

# First Call for Help:

## 211 Connects Alabama Answers

### Outcomes and Lessons Learned from Hurricane Gustav September 2008



Hurricane Gustav September 1, 2008



## First Call for Help: 211 Connects Alabama Answers

### Process, Outcomes, and Lessons Learned in Response to Hurricane Gustav

#### History and functionality of 2-1-1 in Alabama

The Volunteer & Information Center, in partnership with the River Region United Way established the first 2-1-1 call center in Montgomery, Alabama in 2001, making Alabama the 4<sup>th</sup> state in the United States to provide 2-1-1 services to its residents. This, an accomplishment ahead of the 2002 Federal Communications Commission order that designated 2-1-1 as the number to call for access to health and human services. 2-1-1 is now available to over 90% of people in the state.

The 211 Connects Alabama network consists of 14 regional independent call centers, unified and guided by the United Ways of Alabama Executive Director and Board. Resource data is shared by the call centers utilizing the Refer software, a product of RTM Designs, yet still maintained and managed at the local level by each call center.



When 2-1-1 is dialed from any land line phone in Alabama, the call is pointed to a central 800 number. The caller hears a front end message requesting input of the zip code and is seamlessly routed to the appropriate call center, with no break in the call. Two numbers are published statewide when marketing 2-1-1 services: 2-1-1 (landline) and 1-866-869-4921 (cell phones and out of state area codes).

#### Planning for Hurricane Gustav Response

The 211 Connects Alabama network quickly realized that Alabama would be greatly impacted by Hurricane Gustav, if not by physical damage from storm surge and winds, then by the droves of evacuees that would be seeking refuge in our state.



hurricane related information.

- The 211 network met on Wednesday, August 27, 2008 to put a plan into action upon word given on an Alabama VOAD conference call from the Alabama Emergency Management Agency (AEMA) that 400 buses from New Orleans with 100 people on each bus would be arriving in Birmingham late in the week with the possibility of more buses to come. Evacuees would also be arriving in Alabama in their own vehicles and would need accurate information about shelters, food distribution, evacuation routes, and other
- The number one goal of the first planning meeting was to swiftly identify a seamless, real time system of updating and accessing accurate information from each call center. We knew we would need to obtain and disseminate additional hurricane information from the states of Louisiana and Mississippi as well as evacuees would have questions and concerns about what was happening in their hometown and when it would be safe to return.
- A central Intranet site was created whereby each call center could access and keep open on their desktops to search for resources when assisting callers. The decision not to utilize the Refer database was made as much of the needed resource data was not there

- (information from other states) and the data that was there was changing almost by the minute that it would be difficult to update fields, set service areas, and attach proper taxonomy in a timely and efficient manner.
- The Intranet site contained a message board that was maintained and updated by the 211 Call Center Director in Dothan, Alabama and backup provided by the IT Director at the Birmingham Call Center. As a regional call center sent in their local information regarding shelter openings, volunteer needs, etc., the content was reviewed by the designee and posted to the message board to be viewed by all. Additionally, a "Helpful Links" column was created with links to Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana EMA's, Departments of Transportation for the three states, Red Cross, and FEMA.
- A second planning meeting occurred on Friday, August 29, 2008 to discuss the potential for increased call volume and plans to handle the influx. Calls to 2-1-1 after hours and on weekends are currently managed by the Crisis Center in Birmingham, a program of the United Way of Central Alabama. (Crisis Center handling of after hours/weekends 2-1-1 calls is still currently in its pilot stages, there is no formal agreement at this time.) This plan remained in place. However, each call center was tasked to designate staff and volunteers to answer phones, determine operating hours (the following Monday was Labor Day - what call centers would be open), and who would provide backup.
- A plan also had to be in place to deal with the ongoing cell phone issue that many 2-1-1 systems across the country face on a daily basis which can be compounded during a multi-state disaster. Seven additional 2-1-1 phone stations were set up in a "mobile call center" (to be opened as determined by call volume) adjacent to the Crisis Center to specifically handle calls to 2-1-1 from cell phones with out of state area codes and for those who did not know their zip codes. The crisis center was set up to only answer "overflow" 2-1-1 calls if need be (overflow - all the 2-1-1 lines in each of the 14 call centers are busy). The Montgomery call center was also identified as a potential call overflow forwarding site.
- Three regional call center directors near the Birmingham site, volunteered to supervise the "mobile call center" in shifts. Additionally, volunteers were recruited and trained to answer calls in shifts. The mobile call center was opened on Sunday, August 31<sup>st</sup> after the 3<sup>rd</sup> and final planning meeting.

