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Cities across Arizona using Twitter to share news, connect with public

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By JENNIFER GAIE HELLUM

Cronkite News

PHOENIX – As a mother of twin 3-year-olds with muscular dystrophy, Cassandra Byrd can't go anywhere without finding out whether her destination can accommodate two wheelchairs.

When Byrd wanted to take her family to see a spring training game at the Peoria Sports Complex, rather than check a website or pick up the phone she assumed her [Twitter](#) identity of @aclevergirl and sent a tweet asking if anyone knew about wheelchair access.

Within minutes, Stuart Robinson, public affairs specialist for the city of Peoria, saw the mention of his city and replied via Twitter with an offer to contact the sports complex. He even provided her with photos of the facility's handicapped seating areas.

Byrd said she didn't expect someone to help her so quickly. She now follows the city of Peoria, as well as all other Valley municipalities, on [Twitter](#) because she feels she gets more reliable information from people with personal accountability for answers they provide.

"I don't have the patience to go online, then go to the phone and get sent to an automated phone tree or voicemail, only to end up with a person who can't help

Some Arizona municipalities on Twitter:

– Apache Junction: [@AJCityAZ](#)

– Casa Grande: [@cgazgov](#)

– Chandler: [@cityofchandler](#)

– Fountain Hills: [@fountainmedia](#)

– Glendale: [@GlendaleAZ](#)

– Marana: [@townofmarana](#)

– Maricopa: [@cityofMaricopa](#)

– Mesa: [@MesaAZgov](#)

– Oro Valley: [@OroValleyAZGov](#)

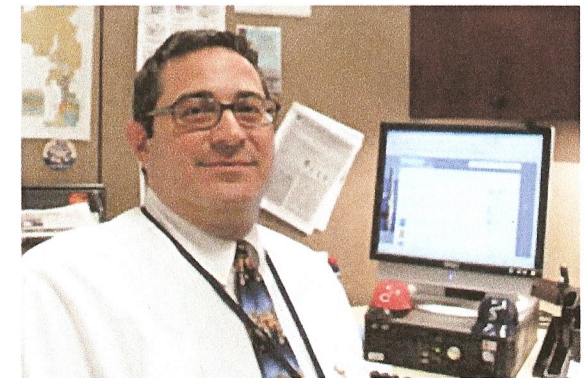
– Peoria: [@PeoriaAZ](#)

– Phoenix: [various accounts](#)



Phoenix resident Cassandra Byrd, with her son Kyle (left) and daughter Lauren, uses Twitter to seek information about wheelchair access at locations around the Valley.

Photo by Jennifer Gaie Hellum



Peoria public affairs specialist Stuart Robinson uses the city's Twitter account to distribute information about city operations and to respond to questions from the public.

Photo by Jennifer Gaie Hellum

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me," Byrd said. "I know I wouldn't have gotten as detailed a response."

Many municipalities across Arizona have turned to Twitter to connect with residents and share information with the wider public. Nearly two dozen cities have official Twitter accounts, including some with separate accounts for their police and fire departments, parks and libraries.

Yuma, Oro Valley and Casa Grande are among those using the popular microblogging platform mainly to disseminate city council minutes, public works announcements and the like, much like a newsletter, e-mail announcement or Web page.

Peoria and Tempe are among those using Twitter as a two-way communication tool, sending replies to specific questions about city departments and upcoming events, as well as posting questions in a way that invites public response.

Robinson's direct contact with the community via Twitter is part of the city of Peoria's greater [social media strategy](#). He said he likes to respond publicly to tweets, not only because the reply might be of interest to others but also because it lets people know that city employees respond to public inquiries and want to help when they can.

"In any large organization, often the hassle factor isn't getting the information; it's getting to the person who has the answer," Robinson said.

Ken Strobeck, executive director of the [League of Arizona Cities and Towns](#), said his organization has held workshops for Arizona communities to learn about using social media to get the word out about traffic and emergencies, connect with community members and get messages to the public quickly.

"Mailed-out newsletters are getting more and more expensive to produce and deliver," Strobeck said. "Electronic distribution is the way of the future."

While most cities have one person solely managing social media outreach, Tempe allows nearly a dozen city communicators access to its account.

Nikki Ripley, Tempe's communications and media relations director, said it's more efficient to have specific people intimately familiar with an area of government put out official information with traditional tools as well as engage people more casually through social media, including Twitter, Facebook and YouTube.

"We're all doing more with less," Ripley said, referring to tightened municipal budgets.

- Prescott: [@PresTweets](#)

- San Luis: [@CityofSanLuisAZ](#)

- Scottsdale: [@scottsdaleazgov](#)

- Surprise: [@AZSurprise](#)

- Tempe: [@Tempegov](#)

- Tucson: [@cityoftucson](#)

- Yuma: [@cityofyuma](#)



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Dawn Gilpin, an Arizona State University assistant professor who studies organizational communication, said Tempe's looser approach is forward-thinking.

"Most governments are not willing to empower people to respond directly," said Gilpin, who teaches at the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication. "Twitter is about conversations; you should have a sense that you're actually talking to a person."

Mesa not only has official accounts for individual government offices and services, but Mayor Scott Smith send tweets about his daily activities on his personal Twitter account. Flagstaff mayor Sara Presler used her her personal account to keep residents when wildfire and flooding struck over the summer.

Northern Arizona University political science professor Fred Solop said he applauds public officials for exploring news streams of communication.

"It's a natural progression for politicians and public officials to use social media to connect with constituents, especially in the context of crisis," Solop said.

For Byrd, the Phoenix mother with twins, Twitter has become the primary source for news about city business, road projects and economic development. When asked via Twitter about the appeal of following communities' tweets, she replied that it keeps her from missing relevant new throughout the day.

"I like following the cities because they don't tweet as often as newspapers and newschannels, so what they tweet is the important stuff."

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