

Trial By Fire:

How 2-1-1's Regional Response to the
2007 Southern California Wildfires
Underscored the Need for a Statewide Network



February 2008

Dear Friends of 2-1-1:

After 35 years in the information and referral field, 21 years running the program that ultimately became 2-1-1 San Diego, and a long-held passionate belief in the potential of 2-1-1 to revolutionize the way people seek and receive help, I dialed 2-1-1 in late October.

It wasn't to check the functionality of the system, nor to connect with a particular 2-1-1 specialist, nor to be sure my cell phone had access to 2-1-1 service.

It was to secure information on how best to clear the debris from my Starvation Mountain home, which burned to the ground on October 22, 2007 — the same day that had long been planned as my official retirement as CEO of 2-1-1 San Diego.

I remember feeling very proud as a volunteer — one of more than 1,200 volunteers that came to 2-1-1 San Diego's aid — worked with me, despite a dearth of specific information on available resources to clear our property. As she guided me to some web sites that we reviewed together, I remember thinking, "She's working with me. Beside me."

And that is the whole point of 2-1-1, which was designated in 2000 by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) as the national telephone number for information and referral and is now available to approximately 75 percent of Americans and 84 percent of Californians.

As wonderful as it is to contemplate that 2-1-1 is available to more than 27 million Californians, the lessons of the wildfires must not go unheeded: **we must achieve 100 percent coverage with an integrated network that can function optimally in future disasters; and we must develop a sustainable funding model in partnership with stakeholders from every sector.**

In addition, even as we tackle the work ahead in California, we must continue to advocate for a truly national 2-1-1 system with consistent, stringent quality assurance standards; large-scale visibility of 2-1-1's benefits; and federal support for the Calling for 2-1-1 Act, which, if passed, will assist communities with the costs of operating their 2-1-1 systems.

As this report will detail — and many other post-disaster reports have also quantified over the past several years — the value of 2-1-1 is no longer in question.

Now it is incumbent upon all of us — as community leaders, citizens, legislators and funders — to understand the lessons learned and translate them into a strong commitment to 2-1-1.

Our communities deserve no less.



Sincerely,

Sara W. Matta
Former Executive Director
2-1-1 San Diego

2-1-1: A Critical Tool During Disasters

The National 2-1-1 Initiative was launched in July 2000 when United Way of America, the Alliance of Information and Referral Systems and several other partners successfully petitioned the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to assign 2-1-1 as the universal telephone number for information and referral services. At the time, 2-1-1 was seen largely as a means through which those in need would more easily access a human services system that is often disjointed and confusing to understand and access.

In the nearly eight years since the FCC formally assigned the number, it has become clear to creative citizens, community leaders, funders and government officials that 2-1-1, now available to approximately 75 percent of Americans, is a powerful tool that innovative communities can leverage to address their specific needs, and 2-1-1 has gained particular notice during times of disaster.

Even as early as 2001, during the September 11 attacks, the necessity for 2-1-1 as a means of aggregating resources and enhancing post-disaster assistance became obvious. In Connecticut, where a statewide 2-1-1 system was in place, the governor optimized the 2-1-1 infrastructure to assist those searching for loved ones employed at the World Trade Center — and later used the system to connect those suffering from the attack’s aftermath to mental health services.

In contrast, New York City and Washington were left with what the Brookings Institution and the Urban Institute later called, in referring particularly to D.C., a “disjointed and haphazard” health and human services system. Their follow-up report, *Calling 2-1-1: Enhancing the Washington Region’s Safety Net After 9/11*, specifically recommended the implementation of a 2-1-1 system to provide a single access point through which agencies’ services could be effectively coordinated. This need was particularly evident in New York City, where hundreds of unique 800 numbers were launched to assist those needing information, but ultimately added to the confusion.

Following the Katrina and Rita disasters, FEMA issued a follow-up study, the *2005 Hurricane Season After-Action Report*, in which it both recognized the accomplishments of 2-1-1 and made a strong recommendation that states move forward on statewide 2-1-1 implementation.

In October 2007, Southern California communities experienced first-hand the role 2-1-1 can play during a disaster. Twenty separate wildfires consumed large parts of six Southern California counties; in all, more than 500,000 people would be evacuated from homes in San Diego County alone. During these evacuations, major highways were closed as new fires began and existing fires spread. Information about evacuations, shelters, and road closures changed by the minute.

