ALBUQUERQUE, NEW MEXICO

Albuquerque's Air Quality Division Increases Productivity and Revenue with Comprehensive Data Management

The rapidly growing City of Albuquerque is the most populated city in New Mexico. Though Albuquerque possesses a barren desert climate, the city experiences distinct changes of season, with snowy winters and torrid summers. It hosts the largest hot air balloon festival in the world, enabling the City to showcase its rich New Mexican culture and history.

Lack of transparency

When Danny Nevarez became the Acting Deputy Director with the City of Albuquerque's Environmental Health Department, Air Quality Programs productivity was in question and the transparency didn't exist to explain why. The Programs maintained duplicate data for the same facilities in as many as eight different databases and spreadsheets, and limited reporting options meant critical information was difficult to assess. Nevarez wanted a more transparent solution to increase efficiency.

Additionally, Air Quality was forced to rely on the City's notoriously slow central accounting system. Vehicle pollution team members were required to drive downtown just to drop off a payment, which frequently took a month or more to process. Often, an emissions testing station would try to purchase emission-testing certificates only to find that previous payments hadn't yet been processed. This was inconvenient for the customer and also meant that the Program budget didn't accurately reflect its true financial situation.

Central to the Air Quality Programs' operations is the permitting of facilities that produce air pollution; however, a tremendous backup of pending applications prevented the Division from issuing permits within the legal timeframe. "We had well over 100 pending permits, and we lacked internal communication about their statuses," remembers Nevarez.

"Permitting is permitting. You have an owner, you have a facility, you go out and perform inspections and you track compliance. Anyone who is doing permitting, enforcement and compliance – Accela Environmental Health is a perfect fit, no matter what industry you are talking about."

Danny Nevarez, Acting Deputy Director

Population
555,417

Challenge
Relied on a slow and inefficient accounting system to process payments, and a tremendous backup of pending applications prevented the issuance of permits in a timely manner

Solution
Accela Environmental Health

Results
Collected $60,000 in back fees in two years since going live

Received 97% of the fees the department billed for as of the end of 2013

Reduced pending permit count by 50%, with 100% of permits issued within the regulated timeframe

Can run reports that quickly show processing status of permits, workloads of employees and overall productivity

How Accela empowers the City of Albuquerque

Albuquerque's Consumer Health and Business Registration Programs were already using Accela Environmental Health with great success. Having been part of these implementations, Nevarez could see that the Air Quality Permitting and Vehicle Pollution Divisions would benefit from similar consistency.

Nevarez felt the solution was the right fit because each Program had standard inspections and permitting tasks. However, some Program leaders felt that their air quality permits were too distinctive to be based off a template. Nevarez sat down with them to examine the documents and confirmed that as many as 90% would in fact fit a template.

Leadership began to lean on Nevarez to expand the scope of the project to enforcement, compliance and small business assistance. "Management quickly realized that there was value in transparency. With Accela Environmental Health, we could communicate status, progress and success to all levels of the organization."

Data where it makes a difference

Each Program can now use comprehensive reports to create and track financial compliance. And, customers don't have to wait a month for a payment to be processed. The solution has enabled the City to setup a standardized collection workflow that automatically generates follow-up letters, mails post-inspection notifications and interfaces with a contracted collections vendor.

Air Quality Permitting Manager Israel Tavarez notes that it's easier to track the financial status of a permit. Air Quality can now refuse customer requests, such as a permit modification, until outstanding fees have been paid. Tavarez estimates the Program has collected $60,000 in back fees in the two years since going live. "It's been pretty powerful to be able to do that."

The bottom line

Nevarez' favorite benefit is the transparency that comprehensive data management provides. The Programs can now run reports that quickly show the processing status of permits, the workloads of employees and overall productivity. The pending permit count is down by 50%, and 100% of permits are now issued within the regulated timeframe. Transparency reports can be automatically emailed to the director and staff to show the current status of every permit. "I can't begin to communicate how big this is. Permitters and the Director alike can look at the same report and instantly know where we were in achieving our goals. Permitters can clearly see how their efforts contribute to the overall success of the Program."

The transparency that the solution delivers has provided division managers and department leadership the tools to increase revenue, lower pending permit counts, track performance and recognize jobs well done. Says Nevarez, "Now they are tracking their work and more importantly, taking credit for their work."

About Accela

At Accela, we believe that engagement makes all the difference. We're ushering in a new era where democracy thrives when government works directly with the people, coming to citizens on their terms through mobile devices, social media and networks, and open data. By streamlining critical agency functions like land, asset and right of way management, licensing, legislative management, recreation and resource management, citizen relationship management and environmental health and safety, the Accela Civic Platform bridges the gap between agencies and citizens. We help build better communities by powering thousands of services and millions of transactions daily for agencies of all sizes. Accela is headquartered in San Ramon, California, with offices in San Francisco, New York, Melbourne and Dubai.

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