

Baltimore, Maryland



A Historic City – and an Aging Infrastructure

Baltimore City is nearly 300 years old and encompasses 92 square miles, more than 620,000 residents and countless icons – the Inner Harbor, Mount Vernon, Fort McHenry, the home of the Preakness Stakes, Camden Yards, and Johns Hopkins University – but with its wealth of history comes an aging water and sewer infrastructure.

Portions of the water infrastructure date back to the Baltimore Water Company, the first water company established in the country. Major expansions and improvements to the system were made until the 1960s, but many water lines are decades old. Miles of downtown sewers were built 100 years ago, after 70 city blocks were flattened by the fire of 1904.

A MOUNTING PROBLEM

In 2013, water line breaks were plaguing downtown Baltimore City, inconveniencing residents and visitors alike. City leaders knew if the city officials were struggling with infrastructure problems on the public side, then so were residents.

“We needed to find a solution for our residents, because they could be faced with unexpected, and high, repair bills,” Shonte’ Eldridge, Baltimore City’s Deputy Chief of Operations, said.

In an effort to modernize the water system, Baltimore rolled out the Advanced Metering Infrastructure (AMI) system to improve meter accuracy and reduce water loss. As crews replaced meters, they found stark evidence of the water system’s age: In some cases it was difficult to reconnect service because of deteriorating lines and, in other cases, when they could be reconnected, resuming water pressure damaged them.

“When we went to put in the meters, it became apparent that dirt was the only thing holding some residents’ pipes together,” Eldridge said.

A NEED FOR EDUCATION

Baltimore City officials not only needed to help residents manage costs of their service lines, but also educate residents on their responsibility so they could plan for the potential costs. Many residents had no idea they were responsible for maintaining service lines, and they were shocked to find out the cost could be several thousand dollars. Home owners usually were unaware of their responsibility for paying the huge bill until after a plumbing emergency struck.

“I’m very pleased with the service and I recommend it to others.”

Myra S.,
Baltimore, MD

"You can understand having a break in something you didn't know was your responsibility, and then having to come up with thousands of dollars to keep from going without water or sewage service, was a huge issue," Eldridge said.

A SEARCH FOR A SOLUTION

Baltimore City officials began a year-long process to determine how to address the problem.

"We knew residents were having breaks and we could not just turn the water off and say 'good luck,'" Eldridge said. "That's not good leadership and that's not what citizens expect from government, so we had to look for another plan."

Baltimore City officials solicited pitches in 2014 from home warranty companies vying to become the City's preferred vendor. The City ultimately chose HomeServe, citing, among other things, the company's Stevie Award-winning call center, use of local contractors, and competitive rates.

"We gave potential vendors the opportunity to demonstrate the value they would bring to Baltimore City in a very lengthy, transparent, public process," Eldridge said. "We chose HomeServe as our preferred provider, which is something that doesn't normally happen in Baltimore City. This was the first of its kind that we had initiated."

AN AWARD-WINNING CALL CENTER

Eldridge cited the large number of customer service representatives, bilingual customer service representatives and around-the-clock call center service as factors in the decision.

HomeServe's call center has won multiple customer service awards. Their in-house Chattanooga, Tennessee, and Canonsburg, Pennsylvania-based centers utilize up-to-the-minute technology and extensive training that, combined with the number of dedicated customer service staff, results in one of the shortest hold times in the industry.

"If it's 3 a.m. and [a customer has] a sewage backup, you don't want to tell them they have to wait," Eldridge said.

The call center also offers around-the-clock availability seven days a week, while other companies had off-hours during which a customer would have to leave a message and wait for their call to be returned. Additionally, the availability of bilingual service representatives reduces frustration and stress for those whose first language isn't English.

"HomeServe exceeded our expectations for the program," Eldridge said.

PUTTING LOCALS TO WORK

HomeServe utilizes local contractors, vetting them rigorously before accepting them into their network and dispatching them to customers' homes. Each one has an A rating with the Better Business Bureau and maintains a high customer satisfaction rating.

"With HomeServe, we are making sure the City is benefitting in two ways: residents get great service and our local businesses and employees are getting work," Eldridge said.

Tom Shrum, owner of Prime Plumbing, is one of those contractors. Shrum has been a plumber for 15 years and has owned his own business for approximately 6. He became a HomeServe network contractor in early 2015, shortly after Baltimore City and HomeServe partnered.

I really appreciate how fast the service was. They are not expensive, and I would recommend them to anyone.

Sandra E.,
Baltimore, MD

Shrum has seen an increase of business, adding a new truck – and hiring another technician – every 12 to 18 months to handle the demand created by HomeServe clients.

“Everybody’s local,” he said of himself and his employees.

Prime Plumbing completed approximately 3,000 repair jobs for HomeServe over the past year.

“We are doing two water line repairs every day for HomeServe,” he said.

Following the winter weather event in January, Shrum and his crews were working seven days a week for three weeks, addressing breaks caused by the extreme cold. Some of these jobs had an added urgency – many Baltimore homes have boilers, which depend on water to provide heat.

“When we see no water service [to a home with a boiler], that’s a priority job,” Shrum said.

Many of Shrum’s HomeServe clients are elderly or on fixed incomes, and repairs would be difficult if they didn’t have the repair service plan.

“A majority of them couldn’t afford it or it would be a hardship to them,” he said.

Shrum’s HomeServe clients have included a woman who had sewer service returned after a long period without access because of a collapsed line, and a family of six whose water service line was repaired and service returned through the company’s HomeServe Cares program for disadvantaged residents.

“HomeServe replaced the entire service line,” he said.

A WINNING PARTNERSHIP

Baltimore City and HomeServe have a reciprocal relationship – HomeServe provides educational materials for homeowners, while the City identifies those who need education.

“HomeServe really helps with getting the message out – and they do it at their expense,” Eldridge said.

Baltimore City officials directed the City’s program royalties toward assisting low-income homeowners who have plumbing emergencies. The City doesn’t make a dime on the HomeServe partnership, instead diverting the royalties to a program allowing those below an established income level to receive needed service line repairs.

“If someone has a break and doesn’t have water, they don’t have to wait several weeks until they get the money or ask family or friends for a loan,” Eldridge said.

Since 2014, HomeServe has performed approximately \$6.7 million in repairs, and 43,000 residents have opted into the repair service. Baltimore City officials gave the green light to expand program offerings because of the initial success of the program.

“With all this combined – competitive coverage and rates, outstanding customer service and being able to give back to our residents – HomeServe is an excellent partner for us,” Eldridge said.

To learn more about how your municipality and residents can benefit through a partnership with HomeServe, visit our [website](#).

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Chief of Operations