

Alaska 2-1-1: A Critical Tool in Times of Disaster

When United Way of America and the Alliance of Information and Referral Systems petitioned the FCC in 2000 to designate 2-1-1 as the official information and referral phone number, advocates described its value largely in terms of the ease of a three-digit, readily accessible number capable of connecting citizens with needed services.

2-1-1 can enhance post-disaster assistance

Following the September 11 attacks, the necessity for 2-1-1 as a means of aggregating resources and enhancing post-disaster assistance became obvious. Following the attacks, the Brookings Institution and Urban Institute collaborated on a study on the post-September 11 recovery efforts. The study found that those affected by the disasters “found it difficult to connect with resources, due to a social services infrastructure that does not support a simple and efficient method for people to learn about and access services and agencies to coordinate their activities.”

Since the September 11 attacks, 2-1-1 has proved its worth time and time again:

► **2-1-1’s role during and following the 2004 Florida hurricane disasters** was studied and summarized in “Trial by Wind and Water: How 2-1-1 Played a Vital Role During the 2004 Florida Hurricanes.” In that report, Dr. Kenn Allen, president of the Civil Society Consulting Group LLC in Washington, D.C., concludes that despite its availability to only 75% of Floridians, “2-1-1s conclusively demonstrated the significant contribution that they can make in an emergency,” including expanding the capacity of the emergency response system; managing unmet needs; reassuring callers; mobilizing and managing volunteers; serving as intake for service.

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

[We] encourage states to establish a 2-1-1 telephone system [like those in Texas, Louisiana and Arizona] from which victims can get shelter information, where [Disaster Response Centers] are, what the hours are, locations and telephone numbers.

► **Most recently with the California wildfires**, the Newsweek story of November 5, 2007, entitled “Lessons From The Flames,” said:

“Perhaps most critically, the region implemented reverse 9-1-1 and 2-1-1 call systems. The former automatically dialed tens of thousands of homes, issuing warning and evacuation orders as fires spread. The other became a hotline for harried residents to call with questions about road closures, shelters, and evacuation routes.”

As Alaskans have faced numerous natural and man-made disasters over the years, we have been compelled to examine our willingness to confront crises before they are beyond our control. As 2-1-1 continues to prove its worth as a critical tool in disaster response, we must join together – as stakeholders, providers, funders and citizens – to ensure that we have a coherent plan to serve all who are in need – quickly and efficiently 2-1-1 is, and must remain, a critical component of that plan.

The Alaska 2-1-1 call center is co-located in the Anchorage Emergency Operations Center for ready integration into emergency response and volunteer coordination.