### **Outcomes and Lessons Learned**

A number of help lines were operating and even established during the preparations and response to Hurricane Gustav, throughout the tri state area. One could dial a number for shelter information, another number for road closings, and another for word when it was safe to return home. Yet, with one call to 2-1-1, call specialists provided the above information in detail as well as driving directions, volunteer needs, and even weather and damage reports to anxious callers fleeing from their hometowns. A total of 3008 callers were helped from August 29, 2008, three days before landfall, to September 5, 2008.

Hurricane Gustav gave 2-1-1 Connects Alabama its first real opportunity to respond on a statewide level, never before done within our system. The following report is an analysis of a survey created and distributed by the Chairperson of the statewide standards committee to each call center within the Alabama network. It is a compilation of questions and responses from call specialists and managers on the "frontlines" who were there to offer the information people were seeking and to reassure them that 2-1-1 in Alabama was there to help.



**Question:** What worked regarding the response of our 211 system? Please provide your outcomes locally as well as what you thought ran smoothly on a statewide level.

**Response:**

- **The intranet site** proved to be the most valuable tool to the call centers handling hurricane related calls locally as well as calls from areas out of their coverage zone. Call specialists were able to disseminate real time information about shelter locations anywhere in Alabama, evacuation routes and road closures anywhere in the tri-state area, school closings, gas stations along I-65 (the major north/south interstate in Alabama), medical needs shelter locations anywhere in the state, prescription needs and other information published by the Alabama Department of Public Health, gas voucher resources, all from one central site. The intranet was also used to communicate information not necessarily related to resources such as suggested scripts for volunteers answering phones, minutes from Alabama VOAD conference calls, statewide volunteer management and coordination services, and press releases from the Governors and local and state Emergency Management offices to residents of the affected areas.



- **FEMA and the Alabama Department of Transportation requested and were granted access to our intranet site.** - What a wonderful fact to present upon potential talks for future funding from either agency. The site will also be utilized for future disaster planning.
- **Communication, communication, communication** amongst the call centers by daily teleconferences was vital to the successful outcome of providing immediate I&R to those in crisis/need. Additionally, direct communication with responding agencies on the local level such as Red Cross Chapters, faith-based responders, and Emergency Operations Centers made the collection and update of information a smooth process. The Red Cross referred many callers to 2-1-1 for services they could not provide, such as prescription refills for example, which worked very well in letting people know that 2-1-1 was available to them.

Note: Contact and coordination with the above agencies during hurricane response would not be possible without the PRIOR development and strengthening of relationships long before the hurricane ever formed. Three of the regional call centers have Memorandums of Understanding with their local Emergency Management Agencies and the others are in the process of developing an agreement to strengthen their existing relationships. Each call center also actively participates in their local VOADs. Collaborative relationships with other first responding agencies such as the Red Cross and Salvation Army in the coverage area are equally important, and have been established by the call centers.

- **People with non-emergency needs were directed to call 2-1-1 by a host of local, state, and national entities.** The National Weather Service, Fox News, FEMA, Alabama Department of Transportation, local EMA's, news stations and newspapers were promoting 2-1-1 on news broadcasts, websites, and publications. Although other numbers such as the FEMA helpline and the American Red Cross were also published, this national

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recognition of the 2-1-1 dial code for non-emergency needs illustrated the awareness and value placed on 2-1-1 to deliver a seamless system of information and referral.

- Call specialists reported receiving a number of calls from state agencies such as the Department of Human Resources wanting to verify correct information to give to evacuees, further evidence that 2-1-1 is a single point of contact **for all** to find accurate information in a timely manner.
- Two final noted responses:
  1. Emergency contact information for key statewide personnel was extremely beneficial considering we were working over the weekend.
  2. Ability to work from home outside normal work hours when necessary via the internet and telephone and still effectively share, post, and provide information.

**Question:** What needed improvement? (locally AND statewide)

**Response:**

- Four regional call centers reported challenges with obtaining accurate local shelter availability information in a timely manner. The centers were receiving conflicting information and spending time verifying it with the shelters themselves. Many evacuees reported receiving a list of available shelters only to find that when they arrived the shelter was full. This lesson taught us to identify a consistent and reliable source in each county who will be able to disseminate the correct shelter availability information. - Typically, it will be the EMA director for each county. This is where that previously developed partnership comes into play.
- Barriers continue to exist amongst local and state agencies preventing a seamless collaboration in local areas resulting in duplication of services. (The left arm does not know what the right arm is doing.)
- One response indicated the need for a VOAD in their county - for the reasons stated above.
- **The cell phone issue continues to be a challenge and needs to be a top priority in the goal to provide 2-1-1 access to all.**
- Resources to assist people upon word to return home were few and far between. A plan needs to be in place for helping evacuees get home - a list of the agencies that will supply qualifying individuals with gas vouchers needs to be compiled and in place prior to any implementation of a plan to assist evacuees.



