

**Testimony of J. I. Swiderski for the
Council of DC Committee on the Judiciary & Public Safety
on 2020 Performance of the Office of Unified Communications
March 18, 2021**

My name is J. Swiderski and I am a resident of Ward 1, ANC 1C08, and for the record I use they/them pronouns. I am a member of the board of the Reed-Cooke Neighborhood Association and the Ward 1 Representative to the Pedestrian Advisory Council, but I write today solely in my personal capacity and about my own experiences.

Though I fortunately have only rarely needed to call 9-1-1 in the District, I am a frequent and active user of the 3-1-1 system—in 2019, when they changed the backend system they use, they “identified [me] as a 311 Super User” because I had “submitted at least 100 service requests” in the previous year. So, first I want to publicly and openly thank the OUC staff who handle all these requests.

I submit almost all the 3-1-1 requests through my Twitter account @infinitebuffalo for several reasons. One is simply, because I can, and again I thank OUC and the 3-1-1 staff for making this option available and easy, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

However, another is because the app and website options are supremely complicated. For an example, earlier this week I reported an overflowing streetcorner trash can I passed while walking late one evening. I passed the can and took a picture at 10:19pm, then wrote a brief description of the issue and location and tweeted it at 10:20¹; five minutes later, I received an acknowledgement from the 3-1-1 account.² To open a request myself, I would have to navigate the 3-1-1 system to find a button to open a new service request, find the type of service request in a very long list—some of which are sorted by department, or use acronyms or technical terminology—and then find the location on a map, and there are several more steps besides. Especially as we have heard repeatedly that, for example, DDOT prioritizes sidewalk and roadway repairs based on 3-1-1 requests, I worry that the needlessly complex primary system for making such requests will limit the willingness of some members of our community to make them, which in turn could have significant impacts on who and what roads get these services. It should not be necessary for community members to learn complicated terminology or even to know which agency is responsible for what in order to have their issues addressed.

And that doesn’t even get into the fact that, over 15 years after Council passed the Language Access Act of 2004 requiring that “any District government agency, department, or program that furnishes information or renders services, programs, or activities directly

¹—<https://twitter.com/infinitebuffalo/status/1372372353326460932>

²—<https://twitter.com/311DCgov/status/1372373619343564802>

to the public” provide such information, services, etc., in any language spoken by at least 500 DC residents who don’t speak English well or at all,³ 3-1-1’s website is still only and entirely in English. (I do note that Council’s 2019 amendment which specifically calls out the OUC as such an agency, the Language Access for Education Amendment Act of 2018,⁴ has apparently never been funded. Council should provide OUC and other agencies the funding necessary to make 3-1-1 and other services available in DC’s various languages.)

Another reason I usually submit 3-1-1 requests on Twitter is the openness of the system and its accessibility to anyone. Anybody who uses the system—and, really, even anyone who doesn’t—can follow an individual or even words like “#bikeDC” or “#walkDC” used to highlight posts of interest to DC’s cycling and walking communities. This means that when safety hazards such as broken sidewalks, potholes, and missing safe accommodations (about which more later) are identified and reported, other members of the community can be aware of them, avoid them, and follow up later to ensure they are addressed. However, for some reason over the last couple years, 3-1-1, or certain members of its staff, have developed a habit of replying to certain submissions via private, direct message. This means that other people can’t follow, and follow up on, hazards that have been submitted. Indeed, it has even been difficult for me to follow up on my own reports—and when 3-1-1 emails an update some time later, even just to say “work completed”, it can be difficult to find the original report when the request number was buried in a direct message. I and others have been asking 3-1-1 for at least two years why they reply to some twitter requests by DM,⁵ but have never gotten a response.

One of the issues I most frequently attempt to report, and for which I frankly receive the least satisfaction, is safe-accommodations issues. As Committee members are likely aware, those who receive permits for construction in sidewalks or bikeways are required by DC law⁶ and regulation⁷ to provide an equivalent alternative pathway. DC’s Department of Transportation is tasked with issuing the relevant permits and enforcing the requirement. While the quality of DDOT’s permits and enforcement is a matter for a different committee (which I believe heard extensively about this problem last month. . .), there is also a major problem with attempting to file reports about safe accommodations problems through 3-1-1.

