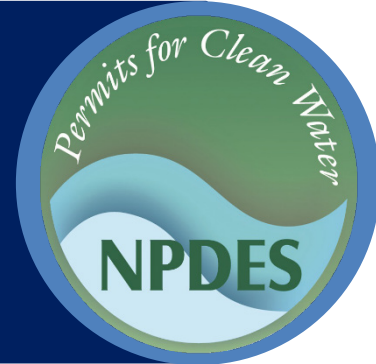




Stormwater Best Management Practice

Community Hotlines



Minimum Measure: Illicit Discharge Detection and Elimination
Subcategory: Public Reporting

Description

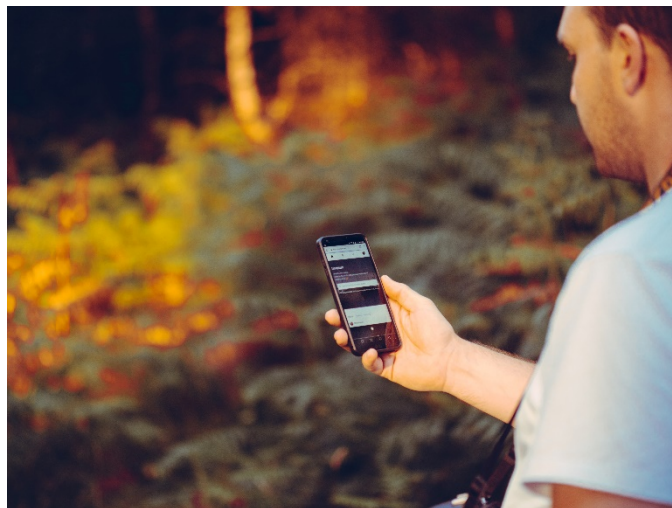
Regulators and authorities often encourage the public to report potential environmental problems. Community hotlines enable concerned residents and agencies to contact the appropriate authority when they see water quality or other environmental problems. A hotline can be a toll-free telephone number, or an electronic submission form linked directly to a utility or government agency such as the water quality control board. A typical caller might report illegal dumping, concrete washout dumped on the street, paint in a creek, construction stormwater discharge, or debris (including pet waste) in a drainage system or waterway.

Applicability

Municipal separate storm sewer system (MS4) National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System permits typically require MS4 programs to have a way for the public to report illicit discharges, as well as a program that enables municipalities to investigate those reports. Generally, an investigation team promptly responds to a hotline call and, in most cases, visits the problem site. If the team can identify a responsible party, it informs the party of the problem, offers alternatives for future disposal and instructs the party to resolve the problem. If the responsible party does not resolve the issue (or the investigation team cannot identify the party), the proper authority takes action to remediate the situation and prevent future violations.

Implementation

Choose the type of hotline to use. A hotline may be a dedicated phone line, electronic submission form or social media account. Generally, the more ways the public can provide information, the better. The most important part of deciding which reporting system to use is ensuring that adequate staffing is available to monitor the system(s), including on evenings, weekends and holidays.



Community hotlines should be easily accessible and known to the community to be successful.

Credit: Photo by Unsplash

Another emerging option is the use of a centralized customer service number to connect residents with city services. For example, the City of Alexandria's **Alex311** program uses the 311 number in addition to a mobile app and social media accounts to allow residents to interact and connect with the City's 175 services. Leveraging already existing and centralized support systems instead of establishing a new hotline can be a powerful tool for increasing community reporting of stormwater issues.

Determine costs. Hotlines are generally a low-cost tool once implemented. Most municipalities will either train city staff or hire a professional hotline service depending on cost. Municipalities should consider both the upfront costs to establish the hotline and the cost for maintaining a dedicated person or an email presence for the hotline. Municipalities can also determine if they can draw on existing communication networks and staff to help provide coverage, which may help lower costs. After a system is in place, the cost for ongoing implementation can be relatively low.

Decide which agency will be responsible for the hotline. To establish a stormwater pollution hotline, the

municipality should first identify a party or agency responsible for maintaining the hotline and responding to incoming complaints. The responsible party could be a division of local government, a water quality board, a public utility or an environmental agency. The municipality should also consider how it will monitor the hotline outside business hours—for example, by keeping city staff on call for spill events that could cause public health and environmental concerns.

Implement the hotline. After establishing a hotline or electronic submission form, a municipality should determine how to implement it. A hotline or electronic submission form will quickly lose value to the community if the municipality does not properly follow up on complaints. The municipality can ask the following questions to help train employees and prepare for the implementation of the hotline:

- Does the municipality receive frequent phone calls for information about waterbodies and stream pollution?
- Are there frequent complaints about other environmental concerns?
- Are there any anticipated construction or other projects in the municipality?
- Are there any new ordinances or regulations?

Publicize the hotline. All distributed materials should include pollution hotline numbers and information. Typically, hotlines are advertised on public education materials concerned with water quality, such as social media accounts, flyers, door hangers and brochures. The hotline could also be publicized on "permanent" materials, such as bumper stickers and refrigerator magnets, where residents can retain and easily locate the number.

Seattle, Washington, offers an example of a successful reporting system—a program typical of municipalities with a mature stormwater program. Seattle's residents use an online "[pollution report form](#)" to report potential pollutant discharges to the city's creeks, lakes and MS4. The form includes spaces for information about the reporter and the alleged violation. If worried about

privacy, a reporter can submit the complaint anonymously. Additionally, Seattle maintains a phone hotline that residents can leave a message on, which activates a notification system that alerts responders. The City keeps the identification of callers confidential, pursuant to the provisions of the Washington Public Information Act.

Seattle Public Utilities environmental compliance inspectors respond to water-quality-related complaints within city limits. When an inspector responds to a complaint, they make every attempt to determine the responsible party and inform them of the environmental impact of their actions. The responsible party needs to stop the action that is polluting the surface water. Staff members provide information on cleanup, alternative disposal options, erosion and sediment control, and other applicable practices. Inspectors respond to all water quality complaints within three business days (City of Seattle, 2019).

Effectiveness

A stormwater hotline is effective when its number or Web site is easily remembered, easily accessible and widely publicized. Most important, however, is how well the local government staff responds to reports. If a resident reports an illegal dumping event, but the appropriate authority does not act, the problem goes unchecked and that citizen could lose faith in the hotline. Hotlines require community cooperation; the combination of wide public participation and effective and timely responses is key to a successful reporting system.

Benefits

A hotline can serve as a link between residents and the municipality's staff. It can be an avenue for people to feel more involved in their community. It can also be a way to expand available resources for monitoring critical waterways and outfalls, catching illegal polluters or stopping accidental spills.

Additional Information

Additional information on related practices and the Phase II MS4 program can be found at EPA's National Menu of Best Management Practices (BMPs) for Stormwater website

References

City of Seattle. (2019). 2019 NPDES Phase I Municipal Stormwater Permit Stormwater Management Plan.

Disclaimer

This fact sheet is intended to be used for informational purposes only. These examples and references are not intended to be comprehensive and do not preclude the use of other technically sound practices. State or local requirements may apply.