**Question:** Did your 211 call center provide any additional services to evacuees or agencies? (ex. coordination of gas vouchers, Charity Tracker admin, VRC assistance, etc.)

**Response**

- 211 Centers helped with Volunteer Registration Center setup, operations, referrals, and assistance.

- 211 Centers made daily contact with hotels to capture the count of self evacuees in the area and were the avenue used by the faith-based community to get word to the self evacuees of meals and assistance available for them.
- One 211 center created a social services disaster intake form for agencies such as Department of Human Resources, the County Public Health Department, and Family Success Center as well as maintained the database of applicants.
- One 211 center coordinated the disbursement of food and gas vouchers by the Salvation Army, as well as provided administration for Charity Tracker (a web-based program designed to prevent duplication of services).

**Question:** Suggestions for future disaster response operations?

**Response:**

- **Continue to push cell phone providers to recognize the 2-1-1 dial code.**
- Continue improvement on coordination of local, state and national resources available at the disaster sites and surrounding areas. Continue to develop strong working relationships with those key agencies - EMAs, American Red Cross Chapters, Salvation Army, VOAD, Family Service Centers, Department of Human Resources, etc.
- Contact Louisiana 211 to get ideas about their website and how they tracked website traffic by zip code and need.
- Maintain and update the intranet for further use. Change the site domain name to reflect the 211 Alabama Network. Determine parameters, type of information, predetermined necessary categories, etc. ahead of time for resources needed on the intranet and make available to call centers to assist in collecting uniform information statewide. Similar to the Louisiana site

Note: <http://www.la211disaster.org/Main.aspx> where they have categories listed such as: Important Numbers, Evacuation Areas, Evacuation Shelters, Road Closures, General Updates, Resources, Site Administration, etc.

**Question:** List any agencies and/or organizations (large and small) that your call center coordinated with to provide assistance to those in need.

**Response:**



- All of the regional call centers coordinated response efforts with media, FEMA, Alabama Department of Transportation, the Alabama VOAD, the American Red Cross, and their local Salvation Army offices.
- Other agencies included Columbia Baptist Association, Catholic Social Services, Volunteer Center of Morgan County, the local United Methodist Disaster Assistance group, Morgan and Lawrence Counties' United Ways, Morgan and Lawrence County VOADs, All Saints Interfaith

Center of Concern, Randolph County Baptist Association, Gadsden/Etowah EMA, United Way of Etowah County, Bob Echol's Family Success Center, , Etowah Baptist Mission Center, Catholic Center of Concern, Etowah County VOAD, Gadsden Regional Medical Center, Elliott Community Center (City of Gadsden), Etowah County Rescue Squad, Etowah County Health Department, Volunteer & Information Center, Inc.

Etowah County Dept of Human Resources, United Way of Central Alabama, Retired and Senior Volunteer Program of Etowah County, Riverview Regional Medical Center, TESA Department of Human Resources, St. Paul Methodist Church, Marshall County Baptist Assoc., City of Boaz, Guntersville First United Methodist Church and MC VOAD, Tallapoosa RSVP, Tallapoosa-Coosa VOAD, Tallapoosa and Coosa County Department of Human Resources, Tallapoosa EMA,, SAFE in Sylacauga, Lee County EMA, Lee County VOAD, Mobile County EMA, Volunteer Mobile, Compassion Coalition, Montgomery City/County EMA, Family Guidance Center of Alabama, Vaughn Park Church of Christ, Aldersgate UMC, Frazer UMC, Landmark Church of Christ, First Baptist Caring Center, River Region United Way.

**Question:** Have any agencies/organizations contacted your local call center for information regarding Gustav response outcomes - number of calls, types of assistance available, etc. If yes, who are they and what types of information were they requesting?

**Response:**

- Morgan and Lawrence County United Ways, Volunteer Center of Morgan Mental Health Association of Morgan County
- State and county offices of the Department of Human Resources contacted the number calls received by self evacuees and for verification of numbers still in the area on any given day.
- Local American Red Cross Chapters contacted 2-1-1 on a few occasions for non-sheltered evacuees for resources that were providing food, clothing, gas vouchers, bus tickets, etc.



- The 2-1-1 Call Center in Mobile reported that FEMA directed callers to 2-1-1 for temporary housing information.

This survey and its outcomes were produced for the purpose of recognizing the strengths of our collaborative 2-1-1 system in Alabama as well as the areas that need improvement. The next step in the Alabama 2-1-1 plan is to do just that: PLAN - take what we have learned and solidify a comprehensive disaster response plan so that those in need in our state will continue to "Get Help or Give Help" when it is needed most.