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Speed Dial

Tested by Hurricane Katrina, a three-digit hotline for charities gains momentum

By Sam Kean

Many charities are still emerging from their post-Hurricane Katrina phase, but enough time has passed that they can look back to evaluate which disaster-response programs succeeded and which fell apart. As they parse complicated and multilayered relief plans, however, they are discovering that one of their most effective services was also one of the simplest: a three-digit telephone number, 211.

That number — commonly referred to as a "social-service hotline" — acts like a combination of 411, the information line, and 911, the emergency line, offering help in situations that aren't urgent but require intervention, like landlord-tenant conflicts.

But, as 211 proved during the Gulf Coast hurricanes in 2005, it can take on much of the burden of its better-known cousins.

After a second hurricane chewed through refugee camps for New Orleans residents left homeless by Hurricane Katrina, workers at the 211 call center in Monroe, La., found themselves as crowded and bedraggled as the people they were helping.

For a month, since Hurricane Katrina, volunteers had been flying into Monroe from as far away as Connecticut to help displaced people secure medicine, food, and clean water, and to locate missing relatives — exactly the sort of aid that 211 was designed to provide. A local United Way, which ran the 211 center, installed 50 extra phone lines within a day of Katrina to accommodate calls. It had to quintuple its staff of 12, and ended up piling volunteers' suitcases in the lobby and starting an in-house meal service.

But when Hurricane Rita hit on September 24, 2005, 911 services went down, and suddenly 211 had to handle emergency calls, too.

Janet S. Durden, president of the United Way of Northeast Louisiana, says her harried staff members had a signal — a raised hand with three fingers extended — whenever a worker was on the line with someone in a life-or-death situation.

And even in the middle of the night, she says, "you could walk in at any time and find somebody with three fingers in the air."

A Deluge of Calls

In all of 2004, the Monroe center took 9,000 calls. From September to December 2005, the center handled 111,000, including 7,358 in the 24 hours after Rita.

"It was especially important directing people to shelters," said Melissa S. Flourney, president of the Louisiana Association of Nonprofit Organizations.

That success in helping people find relief explains why 211 was one of the few social services to escape censure, official or otherwise, in the hurricanes' wake.

More and more charities have come to rely on 211 hotlines, albeit in circumstances less harrowing than those in Louisiana. Indeed, as 211 spreads — more than two-thirds of the country now have access — nonprofit groups have seen the value of establishing one easy number that people in trouble can dial to find help.

That's why United Way of America, in Washington, is helping establish 211 as a national hotline for social services by organizing call centers and supporting them financially, at least for a few months.

In Baltimore this past October, for example, the United Way of Central Maryland employed a typical strategy. It integrated and rerouted hundreds of social-service phone numbers into 211 and put up \$900,000 to run the center for 10 months. At that point, it hopes the state government will have come to depend on 211 and will pick up three-fourths of the cost in the future.

Martina A. Martin, director of the 211 program at United Way of Central Maryland, thinks the number can bring the efficiency of 911-emergency-response centers to charities: "Taking over 500 numbers in Maryland, which is a pretty confusing maze, down to one number is a great idea."

United Way officials emphasize that 211 is not a relay center to patch calls through to government agencies or charities. Instead, centers seek employees with social-work backgrounds, who field calls and walk people through processes like applying for food stamps.

But people still have to dial that one number. Although nearly every metropolitan area has 211 service, few people know about it, in part because few local United Ways promote it. Embedding 211 in the public consciousness, like 911, will be necessary to make the hotline a public service.

Beyond Emergencies

As telephone services got more complex in the mid-20th century, police- and fire-department numbers grew longer and more convoluted, a danger when people couldn't remember what to dial during emergencies. So in 1968, Haleyville, Ala., pared away the

extra digits and installed the nation's first 911 system.

It was a hit, and spread quickly. In fact, people liked the simplified number so much that complaints of the my-cat's-in-a-tree variety began to bog down call centers. But people also began calling 911 for basic social services, because they couldn't figure out where else to start. Clearly, the public wanted short, mnemonic numbers for more than just emergencies.

