

THIRD ANNUAL DISASTER RESISTANT CALIFORNIA CONFERENCE

2-1-1: A NEW ESSENTIAL LINK FOR DISASTER INFORMATION

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Abstract

In 2000, the FCC set aside 2-1-1 as the standard link to comprehensive community information and referral services (I&Rs) throughout the United States, parallel to 9-1-1 for life-threatening emergencies. California I&Rs will begin implementing 2-1-1 services in late 2003.

2-1-1 will greatly enhance the public's access to disaster information. Under the standards for 2-1-1 set down by the California Public Utilities Commission, all I&Rs that are designated as 2-1-1 agencies in the State must develop cooperative relationships with their local emergency management organizations. This codifies a trend that is already well advanced in California.

In California, community I&Rs have played a significant role in disseminating disaster information at least since 1989. This role is formalized in some counties but in others it is not. It is critical that emergency managers understand the potential of 2-1-1 and that the 2-1-1 services and emergency managers develop effective systems of collaboration.

2-1-1 In Light of the September 11, 2001 Attacks

In the aftermath of a major disaster the public has needs for information that are most readily and appropriately met by comprehensive health and human service Information & Referral (I&R) agencies rather than disaster operations organizations. These include calls from:

- families (including frightened children & concerned parents) trying to determine whether missing persons were victims;
- individuals reliving other disasters;
- survivors feeling guilty;
- persons offering information on suspects;
- people wanting to help by donating blood, money, or goods;
- mentally ill persons feeling overwhelmed by the disaster; and
- persons seeking location of vigils or contact information on support groups.³

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³ The following discussion of Connecticut 2-1-1 is from: Carlson, *The Experience of September 11th: The Role of a 2-1-1 Call Center in Responding to a Disaster*.

The public needs this kind of information following any major disaster; the need is even greater when the disaster has the additional emotional impact of a terror attack.

In New York, following the September 11, 2001 attack, there were an estimated 400 toll-free (8yy) numbers that provided some portion of this kind of information to the public. Some of these were existing numbers of organizations like the American Red Cross. Many of them were new numbers set up specifically for this event, such as those for the numerous funds that were established to help victims' families. The result for the people who were seeking to get or to give help was confusion and frustration. The result for some of the organizations involved was unseemly competition for public attention and, in some cases, dollars. It was also a situation ripe for exploitation by unscrupulous individuals.

It is instructive to contrast this to the situation in Connecticut. That state was heavily impacted by the terrorist attacks because many of the people who work in lower Manhattan live in Connecticut. Because the United Way of Connecticut's Infoline had implemented 2-1-1 dialing for comprehensive I&R in 1998 the number was already well-known as the connection to a reliable provider of information prior to September, 2001.

The Governor established a special 8yy number, 866-CT-HELPS, for the event, and people were urged to call either it or 2-1-1 to give or get help. It is estimated that 95% of these calls went to 2-1-1. At first, calls to 866-CT-HELPS were handled by state employees who were trained by Infoline staff. After a short while, the United Way staffed both lines so the preference for 2-1-1 was not a matter of one line developing a reputation for giving better service than the other. It was primarily a matter of 2-1-1 already being known and being simpler to remember and dial.

Rather than competing with other information lines, Connecticut 2-1-1 worked cooperatively with them. Because of Connecticut's proximity to New York, the Connecticut Red Cross immediately became involved in assisting with New York's disaster recovery efforts. Since it was impossible to get through to the Connecticut Red Cross Office phone lines in the days immediately following September 11th, staff from Infoline 2-1-1 visited Red Cross headquarters to meet with personnel to devise a plan to deal with the onslaught of calls both agencies were receiving that related to Red Cross Services. In the time following September 11th, Infoline 2-1-1 made no direct referrals to the Red Cross. Instead, the Red Cross provided Infoline 2-1-1 with information to share with callers. In addition Infoline 2-1-1 kept a daily list people calling to volunteer services or donate blood.

Based on a longstanding working relationship, Infoline 2-1-1 was able to quickly develop an arrangement with the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services to provide back-up support and to take the referrals of the more serious cases involving victim's families immediately following September 11th. Infoline 2-1-1 Call Specialists provided the families with crisis intervention and referral to the various programs and agencies providing services for victims and families.

