



PLACER COUNTY GRAND JURY

Placer County Code Enforcement Complaint Feedback and Tracking

Inconsistency and Confusion

June 23, 2016

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Inconsistency and Confusion

Summary

Placer County Code Enforcement does not consistently respond back to the originator of a citizen complaint. Citizens are concerned that their complaints are not being addressed. The Grand Jury undertook an investigation into Placer County Code Enforcement Division's policy for supplying responses to citizens complaints and whether or not they have a process for tracking complaints and resolutions.

The Grand Jury found the Placer County Code Enforcement unit has been neglected by its parent department, the Placer County Community Development Resources Agency. The Code Enforcement unit is understaffed and deprived of important case management software training. This has resulted in a burgeoning complaint load for each Code Enforcement Officer, slow response times to complaints and a lack of data to properly review the efficiency and effectiveness of the department's operation.

The Grand Jury recommends that the Code Enforcement unit be brought up to full staffing levels to include a Code Enforcement Technician and a clerical staff position. In addition, the department must develop a process for tracking complaints until the Accela program is adapted to completely handle the Code Enforcement unit's daily tasks. Finally, the Board of Supervisors should ensure that the Code Enforcement department of the Community Development Resources Agency is adequately funded. These funds are necessary to hire critical staff and utilize the basic Code Enforcement software in Accela.

Background

The Grand Jury investigated whether Placer County Code Enforcement Division has a policy in regards to supplying responses to customer complaints. If such a policy exists, how effectively is it being implemented? Finally, do they have a process for tracking complaints and resolutions?

Code Enforcement is a department within the Placer County Community Development Resource Agency that also regulates land use and development in the unincorporated areas of Placer County. Code Enforcement's primary mission is to ensure compliance with the County Code and nuisance abatement ordinances. Code Enforcement Officers will respond to health and safety violations they may witness. Otherwise, their investigations are primarily initiated by complaints that residents (reporting party) submit directly to them.

Placer County residents can be frustrated when they do not know the status or outcome of a complaint which they have filed with the County Code Enforcement Division. The reporting party is not notified if the complaint has been received, nor are they advised if the complaint has been referred to another department for review. It is up to the reporting party to take the initiative to learn the status of their complaint.

Placer County Community Development Resource Agency uses a data management software package called Accela. Accela is an enterprise software solution with numerous preconfigured packages for private business and government organizations to manage core applications such as land management, licensing, asset management, and public health and safety data. Accela can be modified and tailored for the specific requirements of the agency and allows for public access to some functions. Other county governments utilize the Accela platform to track and resolve code enforcement complaints.

Investigation Methods

- Interviewed staff of the Placer County Code Enforcement department
- Reviewed Placer County Code Enforcement website
- Interviewed managers of the Community Development Resource Agency
- Reviewed data provided

Two members of the Grand Jury were recused to avoid any conflict of interest and the appearance of bias.

Facts

- There are three funded Code Enforcement Officer positions.
- Code Enforcement has a funded, permanent, full-time clerical position that is not filled.
- Code Enforcement contracts with a temporary staffing agency to provide a temporary part-time clerical position.

- Code Enforcement division is overseen by a supervisor who splits time with grading inspection.
- Code Enforcement receives 60 to 80 new complaints per month.
- Current staffing levels require Code Enforcement Officers to carry 80 to 100 open complaints at any given time.
- Historically there was a Code Enforcement Technician position to provide office support but this position is currently unfunded.
- Code Enforcement used to send the reporting party a notification that their complaint had been received. However, they no longer notify the reporting party that they have received a complaint, will investigate it, or the final disposition of the complaint.
- Complaints are assigned to Code Enforcement Officers based on an Assessor's Parcel Number corresponding to the geographical area covered by each of the Code Enforcement Officers
- Complaints are prioritized based on the nature of the complaint. For example, health and safety violations take top priority while complaints regarding sign compliance receive the lowest priority.
- The temporary clerical staff person in consultation with one of the Code Enforcement Officers makes the determination of the priority and assignment.
- Complaints are entered into a database, known as Accela, which assigns a complaint number.
- There has been limited or no training for the Code Enforcement Officers on the use of the Accela database.
- Rather than manage their caseload with Accela, Code Enforcement Officers rely on written notes in paper files.
- There is no tracking of complaints assigned to individual Code Enforcement Officers.
- Data was requested from 2015 Code Enforcement complaints but the Grand Jury was advised it would take several months to compile a list of all complaints, their disposition and any final resolution of the complaint.
- One Code Enforcement Officer is assigned on a rotating basis to be on-call each weekend for event complaints.
- The Code Enforcement office is sometimes left unattended during regular business hours.