Over the period of October 21 through October 25, 2007, more than 130,000 calls to 2-1-1 were answered in the counties of Los Angeles, Riverside, Orange, San Bernardino, San Diego and Ventura, an increase of 764 percent over the same period the previous week. In a single day, October 24th, the six call centers answered more than 41,000 calls (with 2-1-1 San Diego answering 81 percent of them), comparable to the call volume of a mid-sized call center for an entire year. Unlike other types of disasters, wildfires pose the challenges of shifting evacuations, fires burning and expanding over days, continuously changing traffic closures, and simultaneous situations of response and recovery.

This report summarizes the enormous accomplishments of 2-1-1 and its multi-sector network of partners and volunteers during the October 2007 wildfires; examines the development of 2-1-1 California, particularly its ongoing commitment to disaster preparedness; and makes recommendations on how best to build upon the lessons of October 2007 to achieve and maintain the maximum state of readiness.

“2-1-1 is an essential service for our city residents every day of the year, and even more critical to support our emergency personnel in the event of a natural or man-made disaster.”

Merrilee Boyack
Deputy Mayor
City of Poway



The History of 2-1-1 California

In 2003, following statewide planning meetings among a variety of multi-sector stakeholders, the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC) issued an Order establishing the parameters under which 2-1-1 could be provided in California. 2-1-1 California, an unincorporated collaboration, was formed in 2004 through an agreement between the California Alliance of Information and Referral Services (CAIRS) and United Ways of California (UWCA). More recently, 2-1-1 California has expanded its partnership to include Volunteer Centers of California and the Governor's Offices on Services and Volunteerism and Emergency Services. Since the first counties launched 2-1-1 services in California in 2005, 19 counties covering approximately 84 percent of the state have launched 2-1-1 service, with full coverage anticipated in 2010.

The Need for 2-1-1 in California

While the U.S. population as a whole is expected to increase at a rate of 13.4 percent between 2000 and 2015, California's rate of increase is projected at 22.3 percent.

Even as California's population is growing, the challenges of serving that population are increasing proportionately. The most frequent non-disaster-related service calls to comprehensive information and referral agencies — including those in California — are for needs such as emergency shelter; protective services including child and elder abuse; rent, food, and utility bill assistance. In terms of these indicators, California is particularly challenged.



With 14 percent of Californians currently living in poverty — nearly 18 percent in Los Angeles County — California continues to rank last among the states in affordability of rental housing, with the necessary average hourly wage to afford a two-bedroom rental unit projected at \$21.24 per hour, assuming a 40-hour work week. The Annie E. Casey Foundation's *2007 KIDS COUNT Data Book: State Profiles of Child Well Being* reports that more than one third of children in California live in families where no parent has full-time, year-round employment.

An October 2006 report by the California Budget Project documented an alarming number of California's high-need indicators:¹

- More than one in eight Californians had incomes below the federal poverty level in 2005, notably higher than in 2001;
- The share of California children living in poverty rose from 16.4 percent in 2001 to 18.5 percent in 2005, ranking California as the 17th worst state in terms of child poverty;
- The number of Californians living without health insurance rose to 20.6 percent, with only five states indicating higher shares of uninsured non-elderly residents;
- The number of California children without health insurance rose to 1.35 million in 2005, from 1.17 million only one year prior.

Given the sheer enormity of California's human services challenges, the cultural diversity of the state (almost 40 percent do not speak English at home), and the fact that there are approximately 180,000 nonprofit organizations in the state², the need for single access point through which comprehensive, accurate information may be secured is evident.

¹ "New Census Data Show Few Gains for California." Published by the California Budget Project. Updated October 2006. Found at http://www.cbp.org/publications/documents/o6o8_pp_poverty_ooo.pdf

² The Center for Non-Profit Management referenced 178,223 nonprofit organizations currently registered in CA according to Guidestar.

