

City of Santa Maria Utilities Department

When relying on door tags became too costly and labor intensive in the face of budget shortfalls, the utilities department at the city of Santa Maria, California, turned to the Blackboard Connect™ service to streamline delinquent customer 48-hour shut-off notification. According to Shannon Sweeney, the department's water resources manager, "Using Blackboard Connect, we've been able to reduce our use of door tags from 100 per day to just 20. We not only lowered our labor, vehicle, and printing costs, but we were able to take the staff dedicated to distributing the door tags and reallocate that resource to tasks that actually increase revenue."

CHALLENGE: Doing more with less

Santa Maria, with a growing population of just over 100,000, is the largest city in Santa Barbara County. With its many vineyards, the area is part of the Santa Barbara County wine country and has its own American Viticultural Area designation. The city offers a full range of community services, and its Utilities Department serves over 21,000 households and businesses with water, wastewater and refuse collection, employing about 85 staff members.

While staffing has consistently been a challenge, the recent economic downturn brought additional operational challenges due to mandatory furloughs. For the City's Utilities Department, providing the same level of service with a reduced staff was difficult. "We deliver water to over 20,000 connections, but we don't have enough staff to be able to provide all the services that need to be done," said Sweeney. "For example, we use door tags to notify people who haven't paid their water bill. But we had to dedicate one person—on our very limited staff—to nothing but hanging 21,000 door tags a year."

QUICK FACTS

- ▶ Provides water for 100,000 people through over 21,000 connections
- ▶ Economic downturn created need to deliver the same level of service with fewer resources
- ▶ Leveraged existing Blackboard Connect service to automate notification of overdue bills and pending service shut-offs
- ▶ Reduced the need for door tag notifications from 100 tags per day to fewer than 20
- ▶ Saw increased revenue of \$600,000 after staff was redeployed or redirected to focus on backlogged tasks

SOLUTION:

The Blackboard Connect Service

The need to deliver the same level of service using fewer resources was the impetus for the department's search for a solution. "This one task—hanging door tags—was costing us an entire year of labor, in addition to the cost of printing the tags and providing fuel and maintenance on the vehicle," said Sweeney. "We had to find a more cost-effective and efficient way of notifying customers of impending shut offs."

The City of Santa Maria implemented Blackboard Connect in 2007 to communicate with constituents during emergency situations. However, continuing cost restrictions made the Utilities Department view the service in a new light. "Because resources were limited, we wanted to work with a system we already had," said Sweeney. "Our existing Blackboard Connect service seemed like a perfect fit."

RESULTS:

The department quickly replaced the majority of door tags with automated Blackboard Connect phone calls—and experienced significant labor and cost savings. "Using Blackboard Connect, we've been able to reduce the distribution of door tags from 100 per day to just 20," said Sweeney. "We not only lowered our labor, vehicle, and printing costs, but we took the staff dedicated to distributing the door tags and reallocated that resource to tasks that actually increase revenue."

This reallocation of staff allowed the department to catch up on backlogged work. "Before Blackboard Connect, we were so behind we weren't able to turn off meters or fix stuck meters in a timely manner. This meant we were delivering water we weren't being paid for. We were losing revenue," said Sweeney. "Using Blackboard Connect freed our staff to focus on other tasks, like shutting off meters, and allowed us to reduce unaccounted water usage from 6 percent to just over 2 percent. This was \$600,000 worth of revenue gained just by being able to get to a backlog of work we hadn't been able to address."

Using Blackboard Connect has had an additional benefit: improving the department's customer database. "We still hang about 20 door tags per day, as we don't always have the right phone numbers," said Sweeney. "When the tag comes in, we ask customers for their correct number. We're getting better notification results with Blackboard Connect as time goes on

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Shannon Sweeney
Water Resources Manager
City of Santa Maria Utilities Department

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because we're improving our customer database." The service has also been instrumental in addressing rebuttals from customers who claim they never received a phone call. "People sometimes say they didn't get the shut-off notification. We just pull up the list from Blackboard Connect and show them the date and time the call was received."

A recent review of Blackboard Connect prompted staff to worry that the service would be discontinued. "When I started asking staff about their opinions on Blackboard Connect, the first thing I heard back from every single one of them was, 'You're not taking it away, are you?'" said Sweeney. "The staff was concerned we would go back to the old way, where it was more difficult for them to manage their work. They now feel like they have control over their workload. The improved morale is a huge benefit."

The department's revenue- and labor-saving success with Blackboard Connect has stimulated the interest of other City departments. "I'm starting to hear from departments who want to know how we made it work," said Sweeney. "They're also thinking of applying it beyond emergency notification, as they've seen how it has significantly improved the efficiency and revenue of our department."