It took three decades, though, before Atlanta installed the first 211 system in 1997, followed by Connecticut the next year. Soon afterward, charities began lobbying the Federal Communications Commission to block off that number for social-service centers. The decision to do so came just in time: By 2000, all other "blank-1-1" numbers were either taken or unavailable for technical reasons. Since then, more than 200 centers have sprouted up, most at the instigation of a local United Way.

Connecticut helped convince many people of 211's efficacy, because it basically ran a controlled, and successful, experiment. From 1976 through 1997, the state had a single social-service hotline, identical to 211 except its telephone number was 10 digits. Few people called. In the first year Connecticut adopted 211, calls jumped 40 percent, and they have grown by 100 percent in less than a decade.

In addition to simplifying calls for people in need of help, a local 211 has provided additional benefits to charities and government agencies: Incoming calls, which are logged according the type of help sought, can be used as a social barometer. "Planners and funders can see emerging needs" and adjust resources, says Ms. Martin.

Indeed, since 2005, the Community Foundation for Greater Atlanta has used 211 information to identify gaps in its efforts to improve the health of homeless people.

"For instance, we found that homeless people didn't have access to voice-mail services, so it's very difficult to make appointments," says Lauren E. Norton, vice president for communications at the foundation. Homeless people have similar problems finding public transportation to get to appointments. Tracking 211-call data, which her foundation requests monthly from the call center, allows Ms. Norton to shift money appropriately.

Similarly, when the State of Connecticut cut thousands of people from its welfare rolls in 2001, 211 was flooded with calls, some unanticipated: "They started seeing a huge spike" in inquiries about food stamps, says Sally A. Mancini, an assistant director at End Hunger Connecticut, because many people who received both welfare and food stamps did not realize that losing one service did not mean losing the other. Ms. Mancini says 211 information helped her organization react quickly and quell confusion.

She adds that, although End Hunger has debated adding a toll-free phone number for its patrons, it decided against doing so since "211 serves that purpose."

According to data collected by the United Way of Connecticut and reflected at other centers, more than 30 percent of callers seek financial information — questions about how to apply for rent subsidies or about finding holiday gifts for poor children, for example. Ms. Martin describes financial assistance as 211's "core" service, adding that more people lately seem concerned about paying mortgages. Counseling services, such as legal counseling, drug rehabilitation, and job advice, are also in demand.

Stumbling Blocks

Months before Hurricane Katrina, Sens. Elizabeth Dole, Republican of North Carolina, and Hillary Rodham Clinton, Democrat of New York, had introduced a bill in Congress to establish a national 211 program. Given the service's performance during disasters — not only in Louisiana but during earlier hurricanes in Florida, and in aiding September 11, 2001, survivors in Connecticut — it seemed likely to pass. The bill went nowhere. Like a similar bill introduced in 2003, it languished and died from inattention.

Disagreement over how the program would be set up, and the fact that it represented new spending during a tight budget, doomed it, says Linda S. Daily, director of United Way of America's 211 service. However, she adds, new leadership in Congress gives her reason for optimism. In fact, Rep. Anna G. Eshoo, Democrat of California, and 87 House co-sponsors introduced legislation on the first day of the new Congress, January 4, to start the national 211 service.

The bill probably also failed the first time because few Americans knew enough about 211 to fight for it. A national study of 211 programs by the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs, at the University of Texas at Austin, determined that cities record, on average, one 211 call for every 16 residents, and the great majority of those calls are made by the same few people calling repeatedly, more than 10 times in some instances.

In addition to low recognition among the public, 211 has struggled to keep up with mobile technology. When Central Maryland's United Way says 70 percent of callers in the state are covered by 211, it means 70 percent of land lines. No cellphones in the region can use the service yet.

A few small states, like Connecticut, do have cellphone coverage, but only because the public-utilities commission ordered that cellphone providers add 211 service.

