

Yelp for cops and building inspectors? You can review Miami government workers online

By Joey Flechas

jflechas@miamiherald.com

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If you've ever dealt with one of Miami's public employees and have something to say about the experience — good or bad — you're about to get a digital suggestion box to speak your piece.

A new startup called CityGrader has [launched a website](#) where anyone can leave reviews of municipal employees and departments online for the whole world to read. Think Yelp or TripAdvisor for Miami's government. That includes cops, clerks, parks personnel, elected officials and entire city departments, such as code compliance and building.

The city of Miami is just one of 40,000 U.S. jurisdictions CityGrader has in its database, which will be rolling out through this year. Several Miami-Dade cities and their workforces are already listed on the site.

Paola Newell and her husband Tony, who have worked in construction for years, founded the company in Coral Gables after having a range of positive and negative encounters with building department employees. Working as general contractors, they were often pulling permits and meeting with inspectors.

They wanted to make sure that feedback got to supervisors, but it was hard to cut through the layers of bureaucracy to reach the right people.

"We've had some rather remarkable experiences, both positive and negative," Tony Newell said. "I find it's hard to do anything about those experiences, to give credit where credit is due and to give criticism where criticism is due."

CityGrader started developing its platform last year. The company doesn't need local government's blessing because it's using publicly available information — rosters of public employees. But Miami and Coral Gables have both passed resolutions supporting the venture.

No later than June, visitors at Miami City Hall on Dinner Key or the city's downtown riverside administration building can stop at a kiosk to use a streamlined version of the CityGrader platform to leave feedback. Later in the summer, Coral Gables will get a similar setup.

"We believe in transparency in government and that extends to the work that we do as public servants," said Miami spokesman Eugene Ramirez. "We look forward to providing our residents access to the platform in convenient locations so they can tell us how we're doing."

It probably behooves Miami to get on board with the concept. Whether City Hall officials like it or not, CityGrader will give anyone the ability to grade the city's operations and personnel and post public comments.

The screenshot shows the CityGrader website interface. At the top, there is a search bar with the placeholder text "Find jurisdictions, departments, employees...". Below the search bar, the profile of "Carlos A Gimenez" is displayed, with the title "Mayor Miami Dade County". To the left of the profile, there are two dropdown menus: "Department" with "Office Of The Mayor" selected, and "Jurisdiction" with "Miami-Dade County, FL" selected. Below these menus is a map of Miami-Dade County with a red pin. To the right of the profile, there is a form with a header "A B C D F" and a prompt "Make your community better by providing feedback, offering suggestions, or sharing your experience!". Below the prompt, there is a warning: "Please don't write a review if you're employed by this jurisdiction or have been asked to by someone associated with this jurisdiction." At the bottom of the form, there is a "Grade" button and a link to "grading guidelines".

This screenshot shows how the CityGrader website looks. Users can review public employees, departments and even elected officials.

As with any such service, trolls or even political operatives would be able to participate in the conversation. The website allows users to grade employees and departments with their user names or anonymously.

Newell said the platform will be moderated and government officials will be able to work with CityGrader to flag threatening or offensive content.

"What you find through time, with careful moderation, and with public partnership, you can weed out the bad stuff," he said.

Miami and Coral Gables will be getting the kiosks for free for the first year, after which municipalities will have to pay for the streamlined "Grade Onsite" functionality of CityGrader that allows people to easily review their experiences at government buildings.

Newell said cities will be able to use CityGrader to post and respond to user posts. Governments will also be able to use the site as a data-mining tool to track issues across the city through keyword searches of public posts. For example, bureaucrats can pinpoint persistent issues with trash pickup in a neighborhood through using searches to find posts about the issue.