Testimony of Jessica Singleton, Office of the Mayor
New York City Council Committee on Technology
Hearing on
Introduction 471 (We the People Online Petition Bill)

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Good morning Chairman Vacca and members of the City Council Committee on Technology. My name is Jessica Singleton, and I am the Digital Director for the City of New York. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on Intro 471, which would require the Department of Information Technology and Telecommunications, or DoITT, to establish a website allowing the public to create and sign online petitions, and requiring City agencies and authorities to post responses to those petitions. With me today is Donald Sunderland, DoITT's Deputy Commissioner for Application Development Management.

Digital engagement is a major priority of Mayor de Blasio's. From the first day of this administration, there has been a clear, focused attempt to find innovative new ways of interacting with New York City residents. To emphasize its importance, my unit, NYC Digital, now operates out of City Hall. As the Digital Director, I report directly to the Senior Advisor to the Mayor, Peter Ragone. I oversee digital engagement for the City and have been charged by Mayor de Blasio to make New York City the most digitally-engaged city in the world.

My office oversees digital engagement for the City of New York and the goals of my office include:

- Ensure that the Office of the Mayor and every City agency develop and maintain a robust social media presence that engages the New Yorkers we serve.
  - – In addition to original outbound content, many agencies have developed criteria, in consultation with my office, for responding directly to to constituent requests for information or direct services. These criteria and sample questions or replies vary across government but common solutions are directing someone via a link to 311 or another link to more information.
- Use data to measure engagement and online sentiment. We use analytics to measure the quality of our engagement and use the data collected from these reports to inform our approach and help determine how we can best serve our customers: New Yorkers. Additionally, we use reporting tools to measure sentiment about any number of issues over any give period of time.
- Develop a roadmap for putting the entire City on a mobile-responsive site. Like the nyc.gov homepage, every agency's web presence will be optimized for a mobile device.
- Identify opportunities for digital tools to improve the user-experience and outcomes of programs and services.

- o Working with Don and the rest of my DoITT colleagues, we developed a pre-k find and apply mobile search tool. Before the tool existed, parents going to nyc.gov/prek were directed to print a .pdf form and hand deliver an application to various pre-k sites. The find and apply tool that we developed enabled parents to begin the application process on their smart phone. The location-based tool populated search results based on the user's location and gave parents a way to begin the pre-k application process right then from their phone.
- Utilize SMS short codes. Many of the City agencies use SMS shortcodes tools to send text message updates and receive text message feedback or request for more information from New Yorkers. The SMS short-code infrastructure is managed at an agency level and we are exploring ways to centralize this system and data so that we are able to share even more information and receive feedback from even more New Yorkers.

Operate official City email program. City Hall has an email program and user data-base, which enables us to send email updates from voice of City Hall and elsewhere in City government and create form-field pages to collect additional feedback from users.

In addition to these initiatives, the administration has been focusing on directly engaging the public whenever and wherever possible, improving on old models and developing new ones. This is by no means an exhaustive list but I hope it will give you a sense of the Administration's commitment to using digital tools as one means of improving the delivery of services to our customers: New Yorkers.

Additionally, we have strengthened and, where necessary, created new offline community engagement units at every agency. This began with the overhaul of the Mayor's Community Affairs Unit. Now, every agency has a group specifically dedicated to the interaction with individual community members and stakeholders who are directly impacted by the work of that agency.

In addition, the Mayor's Office of Correspondence plays a vital role in ensuring that all those who write to the City receive a timely response as well as answer to their questions and help navigating City government. The Office aims to respond to every single letter sent directly to the Mayor. Over two thirds of these letters are delivered electronically. A significant number are sent via a mobile-responsive page on *NYC.gov*, which have category classifications (http://www.nyc.gov/html/static/pages/officeofthemayor/contact.shtml). Upon receiving correspondence, they typically reroute it to the correct entity or follow up directly on behalf of the Mayor's Office.

You are all familiar with NYC 311, which has revolutionized the way individuals interact with City agencies. With few exceptions, 311 calls and online actions result in one of the following:

1. Service request (the City needs to do something)
2. Information Request (Is Alternate Side Parking in effect? When is my trash pick-up day?,etc.)
3. Referral to an outside entity (MTA, NYS, District Attorney, etc.)

This system allows the City to track a preponderance of requests or complaints about any of the three categories, and measure the sentiment. 311 allows anyone to directly contact the City and seek help in navigating City government and accessing the services available to them. This also provides one avenue through which individuals can express concerns or frustrations that they may have with the City.

NYC 311, of course, remains the most popular means for customer engagement with City government. Since 2003, 311 has received nearly 200 million calls on all manner of City issues, and has expanded in that time to include round-the-clock access via the web, text, Skype, Twitter, and mobile app. Complaints filed through any of these channels are routed directly to the appropriate City agency for follow up, with Service Level Agreements in place defining the timeline within which agencies must respond. The public may also use 311 to file comments directly with the Mayor or complaints about any City agency or employee.

311's backend data collection service is robust, and NYC Digital is now working with 311 to consider new ways of collecting and interpreting this data to track and respond directly to specific and threshold number of complaints.

Returning to digital engagement, we recognize that in a networked economy, the barrier for communication between government and the public it serves should be in-step with the way people communicate with each other. And yet, petitions are only as strong as the people who organize them. The truth is the WeThePeople model fell short in part because there was no email program or supporting digital organizing infrastructure to ensure that users returned to the site and moved up the ladder of engagement.

In 2014, a government-sponsored petition tool is a waning model in the age of direct engagement. And the White House version of the petition tool that inspired this bill can help illustrate some of the shortcomings of a petition model.

The Obama Administration first sought to give individuals and groups a means to express themselves and set a standard for when a response was necessary. This website allowed for a situation in which a series of concerns must reach a specific threshold before receiving a response.

This was not the result of the White House site. Instead, the site has in some ways become a dumping ground. A number of these petitions were either frivolous or not grounded in serious policy goals and very few have spurred specific action beyond a single response. As New York City officials, we constantly seek to better understand popular sentiment and what is driving the conversation – online and off.

The goal of this Administration is to respond to every single New Yorker in a timely manner. This is clearly a big challenge and there will be times when this is difficult. But through technological advancement and a streamlining of our systems, we will work to ensure that all receive a response, not just those whose point of view reaches a pre-determined threshold. This is the future of digital engagement: One-on-one communication and service.

It is our belief that we should not establish a threshold for the point at which New Yorkers receive a response. Rather, it is our goal to engage with constituents directly, regardless of how many others share their point of view.

Creating a threshold for response silences too many – whereas with direct digital engagement, everyone can be heard, not just those who organize around it.

Furthermore, it is important to note that a number of private websites provide the same online infrastructure that the bill seeks to create. It is our view that government does not need to reinvent the wheel; we need to deliver better outcomes for New Yorkers.

In an age of taking a data-driven approach to governance, data analytics defines our approach to digital engagement. We use aggregate data to measure the sentiments of our end-users but our bottom line is measured by our ability to deliver services to every single New Yorker. And we believe the digital tools we have in place and in the pipeline for development do this much better than a government sponsored petition would.

In conclusion, while we greatly appreciate the intent of this bill, we do not believe it to be the most effective model to achieve its goals. The White House Model showed, and I firmly believe, that government sponsored petitions are not the most effective means to engage and gauge the public's views.

Using all of the digital engagement pieces I have described today, we measure aggregate sentiment, and our fundamental commitment is to provide direct services to individuals. The aggregate means that the sum can be greater than its parts and have the same effect as a petition -- while also helping people directly, which a petition cannot do.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify, and I will be happy to answer any questions you may have.