That need is significantly more acute during crises or disasters, and victims of wildfires, which are characterized by simultaneous evacuations and recoveries of long duration, are particularly prone to what has been termed the “second disaster”:

The process of seeking help from government, voluntary agencies and insurance companies is fraught with rules, red tape, hassles, delays and disappointment for survivors of disaster. Feelings of helplessness and anger are common.³

It was exactly those feelings of “helplessness and anger” that 2-1-1 was able to ameliorate following the 2005 Gulf Coast hurricanes, according to a Crisis Unit Coordinator who remained on the front lines during the many months of recovery:

“2-1-1 is the mental health hub and pulse of this area....2-1-1 has been instrumental in saving the sanity and lives of many who are still struggling to find their way through this mess.”

*Cecile Tebo, Crisis Unit Coordinator
New Orleans Police Department*

A Vision of Statewide Disaster Readiness

Since its inception, 2-1-1 California has been grounded in the vision of an integrated statewide network of independent call centers that can reduce the confusing maze of information and services that overwhelms individuals who need help, both in addressing everyday challenges and in times of disaster.

In addressing 2-1-1’s potential role in a significant California disaster, the 2-1-1 California Business Plan specifically describes a statewide network that will be ready to:

- Connect people with the specific services they need, relieving first-responder organizations
- Help federal, state and local governments get accurate, current information to the public
- Provide reassurance to callers by responding to rumors and letting callers know where they can call for support
- Work directly with service providers to ensure the dissemination of accurate information about the availability of services
- Channel the efforts of those who want to help — from spontaneous volunteers to people wishing to donate material goods or money — to the right places that can benefit most immediately and directly

As 2-1-1 California moves forward with this vision of a fully integrated, statewide 2-1-1 system, the multi-sector local and statewide partnerships that have been integral to the success of 2-1-1 California will be more critical than ever:

- The Governor’s Office of Emergency Services, which serves on the 2-1-1 California leadership team, hosted a September 2007 2-1-1 summit, and has provided significant funding through a homeland security grant for statewide technology planning and disaster preparation
- Local Offices of Emergency Services that partner closely with local 2-1-1 providers through their Emergency Operations Plans
- Volunteer Centers of California, which serves on the 2-1-1 California leadership team and provides a vital link between local 2-1-1s and the Volunteer Centers in each community

³ Diane Myers, R.N., MSN: *Psychological Recovery From Disaster: Key Concepts For Delivery of Mental Health Services*: NCP Clinical Quarterly 4(2): Spring 1994



“Information on temporary shelter, school closures, animal care, medical needs, various social services, or anything else related to the fire is now as easy as simply dialing 2-1-1.”

Paul Biane, Chairman
Board of Supervisors
County of San Bernardino

- California Volunteers, Office of the Governor, which serves on the California 2-1-1 leadership team and strengthens the connection to the governor's efforts and priorities
- Strong local relationships with public officials:
 - The Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors has consistently stood behind 2-1-1 LA, awarding \$5.5 million each year since the 2005 launch, investing almost \$2 million in new state-of-the-art call technology, and establishing formal contracting relationships for public-information services during emergency/disaster situations.
 - Chairman Greg Cox of the San Diego County Board of Supervisors has consistently supported 2-1-1 San Diego.
 - There has been growing support from cities, including a new task force committee of the League of Cities to further develop partnerships between 2-1-1 San Diego and local cities.
- Financial support from private organizations to develop and implement 2-1-1:
 - Local First 5 commissions across the state have provided more than \$17 million in operational support⁴ to their local 2-1-1 counterparts in recognition of the 2-1-1's value to their 0 - 5 year-old target population.
 - Local United Ways statewide provided more than \$3 million in operational support⁵ to their local 2-1-1 providers or emerging 2-1-1 services.
 - In 2001, the California Endowment awarded a \$500,000 planning grant to support the development of 2-1-1 California and its statewide business plan.
 - In 2005, the Irvine Foundation awarded a \$75,000 planning grant to support the development of 2-1-1 California and its statewide business plan.
 - Kaiser Permanente Foundation has provided operational grants to 2-1-1 in Southern California and the Bay Area, grants to the six fire-impacted counties to help offset costs related to wildfire response, and, most recently, a \$50,000 grant to support statewide implementation of the 2-1-1 California business plan.
- Businesses such as Qualcomm, IBM, Google, and AT&T, who recognize the value of 2-1-1 to the communities they serve and support the development of a strong 2-1-1 infrastructure

As the next sections illustrate, the events and lessons of the 2007 wildfires demonstrate that the Vision articulated by the 2-1-1 California Business Plan was — and remains — accurate:

2-1-1 California Vision: All Californians will have access to current community, health and disaster information 24 hours each day through a free, easy-to-remember telephone number.

