (GIS) implementation, while dataVoice took the lead on the rest. When the system was ready to go, dataVoice provided on-site training to City employees. Training and support are ongoing, to make sure the experience of using the system remains consistently positive.

OUTCOMES:

Now that the system is in place, the utility hears quickly and easily from citizens, sends out alerts and communicates exact data with linemen in a simpler and more modern way, replacing the legacy processes that existed before. Interactive Voice Response (IVR) features no longer require manual action from workers in the middle of the night. Office users can log into the OMS directly through NorthStar, without needing to use a second set of login credentials.

With features lightening the load on all employees and helping them deal with detecting, locating and resolving outages in a timely and effective fashion, the combination of OMS and lineman app is ready to improve the response to the next major weather event to affect the city. The dataVoice system is popular with office staff and linemen alike.

Clark reports:

“The linemen, they love it. Our office staff loves it. NorthStar has implemented some things for us to be able to launch the OMS from within NorthStar.”

The City of Shelby plans a major promotional push to inform customers about the new system. It will call customers and send a flyer in its bills. With features such as text-based alerts rolling out and the county looking into new communications options for water and natural gas, it's clear that the relationship between dataVoice and the City of Shelby has just begun.