Ventura County, California

Self-Service Test Reporting on the Civic Platform

Ventura County, California is situated between Santa Barbara and Los Angeles on California's Central Coast. Recently named one of the most desirable places to live, Ventura County offers a mix of urban sprawl, coveted beaches and beautiful mountain ranges where many go for a reprieve from busy Southern California lifestyles.

The Ventura County Environmental Health Division oversees many activities essential to keeping county residents safe. Since 2010, their health programs– ranging from ocean water monitoring to restaurant and recreational safety– had data stored in a software system acquired by Accela, Decade Software. While Decade was pivotal in helping the division improve their permit tracking capabilities, they were starting to get bogged down by the increasingly manual work happening outside the system when it came to logging backflow test reporting results.

A cycle of backlogs and data entry

The County of Ventura's Backflow Prevention program is pivotal in preventing non-potable water from rushing back into the water supply and posing a major health risk to the community. To help manage the workload of inspecting all backflow devices used in commercial facilities, industrial buildings, irrigation systems, and water distribution systems, a certification program was created to allow third party professionals to test the devices themselves. "Citizens are first notified by the health department, then they contact a certified tester who conducts the test and submits the test results to the division for review," explains Ron Ventura, the Backflow Prevention Supervisor for the county's health division. The certification program was a big success in reducing inspections for county staff, but it came with some operational hurdles.

With 17,000 devices tested and inspected annually, the county was on the hook for the data entry of more than 1,300 test results every month. And, because the certified testers often waited until the end of the month to submit the tests results by fax, health division technicians would be completely bogged down entering the results into the system. "Our fax machine was just going nonstop for three straight days at the end of each month," says Ventura.

A cross-connection, or backflow prevention device separates drinking water from contaminated water sources. If the flow of water reverses due to decreased water pressure or other disruption in the system, the dirty water can "backflow" into the clean water. Backflow prevention devices create an air-gap between the two sources and help prevent a public health risk, and are often regulated by the health department.

Population
854,200

Challenge
Address backlog for backflow inspection program by eliminating manual data entry for staff, and introducing self-service field inspections on a mobile device for certified professionals

Solution
Accela Environmental Health

Results
Allowed certified professionals to do inspections in the field on a mobile device, reducing need for faxing, mailing and inputting data from paper forms

Freed up staff time for training programs and other department priorities

Reduced errors in the system due to lag in manual data entry, because data is populated in the system in real-time during an inspection

Improved relationship and communication between certified professionals and citizens

Accela

> "The public portal saved us because our technicians aren't slammed at the end of the month, trying to conduct data entry into the system, which allowed us to move forward and do other things with that time, like holding more training sessions, and making improvements to the program."
>
> –Ron Ventura, Supervisor for the Backflow Prevention Program, Ventura County Health Division

Sometimes, the delays caused by the backlog in data entry created more problems for the county. "There wasn't enough time for staff to enter the data before the end of the month, which caused a lot of confusion because we were sending late notices to customers who already submitted their results," explains Ventura. This resulted in frustrated citizens and created more work for division technicians to undo the errors. The cycle of paper-based processes, backlogged information and missed communications resulted in real losses in time and money for the county, and led them to explore alternate solutions.

Leveraging existing relationships for success

Though the division was satisfied with the Decade Software system they'd been using to track their health data, they needed a solution that would allow backflow testers to be more self-sufficient, and one that would ease the burden on county technicians. Since Ventura County was already using Accela for their Building, Planning and Code Enforcement Departments, it was a no-brainer to see what the system could do for the Health Division.

It didn't take long for staff to see the benefits of the Accela Civic Platform, especially with its public portal feature, "Accela had a citizen access portal where the public could log in to view permits and other information. We were able to use it to collect data right from the testers, which saved us time and money by accepting the results online, avoiding manually entering data into the system, and filing the results." Says Ventura, "The system stores all information for cross connection for the county now."

But the real game changer was the mobile app that allowed the certified testers to submit their tests directly from the field, sending the data to the division's back-office system in real-time. They worked with Accela partner, CityGovApp to create a customized mobile app, powered by the Civic Platform that allows backflow testers to create a new device in the system, or work from an existing device. They'd snap a few photos, complete the inspection and move on to their next job. "And it saved us because our technicians aren't slammed at the end of the month, trying to conduct data entry into the system, which allowed us to do other things with that time, like holding more training sessions, and making improvements to the program." Ventura says, "So that alone was completely awesome."

When asked what advice he would give other Environmental Health Departments considering a switch from their existing software to the Civic Platform, Ventura offered this: "Once you acclimate yourself to using a new system in general, you get the hang of it really quick. We realized it really is a great program that is better than what we were using," he says. "The main thing that really beats other systems is the portal where the certified professionals can enter data themselves, and with that, we are ahead of the curve, and that's the biggest benefit of using Accela."

About Accela

Accela provides market-leading SaaS solutions that empower governments worldwide to build thriving communities, grow businesses and protect citizens. From planning, building, licensing and permitting, service request management, environmental health and more, Accela's offerings accelerate efficiency and transparency in governments of all sizes. Powered by Microsoft Azure, Accela's open and flexible technology helps agencies address specific needs today, while ensuring they are prepared for any emerging or complex challenge in the future. Accela's solutions serve more than 80 percent of America's largest cities. Accela is headquartered in San Ramon, California, with additional offices around the world.

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