



When Every Call Counts:

How Municipal Utilities Are Modernizing Customer Experience

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When a water main breaks or a summer heat wave knocks out power across a service territory, thousands of residents pick up the phone at the same time. They want answers, and they want them quickly. That impulse isn't new, but the expectations have changed.

Constituents who pay bills through an app, track packages in real time and resolve banking issues over chat now expect the same speed from their municipal utility.

Legacy contact centers weren't built for this reality. But a unified, AI-enabled, cloud-based communications platform enables utilities to serve their customers when they need it most.

Why Legacy Contact Centers Can't Keep Up

Many municipal utilities still run their contact centers on premises, built on outdated customer information systems and CRM platforms that were never designed for the way residents interact with service providers today. Changes to call routing procedures that should take minutes require IT tickets or costly professional services. Reporting is limited. When call volume surges during an outage or severe weather event, the infrastructure has no way to scale.

"The technology many organizations are running on doesn't provide citizens with choices," says Bill Lochten, vice president of public sector sales at Genesys. "If you want answers or help, your only option in most cases is to call and wait. Today's residents aren't willing to accept that."

Utility employees are just as strained. As Lochten notes, most utilities are understaffed by roughly one-third, and high employee turnover rates drive up training costs while putting pressure on the agents who remain. When the only channel available is a phone call, every constituent interaction lands on an already overwhelmed team. Billing disputes, routine account changes and outage inquiries all compete for the same limited pool of agents.

Modernizing the Resident Experience

For utilities ready to move beyond legacy platforms, modernization starts with a practical question: Which problems can technology solve right now? The answer often starts with the routine, everyday interactions that consume agents' time:

- Outage status checks
- Start, stop and transfer service requests
- Appointment confirmations and scheduling
- Account balance and payment inquiries

"At many of these utilities, roughly 70% of inbound calls are billing-related," Lochten says. "One municipal utility we work with in the Southeast gets 1.3 million calls a year. If we can handle 30% to 40% of those through self-service, agents are freed up to spend time on the real problems — the things you can't solve through a bot or a chat."

Other modern capabilities make utilities even more responsive. Automated SMS and email notifications enable a utility to proactively push outage updates or service alerts to affected residents before they pick up the phone, reducing inbound volume. Cloud platforms provide elastic scalability, absorbing surge volume during storms or heat waves without requiring additional licenses or temporary hires.

Augmenting with AI

AI is helping new agents get up to speed faster, and it's improving the way supervisors manage service quality.

AI-powered knowledge bases can cut agent training from months to weeks by ensuring consistent, accurate answers from day one. "The AI only pulls from data the utility has approved," Lochten says. "It doesn't search the

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open internet, so every resident gets the same accurate answer whether they're talking to a 10-year veteran or someone in their first week on the job."

AI-driven quality scoring provides a similar level of consistency for supervisors. Rather than manually reviewing a handful of calls each week, the system can evaluate every interaction, flagging patterns and identifying where coaching will have the most impact. Automated call summaries reduce after-call work, letting agents spend more time with customers and less time on documentation.

The Business Case for Better Customer Experience

Modernizing a contact center requires investment, and municipal utilities often face scrutiny over how they allocate public resources. But research suggests a valuable return on investing in customer experience: One study from the Kelley School of Business at Indiana University Bloomington found that for every one-point increase in customer satisfaction on the American Customer Satisfaction Index, utilities reduced their operating costs by \$29 million.¹

"As with other companies, providing good customer service has efficiency-enhancing benefits for utility firms, such as lower direct and employee engagement costs of dealing with dissatisfied customers, and it generates greater customer trust and cooperation from customers," said Neil Morgan, a marketing professor at the Kelley School and an author of the study, in

Where to Start

These four priorities offer the strongest foundation for contact center modernization.

- 1 Identify the highest-volume, lowest-complexity interactions that can move to self-service first.
- 2 Start with a small proof of concept and expand as the team gains confidence with the platform.
- 3 Use AI-powered knowledge bases to accelerate agent onboarding and ensure consistent answers.
- 4 Establish a phased AI adoption plan that satisfies governance requirements while delivering early wins.

releasing the report. "Our results indicate that greater satisfaction of utility customers not only ensures consumer welfare by improving utility provider efficiency but also increases the future profitability of the utility."

Part of the reason for that is because utilities that pursue rate increases must often demonstrate they are delivering value to the communities they serve. Higher customer satisfaction rates make it easier for utilities to make that case.

A Practical Path Forward

Municipal utilities don't need to overhaul everything at once. Successful organizations typically start with one or two problems they know they can solve, prove the value and expand from there.

"With a modern cloud contact center, we can address legacy challenges, make the workforce more effective and give utilities a path forward that future-proofs their investment," Lochten says.

By investing in agile, cloud-based, AI-powered platforms, utilities can improve customer experience while strengthening the bottom line. When operations run more efficiently, accessibility expands across channels and residents feel heard. The result is stronger public trust and lower costs. For municipal utilities managing limited resources and rising expectations, that's a powerful combination.



1. <https://blog.kelley.iu.edu/2021/02/02/good-customer-service-can-lead-to-higher-profits-even-for-utilities-without-competition/>

*This piece was written and produced by the Government Technology Content Studio,
with information and input from Genesys.*



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