

In the government trenches, trusty telephone at their side

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The front line of Boston city government, says Mayor Thomas M. Menino, is the eighth floor of City Hall, where requests, complaints, and feedback pour in, 24/7, from more than 600,000 residents. Phone calls range from gripes about potholes and graffiti, to comments on such issues as crime and education, to questions about the city's small business services — just to name a few.

This week, seven Northeastern undergraduates are joining the small army of city employees who field these calls in the mayor's 24-hour constituent services call center, part of a newly established co-op partnership between the University and the City of Boston.

"This is really what it's all about," Menino said Wednesday during a kick-off meeting with the Northeastern team. "Here, you're in touch with people in a way that makes a huge difference in their perception of government."

The students, who represent a variety of majors including history, political science, psychology, international relations and computer science, were selected from a pool of nearly 40 Northeastern applicants.

John Tobin, former Boston city councilor and Northeastern University's vice president for city and community affairs, said the new town-gown partnership gives co-op students a unique opportunity to be part of what makes city government work.

"When it's all said and done, all politics is local," he told the students. "It's about taking care of issues that arise and getting results."

Justin Holmes, the city's director of constituent engagement, said the group would provide a significant boost to the day-to-day operation of the call center; his 13-member staff field between 600 and 700 calls on a normal day. After completing training, during which the students will listen in on live calls, learn how to triage a complaint that involves multiple departments, and meet with city officials, the group will try their hand at what Menino called "retail politics."

A live person greets callers at any hour of the day or night, Menino explained to the students.

“I’ve been in the business long enough to know that human contact is the best way to help Bostonians connect with their government,” he said.

Tom Shepard, a third-year political science major and one of the students eager to shake the mayor’s hand, said the chance to be part of City Hall’s constituent service hub would give him a close look at nearly every element of city government.

“It’s an amazing opportunity to have a look at how everything in city government fits together.”

For more information, please contact Matt Collette at 617-373-8618 or at m.collette@neu.edu.