

# After the Storms:

2-1-1 Stories from the 2005 Hurricane Season



United Way • AIRS  
**2-1-1**<sup>TM</sup>  
Get Connected. Get Answers.



# INTRODUCTION

---



The 2005 hurricane season, particularly Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, tested the 2-1-1 system in ways that it had not been tested before. All around the country, 2-1-1 call centers responded admirably, coordinating services and help for those who had been displaced by the storms, and sending staff and resources to the 2-1-1s that were dealing directly with the crises.

The 2-1-1 call centers in the states most affected by the hurricanes responded heroically, often becoming the “go to” number for evacuee support and services, for volunteers hoping to help, and for information about the storms. In many cases, 2-1-1 centers were the only source of information and support in an area. For weeks on end, call center staff and volunteers found themselves dealing with call volumes two to ten times their normal level. In addition, the calls coming in were extraordinary - people calling from their rooftops, looking for rescue; families looking for parents or children from which they had been separated; senior citizens trying to replace their life-saving drugs without their prescriptions or in some cases, without proof of who they were; people in mental and physical distress, hoping to find a live voice at the end of a phone line; families caught on clogged highways, looking for the best evacuation routes before new storms hit; and evacuees from one storm finding themselves evacuated again, being taken even further from their homes.

This paper looks at what worked well during the Hurricane Season of 2005, what challenges 2-1-1s faced, and the valuable lessons learned throughout the process. United Way of America is committed to learning from this experience and making whatever accommodations are necessary to ensure that United Way 2-1-1s are as prepared as possible the next time they are asked to respond to a large-scale disaster.



## The Louisiana Story

There are six 2-1-1 call centers in Louisiana and together they provide coverage for the entire state. After Hurricane Katrina hit on August 29th, the 2-1-1 call center in New Orleans (VIA LINK) was forced to close and its staff forced to evacuate the city. The 2-1-1 call center in Monroe, which is housed in the United Way of Northeastern Louisiana (UWNELA), had agreed to take calls from VIA LINK in case this happened. An arrangement that everyone thought might last only a few days lasted for over three months. The Louisiana story should be titled, “The Little Engine that Could.”

As the horrors of Hurricane Katrina began to unfold, UWNELA realized that its four phone line call center could not handle the extraordinary influx of calls it was likely to receive. In a matter of hours, with the help of United Way of America and UWNELA’s private sector partner, CenturyTel, the call center in Monroe went from a four seat operation to a 65 seat facility (50 seats for 2-1-1 and 15 seats for volunteer and donations management), transforming all of their board and meeting rooms into one large call center. The next day, the President of CenturyTel persuaded her colleagues in the cellular telephone industry to point all of their 2-1-1 calls to Monroe, which they did within an amazingly short 24 hour period. United Way of America also arranged for hundreds of 2-1-1 call specialists from around the country to help manage the work related to disaster response, including emergency resource management and responding to callers.

Life got more challenging when, with every government agency in Louisiana stretched to capacity (and beyond) and all emergency numbers slammed continuously, the Governor selected 2-1-1 as the “go to” number for all social services, shelter, feeding station, volunteer and donation information. In the aftermath of Hurricane Rita, with communities in Lafayette and Lake Charles severely impacted, even more calls from Louisiana were forwarded to Monroe.

While at times the system was stressed beyond its capacity, it performed incredibly well. Together with hundreds of community volunteers and a staff that worked around the clock, the Monroe 2-1-1 responded to 70,538 calls in September and 40,875 calls in October, with call volume peaking at 7,358 calls per day during the height of the Katrina/Rita crisis compared to ‘peace time’ daily call volumes less than 200 calls per day.