In the wake of the wildfires, the only change to that vision is the substitution of the word “must” for the word “will.”

2-1-1 California Mission:

To create and sustain a statewide network that brings together high-quality local and regional 2-1-1 call centers and provides benefits beyond what is possible independently.

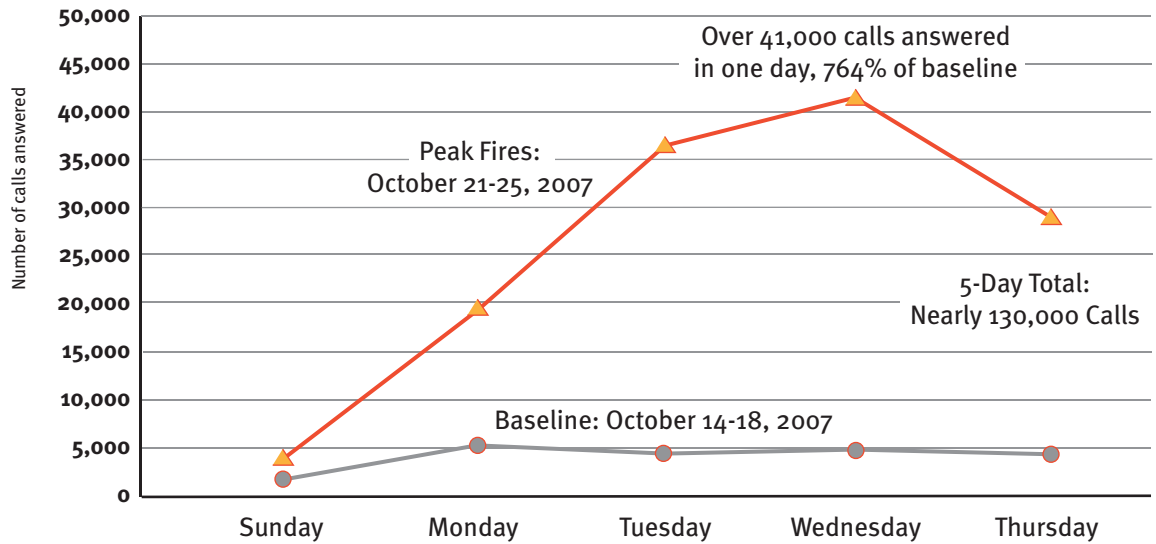
Goal: 100% of Californians have access to high-quality 2-1-1 services by 2010.



⁴ Beginning in 2001

⁵ Beginning in 2004

California Wildfire 2-1-1 Response Total Number of Calls Answered



“The 2-1-1 service was an invaluable resource during the firestorm in that it freed up calls from 9-1-1. We could give information on repopulated neighborhoods to the 2-1-1 operators. We saw 9-1-1 calls diminish over time because of that.”

Bill Gore
Undersheriff
San Diego County

2-1-1 and the 2007 California Wildfires

During the 2003 wildfires in San Diego County, the public was told to access many different numbers for fire-related information. In 2007, however, there was one number — 2-1-1.

As the Southern California wildfires erupted in late October 2007, the six counties that were ultimately named disaster areas — Los Angeles, Riverside, Orange, San Bernardino, San Diego, and Ventura — were equipped with fully operational 2-1-1 systems (see 2-1-1 coverage map on page 4), and all six had been long-time, active participants in a 2-1-1 Southern California Collaborative.

2-1-1 San Diego, serving the area of greatest impact, was previously established as an official partner with the County’s Office of Emergency services as the central source of emergency information for the public. Because of this pre-established partnership, 2-1-1 San Diego learned immediately about the activation of the County’s Emergency Operations Center on the first day of the fires.

Through an established relationship with the local Office of Emergency Services, 2-1-1 San Diego was named on information crawlers on television, noted as the number to call during daily news briefings, mentioned in radio stories, and was always included in OES press releases and on their web site. In addition, the Sheriff’s Department all carry 2-1-1 reference cards, as do many fire and rescue units. From the beginning, 2-1-1 was a central and integral part of the two-way communication necessary during this disaster, and continues to provide recovery information and referrals through Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (VOAD) and the Coordinated Assistance Network (CAN).

