

Blackboard & Freeport, Texas

CITY USES BLACKBOARD CONNECT TO RECOUP \$30,000 IN FEES AND CLEAR WARRANTS

When the city of Freeport needed to communicate details of a warrant amnesty program, they turned to the Blackboard Connect service to reach out to the community. Messaging resulted in the recoupment of \$30,000 in fees and the clearing of over 100 outstanding warrants. According to Jeff Pynes, Freeport City Manager, "Using Blackboard Connect, we were able to clear hundreds of warrants and bring in a lot of money for the city that would otherwise be considered uncollectable."

CHALLENGE

Located on the Gulf of Mexico, Freeport, Texas, is home to the 16th largest port in the United States. While the residential population is 14,000, the daytime population swells to over 100,000 due to employment at both the port and several large chemical refineries. Tourism plays an important economic role in the city, and beach and water activities provide a large year-round draw.

Once a year, the city offers a warrant amnesty program to citizens with outstanding Class C warrants, misdemeanors that include traffic infractions and social order crimes. The program allows the city to dismiss both the warrant fee and "failure to appear" violations; citizens remain responsible for the amount of the original violation. "Especially in light of the recent economic situation, we want everyone to know that the city is here to help, that we are compassionate and understanding in regards to challenges people might be facing," said Pynes. "This amnesty program gives people a chance to start over, and it allows us to collect money that otherwise would just be sitting on the table."

QUICK FACTS

- ▶ Located in southeast Texas
- ▶ Population: 14,000
- ▶ Uses the Blackboard Connect service to notify citizens of warrant amnesty program
- ▶ Recouped \$30,000 in fees and cleared more than 100 outstanding warrants

Letting individuals know about the program and their outstanding warrants, however, proved to be challenging. “Some people don’t know they have outstanding warrants or have forgotten about their responsibility,” Pynes said. “We started out with employees making individual calls to citizens to remind them, but it wasn’t really realistic. It was time consuming and just not effective, as people would promise to come in and then never show up.”

SOLUTION

To communicate with citizens about the amnesty program, the city turned to their existing Blackboard Connect service. “Any good manager has to look around at the tools available,” said Pynes. “Blackboard Connect is one of the best tools we have to communicate with the masses.” The city used the service to send out two messages at the beginning of the year to communicate details of the amnesty program. “With Blackboard Connect, it was easy to identify the outstanding warrant population group and then record our message and send it,” Pynes said. “In addition, we were also able to get immediate feedback on the people who received the message and which phone numbers were still viable.”

RESULTS

For the city of Freeport, the warrant amnesty program has been a dramatic success: in total, the program has netted approximately \$30,000, and more than 100 people have taken care of their outstanding warrants. “Using Blackboard Connect, we were able to clear hundreds of warrants and bring in a lot of money for the city that would otherwise be considered uncollectable,” said Jeff Pynes. “The service has also allowed us to have a positive impact on people. We simply didn’t have enough employee resources to sit down and make all those phone calls. And without this program, a lot more people would have been incarcerated.”

The program was so successful that the city now offers a monthly amnesty opportunity. “Every month, we contact citizens via Blackboard Connect and offer to reduce warrant fees if the warrant is taken care of within the first 30 days of issuance,” observed Pynes. “By doing it monthly, we have a better chance of ensuring the contact information is still current.”

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Jeff Pynes
Freeport City Manager

In addition to the warrant notifications, the Blackboard Connect service is used for both crisis and general outreach messaging. “Recently, Dow Chemical had a pipeline release, and we were able to isolate a particular part of the community and send out information about the evacuations. At all times, people knew the status of the leak and the security issues related to it. It went very smoothly,” Pynes noted. The city also uses it to message specific community groups. “We can send a quick message to cancel Little League practice when the weather is bad or help service groups send meeting reminders to their members. We even use it to set up municipal court appearance reminders for our police officers. Many of our officers do shift work, and the reminders are an important component in ensuring they make it to court on the right day, at the right time.”

Feedback from the community has been positive. “It’s been very well received, and people appreciate hearing from us,” said Pynes. “Ultimately, our goal is to get people to come in and take care of their stuff. We want to keep people out of jail. And Blackboard Connect has helped us connect with citizens in a timely, consistent manner without expending additional resources. With the service, we can record one message and then get that message consistently to ten people or thousands of people at the push of a button. Without it, we just wouldn’t be able to communicate like we do.”

