

2-1-1: A Critical Tool in Times of Disaster

When United Way of America and the Alliance of Information and Referral Systems petitioned the FCC in 2000 to designate 2-1-1 as the official information and referral phone number, advocates described its value largely in terms of the ease of a three-digit, readily accessible number capable of connecting citizens with needed services.

Following the September 11 attacks, the necessity for 2-1-1 as a means of aggregating resources and enhancing post-disaster assistance became obvious. In fact, Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton, having observed 2-1-1's effectiveness in providing post-attack assistance to citizens in neighboring Connecticut, where a statewide 2-1-1 system was in place, noted, "We need this in New York. We need this everywhere."

Following the attacks, the Brookings Institution and Urban Institute collaborated on a study concluding that in Washington, D.C., the post-September 11 recovery efforts were "haphazard and disjointed." The study went on to document that those affected by disasters "found it difficult to connect with resources, due to a social services infrastructure that does not support a simple and efficient method for people to learn about and access services and agencies to coordinate their activities."

**"We need this in New York.
We need this everywhere."**

— Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton

Since the September 11 attacks, 2-1-1 has proved its worth in times of crisis time and again:

- 2-1-1's role during and following the 2004 Florida hurricane disasters was studied and summarized in "Trial by Wind and Water: How 2-1-1 Played a Vital Role During the 2004 Florida Hurricanes." In that report, Dr. Kenn Allen, president of the Civil Society Consulting Group LLC in Washington, D.C., concludes that despite its availability to only 75% of Floridians, "2-1-1s conclusively demonstrated the significant contribution that they can make in an emergency," including expanding the capacity of the emergency response system; managing unmet needs; reassuring callers; mobilizing and managing volunteers; serving as intake for service providers; and sustaining the critical connection to citizens.
- Following the Katrina and Rita disasters, FEMA issued a follow-up study titled, "2005 Hurricane Season After-Action Report," in which it both recognized the accomplishments of 2-1-1 and made a strong recommendation that states should move forward on statewide 2-1-1 implementation:

[We] encourage states to establish a 2-1-1 telephone system [like those in Texas, Louisiana and Arizona] from which victims can get shelter information, where [Disaster Response Centers] are, what the hours are, locations and telephone numbers.
- During recent tornadoes in Indiana, unusually severe snow storms in Denver and Buffalo, heat waves in St. Louis, wild fires in San Diego and Arizona, and chemical spills in South Carolina, the 2-1-1 system provided residents with invaluable information and connections to important resources.

As Americans have faced numerous natural and man-made disasters over the past several years, we have been compelled to examine our willingness to confront crises before they are beyond our control. As 2-1-1 continues to prove its worth as a critical tool in disaster response, we must join together – as stakeholders, providers, funders and citizens. This partnership can ensure that we have a coherent plan to serve all who are in need – quickly, efficiently and ubiquitously. 2-1-1 is, and must remain, a critical component of that plan.