Another service that Infoline 2-1-1 provided was training and technical assistance to other agencies and companies who were experiencing an increase in calls which their staff/operators were unprepared for. Infoline 2-1-1 provided a "Coping with Trauma (after a terrorist attack)" training to area insurance companies⁴ and employee assistance programs and developed additional training materials. This training was offered by

⁴ Several insurance companies have their headquarters in Hartford CT.

Infoline 2-1-1 staff to several companies on multiple occasions. Technical Assistance was offered to companies and agencies to educate them in effectively dealing with the calls they were receiving regarding the terrorist attacks.

The Infoline 2-1-1 Call Center continues to provide ongoing I& R and crisis intervention related to September 11th, routinely handling calls from people whose jobs or businesses have been impacted, victim's families needing assistance, and members of the general population having difficulty coping with changed circumstances.

Infoline 2-1-1 also continues to survey agencies and other organizations in the state to seek out new resources in the areas of bereavement, counseling, support groups, and other special crisis counseling services available to Connecticut victim's families. Infoline 2-1-1's Information Department conducts daily searches of Web sites, newspapers, magazines, and television news programs. This data is stored as part of the agency's database so that all Call Specialists are easily able to access the data when needed. This information is also posted on the agency's public Web site.

A review of the aftermath of other disasters showed a demand for information on post-traumatic stress disorder and the pressure of changed or reduced circumstances. Therefore, the Information Department proactively seeks enhanced information on these types of services as well as other services for Connecticut residents related to coping with the aftermath of the terrorist attacks.

Infoline 2-1-1 also continues to respond to the events of September 11th by serving as the fiscal agent for Connecticut's September 11th Fund Cash Assistance program. The agency's role is to disburse immediate short-term cash grants to families of Connecticut victims, seek out other eligible family members through case management and follow-up efforts, assist families with the application process, and provide ongoing case management to families of Connecticut victims.

The agency has two full time Call Specialists who provide ongoing support and case management services to the victim's families that Infoline 2-1-1 serves and who work to ensure that the families receive the services and benefits assistance they need. They also provide ongoing outreach to the families, calling them periodically and letting them know about new funds, support groups, or advocacy groups. In addition, they ensure that all victim's families and dislocated workers know about all of the services available to them.

Infoline 2-1-1 continues to provide information and statistics as necessary to other agencies for use in determining the needs of Connecticut residents. The importance of that data was acknowledged in a Connecticut Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services report entitled *Connecticut's Need for Behavioral Health Services Following the Terrorist Attacks on September 11, 2001* that stated: "One of the few quantifiable indicators of behavioral health need in Connecticut that can be reasonably connected to the events of September 11 comes from Infoline, a United Way affiliated, statewide, comprehensive information and referral system."

Nonprofit Agencies in California Before 2-1-1: Loma Prieta and Beyond

Local nonprofit agencies have played an active role in California's many disasters since the Loma Prieta earthquake of 1989. Their disaster work has been increasingly

coordinated with their local government emergency operations organizations and grown steadily more sophisticated.

When the Loma Prieta earthquake struck, roles and responsibilities for disaster work were clearly defined. First responders came from local government: law enforcement, fire, medical, search and rescue, and critical infrastructure monitoring and repair. Relief was largely in the hands of the nonprofit organizations that are members of National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (NVOAD), including the American Red Cross and numerous faith-based organizations such as The Salvation Army. Long-term recovery primarily was a joint effort of local, state, and national government, relying heavily on FEMA and Small Business Administration funding and personnel. There was no expectation that local nonprofit service and advocacy organizations would take an active role.

