

Trial by Wind and Water:

How 2-1-1 Played a Vital Role During the 2004 Florida Hurricanes Executive Summary

In 2004, Florida became the first state in 130 years to be hit by five “tropical cyclones” in a single year—Tropical Storm Bonnie, Hurricane Charley, Hurricane Frances, Hurricane Ivan, and Hurricane Jeanne. For the first time, 2-1-1 centers across a state played a vital role throughout a major emergency—in the days leading up to each of the storms, during the storms themselves, in the immediate aftermath, and in the long-term recovery.

United Way of America commissioned this report to document the work done by the 2-1-1 centers, to offer the Florida 2-1-1 centers the opportunity to reflect on and learn from their experience, and to share their stories with 2-1-1 centers and emergency management staff throughout the country.

2-1-1 in Florida

2-1-1 is the three-digit telephone number designated by the Federal Communications Commission in 2000 as “an easy-to-remember and universally-recognizable number” to connect people with human and social services. There currently are twelve active 2-1-1 regional and local call centers that serve 33 of Florida’s 67 counties, providing 2-1-1 access to 75 percent of its population, and handling over 500,000 calls per year. There are nine additional comprehensive information & referral centers in the state, many of which have announced their intention to become 2-1-1 centers. The 2-1-1 centers come together in the Florida 2-1-1 Network, a cooperative effort of the Florida Alliance of Information and Referral Services (FLAIRS) and the United Way of Florida.

While 2-1-1 is available to 75 percent of Florida’s population, it is not accessible in half of the state’s 67 counties. When Hurricane Charley hit the southwest coast of Florida, Lee County had 2-1-1; Charlotte County did not and could not provide the enormous help to residents and to the 9-1-1 system that Lee County’s 2-1-1 did. When Hurricane Frances battered Florida’s east coast, the 2-1-1 centers covering Broward, Martin, St. Lucie, Indian River, Brevard, Osceola, Orange, and Seminole counties answered tens of thousands of calls for help, directing resources to those areas of the community with the greatest needs. When Hurricane Ivan swept through the Florida Panhandle, there were no 2-1-1 centers in any of those counties—Escambia, Santa Rosa, Okaloosa, Walton, Holmes, Washington, Bay, Jackson, Calhoun, and Gulf. There was a huge need in these counties for help that went unmet.

The lack of statewide coverage limited the extent to which 2-1-1 could serve the state during the emergency—there could not be a coordinated state-level decision to establish 2-1-1 as the dialing code to be used throughout the state to reach disaster response services. Until 2-1-1 becomes a truly statewide system, it is unlikely that it will be fully recognized as a partner in emergency management and, thus, continue to be ineligible for the funding from FEMA and other sources required for it to make the maximum possible contribution during an emergency.

The Value of 2-1-1

During the Emergency, 2-1-1 made seven primary contributions:

- expanded the capacity of Emergency Operations Centers (EOCs) by providing trained information and referral specialists and by offering the public an alternative access point for information;
- managed information about availability of services and the status of health and human service organizations and government agencies;
- identified unmet and emerging needs, helping direct resources to high priority places;
- provided critically needed telephone reassurance and crisis support for callers;
- helped mobilize and manage volunteers and cash and in-kind donations;
- served as intake points on behalf of government agencies and nonprofit organizations, increasing the efficiency of connecting people with needed help; and,
- offered a sustained connection to help for people whose lives were dramatically affected by the storm as 2-1-1 became part of long-term recovery efforts.



2-1-1 in Action

In Orange County, 2-1-1 staff identified a need for food in an area that had not been reached by the disaster response teams. As a result, the Heart of Florida United Way stepped in to provide canteen services for over 1,000 people.

Lessons Learned

1. 2-1-1 centers conclusively demonstrated the significant contribution that they can make in an emergency.
2. 2-1-1 centers need to clarify the roles they want to play during an emergency, to build relationships in advance to enable those roles, and to be very flexible and innovative.
3. 2-1-1 centers must build strong relationships with partners who will support them and who are in a position to respond to the data 2-1-1 is collecting—with key response organizations like the Salvation Army and American Red Cross, with United Way and Volunteer Centers, and with government and nonprofit service providers.
4. Emergency management does not intuitively understand the potential value add of 2-1-1 to its work, suggesting the need for 2-1-1 to engage in significant education, advocacy, and relationship-building with emergency management at all levels—national, state, and local.
5. 2-1-1 centers must prepare for a new kind of operation during an emergency with the emphasis on advance preparation, flexibility and innovation to respond to sustained spikes in call volume, rapidly changing information that is hard to collect but which must be managed and disseminated, and breakdowns in planned staffing and existing emergency plans.
6. “Telephone reassurance” is an essential role for 2-1-1 to play in all phases of an emergency.
7. The emergency reinforced the importance of developing 2-1-1 as a system at the local, state, and national levels to ensure the highest sustained level of performance and to secure the funds required to enable 2-1-1 to respond to emergencies and the new needs that come with them.

Volume and Nature of Calls

The volume of calls was so great that it proved impossible for 2-1-1 centers to track them accurately. Estimates ranged from 60,000 calls in six days in Lee County to a 300 percent increase in Orlando to increases of 25-40 percent at other 2-1-1 centers.

The nature of the calls received changed rapidly as communities moved from one phase of the storm to the next:

“We estimated that 2-1-1 got 60,000 calls that normally would have gone to 911, freeing those operators to handle emergency calls.”

- Pre-storm—information about evacuation, location and availability of shelters, inquiries from people with special needs, preparation for the storm
- During the storm—reassurance, crisis intervention, emergency assistance
- Immediate aftermath—location of essential services (water, ice, food), rescue needs, debris removal, power outages
- Recovery—disaster relief financial assistance, property damage, disaster-caused health issues, disaster-related transportation issues

The Partnership with United Ways

The state-level partnership between 2-1-1 and United Ways existed well before the storms. FLAIRS and United Way of Florida joined together to develop the strategic business plan for the Florida 2-1-1 Network; worked together to pass the state legislation authorizing development of 2-1-1; and now are jointly seeking funding from the legislature to make statewide access to 2-1-1 a reality.

During the Emergency, the partnership served both parties well. By working together, 2-1-1 and United Ways expanded each other’s capacity to serve their community and enabled both to build stronger relationships with EOCs and with other nonprofit organizations.

For 2-1-1 centers, the partnership directly connected them to the significant community leadership roles undertaken by United Ways statewide, leveraging the value of 2-1-1’s data, focusing greater attention on their contribution, and bringing them new resources. For United Ways, the partnership with 2-1-1 better positioned them to be at the heart of the emergency response effort and gave them new opportunities to demonstrate community impact.

To view the entire case study, please visit <http://www.211.org/news.html>

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