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## After Hurricanes, Support Grows for 211 Call Service

By STEPHANIE STROM

There is 911 for emergencies and 411 for telephone numbers, and in New York City, residents dial 311 to complain about municipal services.

Now support is mounting for a nationwide rollout of 211, a telephone referral service created by United Way of America and its local affiliates that links callers to social services and volunteer opportunities in their communities.

Such systems were used in Louisiana and Texas after Hurricane Katrina, and were widely praised for their ability to assist victims and those helping them find resources and services.

"It was one of the few bright spots of that period," said George Penick, president of the Foundation of the Mid South, a community foundation in Jackson, Miss.

The success of the system attracted more attention to a push begun in 2003 by Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton, Democrat of New York, and Senator Elizabeth Dole, Republican of North Carolina, to establish 211 systems nationally.

The system was started by United Way in Atlanta in 1997 and has spread to all or part of 32 states and Washington, D.C., reaching almost half the nation's population. It was designed to help people navigate the thicket of charities that have sprung up over the last two decades and find the best programs for their needs.

After the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, Congress saw the potential for the system in emergencies, and in 2002, it granted states permission to use federal money intended to prepare for potential bioterrorism attacks for 211 systems.

But under that law, the system competes with 17 other options the states have for that money, and Senators Dole and Clinton believe that the system needs a larger, dedicated source of financing. Their bill seeks

\$550 million over the next five years to build and support 211 systems and requires states to put in another \$300 million.

Last summer, United Way led a lobbying push for the bill that increased the number of senators and representatives supporting it by 49 and was stunned when, with no wooing, 27 more members signed on after Hurricane Katrina. So far, 168 members have signed on to the bill.

That 211 worked so well in the hurricane crisis also came as a bit of a surprise. It was used during the hurricanes that struck last year, but United Way officials said those storms did not challenge it the way Hurricane Katrina did.

"The calls coming in weren't your typical 211 calls," said Peter Bishop, the 211 manager for United Way of America. "We don't usually deal with someone who's in their attic with water rising all around them and 911 broken down."

Ordinarily, 211 operators help find after-school programs, rent assistance, job training, medical support and other services using databases built over months and years.

"You can pretty much chuck that database out of the window during a disaster, particularly this one," Mr. Bishop said, referring to Hurricane Katrina. "None of the organizations listed in it could operate in and around New Orleans. Their phone lines were down, and the phone numbers people wanted and needed anyway were totally new."

With the 211 system in New Orleans knocked out, Monroe, La., population 53,000, became home to the 211 system for the state. The call center in the local United Way office went to 50 seats from 4 seats over three days.

Six volunteers were assigned to do nothing but seek phone numbers and information to add to the new data-

base, and operators took calls from people who could not get through to the state's emergency services. Mr. Bishop estimated that 80 percent of calls were answered within 30 seconds, the standard that United Way has set for the system.

"It did not work perfectly," he said. "Sometimes we gave out wrong information, and I'm sure not everyone could get through. But I am so proud of the 211 system."

Mississippi did not have a 211 system when Hurricane Katrina hit, although United Way of the Capital Area in Jackson was planning one.

"Can you imagine how many 800 numbers people had to try to remember during this crisis and how much easier it would have been to remember 211?" said Carol J. Burger, president and chief executive of the Jackson United Way. "It would have been so much more manageable here if one phone call was all that was needed to send people to the right place with the right information. Instead, it was chaos."

The Mississippi Commission for Volunteer Service quickly created a hot line that helped storm victims and coordinated delivery of relief supplies and volunteer services.

"We had 41 lines going 16 hours a day," said Marsha Meeks Kelly, executive director of the commission. "The volume of calls is going down, but it takes the individuals answering the phone calls two or three days to follow up because the needs are more complicated at this point in the recovery."

Ms. Burger said she hoped to have the state's 211 system in operation in January, provided that state regulators approved it.

"I visited Monroe," she said. "It was amazing to sit there and see how well it operated, how they could get people going in the right direction — and wish we had the same thing."

**A system built for social services could play a crucial role during emergencies.**

### What's the 211?

There's 911 for emergencies and 411 for phone information. In New York, 311 offers help with city services. Now, support is mounting for a nationwide rollout of 211, a service that links callers to social services and volunteer opportunities.

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