However, a number of factors served to propel the local nonprofits into disaster relief and recovery work following the Loma Prieta earthquake:

- The sheer size of the event initially overwhelmed government and NVOAD agencies; in Watsonville the first medical aid was provided by the local free clinic and the first supply of food, clothing, and bedding was provided by the food bank.
- The impact of the event on a heavily urbanized area meant that very large numbers of people needed help during the relief and recovery phases; many of the victims were poor people living in old structures that did not survive the earthquake. They were the least likely to successfully navigate the relief and recovery system without assistance.
- Near the epicenter, large numbers of extremely poor farmworkers were impacted; because the media focused on San Francisco and Oakland these people were, for the most part, invisible to the public and did not receive an equitable portion of outside aid.
- An overly restrictive interpretation of laws and regulations worked against providing needed help to some of the most vulnerable people; more flexible interpretations in later disasters demonstrated that much more help could be provided.
- Specifically, under the law, homeless people could not be placed in housing because they were not housed before the event. This was understood by all. However, government agencies were also resistant to funding restoration or rebuilding of the shelters and single-resident occupancy hotels that homeless people depended on for survival. Many of these were located in old buildings that were too severely damaged to be usable.
- Large amounts of money was raised in the name of providing assistance to Loma Prieta victims; when the American Red Cross attempted to put some of this money into its general disaster fund local agencies were outraged.⁵
- Bay Area nonprofit agencies had a history of vigorous advocacy on behalf of their clientele; the machinery for making themselves heard was already in place.

Given these factors, it is hardly surprising that the first major activation of local nonprofit organizations in California for disaster relief and recovery work was

⁵ As will be seen below, the ARC responded to the criticism in positive ways. ARC efforts after Loma Prieta laid the groundwork for the positive work among local nonprofits in subsequent years.

spontaneous, uncoordinated, and confrontational. The fact that their disaster work has become planned, coordinated, and cooperative in the years since then can be attributed to the local agencies' initiative and insistence on being included in the process. With the support of the United Way of the Bay Area, the Red Cross and many local government officials began to see the need to include non-profits and community service providers in various aspects of disaster preparedness, response and recovery. They have also recognized the need for these agencies to be organized and working with, but independent of, the traditional emergency service organizations.

Using money that had been raised for Loma Prieta, the American Red Cross provided grants to new disaster preparedness collaboratives in Bay Area counties. For the most part, these collaboratives were successful in bringing together local nonprofits, the local affiliates of NVOAD members, and representatives from city and county emergency operations organizations. Through these collaboratives, specific roles for the nonprofit agencies and their relationship to the other partners were defined. With its portion of the ARC funds, CARD (Community Agencies Responding to Disaster), the collaborative in Alameda County, produced a number of useful tools including training outlines and template emergency manuals specifically designed for local nonprofit agencies. These were made available throughout California and, with some modifications, found their way around the country through various channels. Over the years, these materials have continued to become more standardized and more sophisticated. CARD's overall goal is to have simple, standardized, sustainable plans available to every community service organization. This includes, but is not limited to, childcare & eldercare agencies, local clinics, homeless shelters, churches and other faith-based organizations, animal service organizations, agencies serving non-English speakers, homeowners associations, mental health counseling agencies, food banks and food pantries. Their materials are designed to work in concert with local emergency responders, yet are simple enough that anyone can fully understand the most important aspects of preparedness, response and recovery. In Alameda, CARD serves in the County's Emergency Operation Center during disasters, addressing the needs of local nonprofits and special needs communities.

Through CARD materials, local nonprofits were made familiar with the State's Standardized Emergency Management System (SEMS) and many have adopted the ICS model for their disaster work.

The Northridge earthquake provided the impetus for the formation of a broadly based coalition in Los Angeles County similar to CARD in Alameda County. The Los Angeles coalition is called Emergency Network Los Angeles. Unlike CARD and the other northern California collaboratives, ENLA is part of the Southern California VOAD. ENLA agencies are trained in and committed to the use of ICS in emergencies.

The Specific Role of the Information & Referral Agency in Disaster

The disaster mission of the local nonprofits is an extension of their day-to-day work. An agency that does mental health counseling every day may be trained and prepared to provide post-traumatic stress debriefing to disaster victims. A volunteer center that regularly refers seniors to tutoring opportunities may take on the task of matching disaster volunteers with work that needs to be done.

The day-to-day work of comprehensive I&Rs is to gather information about available resources and to let people in need know where and how to access those resources. In a disaster, the I&R must determine what special disaster-related services are available and the eligibility requirements for accessing those services. It is not enough to know that the American Red Cross will set up shelters for displaced persons and The Salvation Army and Southern Baptist Disaster Relief will help feed people in the shelters. People need to know where the shelters are. Others may need to know how to get a life-sustaining prescription filled when their usual pharmacy is closed due to damage. It is important to know that FEMA may verify legal residency and report undocumented residents to the INS so callers can be told this before they apply to FEMA for assistance. This information must be gathered, verified, put in a usable form, and gotten to the people and agencies who need it.

