



# When City Workers Pick Up Their Phones, Underserved Neighborhoods Benefit

*New Rutgers SPAA Research Shows How Frontline Government Workers  
Use Civic Tech to Bridge the Digital Divide in Newark*

## Practical Takeaways

- **Flexibility Over Rigidity:** Platforms allowing photos, free-text descriptions, and GPS tagging give workers and residents alike a better way to describe what they see on the ground.
- **Leadership Sets the Tone:** When mayors and city leaders consistently talk about serving underserved neighborhoods, frontline workers notice. In Newark, that messaging shaped where workers directed their reporting.
- **Technology Complements Human Judgment:** The right digital tools do not replace frontline workers' judgment—they give workers a faster, easier way to act on what they already know about their communities.

### SOURCE:

Porumbescu, G. A., Trehan, V., & Edomwonyi, A. (2025). Frontline workers and civic tech: Bridging the responsiveness gap in digital client encounters. *Public Administration Review*.

## EXECUTIVE OVERVIEW: Frontline Workers are the Unexpected Fix

Nearly 1 in 4 service requests on Newark Connect came not from residents, but from the city's own frontline workers — and those workers focused their reports on Newark's lowest-income neighborhoods.

Every city wants its digital service app to work for everyone. Few actually do. Residents with less internet access, less digital literacy, and less faith in government are consistently the least likely to report problems—which means their neighborhoods get less attention. New research from Rutgers University's Gregory A. Porumbescu and Vishal Trehan, together with the City of Newark's Agbonlahor Edomwonyi, points to an unexpected fix in Newark: frontline workers. Given flexible tools and a clear signal from leadership, they stepped in where residents couldn't—and the city's most underserved neighborhoods were better off for it.

### The Promise and Peril of Digital Government

Digital government has made it easier than ever to renew a permit or report a pothole—if you have a smartphone, reliable internet, and enough trust in government to bother.

For many residents, those are big ifs. Many civic tech platforms are built around rigid forms and dropdown menus. If your problem doesn't fit neatly into a category, the system fails you. Scholars call this the "digital cage"—a setup that promises efficiency but quietly excludes people with more complicated needs.

The result is predictable: the residents most likely to use these tools are the ones who already have resources. So who fills the gap? According to this study, it's often the city employees already working in those neighborhoods every day.

### Why It Matters for New Jersey

New Jersey municipalities are spending real money to modernize service delivery. Newark's experience is a cautionary tale and a model at the same time.

Newark is dense, diverse, and home to many residents with limited digital liter-



acy. Yet Newark Connect has improved responsiveness across the city—not because residents embraced the app uniformly, but because frontline workers stepped in where residents could not. For cities rolling out similar platforms, the finding is clear: technology alone isn’t enough. The workers who already know their communities need flexible tools and permission to use them.

### Key Findings

- **Frontline workers are active platform users.** Nearly one in four service requests on Newark Connect came from city workers. Most of the time, these workers were not relaying resident complaints—they were reporting infrastructure and public safety issues they noticed themselves.
- **Frontline workers focus on underserved communities.** Resident requests tended to come from the more affluent parts of Newark. Worker requests were different. Most were concentrated in

lower-income neighborhoods where residents were least likely to report problems themselves.

- **Ease of use, anonymity, and leadership priorities drive engagement.** When asked why they used Newark Connect, workers pointed to two things: the platform was simple, and it let them report anonymously. Additionally, workers described feeling responsible for the city as a whole, a sense reinforced by the mayor’s repeated focus on equitable development.

## Bottom Line

The best civic technology doesn’t just open a channel between residents and government. It empowers the workers who walk those streets every day to speak up for the communities that can’t always speak for themselves.