community policing DISPATCH

The e-newsletter of the COPS Office | Volume 2 | Issue 8 | August 2009

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The Role of 311 Nonemergency Systems in Emergencies

With hurricane season in full swing, cities and counties across the nation, especially those with histories of finding themselves in hurricanes' paths, are preparing. They are preparing public notification plans, stockpiling resources, and revisiting Continuity of Operations Plans (COOP). For some jurisdictions, 311 nonemergency systems[1] have become a key component of their emergency planning.

Whereas 311 systems traditionally have been used to report incidents where the immediate presence of a police officer is not required, such as crimes no longer in-progress or quality-of-life problems,[2] 311 systems are increasingly being used to *support emergency operations.*[3] For example, during emergencies, callers can dial 311 (in jurisdictions that have established 311 systems) to receive up-to-date information on road and building closures, evacuation routes, and shelter locations. By diverting nonemergency calls from busy 911 systems before, during, and after emergencies, 311 systems help ensure that first responders remain available to respond to situations that are immediately life-threatening.

On March 26, 2009, the International City/County Management Association (ICMA) and the COPS Office cohosted a conference call on *311 and Emergency Response,* funded by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation. The call's participants included representatives from jurisdictions experienced in using 311 systems: Riverside (California), Orange County (Florida), Minneapolis (Minnesota), Houston (Texas), and Hampton (Virginia).[4] A representative from the Federal Emergency Management A gency (FEMA) also participated in the call.

Much of the call focused on how each jurisdiction used its 311 systems to address disasters, such as hurricanes, wildfires, and bridge collapses. The conference call highlights which follow illustrate, as the official from Houston stated, "the complexities and possibilities of 311."

Preparedness

Information Sharing. 311 systems can represent the first line of communication between citizens and their government. Citizens can call 311 systems to receive up-to-date information on impending emergencies, such as hurricanes, receive guidance on how to shelter in place, where to locate sandbags, and learn about expected flood zones, evacuation routes, and locations of the nearest evacuation centers. 311 call takers can also provide controls on information 'rumor mills' that can often accompany emergency situations.[5]

The Hampton (Virginia) participant noted that because its citizens had been used to calling the 311 number in their day-to-day lives, they were more likely to use it during times of emergency. This experience was in stark contrast to the earlier experience of Hampton officials when they rolled out a 10-digit public information telephone number, which was published only during disaster-type events. Citizens did not know what number to call and the inconsistency, caused by the unpublished public information line telephone number, added to the confusion.

911 system backup. Jurisdictions that house 311 systems in a separate facility will often equip them with the wiring, hardware, and software that enable 911 capabilities and allow the center to handle an overflow of 911 calls. These 311 call centers can also serve as a backup should 911 system capabilities be compromised.

Planning. Conference call participants reported incorporating the use of 311 systems into their emergency operations plans and/or COOPs.

Response

Public safety support. During Hurricane Rita, Hurricane Ike, and then again in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, Houston 311 systems relieved 911 systems from handling nonemergency calls, resulting in first responders remaining free to handle life-threatening situations. Houston credited its 311 system with providing police and fire department personnel the necessary time they needed to block off flooded roads so that drivers would not accidentally drive through them.

911 system support. During Hurricane Rita, Houston 311 call takers answered more than 100,000 calls in a period of 3 to 4 days. The effectiveness of the 911 system could have been severely impaired, had it needed to respond to these calls in addition to the average 911 call volume.

24/7 government access. In their discussion of the *I-35W Bridge Collapse* of August 1, 2007, Minneapolis participants noted that the incident occurred at 6:05 p.m., a time when the majority of government service agencies were closed. By default, the 311 Center became the gathering point for media and citizen requests for information. The 311 Center's television monitors also allowed staff to collect real-time information on emergency operations, and anticipate questions they were likely to receive, and quickly develop and disseminate responses to the public.

EOC operations support. Since all 311 calls in Minneapolis are recorded, 311 Center staff could send incident-related *.wave* files to Emergency Operations Center (EOC) personnel. 311 Center staff were also able to give information to EOC staff on citizen travel routes and gathering locations, as well as Red Cross supplies and personnel distribution locations.

Evacuations. Citizens can call 311 to request an evacuation or information on evacuation efforts. During Hurricane Ike, Houston transferred the information from 311 calls taken from bedridden citizens to the Emergency Management Center. The Center could then arrange for a special transport device that would allow these citizens to lie down during evacuation, rather than devices requiring them to sit up.