³—DC Law 15-167, <https://code.dccouncil.us/dc/council/laws/15-167.html>; DC Code §2-1931 *et seq.*, <https://code.dccouncil.us/dc/council/code/titles/2/chapters/19/subchapters/II/>

⁴—DC Law 22-282, <https://code.dccouncil.us/dc/council/laws/22-282.html>

⁵—such as at <https://twitter.com/infinitebuffalo/status/1194333932977680384>, <https://twitter.com/infinitebuffalo/status/1315745885201010691>, or <https://twitter.com/infinitebuffalo/status/1365808792416497666>, among others

⁶—DC Law 20-49, the Bicycle Safety Amendment Act of 2013, §3(a), DC Code §10-1141.03 (f), [https://code.dccouncil.us/dc/council/code/sections/10-1141.03.html#\(f\)](https://code.dccouncil.us/dc/council/code/sections/10-1141.03.html#(f))

⁷—DCMR Title 24, §3315, <http://dcrules.elaws.us/dcmr/24-3315>, <https://dcregs.dc.gov/Common/DCMR/SectionList.aspx?SectionNumber=24-3315>

For those who wish to submit using the website or app, it is unclear how to categorize such reports, and even 3-1-1 staff themselves don't seem to know where to put them when they are submitted via Twitter. I have had Safe Accommodations reports I submitted filed as Traffic Safety Investigations⁸ or Illegal Construction⁹—which is assigned to DCRA—or conveyed to DDOT directly, outside the standard 3-1-1 system and with no tracking number provided,¹⁰ or they are simply never responded to at all.¹¹

This is not the only type of issue where it is unclear to both users and 3-1-1 staff how to file reports, as WABA's Ursula Sandstrom noted in her testimony,¹² so in addition to DDOT's utter failure to provide and require others to provide safe accommodations and to enforce them, it is clear that OUC needs to restructure their reporting categories so that residents can report problems accurately and get them fixed promptly and properly.

I also want to quickly highlight another issue that Ursula touched on: that when issues are reported in the wrong category, or reported to the wrong agency, they simply get closed, perhaps with a note to the original user that they need to be reported differently or to some other organization. Given that OUC's 3-1-1 staff already have the information—or know whom to ask if more is needed—and know to whom it should be submitted and how, they should refile or forward the report themselves. As an example, if I report, say, an overflowing trash can along Beach Drive in Rock Creek Park or a pothole on Ohio Drive at Hains Point, I will receive a response that it is a National Park Service issue. Especially given the multitude of often overlapping, opaque responsible agencies in the District, rather than simply dismissing the issue, 3-1-1 should *at minimum* provide detailed reporting contact information, or preferably forward the actual report to the responsible agency. A 3-1-1 system where reporting categories matched how residents refer to and name requests, then assigned them to responsible agencies, I believe would help both residents and 3-1-1 staff actually submit requests and get them fulfilled successfully.

DC-3-1-1 is a wonderful system, and I appreciate nearly every day the ability to use it, but it could be even better. Thank you for your time.

⁸—<https://twitter.com/infinitebuffalo/status/1075393074057175040>, <https://twitter.com/infinitebuffalo/status/1178703398482452481>, <https://twitter.com/infinitebuffalo/status/1334976790402568194>

⁹—<https://twitter.com/infinitebuffalo/status/1365805912909369344>, <https://twitter.com/infinitebuffalo/status/1365808148095905797>

¹⁰—<https://twitter.com/311DCgov/status/1243219114228924418>

¹¹—Examples include <https://twitter.com/infinitebuffalo/status/1139320820357115909>, <https://twitter.com/infinitebuffalo/status/1245564403757563908>, <https://twitter.com/infinitebuffalo/status/1323420118869827585>, <https://twitter.com/infinitebuffalo/status/1336880146867949568>, and <https://twitter.com/infinitebuffalo/status/1337617556107038721>, among others

¹²—<https://waba.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/WABA-Office-of-Unified-Communications-Testimony.pdf>