

# 2-1-1: One Call, *Community* One Click for Services

written by Carol Wood, Director, 2-1-1 HELPLINE



2-1-1 is, quite simply, a telephone number set aside by the Federal Communications Commission in 2000 for “access to community information and referral services.”

## As a public official, do you know how 2-1-1 helps your constituents?

Imagine a program that helps people gain awareness of the range of services available in your city, village or county. Imagine an up-to-date, accurate and well-organized county- or city-wide directory of community services, made easily available to your residents. That’s 2-1-1. It is also a searchable website where you and your neighbors can find out where to recycle, or get counseling, or find a food pantry. It’s also a data/information resource for real-time trends occurring in your community, in normal or disaster situations. It’s a network of call centers across the state (and country), with capacity and technology to handle calls or back up another region with extraordinary needs.

### Public-Private Partnership

2-1-1 demonstrates the benefits of strong public-private partnership. It is built on a foundation of regional helplines providing free and confidential information and referral – defined by the industry as “the active process of linking a person with a need or problem with a service which will meet the need or solve the problem.” Many times, people call 2-1-1 with an issue they can’t clearly define, or with multiple issues they are facing at once. Across the country, more than 16 million calls were handled by 2-1-1 centers during 2011.

Numerous cost benefit analyses of 2-1-1 have identified examples of cost savings for taxpayers, employers and government. For example, studies from the University of Texas, United Way Worldwide, and others, show that 2-1-1:

- ◆ Reduces the number of government funded toll-free or “1-800” numbers;
- ◆ Saves duplication of resource lists and databases across county and state agencies;
- ◆ Facilitates volunteer recruitment for non-profits and ability for government to mobilize volunteers;
- ◆ Provides relevant information for cities and counties for planning and resource allocation;
- ◆ Centralizes communication services and costs;
- ◆ Dramatically improves the ability to disseminate public health and crisis preparedness information; and,
- ◆ Saves time for individuals and families through a one-stop call center for a variety of services.

Language interpretation or translation is offered and callers may connect to 2-1-1 via 7-1-1 (New York Relay for the deaf and hard of hearing). The system is also using social media and smart phone technology, in order to meet evolving communication demands. Each call center also maintains an alternative toll-free number, for callers from outside the region.

In order to make sure that emergency calls such as mental health crisis or life threatening situations are handled appropriately, 2-1-1 connects the caller with either 9-1-1 or a crisis line. In some instances, 2-1-1 call centers are also handling specialized information and referral for transportation, crisis, benefits intake or other services. These and other standards for the industry are established by the Alliance of Information & Referral Systems (AIRS) and 2-1-1 New York.

Each 2-1-1 service is supported

through a diverse public/private funding stream, based to some extent on the needs of its community. Some are operated by a local United Way and others by independent nonprofit organizations or, in the case of New York City, by a municipal office. County Departments of Social Services, Offices for Aging or Mental Health Departments, United Ways or call center service contracts are common sources of funding. The New York State budget for 2013 includes support as well, through the Office of Children & Family Services. 2-1-1 New York, Inc., a subsidiary corporation of United Way of New York State, holds the right to use and plan for 2-1-1 services, in partnership with the New York State Alliance of Information and Referral Systems (NYS AIRS). Its Board of Directors is chaired by Elizabeth Hood with the New York State Education Department; she is also a member of the UWNYS Board of Directors. Across the country, each state has crafted a governance style that fits with how the service evolved or garnered support.

2-1-1 system operators collect information that is valuable for planning purposes, both ongoing and disaster-related. This includes the reason for each call, the needs that are identified, and any unmet need, all by zip code, age and other demographics. Caller feedback, obtained through follow up calls, provides insight into the extent to which services are accessed or unavailable, the accuracy of the information provided and the satisfaction level with the original call to 2-1-1.

Last year, in New York State alone, seven 2-1-1 call centers handled nearly three million calls, providing information and referral about a wide range of services encompassing everything from basic needs (food, shelter, transportation), health care and health insurance, mental health, child care or senior services, support groups and

others. (Call statistics are available on the United Way of New York State's website.)

### Disaster assistance

During Tropical Storm Lee and Hurricane Irene, 2-1-1 centers handled disaster-related calls (nearly a million in New York City alone), and provided information about road closings, handling pets and medications, obtaining vital documents, as well as referrals to disaster assistance centers and registration numbers, shelters, code enforcement officers and hundreds of other services. Each time a 2-1-1 center handled a call, it meant that your city or village did not get a misdirected call from someone looking for a service your municipality does not offer.

Behind the scenes, this means working with public officials and first responders to manage information about services provided by federal, state, and private agencies that changes as the disaster and recovery unfolds. This enables the call center to not only provide ongoing, verified information about available services and to report on community needs. 2-1-1 is integral to longer-term recovery, in partnership with case managers (whether declared at the presidential or state level) and those organizations managing recovery funds.

### Other "N-1-1" numbers

If you've heard of 3-1-1, for accessing municipal services, you may also know that 4-1-1 is for directory assistance and 5-1-1 is designated for travel information including road closures and airline information. New York City has merged 2-1-1 and 3-1-1 as one center, which could be a model for other municipalities within a shared services plan.

Aside from providing financial support, what can you do? Help promote 2-1-1. Contact your 2-1-1 provider and ask for brochures or posters. Pass them out in your council meetings and make them available in your clerk's offices. If 2-1-1 is not available yet in

your area, contact 2-1-1 New York to find out how you can help get your area covered.

2-1-1 is an important and evolving resource that is helping to improve the quality of life in many communities across the nation. 2-1-1 is now available for a majority of New York State counties, giving residents access to important programs, services and toll-free numbers through a simple, easy-to-remember three-digit telephone number.

#### Resources and Additional Information:

- United Way of New York, [www.uwnys.org](http://www.uwnys.org) – information including call statistics and fact sheets.
- 2-1-1 US, [www.211.org](http://www.211.org) – national list of 2-1-1 providers by state, zip code.
- Eichenthal, David. "211/311: Is there a case for consolidation or collaboration?" Chattanooga, TN: Ochs Center for Metropolitan Studies, 2010. More information also at <http://blogs.wsj.com/metropolis/2010/07/21/the-411-on-new-york-citys-211-and-311-lines/>.
- Saxton, M.L., et al. "2-1-1 information services: Outcomes assessment, benefit-cost analysis, and policy issues," Government Information Quarterly, 2006.

**Carol W. Wood** is director of 2-1-1 HELPLINE at The Institute for Human Services in Bath, New York. 2-1-1 HELPLINE provides comprehensive information & referral and is a volunteer clearinghouse/resource center for Steuben, Chemung, Schuyler, Allegany and Yates Counties. She is developing the Southern Tier/Finger Lakes VOAD (Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster) and chairs the 2-1-1 New York Application, Review and Oversight Committee. The Institute for Human Services is a non-profit management support organization founded in 1984. The Institute provides management support, information and referral, organizational development, research and technology services to planners, funders and providers serving the Southern Tier of New York State. For more information visit [www.ihsnet.org](http://www.ihsnet.org) and [www.211helpline.org](http://www.211helpline.org).



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