Resource allocation. Conference call participants noted the utility of 311 mapping applications, often linked to call tracking data via Citizen Relationship Management (CRM) software,[6] to identify patterns among

locations generating 311 calls. Sharing this information with municipal service agencies improved resource allocation decision-making processes.

For example, because the Orange County Utilities and Public Works agencies were linked to one coordinated 311 center, information could be shared quickly and resources could be deployed efficiently. Location information generated by 311 call-tracking data could also be compiled and shared with FEMA personnel, assisting their response and recovery efforts.

Recovery

Public safety support. Orange County Sheriff's Office staff used their secure laptops to access the 311 system and electronically report the nature and location of a nonemergency incident directly to the 311 call system. For example, when downed trees blocked routes used for emergency vehicles, officers could log in a 311 request for tree removal from their laptops, which would then be sent to the Public Works field operations center. Public Works would dispatch a vehicle immediately and remove the tree, allowing emergency vehicles to enter the area and provide public safety services to persons in need.

Housing. When Hurricane Katrina left thousands of citizens from neighboring jurisdictions homeless, Houston 311 was the number to call for help with housing issues. 311 became a housing hot line for persons either wanting to temporarily relocate to Houston or wanting to make Houston their permanent home and needed information on how to establish residency.

Orange County officials noted how their call takers provided information on available shelters and where to locate tarps to shield property from further environmental damage.

Volunteer coordination. Riverside participants reported using 311 to coordinate volunteer activities during the Southern California wildfires of 2007. They would receive calls such as "I have five generators in my basement. Do you need these?" Even the EOC staff would call 311 to ask "What volunteers are available? Where are they located?"

Donation coordination. Orange County reported that citizens or even businesses, would want to donate items, but would not know where to donate them. They would often drop them off at a random street, adding to the chaos. In addition, despite good intentions, these donated items were often not needed and only added to the items that needed to be removed and disposed. Orange County now uses its 311 system as a donation call center. Call takers can provide information about the specific types of donations that are needed, and help coordinate the acceptance process and delivery locations of these donations.

Cleanup. Orange County reported using 311 as a public information line for citizens to report debris or downed trees and electrical wires. They could also receive information on where to pick up cleaning supplies and where to drop off debris.

Conference call participants had several recommendations for agencies seeking to use 311 to support disaster preparedness, response, and recovery:

- Visit established 311 sites to learn from those who have already been there. Be sure to bring along a person with decision-making power such

as a city or county executive.

- Integrate 311 into EOC standard operating procedures, emergency operations plans, and COOPs.
- Ensure the 311 system includes robust CRM software with a GIS mapping interface.
- Educate participating municipal service agencies on the benefits of participating in a 311 system.
- Create a culture where agencies consider 311 in their emergency preparedness, response, and recovery plans.
- Recognize and plan for the differences in staffing and financial resource needs among 311 and 911 systems. Following a disaster, 911 systems may resume normal operations more quickly than 311 systems because of the difference in the types of calls handled. 311 calls can remain at high levels because they are driven by conditions that tend to persist long after the height of an emergency has passed (e.g., calls regarding resources (batteries, ice, tarps), debris pickup, cleanup supplies).

For more information about the COPS Office and its 311 knowledge resources, visit www.cops.usdoj.gov or contact the COPS Office Response Center at 1-800-421-6770 or askCOPSRC@usdoj.gov. For more information about the ICMA 311 Study, see www.icma.org.

[1] COPS Office Fact Sheet. *311 for Non-Emergencies: Helping Communities One Call at a Time.*

[2] 311 is often used by callers to request police nonemergency or municipal services; some jurisdictions use "211" for social services 211us.org.

[3] 311 Provides a Valuable Supplement to 911 Service

[4] For three related reports from the COPS Office, see *Building a 311 System: A Case Study of the Orange County, Florida, Government Service Center; Building a 311 System: A Case Study of the City of Minneapolis, and Promising Strategies from the Field: A National Overview*.

[5] COPS Innovations. *Law Enforcement Responds to Terrorism: Lessons in Prevention and Preparedness.*

[6] See ICMA's report: *Call 311 : Connecting Citizens to Local Government Final Report. Customer Service and 311/CRM Technology in Local Governments: Lessons on Connecting with Citizens.*

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