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CITY/COUNTY I & R CELEBRATES 10 YEARS OF SERVICE

PORTLAND— The City of Portland and Multnomah County Information and Referral Program is celebrating 10 years of helping citizens connect to local government services. The program prides itself on providing excellent customer service with its mission of making government services and staff accessible to the local community by answering inquiries ranging from where to pay court fines, to how to deal with drug houses, to what to do about troublesome raccoons.

"More than one million people have called the city-county referral line in the 10 years of its existence," Mayor Katz said. "There is no better testament to its value as an effective customer service tool. It is an excellent example of a successful partnership between the City and County in efficiently providing services to our communities."

Many other local cities and counties across the nation have implemented local government Information and Referral (I&R) services in the last several years but when the City of Portland started up its program in the Fall of 1994, it was one of the very first programs of its kind. In addition to answering the phones, the I&R staff also provides information services to walk-in customers at the front desk at City Hall and the Portland Building. They provide assistance to over 25,000 walk-in customers a year.

Originally the program started out as a City effort. The program grew from about 3000 calls per month in 1994 to now averaging 15,000 calls per month. In November 2000, City Commissioner Dan Saltzman and County Chair Diane Linn decided to consolidate Multnomah County into the City Information and Referral Program. The merge more than doubled the number of calls received by the 503-823-4000 line.

The City/County I&R program is staffed by five I&R specialists, including three of who are bilingual Spanish speakers, and a supervisor. They pride themselves on being able to answer any question thrown their way or, at the very least, point the caller in the right direction. Calls to the 503-823-4000 line range from how to deal with nuisance issues, to how to pay a traffic ticket, to how to find out if a relative is in jail. Not every call is a standard request. Staff has also been known to provide guidance for those seeking to find out what time Halloween begins, how many chickens they can possess within the city limits, and what to do about a rabid squirrel that bit them while walking down the sidewalk.

"We are the first point of contact that many people have with local government so we see our role as ambassadors, representing every City and County program and employee. We set the stage for the rest of that person's experience in trying to accomplish what they need for themselves, their family or their business," said I&R Supervisor John Dutt.

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