#### **What worked in Monroe?**

- **A 2-1-1 representative from Monroe had a “place at the table” when real-time information was being shared by the Office of Emergency Preparedness.** UWNELA had a written agreement with the Ouachita Parish Office of Homeland Security. As a result, a 2-1-1 representative from Monroe was guaranteed a seat at the table during all briefings, had access to “real time” information, and became OEP’s partner in many efforts. At the time, UWNELA was the only 2-1-1 in Louisiana with such an agreement in place; the other five call centers had to depend on Monroe, or other sources, for information—a more difficult and less reliable way to operate during a crisis.
- **UWNELA had a strong partnership with the Louisiana Association of Non Profit Organizations (LANO).** LANO’s CEO, Melissa Flournoy, had a seat at the statewide emergency management table and was the main conduit of information to and from the 2-1-1s to state government emergency management operations. Melissa was on daily calls set up by United Way of America with all the 2-1-1s in Louisiana, starting before Katrina and continuing daily through the next months.
- **UWNELA had a strong working partnership with a major telecommunications provider.** UWNELA could not have performed as effectively as it did without the help of its corporate partner, CenturyTel. Not only did CenturyTel almost single-handedly transform the small call center into a 65 seat facility, but it also used its influence to persuade all of the cell phone providers in the state to point their cell phone 2-1-1 calls to Monroe, a decision that made an enormous difference when most of the land lines in New Orleans were underwater.
- **The 2-1-1 in Monroe was connected to the local volunteer center.** UWNELA was as prepared as it could be to handle the outpouring of volunteers and donations. The 2-1-1s that were not connected to local volunteer centers had a much more difficult time managing this part of the response effort.
- **An incredible outpouring of support from national and local volunteers made it possible for the 2-1-1 in Monroe to succeed.** Over 100 national volunteers from 2-1-1 centers around the country answered a call for help and came to Monroe for two weeks at a time. In addition, over 300 community volunteers worked 8 hours or more, many working every day for two months. The community volunteers were asked to do everything—answer phones, become 2-1-1 call specialists, help feed and house the national volunteers, manage the flow of real-time information, manage the flow of donations, and coordinate with other social service agencies in the area. While there were challenges in managing all of the volunteers (see *Lessons Learned* below), the volunteers were a critical component in the success of the operation.
- **All calls were answered by a human.** The leadership of UWNELA knew instinctively that everyone who called needed to speak with a live person, not a recording. An irritant caused by this decision, however, were the continuous ‘phantom calls’ that resulted from not having an auto attendant answer the lines.
- **All calls stayed “in state.”** The leadership of UWNELA believed that community people have access to real-time information that is not available elsewhere. In addition, community volunteers are often the most empathetic listeners. They know how a state works (including how to pronounce the interesting names of towns and landmarks such as Ouachita, pronounced ‘Wachita’) and they are familiar with the informal service networks. “It is not sufficient to say ‘Roll the calls to Atlanta’—it just doesn’t work that way.”

