

Integrating 311 into Disaster Response & Recovery

3 Pre-Event Planning Case Studies

Hurricane Preparedness

Staff Training at Orange County Government 3-1-1

By Lorenzo Williams, Assistant Manager, Public Safety Communications Division, Orange County Government 3-1-1

Anne Phelan, Consultant

When a natural disaster or emergency strikes, a local government needs to communicate that it is open for business and available to serve citizens. Orange County Government 3-1-1, thanks to meticulous preparation, stands ready to play a frontline role in giving citizens the information they need before, during, and after an emergency, and in alerting government agencies about areas where services are needed.

Before citizens can make a request for information or services, they first need to know the number to call. “When Hurricane Charley occurred in August 2004, there were too many phone numbers in play, making it difficult for citizens to know where to call for what,” says Lorenzo Williams, the assistant manager of the Public Safety Communications Division, who oversees Orange County Government 3-1-1. That motivated officials in this central Florida county jurisdiction to take immediate steps to promote 3-1-1 as a reliable source of information during an emergency. Because of that publicity, citizens knew they could call 3-1-1 or (407) 836-3111 with their questions when hurricanes Frances and Jeanne struck in September 2004.

Orange County 3-1-1 was still in its pilot phase during that busy 2004

hurricane season. It was formally launched in June 2005 and now is an integral part of the county’s emergency planning and response. 3-1-1 and its strengths are built into the concept of operations section of Orange County’s Comprehensive Emergency Management Plan (CEMP) and its Emergency Support Function (ESF) 2 Policy. CEMP and ESF 2 cover potential events related to hurricanes, tornadoes, flooding, large-scale fires, evacuations, pandemics, spectator events, and other natural or man-made disasters. The benefits 3-1-1 offers during an emergency are similar to those during normal operations: faster notification, built around automated processes; clear responses to citizens; and reduced errors in communication.

Preparation is a coordinated effort, and the Office of Emergency Management and 3-1-1 check in with each other about the types of questions residents might ask and how best to respond. FAQs have been established for several highly probable events. While no two hurricanes are exactly alike, Orange County has had enough experience to anticipate the questions citizens are most likely to ask, such as about evacuation plans and routes, where to get sandbags, and the location of shelters.

A public announcement from the government might generate another set of questions. For instance, if a hurricane is predicted, Orange County might send out an advisory to citizens

COMMUNITY PROFILE

Form of Government: County with Home Rule Charter

Population: 1,086,480

Annual County Budget: \$3,142,182,982

Annual 3-1-1 Budget: \$1,558,565

Major Components:

Personnel \$1,410,451

Operations \$129,627

Capital \$18,487

3-1-1’s Location within County

Government: Public Safety Communications Division

Number of 3-1-1 Employees: 28

Type of System: BMC Service Desk Express

Unique System Features and

Management Tools:

