

# The Role of Statewide Information and Referral in Crisis and Disaster



## What is Information and Referral (I&R)?

Information and Referral or I&R is a service that connects people in need of assistance with available community resources. Currently, Kentucky is served by a number of I&R systems operated by a variety of different governmental and non-profit organizations, each covering its own geographic area and each with its own database of I&R resources.

## What is 2-1-1?

2-1-1 is the 9-1-1 of health and human service I&R.

Assigned by the Federal Communications Commission in 2000 solely for health and human service I&R, this easy to remember 3-digit dialing code:

- connects people with vital community services;
- connects volunteers with opportunities to help;
- diverts non-emergency calls from 9-1-1
- results in a better allocation of community resources

A statewide 2-1-1 system, with three regionally-based call centers accessing one centralized database, would provide all Kentuckians with a simple means of accessing all health and human service information and opportunities throughout the Commonwealth.

## How Will 2-1-1 Help in Times of Disaster?

2-1-1 is a critical information system, **before, during and after** a community crisis – attack, fire, flood, tornado, or other local or national emergency.

Effective crisis response demands that an established information system is in place **before** the crisis occurs to be able to respond at a moment's notice.

2-1-1 responds immediately **during** times of disaster, fielding calls about the crisis and directing callers to services most appropriate for their needs.

Once 2-1-1 is implemented, it remains a permanent community presence, allowing people to find necessary in the weeks, months and years **after** the crisis itself has occurred.

## Case Study One: *The Graniteville Chemical Spill*

On January 6, 2005, at 2:45 in the morning, two trains collided in Aiken County, South Carolina, releasing a 90,000 pound cloud of highly toxic chlorine gas. The cloud left nine people dead and

more than 500 requiring medical attention. Nearly 6,000 people were evacuated from their homes for a week and in some cases, two weeks.

Immediately, calls started pouring in to 911. Most of the calls were not life threatening in nature but simply seeking information. Emergency services quickly asked the media to publicize 211 as the number to call for information and referral assistance. During the two week disaster period:

- Aiken 211 fielded more than 2,700 disaster calls and 374 non-disaster calls.
- The average daily call volume at Aiken 211 increased from 26 to 195 calls per day – 172 disaster-related and 23 non-disaster calls.
- Aiken 211 provided information not only to area residents, but also to other states and Canada, to national media outlets, and to state and federal governmental agencies.

The availability of 211 got important information into the hands of those who needed it, while leaving 911 free to handle more life-threatening situations.

*"I have worked in some form of Emergency Relief for nearly thirty-five (35) years. I do not want to live in a community without E911 or 211. Anyone who understands the importance of E911 must realize that we must keep our existing centers in operation and continue to add new 211 Centers until every city, county, borough, parish, burg, town, etc., is offered this new alternative"*

**Richard Powell**  
**Director of Emergency Services**  
**Aiken County, South Carolina**

### **Case Study Two: The 2004 and 2005 Hurricane Seasons**

In the late summer and early fall of 2004, the southeastern coast was battered with hurricanes. 211 was a lifeline to many affected by the storms.

As Hurricanes Charley and Frances drew a beeline on the coast of Florida, the 211 Community Resources in Orlando knew its lines would be impacted by the storms. To insure that citizens were still able to get vital information, the agency transferred its calls to other 211 centers around the country, including Tallahassee, Jacksonville, Tampa Bay, and, Atlanta.

Accessing the Orlando information database via the Internet, and monitoring local television Web sites, these other call centers were able to provide Orlando residents with accurate and timely information both on the disaster and on critical resource information such as alternative shelter or materials like dry ice, sandbags and plywood, that would allow residents to stay at home. Thanks to the seamless transition, Orlando residents were unaware that they were talking with volunteers on the ground elsewhere. The availability of a 211 network allowed more than 1,500 Orlando residents to access vital services that they could not have received if 211 were not in place in other areas.

The 2005 hurricane season, particularly Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, tested the 2-1-1 system in ways that it had not been tested before. All around the country, 2-1-1 call centers responded admirably, coordinating services and help for those who had been displaced by the storms, and sending staff and resources to the 2-1-1s that were dealing directly with the crises.

The 2-1-1 call centers in the states most affected by the hurricanes responded heroically, with 2-1-1 often becoming the “go to” number for evacuee support and services, for volunteers hoping to help, and for information about the storms. In many cases, 2-1-1 centers were the only source of information and support in an area. For weeks on end, call center staff and volunteers found themselves dealing with call volumes two to ten times their normal level. In addition, the calls coming in were extraordinary - people calling from their rooftops, looking for rescue; families looking for parents or children from which they had been separated; senior citizens trying to replace their life-saving drugs without their prescriptions or in some cases, without proof of who they were; people in mental and physical distress, hoping to find a live voice at the end of a phone line; families caught on clogged highways, looking for the best evacuation routes before new storms hit; and evacuees from one storm finding themselves evacuated again, being taken even further from their homes.

### **2-1-1 in Kentucky – Vital to Disaster Preparedness and Homeland Security**

Here in Kentucky, 2-1-1 played an important and innovative role in responding to the natural disasters that struck the Louisville area from September 2008 through August 2009. After the September wind storm, the January ice storm, and the August flash floods, 2-1-1 answered a record number of requests for assistance for people, like those seeking shelters or generators. But in addition to requests for information, 2-1-1 was used both to take requests for clean-up help from the elderly and disabled and to recruit volunteers willing to help with the clean-up. In the week after the wind storm, the Louisville 2-1-1 call center answered 4,203 calls. In the week after the ice storm, 3,273 calls were taken. Normal weekly call volume would be around 600 calls. Following the August floods, the Louisville call center partnered with Voluntary Organization Assisting in Disasters (VOAD) to assist those with flood damage. To date, more than 600 homes have been cleaned and an additional 170 are still awaiting assistance.

2-1-1 is an important statewide tool for information-sharing during disasters of any magnitude – natural or man-made. It serves as the clearinghouse to catalogue the massive needs, and coordinates and mobilizes the resources available to meet those challenges. The three call center/one central database model provides a critical redundancy in the system in the event that one center is knocked off-line by the crisis event. Partnering with local disaster response agencies like the Red Cross, Salvation Army, Volunteer Organizations Active in Disaster (VOAD) and state and local emergency management agencies, a statewide 2-1-1 network will provide the linchpin to get help and give help when people need it most.

Learn more at: [www.uwky.org/211advocacy.html](http://www.uwky.org/211advocacy.html)