### **Lessons Learned:**

- **Louisiana needs an integrated statewide system that includes specific agreements with stakeholders that enable the state to know what things should look like in times of crisis.** While Louisiana may look like an integrated state-wide 2-1-1 network, it is not. A seamless integrated state network would help prepare the state to respond more efficiently and effectively in future disasters. Included as part of the network would be:
  - ♦ Agreements with all stakeholders, including other call centers, that detail when and how a community will roll its telephone lines. Because the 2-1-1s in Louisiana had no plan in place for dealing with disasters, there was unnecessary confusion surrounding when the calls would be rolled to Monroe. Communities need enough confidence in their systems to roll their lines while the technology still works;
  - ♦ Agreements with telecommunications providers to ensure that the technology is in place that allows phones to roll over when they need to, including cell phones;
  - ♦ Agreements about shared data development and the constant feeding of “real time” information;
  - ♦ Agreements about what happens when call centers are forced to shut down and I&R specialists must move to another center, including what their responsibilities are to the host center;
  - ♦ Agreements with the local office of Emergency Operations/Homeland Security that allow a 2-1-1 representative a “place at the table” for access to real-time information;
  - ♦ Agreements with volunteer centers to facilitate the giving and getting of help; and
  - ♦ Software development that includes a “donated goods” section and is relevant in times of disaster.
- **No one really knows what it means to staff a 50 person call center.** Very few United Ways or other 2-1-1s understand what it means to go to scale in this way. It would be helpful to identify the 2-1-1 call center managers who have this experience and be able to call on them for support. Another option would be to train managers specifically for this contingency.
- **Limit the time that staff and volunteers can answer phone calls; provide an opportunity for debriefing.** For the first two weeks of the Katrina crisis, staff and volunteers worked around the clock. Physical and emotional burn out were significant. 2-1-1s must limit the hours that staff and volunteers answer phones and insist that they take breaks during their shifts. While staff and volunteers may insist that they are “fine” and want to work 12 hours straight, evidence shows that in these high-stress situations, people must take breaks or “they break.” Provide an opportunity for staff and volunteers to debrief with someone at the end of their shift. This provides a sense of continuity and an opportunity to share some of the intensity of their day with someone who is trained to take the information in.
- **Training evolves as the crisis evolves.** Be prepared to provide different types of training to different people at different times during the crisis, always re-evaluating what works and what doesn’t. In addition, adapt the training to the volunteer’s level of experience.
- **Volunteer management: be clear about the role of the national volunteers, including how long they will work, to whom they report, rules and expectations for staying in community members’ homes, including whether there are penalties for transgressions.** Feeding, housing, and transporting volunteers from all over the country became a logistical nightmare for Monroe. By the time the volunteers arrived, there were no motel rooms or rental cars available. Community members graciously opened their homes to strangers who stayed, off and on, for several weeks. Cars were shared and carpools created. Meals were provided to the volunteers (many of whom did not leave the UWNELA building during their work shifts) and the community ended up feeding up to 70 people three times a day, for weeks and weeks. While the national volunteers were often gracious and “perfect guests,” at other times ten-

sions arose between the volunteers and their hosts, most of which would have been resolved had there been clearer ground rules in place before they arrived.

- **Open calls for national volunteers may not be the best way to go.** Not everyone who answered the United Way of America's call for volunteers was up to the task. One option is to form a SWAT Team of 2-1-1 call center staff from around the country who are trained on the technical, physical and emotional aspects of disaster relief work. This team could be deployed during times of crisis. Another option, more practical in the short term, is to screen the national volunteers, being clear about what will be expected of them and then weeding out the ones that might not fit the profile.
- **Be prepared to fire a volunteer who is not working out.** Certain volunteers (even those who get through the screening process) may not be equipped to deal with disasters; they may become victims themselves or display inappropriate behaviors. Once someone on staff determines that a volunteer is being destructive to the effort, be prepared to let him/her go. Don't wait—their behavior rarely improves!

## The Texas Story

In 2003, the Texas Information and Referral Network was designated by the Texas Legislature as the Texas Health and Human Services Commission program responsible for the development, coordination and implementation of a statewide information and referral network. The Texas I&R Network is located within the state Department of Health and Human Services Commission and is responsible for, among other things, all 2-1-1s in Texas.



There are 25 different 2-1-1s in Texas, each covering a specific area or number of counties. About a third of these 2-1-1s are located within local United Ways, while the others are located within a city or county government office or are private nonprofits. The state provides the telecommunications system that links them all together. Several of the 2-1-1s have their databases on line and share information with their 2-1-1 colleagues. In normal times, the 25 centers operate independently. For example, a 2-1-1 call from Dallas comes into a main router in Austin, but in less than a second the call is directed to the appropriate 2-1-1 call center in Dallas. During disasters, however, all of the calls are brought together into a "First Available Agent" system. The same call from Dallas goes into a queue and is answered by the first available agent who may be sitting in Houston. Using the shared database, the Houston 2-1-1 call specialist can access and provide the information that the caller needs. If the specialist cannot find the information, then he/she will manually forward the call to the appropriate person in Dallas. Using the centralized technology, the call center specialists can also see which call centers have the capacity to answer overflow calls. As a result, callers are not put on hold or ignored.