Findings

The Grand Jury found:

- F1. Substantiated complaints within Code Enforcement's jurisdiction can take six to twelve months to bring to resolution.
- F2. The Accela database is not being used to its full potential to track the status, age, or resolution of a complaint.
- F3. There is no mechanism in place to determine how many complaints are open or closed.
- F4. The public may find that there is no staff from Code Enforcement available at the office during business hours to answer their questions.
- F5. Code Enforcement Officers must spend part of their time helping and training the temporary part-time clerical worker to research and identify complaints for processing.
- F6. The Code Enforcement department is understaffed for the volume of complaints that are received.
- F7. The Code Enforcement department does not have a full-time supervisor.
- F8. The Code Enforcement department has abandoned any attempt to communicate with the reporting party about the status of their complaint. The reporting party is not informed if the complaint has been received, if the complaint has been dismissed, has been directed to a different department or is currently under investigation.
- F9. Lack of a comprehensive tracking program for complaints severely limits management's ability to evaluate the effectiveness and efficiency of the department's operation.
- F10. Because there is no Code Enforcement Technician and a permanent full-time clerical support staff position has not been filled, Code Enforcement Officers spend more time managing operations and less time resolving complaints.

Conclusion

While the Code Enforcement department is comprised of dedicated and hardworking staff members, the operations and management seem to be dysfunctional. There is no central coordination or tracking of complaints. Management does not know how many complaints are open, the disposition of those complaints, nor the manner in which they were resolved. Without meaningful data regarding the productivity of the department, it is doubtful that management can make any assessments about the efficiency and effectiveness of the Code Enforcement department. Without operational data, funding and staffing levels cannot be properly assessed and/or addressed.

The process of investigating and resolving code violations can be complicated. It can take several months for a Code Enforcement Officer working with a property owner to satisfactorily resolve a violation. However, the complicated nature of resolving verifiable code violations does not absolve either the Code Enforcement department or the Community Resource Development Agency from their responsibility to communicate with the reporting party and to track complaints. Placer County should make a commitment to its citizens to provide an efficient and consistent Code Enforcement department.

Recommendations

The Grand Jury recommends that the department:

- R1. Have the Code Enforcement Supervisor's sole responsibility be to manage this department.
- R2. Implement a standard procedure to issue a Letter of Receipt to the complainant, within 10 days of complaint receipt. The letter should indicate if the complaint:
 - Will be actively investigated
 - Is outside the scope of Code Enforcement
 - Has been forwarded to another departmentInclude general information regarding the code enforcement process with the letter.
- R3. Staff the full-time positions of Code Enforcement Technician and permanent clerical support.
- R4. Develop and integrate a complaint tracking system in the Community Development Resources Agency's Accela software program.
- R5. Implement training of Code Enforcement staff to use the Accela complaint tracking system.
- R6. While R4 and R5 are in the process of being implemented, create an independent tracking system, such as a simple spreadsheet, for management to review, which lists all incoming complaints, dispositions and final resolutions.

Request for Responses

	<u>Recommendations Requiring Response</u>	<u>Response Due Date</u>
Mr. Michael Johnson Director, Placer County Community Development Resource Agency 3091 County Center Drive Suite 140 Auburn, CA 95603	R1 – R6	August 31, 2016

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