

INTRODUCTION

The following is a summary of an evaluation of the City of Seattle's technical support services provided during 2013 for the city's building energy benchmarking and reporting ordinance. The evaluation was conducted in June of 2014 by Resource Media under contract with the City of Seattle with funding support from the Energy Foundation and was reviewed by the Institute for Market Transformation. The aim of this evaluation is to help identify and assess:

- Benchmarking help desk usage trends and user experiences
- Essential services the help desk staff provided and the challenges they faced
- The benefits and drawbacks of help desk and web services systems
- Opportunities that exist for future iterations of the help desk and web services

The [full report](#) can be found on the BuildingRating.org website.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

An evaluation of the City of Seattle's technical support program for building energy benchmarking and reporting in 2013 confirms that a well-staffed and service-oriented help desk, coupled with proactive outreach by help desk staff and web-based integration with U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) ENERGY STAR Portfolio Manager, were essential to achieving high compliance rates among building owners, and in many cases helped transform skeptical owners into energy efficiency champions.

The City of Seattle operated a comprehensive technical support program for its building energy benchmarking and reporting ordinance in 2013. Building owners and managers required to comply with the law had access to live telephone and email support five days a week through the city's benchmarking help desk. The help desk also proactively reached out to owners/managers to help them complete the benchmarking process and correct reporting errors. This proactive outreach was aided by the city's direct link to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) Portfolio Manager tool, which provides real-time access to building energy data and reports.

“The help desk was more than just a technical support line: It was a lifeline for building owners and managers, and played a major role in boosting compliance rates, data accuracy and creating goodwill among owners and managers required to comply with the law.”



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An evaluation of Seattle's technical support services in 2013 clearly shows that they were instrumental to the success of the city's benchmarking program. The help desk was more than just a technical support line: it was a lifeline for building owners and managers, and played a major role in boosting compliance rates, improving data accuracy and creating goodwill among owners and managers required to comply with the law. The high level of service provided by the city was so exceptional it leaves one doubtful that the program would have succeeded without it.

The City of Seattle would benefit greatly from maintaining similarly high levels of technical support in 2014 and beyond to ensure continued strong compliance rates and data accuracy, and to help building owners and managers go beyond benchmarking and take action to improve building energy efficiency.

Summary of Key Findings

Seattle's robust benchmarking help desk resulted in the highest compliance rates in the nation. The capacity of the help desk allowed building owners and managers seeking assistance to receive timely responses and ongoing tailored support to ensure compliance with the ordinance. Proactive outreach and education contributed to the high compliance rate, especially among owners that had not heard of the ordinance.

Technical assistance improved data quality. Help desk staff worked with Seattle building owners and managers to provide answers to their immediate benchmarking process questions and also to review their accounts to ensure no errors were made. During periods of reduced call/email volume, the help desk proactively contacted building owners/managers to alert them to their noncompliance, reporting errors or data discrepancies.

Providing ample technical support to building owners and managers established greater policy awareness, understanding, acceptance and—in some cases—support. Help desk logs tracked customer correspondence that often began with resistance and frustration, then moved to understanding and tolerance and, in some cases, created new energy efficiency champions.

Providing building owners and managers with benchmarking support creates opportunities to engage in conversations about improving building energy efficiency. The vast majority of building owners and managers needed assistance to comply with Seattle's benchmarking requirement. As with any

Help Desk Key Stats

Help desk staff assisted owners and managers of 64% of all buildings (2,451 out of 3,820) required to comply in 2013.

Help desk staff fielded 9,695 calls and emails in 2013.

83% of inquiries were responded to the same day, and nearly all (98%) were responded to in three days or less.

In December 2013, 91% of all buildings required to comply with the law had completed the process.

new process and regulation, there is a significant learning curve. By supporting those needing to benchmark and report their building's performance, city staff were able to help owners move beyond compliance to consider the data and actions they could take to improve building performance.

Technical assistance was critical to the success of Seattle's energy benchmarking and reporting program. Early help desk models quickly indicated that additional consistent support was needed to troubleshoot reporting issues and in most cases facilitate compliance for owners new to the practice of benchmarking. Compliance rates rose from the low 20th percentile in the early stages of the help desk to the mid 90th percentile once the help desk was appropriately resourced and staffed.

Seattle's one-stop-shop model of technical support streamlined the benchmarking process for owners/managers and helped local utilities and EPA improve systems and customer service. Seattle's help desk served as a centralized technical assistance center for the city's three utilities and the EPA, in addition to providing information and support about what is required by the city's ordinance. Help desk staff fielded thousands of calls and emails from owners/managers needing assistance obtaining, inputting and correcting energy use information from utilities into Portfolio Manager. These interactions often led to help desk staff identifying problems and finding solutions to utility and EPA benchmarking systems.