Two days after Hurricane Katrina hit, over 400,000 evacuees from Louisiana and Mississippi entered Texas. Around the state, 2-1-1s were invaluable in helping to determine what services the evacuees needed and how best to provide those services. Specifically, 2-1-1s responded to evacuees who had special medical needs. Because of the Texas I&R Network's location within the State Health and Human Services Commission, call center specialists were able to hand those calls off, quickly and effectively, to the appropriate state health service people or other appropriate state agencies.

Hurricane Rita dealt Texas another blow. The mass evacuations from Houston were chaotic and 2-1-1s were invaluable in controlling rumors and giving people the most up-to-date and correct information. A calm voice on the other end of a phone seemed to be what people needed most; then they needed to know where the nearest shelter was located and the safest route to get there. Until late October, 2-1-1s across the state were busy helping with the repatriation of Texas citizens, especially those with special medical needs. Call centers, which usually averaged about 70,000 calls a month, handled over 267,000 calls in September and over 204,000 calls in October.

### ***What worked in Texas?***

- **Disaster contingency plans were in place.** After Hurricane Allison, in June 2001, 2-1-1s in Texas were required to have “business contingency plans” in place and they all did. The Network had also practiced closing down a 2-1-1 center and moving the resources, including the staff, across the state.
- **The 2-1-1 Network benefited from a close relationship with state government.** 2-1-1 in Texas is the responsibility of and coordinated by the state, but programmatic oversight is provided by the 25 Area Information Centers. This public/private partnership works well. For example, having Beth Wick, the director of the Texas I&R Network, embedded within the state bureaucracy allows her to access resources “at the drop of a hat.” Shortly after they understood the impact of Katrina, Beth was able to open a “26th” call center in a state building that had excess capacity. She was also able to add 400 call center specialists, all of whom were state employees, within 24 hours of asking for them. Having state employees staff the emergency center worked well for the first few days because the calls were similar; once the calls became more complex they were sent to certified call specialists or trained volunteers who had arrived by then.
- Because the Network is part of state government, Beth was also able to access information quickly from relevant state agencies, such as those providing housing, transportation and other services. She and her staff could sift through all kinds of information, separating the good from the useless, and then fill in with the best information.
- **A 2-1-1 representative sat in the State Emergency Operations office “24/7.”** This turns out to be a critical factor in every state. Whenever anything happened, the 2-1-1 person knew about it as soon as the State Emergency Operations person did; that allowed key information to flow in real time to the Network and outward to the 2-1-1 call centers.
- **The 2-1-1 Network kept calls “in state” rather than sending them out of state.** Because the call centers use the same telephone lines and equipment, it was easier and cheaper to route calls to other call centers in the state rather than send them to centers in other states. As in Louisiana, keeping calls in state also made sense from an emotional-support perspective: in-state call center operators understand the cultural nuances within a state (such as how to pronounce names, how to get from one place to another and what you will find once you get there) and seem to provide more comfort in times of crisis than operators working in another state.

### ***Lessons Learned in Texas***

- **A shared database is critical to successful 2-1-1 operations during crises or disasters.** The development of a fully shared database for all 2-1-1s in the state was in process before the hurricanes hit, but since then, more urgency has been attached to that development. With a completely shared database, operators will not have to depend on email and paper reports which are slower and not always available, and calls will not have to be referred.
- **More clarity and support are needed around volunteer recruitment and management issues.** United Way of America sent many trained call specialists to Texas. As in Louisiana, while help from the national volunteers was certainly appreciated, the Texas Network had to figure out how to feed and house them, and take care of them, while they were in Texas. Managing and training the large number of community volunteers was also a challenge. More clarity around donations and volunteers, and what role 2-1-1s play in organizing each, would be helpful.
- **There must be regular opportunities for debriefings.** As in Louisiana, this was a challenge. Proper debriefings with staff and volunteers did not take place nearly enough. Debriefings should have happened at the end of every shift, not the end of every day. Treat debriefings like medical teams do!