States with more than one 211 center, which is most of them, have to negotiate contracts with overlapping providers and face the laborious task of reprogramming and upgrading hubs, satellites, and relay centers to integrate the new service. Yet, it can be done: After Katrina, phone-service providers added 211 capabilities to all cellphones with Louisiana numbers within hours.

Savings and Costs

Most counties and cities, however, view 211 as an investment that will eventually save

them money.

"If we can institutionalize 211," says Ms. Daily, "there will be many savings down the road, not only with people's time and energy, but we won't have to spend the inordinate sums of money marketing" different numbers for different services.

The study from the University of Texas found that the entire United States could save \$603-million over 10 years by building more 211 centers. (The United Way of America often predicts a potential savings of \$1.25-billion, but that number reflects only the high end of an estimated range from the Texas study, and \$603-million is more realistic, says Christopher T. King, who led the study.)

However, the study did not include start-up costs in its calculations, which can be significant. The most recent Congressional bill to establish 211 service nationwide would cost \$700-million over six years, through 2013, with \$300-million of that allocated in the first two years.

Another expense in creating a nationwide 211 system is advertising. Mary B. Hogan, a vice president at the United Way in Connecticut, who flew into Louisiana to help direct 211 services in 2005, says that regional United Ways have been reluctant to spend money to promote 211.

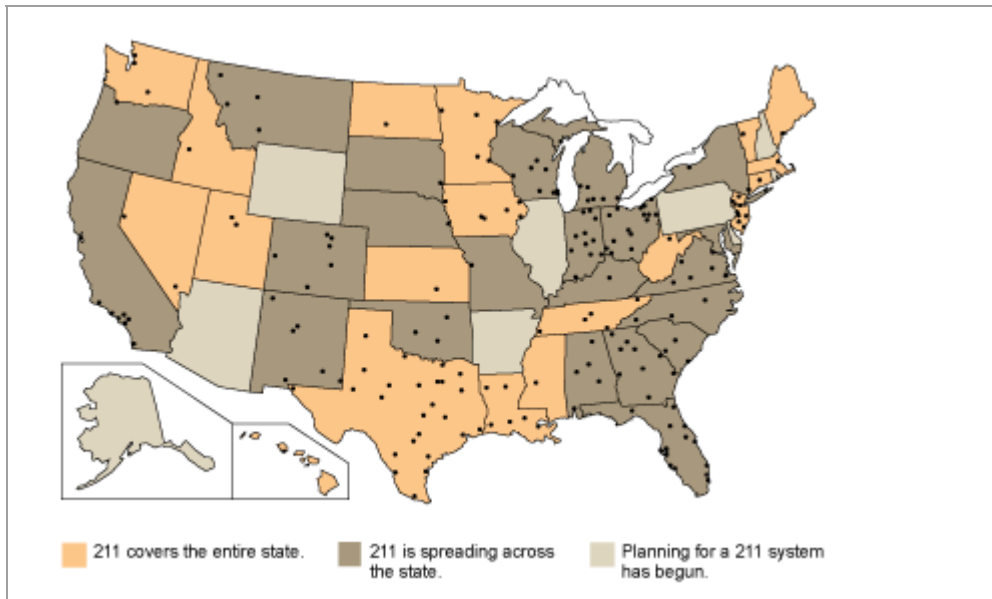
Her office put out brochures and wrote public-service announcements, and other branches produced radio spots and billboards. But the national headquarters decided to delay advertising until national coverage reached 75 percent, which could happen during 2007, says Ms. Daily.

The United Way in Central Maryland demonstrated why waiting was wise. Ms. Martin says that, beyond a news conference, her office did no advertising, fearing it would not have enough staff members or the telephone capacity to handle inquiries if it did.

Unfortunately, the talk-show host Phil McGraw featured 211 services on his nationally broadcast show the same day, October 11, that Maryland started its program. So the rush came anyway.

But, with a laugh, Ms. Daily says it turned out for the better, since the center proved it could handle a large number of calls. "Dr. Phil gave us some good data," she says.

WHERE THE 211 SYSTEM FOR EMERGENCY SOCIAL SERVICES OPERATES



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