In some California counties the local I&R has a clearly defined position in the local emergency operations plan. Based on the lessons learned from Loma Prieta, the Los Angeles County Department of Social Services' Disaster Management Office began working with INFO LINE of Los Angeles in 1992. By the time of the 1994 Northridge Earthquake, INFO LINE was integrated into the DPSS disaster plan and had a standing contract to act as the County's Emergency Information Line in time of disaster.⁶

INFO LINE was one of the charter members of ENLA. Its role in the collaborative is to gather disaster-specific information from all the other member organizations: Are they operational? What services can they provide? At what locations? Etc. This information is added to that gathered from emergency management agencies and the media, verified as necessary, compiled into bulletins, and distributed by email and fax not only to the ENLA members but to an ever-growing list of agencies who find the information useful.

The County Emergency Information Line, which INFO LINE operates, is a toll-free number which is always available to the public. When there is not a declared emergency the line features recorded messages on topics such as fire prevention. As soon as there is an emergency or a warning situation the County Office of Emergency Management provides INFO LINE with specific information. INFO LINE puts that information on the menu-driven system with a simple option for callers to reach a live Information Specialist. The information is updated as often as necessary. During the Northridge relief period, information was updated at least twice daily.

Because the line is always active the public does not need to learn a new number each time there is a declared disaster and old outreach materials remain valid. However, a large number of disaster-related calls also come into INFO LINE on its regular service lines. This demonstrates that people will call an information number they know and have used successfully in the past when one is available.

When 2-1-1 is fully implemented in California it will have a level of visibility far beyond any of the hundreds of local and 8yy numbers that are currently used around the State for I&R. It is predictable that during times of disaster the public will call 2-1-1 in numbers far exceeding the current use of any disaster information line. One positive side effect is that when people have a simple and more appropriate number to call for non-

⁶ All information about INFO LINE and ENLA from Burt Wallrich, who was INFO LINE Disaster Coordinator and member of the ENLA Board of Directors until May, 2001.

life-threatening situations the burden of inappropriate calls to 9-1-1 will decrease significantly.

The implications of this for emergency managers and directors of I&R agencies are clear. Once 2-1-1 is implemented people will call it for disaster information. This means the 2-1-1 service provider must have accurate and up-to-date information to give them. This is too important to be left to chance. It must be based on a developed relationship with government emergency managers, established prior to the disaster, clearly defined, and exercised like all other parts of the emergency system.

Conclusion

The Petition that was submitted to the California Public Utilities Commission by the California Alliance of Information & Referral Services (CAIRS), the professional association for I&R, envisions an active disaster role for every 2-1-1 service provider. The application that must be submitted to the CPUC by an agency that seeks to be a 2-1-1 service provider includes the following standards:

- 2-1-1 service must be available in the event of a local disaster, such as an earthquake, flood, or other emergency.
- The organization must have a disaster plan.
- The organization must have a pre-disaster resource database.⁷

CAIRS and the national professional organization, AIRS, have been providing training in disaster preparedness and disaster service for years. The member agencies are well aware of what the public needs and expects from them. Now, the regulatory muscle of the CPUC makes these expectations mandatory.

The directors of those I&Rs that wish to be 2-1-1 service providers that do not yet have an established relationship with their local Operational Area will be looking for the appropriate point of contact to develop that relationship. For their part, it is essential that the Operational Area managers understand that 2-1-1 will be a valuable resource for them, that the agency comes to them with a high level of understanding of its potential disaster role, and that it is prepared to play a significant, disciplined, and cooperative part in the overall Operational Area structure.

Together, Operational Area managers and 2-1-1 agency directors can ensure that the public has the information it needs during and following a disaster. This will mark the completion of the process that began in the rubble of the Loma Prieta earthquake.

References

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⁷ From California Public Utilities Commission, *Decision Establishing Procedures For Implementing 2-1-1 Dialing In California*, February 13, 2003.

