

Philadelphia Water Department

Two award-winning initiatives, one philosophy: How the Philadelphia Water Department builds trust and drives action

OVERVIEW

The Philadelphia Water Department (PWD) serves nearly 1.6 million customers across one of the largest cities in the U.S., making every communication effort both high-stakes and high-impact. Through a strategic partnership with the Granicus Experience Group (GXG), PWD transformed how it engages residents, moving beyond one-off outreach to a coordinated, data-driven strategy. What began as two distinct initiatives — citywide water meter upgrades and communicating about lead plumbing — helped grow how PWD communicates complex information and builds lasting public trust.

SITUATION | DOUBLE TROUBLE

PWD was navigating two of the most difficult communication challenges in government: driving participation in mandatory service programs and building trust around sensitive public health issues.

MUST HAVE SOLUTIONS

- Communications
- Granicus Experience Group (GXG)



88%

reduction in
properties without
service line records

470k

water meters
upgraded
citywide



95%

customer satisfaction
rate

~50-60%

open rates for
lead service line
and water meter
replacement
emails

“

Adding targeted outreach has helped the Philadelphia Water Department engage more residents and build trust — keeping customers better informed about meter upgrades and the safety of their drinking water. Thanks to the intentional support of GXG, we’re amplifying reach in a way that lets us build on that success moving forward.”

Paul Fugazzotto II | Assistant Deputy Commissioner, Public Affairs | Philadelphia Water Department



Driving action and adoption

In 2020, PWD launched a multi-year initiative to upgrade the technology on every water meter — a mandatory upgrade that required residents to schedule in-home appointments. The beginning of the effort coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic, when many residents were hesitant to allow service workers into their homes.

Outreach for the water meter replacement initiative relied heavily on paper mail, door hangers, and pre-printed messages on monthly bills. These offered limited visibility into public engagement or satisfaction. This approach led to missed appointments, inconsistent participation, and operational complexity across contractors and neighborhoods.

“The goal was a smoother customer experience,” said Herbie Hickmott, art director for PWD. “We know from customer research that email is one of the top ways that people want to be contacted about things like this, so we wanted to pivot from just sending letters.”

Balancing trust and transparency

At the same time, evolving EPA regulations required utilities to create a public-facing inventory of residential water service line materials — a sensitive topic that requires thoughtful communication. PWD needed to clearly explain why they were reaching out, the potential health impacts of lead plumbing, and the next steps without causing alarm.

“A major challenge is trying to balance these important and required notifications while reassuring the public that Philadelphia’s tap water is safe to drink,” said Grace Maiorano, public relations supervisor for regulatory affairs at PWD. **“The challenge was compounded by the need to communicate complex, technical information across diverse audiences, including homeowners, schools, and childcare facilities — each with different concerns and levels of understanding.”**

SOLUTION | COORDINATED COMMUNICATIONS

To address both challenges, PWD implemented segmented, omnichannel campaign strategies powered by Granicus’ Communications solution (govDelivery) and guided by GXG.

The team moved beyond transactional notifications to a coordinated communications approach that:

- ✓ **Used both digital and traditional channels** to reach as many people as possible.
- ✓ **Delivered personalized, data-informed** messaging.
- ✓ **Prioritized clear, plain-language** communication.
- ✓ **Integrated feedback loops** to continuously refine outreach.



Modernizing service communications

For the water meter replacement program, PWD introduced personalized email campaigns to complement mailed notifications, embedding account-specific details and aligning outreach with neighborhood rollout schedules. The team implemented structured reminder sequences and post-appointment surveys, improving scheduling outcomes while capturing real-time feedback on the customer experience. Insights were further refined through contractor-level segmentation, allowing PWD to identify patterns and improve service delivery.

“After months of relying solely on traditional mail, adding email to our toolkit expanded our reach and increased adoption,” said Paul Fugazzotto II, assistant deputy commissioner of public affairs at PWD.

Building trust through targeted engagement

For lead service line outreach, PWD deployed highly targeted communications tailored to specific audiences, such as property owners and school facilitators, alongside educational drip campaigns designed to build awareness and understanding. Messaging focused on simplifying technical concepts, using plain language to help residents understand both the issue and the actions they could take to protect drinking water from lead plumbing.

The message was continuously refined based on feedback. When communicating about service line material, replacing the term “unknown” with “incomplete record” significantly improved engagement.

“It’s very important to note that we really prioritize translating technical information into digestible content for the public,” said Maiorano. **“That language change helped us get people to engage and take action.”**

Bringing strategy to life

GXG played a critical role in helping PWD operationalize this approach — transforming individual campaigns into a repeatable, continuously improving engagement model.

