



311 service proves invaluable in emergencies.

By Anne Phelan

When residents call 911 for non-emergency help, it's mostly a minor annoyance, but those types of calls during large disasters can jeopardize rescue efforts. To reduce the crush of calls flooding into 911 systems, some local governments are using their non-emergency 311 service to manage administrative and informational needs so 911 centers can devote their resources to life-threatening situations. After emergencies, 311's work continues by helping residents find the resources they need to recover and directing departments to infrastructure repairs or other necessary service restoration.

Several communities have found that 311 is effective in issuing disaster warnings, publicizing evacuation instructions, directing residents to shelters, addressing the special needs of disabled residents, relaying information to the media and working with the Red Cross and other groups that are involved in relief and recovery. Those roles, however, took time to develop and strong leaders to carve out the relationships and processes that make 311 services most effective in those functions. The lessons they have learned about cooperation, planning and recovery are paving the way for an expanded 311 role in emergency response.

COOPERATION IS KEY

In the early stages of establishing 311 service, some jurisdictions focus just on the service's role in responding to daily calls for government information or routine service requests and may be reluctant to carve out a role for it in emergency situations. So, 311 directors need to promote their centers' potential value in disasters.

Planners need to consider how 311 can be a factor in responding to the problems that arise during a disaster and build awareness of 311's value. Hampton, Va.'s Call Center did that by sharing data about its call volumes, which spiked during snow storms or when flooding occurred. That information demonstrated to emergency planners that residents were already turning to 311 for information during weather-related crises. 311 then was invited to join the city's twice-a-year tabletop emergency planning exercise. As a result, when Hurricane Isabel struck the Hampton



When Hurricane Isabel struck the Hampton, Va., area in September 2003, the city's 311 center helped divert non-emergency calls from the 911 center.

area in September 2003, 311 had been integrated into the emergency operation plan.

In addition to reducing 911's call volume, 311 can relieve the burden on other government units. Departments such as public works may be challenged to meet their workloads during routine times and unable to absorb added demands during an emergency. 311 can serve as a liaison between residents and departments to dispatch appropriate services to where they are needed. Being able to ramp up during disasters becomes part of 311's mandate so that, during the emergency, its coordinating role multiplies resources.

311 emergency tips

- Integrate 311's functions with the emergency operations center
- Ensure 311's CRM software is robust and has a GIS interface
- Demonstrate to other local agencies how 311 can be of value in an emergency
- Educate residents about 311 so they are aware of its role
- Seek advice from 311 centers in other jurisdictions

311 also can be an important factor in 911's own backup plans. In a fast-moving natural disaster, a 911 center may need to be evacuated or its communications system may be hobbled. If that happens, 311 can help fill in the gaps until 911 service is restored.

Of course, 311 centers need to have their own backup resources to ensure continuity of service during a disaster. Those may include having a large generator, redundancies built into the computer network, and the capacity to direct calls to another location. Like 911, 311 centers need to be given top priority for restoring service by utility companies. With cell phones, satellite phones and laptop computers, 311 staff can set up their operations in an alternate location on relatively short notice.

PLANNING A RESPONSE

311's role during a disaster should be clearly designated and its procedures fully documented. 311 staff may be trained in National Incident Management Service procedures or other specialized training. The 311 center may be embedded in the emergency operations center (EOC), as is the case in Riverside, Calif., or it may have a liaison in the EOC and vice versa, which is the practice in Hampton.

Before disasters strike, 311 staff can anticipate many of the requests that are likely to arise and develop scripts for staff to use in responding to the most common questions. In Hampton, the 311 center has prepared responses for a number of situations, ranging from hurricanes to a pandemic flu outbreak to an accident at a nearby nuclear facility. As hurricane season approaches, staffers review the relevant frequently asked questions, and when a particular incident occurs, the scripted responses can be modified to include more specific instructions.

