

"Federation Corner" column
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Access to county services for an aging population

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The first time I called the county government for a "special trash" pick-up was about forty years ago. I was twenty some years old, and living in a home in Takoma Park that I had rented with four friends who were former college chums. As I recall, we called for the pick-up in order to dispose of an old, beat-up sofa and a few other items too large to fit in the can used for our "regular" weekly trash pick-ups.

None of us who lived in that group house knew the first thing about the county's "special trash" disposal system--not what items qualified or how to sign up for a pick-up or whether there was a charge for the service. But we were all young and mentally agile. And so we eagerly researched the issue by using the phone book and the corded telephone plugged into a wall jack in our group house, which is now referred to as a land line (remember, those were the days before computers and mobile phones).

As I and my fellow renters discovered, in the 1970s any large item (furniture, television, or refrigerator) or metal or glass object (car parts, file cabinets or metal shelving, or a glass coffee table top) that one could not dispose of in regular trash required a "special trash" pick-up. Each residence in the county was allowed four of these a year for free--one each season of the year. You could call and arrange for a greater number of these pick-ups in a year, but you had to pay for any that were over and above the four free ones.

Now jump ahead four decades to the 2010s, to a time when both the county and I have matured. A large percentage of the populace has switched from using home-based land line telephones to mobile phones and, as a result, thick paperback phone books with their residential and county government listings are no longer published and distributed free to each home.

Today, searching for county services does not involve a phone book, but rather the internet or a call to 411 (a dying telephone number information service provided by the phone company) or 311 (our new county government telephone number info and services system). And now that the county government can be accessed and engaged via the internet, in theory there is no longer any need to actually speak with a county employee on the phone in order to sign up for a service.

I recently needed another "special trash" pick-up, from the home where I now reside. The fact that I had no phone book to use was no problem because I knew I could go online to look up the telephone number of the office to be contacted. Because trash pick-up service is an important issue to most residents (special pick-ups, whether your regular pick-up occurs on another day in a holiday week, etc.), I was certain there would be some link to the topic on the homepage of the county government website. But when I accessed to the site I could not find the word "trash" anywhere on the homepage.

I used the drop-down menu from the navigation bar "Departments" option to peruse the listing of county government departments and agencies to try and guess which one oversaw trash pick-ups. Was it the Department of General Services? When I went to their webpage, that department seemed more concerned with county government facilities and their maintenance. Then rather than take

another guess I typed the words "special trash pick-up" into the box at the top of the page and clicked "Search," and was presented the answer I needed.

I discovered that sometime over the past four decades "trash" had been re-branded by the county as "solid waste." I also learned that the "special trash" pick-ups of the past are now either "bulk trash" or "metal scrap" pick-ups, and one now gets five a year for free. The trick with scrap metal pick-ups, however, is that they are only for items that are at least fifty-one percent metal. And how many of us could figure out if that applies to today's televisions or refrigerators, for example? Thank goodness the county site lists standards items which qualify for "metal scrap: pick-ups.

While I still do not know which department oversees solid waste disposal, regular or other, the search trick had led me to a form I could fill out online to request my needed pick-up. Unfortunately, the four blanks for "contact information" and three for "incident/service request address" did not state what info was being requested. So each time I hit the "save and continue" button I was thwarted from continuing because I had placed incorrect info on a blank line. I wonder how many officials have tried to use this form.

After my third attempt to fill out the online form, I noticed a sentence printed in red at the bottom of the page stating if one had questions they should call MC311. "That's me," I said to myself; and then wondered whether I needed to dial the letters MC as well as the numbers 311 on my phone, or just the 311. I tried the latter and got a very pleasant female operator who signed me up for my solid waste pick-up in three minutes (compared to the twenty minutes I had spent online with no result).

The incident brought to mind that many folks resent change as they age because they are losing the mental agility and fortitude of youth which allowed them to reason out the solutions to new problems. Cheer up, fellow seniors. To access county services, all you have to remember is the 311 telephone number.

The views expressed in this column do not necessarily reflect formal positions adopted by the Federation. To submit an 800-1000 word column for consideration, send as an email attachment to montgomerycivic@yahoo.com