San Diego County deployed a computer-generated Reverse 9-1-1 system to alert citizens to evacuate immediately. Upon receiving the call, many residents sought out the human contact of a 2-1-1 specialist to confirm the evacuation order and to secure information about the best routes. Because of careful quality control of information, 2-1-1 was a reliable source of information not only to residents, but to the county departments as well, providing essential services such as rumor control, identification of unmet community information needs, and spontaneous donations management.

Reinforcements in both technological and human capacity were needed throughout the region to meet the tremendous call demand.

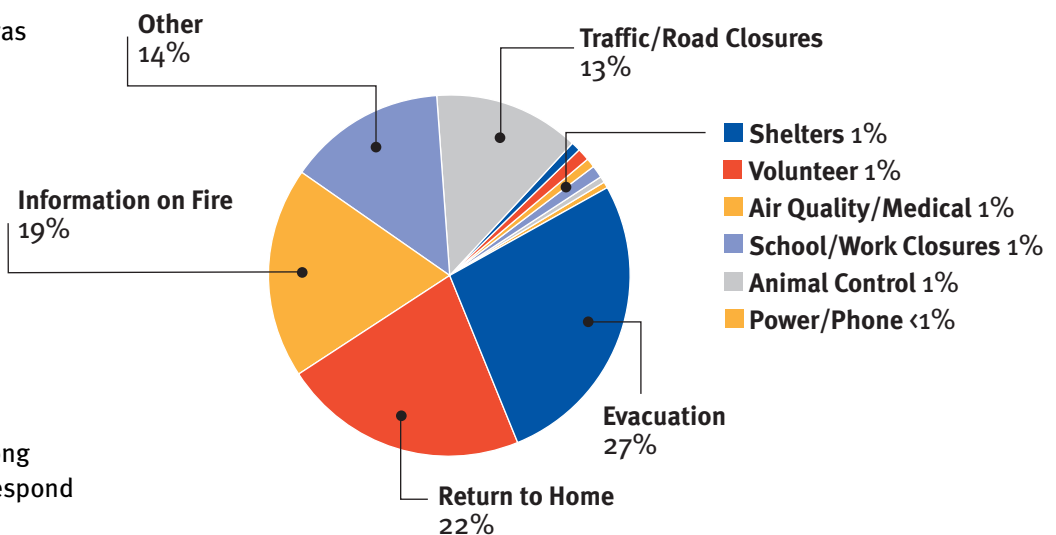
- The 2-1-1 Southern California Collaborative held daily conference calls to share information, identify gaps in resources and generate solutions together.
- Through the Enhanced Call Centers model that is integral to the vision outlined in the 2-1-1 California Business Plan, call surges can be managed effectively such as when Ventura County’s 2-1-1 experienced spiked calls from multiple fire-impacted counties but was able to redirect Orange County calls to 2-1-1 Los Angeles County with less than an hour’s notice.
- 2-1-1 San Diego received 25,000 on the second day of the fires, spiking to more than 44,000 calls on the third day, a 7,000 percent increase over normal operations. To effectively handle this level of call volume, 2-1-1 San Diego needed an emergency technological and telephonic ramp-up. This was provided by AT&T, Google, IBM and Qualcomm, with support from San Diego County.
- Through an existing partnership with the local volunteer center and strong connections with public departments, including the district attorney and children’s services, more than 1,200 volunteers augmented staff, answered calls and donated 7,000 hours of volunteer time in San Diego alone.
- Volunteers from other California 2-1-1 providers as well as the United Way of America/Alliance of Information and Referral Systems Disaster Response Team provided support throughout the region.
- Bank of America provided a volunteer team of highly trained call specialists to relieve staff at 2-1-1 Los Angeles.
- Overall, each local 2-1-1 put services in place to meet the immediate needs of its community.