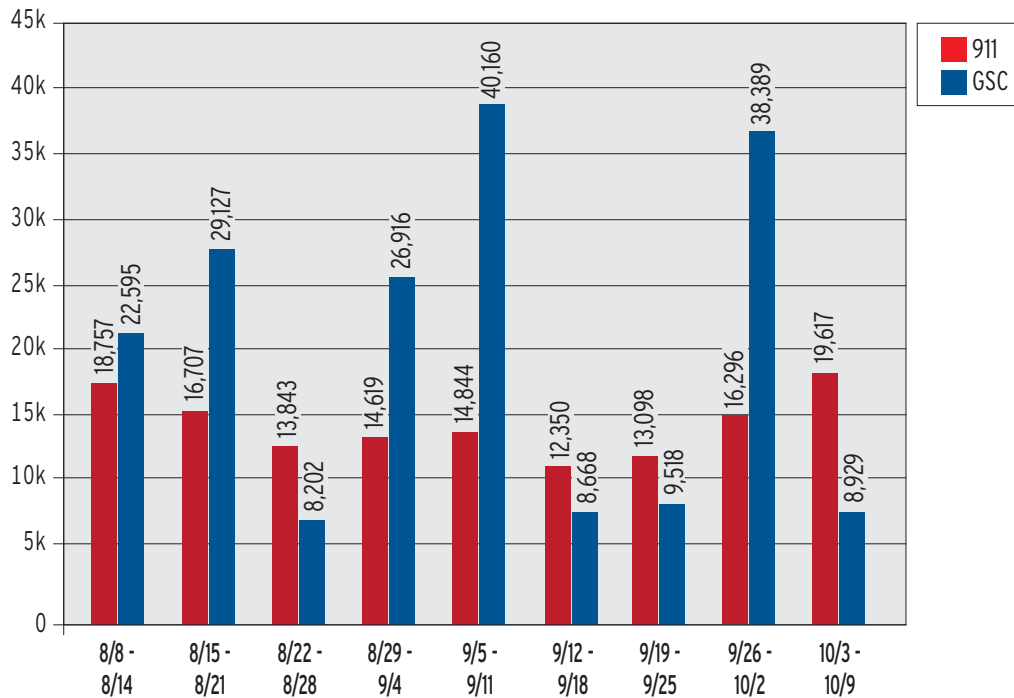
BMC Knowledge Management

Express and interfaces to E-Team,

Chameleon, and Code Enforcement applications



Figure 1: Calls to 3-1-1 and 911 August 8 - October 9, 2004



Note: Hurricane Charley struck Central Florida on August 13, Hurricane Frances on September 5, and Hurricane Jeanne on September 26. Publicity about 3-1-1 in the aftermath of Charley greatly increased the number of calls to the 3-1-1 center for the next two hurricanes. In 2004, the 3-1-1 center was referred to as the Government Service Center (GSC).

to check on their medical supplies; this, in turn, may prompt citizens to call 3-1-1 asking what they can do to keep their medicines refrigerated if electricity goes off. Planners also take into account the composition of their audience: central Florida is a major tourist and convention destination, so visitors unfamiliar with the area may call 3-1-1 with questions different from those of residents.

Training for Emergencies

The strength of Orange County Government 3-1-1 relies on the agents taking calls. Since February 2005, the call center has had a training coordinator on staff to instruct new employees and refresh the skills of experienced call agents. The center worked with Valencia Community College to develop a four-day in-house training module for new hires on its operations and quality control standards. Lead agents monitor new staff for another four to six weeks before they are allowed to work alone on

the floor. 3-1-1 also sends new staff out into the field to observe the work of the agencies they support, such as animal control and code enforcement. “This gives them a greater appreciation for these agencies’ work,” Lorenzo Williams says, “and lets them see how critical it can be to handle questions appropriately.”

To some extent, this routine operational training prepares call center staff for their roles in an emergency. All staff members are also required to complete designated National Incident Management System (NIMS) courses. But special training sessions, totaling about 25 hours a year, are held to refresh staff about their roles in an emergency; since hurricane season in the Atlantic begins June 1, Orange County Government 3-1-1 has designated January 2 through May 31 as a period to review, test, and update its emergency plans. The training and development coordinator leads about half of the allocated 25 hours, using PowerPoint presentations, and then staff spend the remaining time

working through hands-on exercises within the software application’s instruction environment.

3-1-1 has plans in place to expand its staff resources on short notice, should additional personnel be needed during a hurricane or other natural disaster. Three hundred county employees from other departments are ready to be activated as 3-1-1 supplemental call takers. All are certified in emergency support and are given hurricane-specific training during the January to June preparation period.

Coordinating with Other Departments

Part of 3-1-1’s effectiveness can be attributed to the time and energy it invests in building relationships with other county departments, learning about their work, and developing ways to be a source of support. For instance, it created a secure website for law enforcement use during an emergency, enabling officers to

quickly and easily key in data about what they observe in the field. They can also call 3-1-1 directly to report if a traffic light isn't working. 3-1-1 then relays the service request to traffic engineering and follows up as needed, enabling the officer to stay on site and direct traffic.

Orange County has expanded its geographic information systems (GIS) capabilities, which are particularly useful for designating where power lines are down, roads are flooded, or trees have fallen. 3-1-1 staff can plot this information on electronic maps as it's reported by county workers in the field or by citizens. This helps officials and responders determine where resources are most needed. GIS helps staff from 3-1-1 and other departments rehearse their roles through coordinated simulations, as defined in the Emergency Operations Plan.

Keeping these staff skills sharp is essential. For instance, a simulation exercise was held in September 2010, based on the scenario of the aftermath of a Category 4 hurricane. In addition to 3-1-1, it involved staff from growth management, information systems and service, and public works departments, as well as local utilities. Test calls to the 3-1-1 agents focused on physical damage, loss of power, flooding, and the need for resources. The exercise gave 3-1-1 participants practice in verifying their emergency system checklists, responding to likely requests, linking with other depart-



GIS capabilities help 3-1-1 coordinate storm clean-up with Public Works and other departments.

ments, and identifying questions that might not have been anticipated.

Ready for the Next One

Orange County has been fortunate since 2004, when the region was last in the direct path of a hurricane. But in Florida, this can't be a reason for complacency. Orange County Government 3-1-1 continues to test and refine its role during a hurricane or other emergency, so that when citizens call the now-familiar 3-1-1 phone number, call center staff will be ready to respond effectively.

Study Methodology

ICMA conducted a series of conference call discussions with representatives of 3-1-1 centers across the country in the spring of 2010. Select cities then responded to a questionnaire and follow-up interviews to elicit additional information about their preparation for specific emergency situations or large-scale events.

ICMA thanks the staff of Orange County Government 3-1-1 for sharing their time and experience with planning for emergencies. Their contributions to this case study were invaluable.



Leaders at the Core of Better Communities