The GXG team supported:

- Campaign strategy, structure, and cadence
- Personalization setup and execution
- Custom contact and data uploads
- Copy optimization and message simplification
- QA and campaign delivery
- Ongoing performance analysis and iteration



“They are a huge part of our success,” said Hickmott. “We have so many things going on, and because of them, we have the space and encouragement to think about these things. They can take a messy idea and turn it into a real campaign plan, helping with the strategy and logistics of how to accomplish our goals.”

RESULTS | OUTREACH THAT DRIVES OUTCOMES

By adopting a data-driven, resident-first communication strategy, PWD significantly improved both participation and public trust across its most critical programs.

For its water meter replacement initiative, personalized outreach and timely engagement helped drive more than 470,000 completed upgrades across the city. Engagement metrics reinforced this success, and more than 9,500 post-service surveys were completed — with 95% of respondents rating their experience as excellent or great.



PROOF POINT:

Only 36% of organizations actively capture community satisfaction metrics. Yet agencies that **actively monitored and responded to sentiment scores saw a 14-point increase** in positive sentiment year over year.

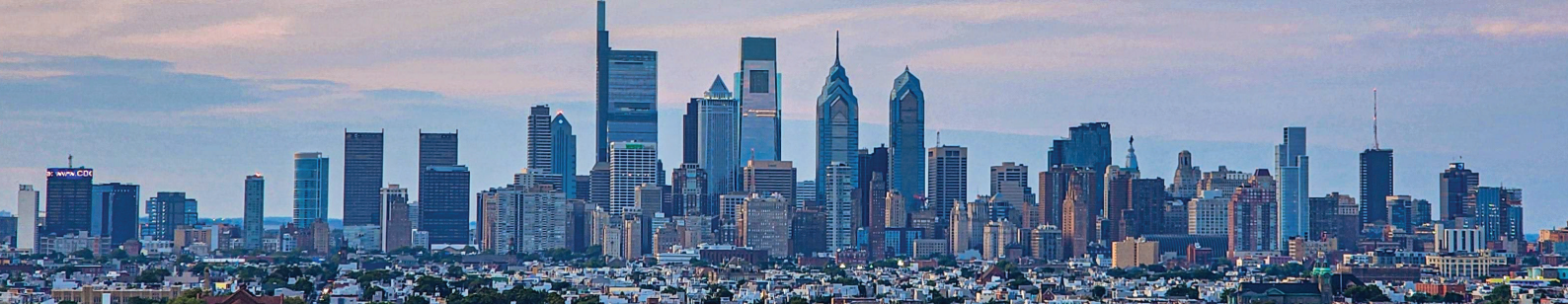
Source: 2026 State of Digital Government Report

At the same time, PWD’s targeted and carefully structured communications around lead service lines enabled more residents to understand safety status and take action.

Communications also encouraged residents to submit their service line materials records to the department. Customers with “incomplete records” received letters and emails with an opportunity to have their service line material checked by PWD.

This outreach contributed to the department’s overall reduction of properties without service line records. More than 85,000 material records were updated from incomplete to known, with an 88% decrease from 130,000 incomplete records to 16,000 incomplete records.

Hundreds of homeowners, childcare facilities, and schools completed drinking water testing and service line verification, providing PWD with a clearer picture of potential risks where potential risks exist



The department reduced properties without service line records from 130,000 to 16,000 — an 88% decrease — while updating more than 85,000 records from incomplete to known. This enabled more effective prioritization of testing and replacement efforts.

Engagement remained consistently strong across both initiatives, with average email open rates ranging from approximately 50–60%, indicating that residents were actively opening communications. This consistent engagement both reflects and reinforces public trust.



DATA INSIGHT:

The median open rate for state and local governments in 2025 was 37%. **PWD's strong open rates highlight the impact of clear, targeted communications.**

Source: 2026 Trends in Public Communications Report

BONUS | LOOKING AHEAD

Building on this foundation, PWD is now expanding its engagement strategy into additional use cases, including noncompliant and defective meter alerts, signal issue notifications, and ongoing outreach tied to lead service line replacement efforts.

With support from GXG and continued investment in data-driven communication, the department is evolving from campaign-based outreach to a continuous engagement lifecycle — one that adapts in real time based on resident feedback and operational needs.

PWD's approach is setting a new standard for large-scale utility communications — demonstrating that clear, human-centered engagement can improve service delivery and build lasting trust with the community.

*This story highlights the hard work and innovation that earned Philadelphia Water Department recognition as a winner in the 15th Annual **Granicus Digital Government Awards**, honoring exceptional achievements in digital government.*

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