



COPS Fact Sheet

COMMUNITY ORIENTED POLICING SERVICES
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE

www.cops.usdoj.gov

311 for Non-Emergencies Helping Communities One Call at a Time

The Need for Change

After more than 30 years in operation, the 911 emergency system has become a victim of its own effectiveness. 911 is a well-known, easy to use, and direct method for local citizens to contact their police departments—so much so that in many jurisdictions its use has expanded beyond its original intent. According to a U.S News and World Report (June 1996), across the nation an estimated 50 to 90 percent of all calls to 911 are not emergencies. These non-emergency calls can cause backlogs and inefficiencies for law enforcement agencies, leading to frustration and sometimes deadly consequences for callers with emergency needs.

The COPS Office Responds

On July 23, 1996, in response to the growing public dependence on 911 for non-emergencies, the COPS Office requested that the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) reserve 311 for national non-emergency use. The FCC approved this request in February 1997 and designated 311 as a national, voluntary, non-toll, three-digit phone number for non-emergencies.

Since then, COPS has funded almost \$6 million in support of the implementation and/or enhancement of 311 non-emergency systems.

311 for Homeland Security and Crisis Management.

In 2003, three agencies received funding to help them develop and implement a 311 system that incorporates multiple public service agencies and enhances homeland security and crisis management plans and practice: Charlotte-Mecklenburg (NC) Police Department; City of Columbus (OH)

Department of Public Safety; and Minneapolis (MN) Police Department.

Producing Results

311 Technical Assistance for Start-Up Grants

In September 2000, the COPS Office awarded grants to establish 311 non-emergency phone services in three communities:

- Austin, Texas
- Framingham, Massachusetts
- Orange County, Florida

Still Producing Results With 311 Technology Grants

In February 1999, the COPS Office awarded 311 Technology grants to six cities to develop 311 programs, in addition to providing the city of Baltimore with new funds to expand its existing and successful program. Those six cities are:

- Birmingham, Alabama
- Dukes County, Massachusetts
- Houston, Texas
- Los Angeles, California
- Miami, Florida
- Rochester, New York

San Jose, California

In the spring of 1997, the COPS Office awarded a grant to the California State Attorney General's Office to develop a strategic plan for statewide consideration and implementation of 311. San Jose was chosen as a pilot site to establish 311 and in November 1997, launched the first 311 system in California. The new 311 number enjoys considerable popularity and provides citizens greater access to public safety services.

"311 has been a miracle. It has been a godsend for us. 311 saved us not only from having our 911 system swamped but saved our citizens who had true emergencies, such as heart attacks and crimes in progress, from getting a busy signal."

Ed Harris,
Emergency Communications
Director
Austin Police Department

Baltimore, Maryland

Baltimore became the first city to have an operational, non-emergency number with support from a COPS Non-Emergency Telecommunications Pilot Project grant on October 1, 1996. The program has become a resounding success. 911 call volume has been reduced and 311 has allowed the emergency phone system to operate more efficiently and effectively. The Baltimore Police Department recorded the following improvements since 1996:

- Average answer time for 911 calls was reduced by 50 percent;
- Percentage of abandoned 911 calls was reduced by 50 percent;
- Average time between incoming 911 calls increased from 70 to 143 seconds;
- Percentage of 911 calls receiving a recorded message was reduced from 18 percent to 4 percent;
- Average "total position busy" time was reduced by 169 hours each month and the percentage of time operators were busy on calls was reduced from 59 percent to 41 percent; and
- From September 1996 to September 1999, the number of police calls dispatched to field units was reduced by 12.38 percent.

(Source: Baltimore Police Department, Final Report to the COPS Office, March 2000.)

Under this grant program, these communities will document the process of designing and implementing a public service model 311 system for their needs. From this documentation process, each agency will develop a 311 technical assistance guide. Once completed, each of these three guidebooks will be available to other law enforcement agencies interested in learning more about starting their own 311 system.

The Future of 311: Community Oriented Government

311 is being increasingly viewed as a tool to enhance citizen access to government services, expanding its original "police non-emergency" role. This public service approach for 311 reflects the nation's move towards community oriented government.

Community policing has long supported the concept of community oriented government by making law enforcement more responsive to the needs of its community. In this same way, 311 can support community oriented government by establishing a direct, citizen-driven link to other city service agencies and providing citizens with a way to track the response to their requests.

The future of 311 finds citizens with easier access to their government and more control over their requests. Instead of leafing through pages of phone numbers, citizens need only dial the easy-to-remember three-digit number and they will be promptly routed to the agency that can best serve their needs. Calls for service are routed to the appropriate agencies based on the service citizens request. Callers can receive their own "service numbers" and check the status of their requests on the Internet or over the phone. Documenting and tracking caller requests can ensure timely responses and increase agency accountability. With their expanding roles in our communities, 311 systems will offer real-time solutions for real-time problems, helping communities meet their needs one call at a time.

Contact COPS

For more information about COPS 311 Initiatives and related publications, please contact the U.S. Department of Justice Response Center at 800.421.6770 or visit COPS Online at www.cops.usdoj.gov.

COPS offers a variety of publications, products, and training opportunities to advance community policing and support its grant programs. COPS publications and products offer insights and experiences from others in the field addressing specific problems including:

- ✓ 911 Misuse and Abuse POP Guide
- ✓ Call Management and Community Policing: A Guidebook for Law Enforcement
- ✓ Law Enforcement Responds to Terrorism

COPS also sponsors training opportunities and conferences to give law enforcement professionals an opportunity to learn, network, and exchange ideas. COPS publications and training opportunities are posted at COPS Online at www.cops.usdoj.gov.