## The Florida Story

The Florida 2-1-1 Network is a cooperative effort of the Florida Alliance of Information and Referral Services and the United Way of Florida to fulfill the mandate of SB 1276, adopted by the Florida State Legislature in 2002, to make 2-1-1 available to every person in Florida. The Network is a collaboration of fifteen independent 2-1-1 regional and local call centers that currently serve 48 of Florida's 67 counties, providing 2-1-1 access to 85% of the population, and handling over 800,000 calls per year. In addition to providing health and human service information and referral, many of the larger 2-1-1s in Florida also manage crisis-prevention hotlines.



In terms of Katrina-related response, Florida was spared the direct impact of the storm but became home to many people who fled Louisiana and the Gulf Coast before the storm hit. For example, 1500 Katrina evacuees came to the Tallahassee area, each of whom was advised to go through a Red Cross processing center. The Red Cross Centers became “one-stop shops” for the evacuees and every group that provided services to the evacuees (including the state social service agencies and faith-based community groups) were present at the Centers. With the Red Cross taking the lead in providing social service information, 2-1-1 Big Bend (which covers an eight county area around Tallahassee) continued to provide 24/7 crisis hot-line coverage. In that part of the state, as in many other parts, 2-1-1s have agreements with local Emergency Management offices but those agreements are not as developed or as effective as they could be. In the aftermath of the 2005 Hurricane season, 2-1-1 Big Bend in Tallahassee is developing a new and enhanced agreement with its local Emergency Management office.

Around Pinellas County, 2-1-1 Tampa Bay Cares also supported evacuee families. In fact, they became active advocates for many of the families because the evacuees were not Florida residents and therefore not eligible for state or county support. 2-1-1 Tampa Bay Cares also answered United Way of America's call for help and sent three key staff people to Monroe for two weeks - all of whom came home much wiser about what needed to be done to prepare their home call center for a similar disaster. Because of what they learned from their experiences in Monroe, the following actions are now underway in Pinellas County:

- **2-1-1 Tampa Bay Cares is entering into an agreement with its local Emergency Operations Center.** The experience in Monroe illustrated for the Tampa staff how important it is for 2-1-1s to have strong working relationships with their local EOCs. 2-1-1 Tampa Bay Cares is in the process of drafting a cooperative agreement with its local EOC. As now drafted, the agreement provides that in the run up to a serious storm or other disaster, EOC's Citizens Information Center will point its calls to 2-1-1 Tampa Bay Cares. Right before and after the storm hits, when the 2-1-1 employees can no longer stay in their space, they will co-locate with the Citizens Information Center until they can return to their own space. Under this scenario, the 2-1-1 continues to have access to the best real-time information.
- **This 2-1-1 is putting its data base on the web.** Many of the 2-1-1s in Florida already have their information on the web in a searchable format. By having the data on the web, the 2-1-1 can “take it with them and dial it up from wherever we land.” In addition, others in the network can access the information, which is critical if the staff becomes unavailable.
- **This 2-1-1 wants to keep the calls “local.”** With respect to whether calls should be forwarded out of state or to other 2-1-1s in state, the board of 2-1-1 Tampa Bay Cares is committed to keeping its calls as local as possible. They hope to accomplish this through their relationship with the local EOC and the Citizens Information Center and its web-based data base.

Hurricane Wilma dealt a significant blow to many parts of south Florida in October 2005. In fact, Wilma is considered the worst hurricane in 55 years to hit Broward County. Power outages lasted for two weeks, many people were left homeless and many structures were condemned. The building that houses 2-1-1 First Call for Help of Broward was one of those severely impacted by the storm. The staff was not able to get back into their offices for almost two weeks, but with battery operated

radios and some cell phones they ascertained the status of the majority of the 650 agencies in their database, stayed connected with the Red Cross, FEMA and other first responders to the disaster, and relayed the information when it became available.

As an agency, 2-1-1 First Call for Help felt as prepared as possible for dealing with hurricane-related crises. Sending calls out of state made the most sense to them because of the erratic nature of these storms—few if any Florida counties are safe from hurricanes. Their plan had always been to send their calls to the 2-1-1 in Connecticut, which they did. They prepared Connecticut 2-1-1 before the hurricane season by providing them with full resource directories and information.