Even with detailed planning and training, however, 311 administrators will encounter unexpected challenges during their first experiences with disasters. Gloria Bingham, director of the 3-1-1 Houston Service Helpline, says that her center's response to Hurricane Ike in September 2008 was more effective because of lessons learned from Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005. For instance, the 311 staff was better able to anticipate specialized evacuation needs for bedridden residents or for people with pets. They also learned that people who have gone through hurricane trauma have different needs and may require more time from 311 operators. "Every customer is different, and we need to respond to them according to the particular situation they bring to the call," Bingham says.

Integrated technology, such as CRM and GIS software, is essential to 311 centers during emergencies. As 311 call takers document information and requests from residents, they can be grouped by map and zip codes, displaying where services need to be directed. In Orange County, Fla., first responders can log onto a secure Web site to report information directly to 311. The 311 center's technology displays the data on its GIS map, using symbols to show, for

instance, where fallen trees are blocking emergency routes or where a power outage may affect medical supplies. "This is not just a pretty picture," says Lorenzo Williams, assistant manager of the Public Safety Commission Unit for Orange County, Fla., Government 311. The maps give people in the field or in the center the means to quickly review data for a better, faster response, he says.

SPEEDING RECOVERY

While 911's first responder role ends with the disaster itself, 311 can be a vital coordinator in the more extensive recovery period. It can receive calls from residents about debris removal and then dispatch the public works department or private contractors accordingly. It can operate a housing hotline, as Houston has done, to serve people who have been displaced from their homes. It can tell non-profit organizations the types of supplies and equipment needed, and what types are not, so there is not an oversupply of some materials and shortages of others.

Interestingly, 311's experience in coordinating service functions during disasters sometimes leads to changes in the normal administration of government services. In the past, when Orange County residents wanted to report a fallen tree or a drainage problem, they would call a district office within the Roads and Drainage Division of the Public Works Department. But, as 311 handled those calls during weather-related emergencies, public works, law enforcement and other agencies began to see the value of routing the service requests through 311 all the time. As the Houston 311 center developed relationships with emergency management services and the transit authority, the partners realized it made more sense for 311, rather than 911, to take calls to arrange transport to cooling centers for seniors during heat emergencies.

City and county officials with 311 in place say there is potential for even greater integration with other local agencies in disaster recovery. For instance, if 311's functions



Orange County, Fla., routes all public works service requests through its 311 center so residents no longer need to know a direct number to a district office to report a fallen tree.

Talk about 311

The Washington-based International City/County Management Association, through its National Study of 311 and Customer Service Technology, has convened a group of 311 practitioners and other experts to study the potential for an expanded 311 role in emergency response and disaster recovery. Funding for the project is provided by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation. For more information about the study, visit www.icma.org/311.

311 administrators also can learn from their peers in other jurisdictions through national professional groups, such as the Association of Government Call Center Employees, or local or regional groups, such as the Florida 311 Coalition. Many are eager to share their experiences with cities and counties that are considering creating a role for 311 in emergencies.



Houston's 311 center has helped the city during several hurricanes, including Ike in 2008 and Katrina and Rita in 2005. "We will never ask for a hurricane," Director Gloria Bingham says. "But, we will certainly learn from it."

could be integrated with local building codes, then the 311 center could track the progress of post-disaster repairs. That means that 311 could follow the status from when a resident calls during a storm to say, "My roof is off," to when a government inspector says, post-repair, "It's safe to live in this house again," Nicely says.

Minneapolis witnessed 311's value in post-incident investigation following the Interstate 35W bridge collapse in August 2007. 311 received and recorded calls from people in the immediate vicinity, providing eyewitness reports as the accident unfolded. Those audio recordings were later used by investigators to determine the cause of the crash.

Even with thorough planning and preparation, however, 311 centers will encounter unexpected developments during an emergency and learn from the experience of responding to them. "We will never ask for a hurricane," Bingham says. "But, we will certainly learn from it." 311 center administrators, having found ways to translate their skills from routine government business to emergency situations, continually review data, technology options and public opinion to ensure that their service delivery becomes even more effective before, during and after disasters.

—Anne Phelan is a freelance writer for the Washington-based International City/County Management Association.

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