In addition to the two-way communication offered to residents, 2-1-1 provided valuable services to county and local agencies when they experienced challenges within their own operating systems:

- A first responder in San Diego County, unable to reach dispatch or 9-1-1 to report exposed power lines, called 2-1-1 to report the location of affected utility poles.
- The San Diego sheriff’s office optimized 2-1-1’s technological capability to provide a three-way patch among 2-1-1, the sheriff’s office and mobile home residents trapped by a surrounding fire.
- In some cases when reverse 9-1-1 was misprogrammed, 2-1-1 collected information from affected callers and helped reverse 9-1-1 to track down the error.

Southern California 2-1-1s demonstrated their ability to provide vital two-way communication to tens of thousands of residents during a disaster. While the technological capacity to handle surges can be established, a sustainable network among call centers across the state is vital to respond effectively to future disasters.

Why Did They Call?



Moving Forward: Translating Lessons Learned into Action

With the lessons of the 2007 wildfires fresh in the minds of all who experienced them, the value of a 2-1-1 is increasingly expressed in terms of statewide disaster preparedness. At a January 9, 2008, follow-up workshop hosted by the California Public Utilities Commission and attended by representatives of telecommunications companies, city and government officials and 2-1-1 system leaders, Maribel Marin, executive director of 2-1-1 Los Angeles County and chair of both 2-1-1 California and the 2-1-1 Southern California Collaborative, noted the following:

“...an **integrated system** could provide a single point of coordination and provision for two-way communication with the public on disaster-related information; provide timely, emergency public information support from unaffected regions to impacted regions; and reduce pressure on critical operational communications such as 9-1-1”

The 2007 Southern California wildfires underscored the following four lessons for assuring effective disaster response:

Statewide disaster planning is absolutely critical and must draw upon the San Diego partnership model

- The local San Diego model of a strong, formalized partnership with the Office of Emergency Services (OES) ensured that 2-1-1 had been incorporated into local assistance center plans, public announcements, and two-way communications plans.
- Involvement in local Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (VOAD) is important prior to disasters to establish relationships important in response and recovery efforts.
- A statewide network will provide a single point of coordination and information support for public agencies.
- An integrated network will allow calls to shift to 2-1-1 providers in less affected regions, minimizing the need to send more people into affected areas.
- However, **2-1-1 must be sufficiently funded to sustain professional staff and to support the needed capacity to respond to major spikes during a disaster.**



State agencies and other partners must embrace the innovative ways 2-1-1 can address their information needs during disasters

- With appropriate funding and capacity, 2-1-1 can quickly ramp up to support local agencies by functioning as the go-to number for evacuation information, medical services, school closures, and various social services.
- During long-term recovery and rebuilding, 2-1-1 remains a critical piece of the community fabric, assisting citizens suffering through the “second disaster,” the period of helplessness that remains long after the emergency responders are gone.

Effective planning must incorporate an understanding that while disasters are local, they are also very often regional and statewide crises and therefore require 100% coverage with regional collaboration

- 29 counties in California currently have no plans for providing 2-1-1 service.
- Regional collaboratives recently formed in the Bay Area and in the Central Valley need support; additional collaboratives will be necessary to assure quality 2-1-1 service in disasters statewide.

All Californians must join together to ensure that Enhanced 2-1-1 service is available to all

- Immediate funds are needed to enable priority, one-time investments to create the statewide network through linkage of centers and resource database integration.
- Community leaders, legislators, funders and citizens must plan comprehensively to ensure ongoing operational funding for 2-1-1 California.

2-1-1 California is committed to realizing its goal of assuring 2-1-1 services for 100% of Californians by 2010, and playing a critical role as one part of the State’s comprehensive and effective disaster response team.

“I was in the 2-1-1 call center during the first hours of the fire and saw firsthand how quickly 2-1-1 San Diego was able to ramp up and take on the critical role of keeping citizens informed during the wildfires. 2-1-1 has become the centerpiece of our region's communications system, providing critical health and community information to people who need it.”

Greg Cox
Chairman

San Diego County Board of Supervisors



Printing provided by a generous grant from
IMPACT: A Fund for Change Through Volunteerism,
spearheaded by the **UPS Foundation**.

2-1-1 California

www.211california.org
Maribel Marin, mmarin@211la.org
David M. Smith, dsmith@vcunitedway.org

**United Way
of America**

701 North Fairfax Street
Alexandria, Virginia 22314-2045
www.unitedway.org