While in theory, and many times in practice, this transfer works well, in this case no one was prepared for the transfer of calls to go on for as long as it did. Most agreements between 2-1-1s to answer calls from another state are premised on the idea that the transfer will be for two or three days, not two or three weeks. After an event such as Hurricane Wilma, the information and referrals that are most needed relate to the availability and status of resources that are operating again and can accept referrals. After the initial flurry of calls that were relatively routine in nature (people looking for shelter and ice, for example), the calls from Broward County became more complex and answers were difficult to find. Even though the Broward County 2-1-1 resource staff updated the Connecticut 2-1-1 staff with daily information gained from local radio broadcasts, and the Connecticut staff was able to find some information by searching the Web, the Connecticut staff had no access to “real time” information. They also had very limited knowledge about how the state of Florida works, so they were limited in their ability to provide answers to questions about state support and programs. Because 2-1-1s in Florida are independent and are not connected in any formal way, no other 2-1-1 in Florida had the local Broward County information; as a result, they were not in a position to take the calls back from Connecticut.

#### ***Lessons learned in the aftermath of Wilma.***

- **Disaster contingency plans need to be in place.** Florida requires that the 2-1-1s in the state meet AIRS Accreditation standards which include criteria for having disaster contingency plans in place. Because each 2-1-1 is independent, there are significant variations in these plans. In fact, two days before Wilma hit, only three of the several 2-1-1s in Wilma’s projected path had an evacuation plan, or a switching plan if they needed to close or move. All 2-1-1s in Florida need at least a back up generator and systems and protocols for getting the call centers up and running again as quickly as possible after a storm. In the aftermath of Hurricane Wilma, 2-1-1 First Call for Help’s landlord donated the funding to purchase enough battery backup for the 2-1-1’s ACD system to operate for at least 72 hours. This will allow counselors to operate from the office during daylight hours, supplemented with battery operated lanterns. 2-1-1 First Call for Help is also now on a priority list for Florida Power and Light.
- **2-1-1 First Call for Help of Broward is developing a relationship with its local Emergency Operations Centers (EOCs).** In most cases, 2-1-1s in Florida have agreements with their local EOCs as required by Florida 2-1-1 Network certification standards, but the EOCs do not always consider the 2-1-1s as a point of access for emergency information. Without further development of these relationships, 2-1-1s will have a more difficult time accessing important real time information. In addition, many state and local government officials do not understand the incredible resource that 2-1-1 can be for their community. As a result, resources do not flow as they might otherwise. Approaching the 2006 Hurricane Season, 2-1-1 First Call for Help of Broward negotiated an agreement with the County Hurricane Hotline to have six counselors, in two shifts, housed in the Emergency Operations Center during EOC activation. The 2-1-1 counselors will handle all crisis calls to the Hotline. In return, 2-1-1 counselors will have the benefit of being in the EOC, ensuring their safety and at the same time providing them with access to the most up to date information.

- **A state-wide web-based database would be helpful.** Most of the 2-1-1s in Florida have their own on-line directory for their service area. If these on-line databases are hosted locally and the websites go down during a disaster, the information becomes inaccessible to others who may need them. 2-1-1 center staff must develop protocols to keep their database systems accessible and updated during a disaster. Solutions could include a statewide database or a system of regional databases that are accessible from a central access point. Then during a disaster, others in the network and those outside the state can access the information.

## The Mississippi Story

To date, 2-1-1 does not exist in Mississippi. Many people are lobbying hard to bring 2-1-1 to the state, and no one opposes it, but the bureaucratic process has been slow. As a result, there are approximately 200 separate information and referral agencies around the state, none of which are connected.



Hurricane Katrina devastated large swaths of the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Without 2-1-1, people had to remember dozens of phone numbers to access help and information. The obvious problem is that people in trauma cannot remember a lot of phone numbers. In addition, there was no way to connect the people who needed the help with people who wanted to give help. There was no way to match volunteers and donations with needs. Without 2-1-1, the hurricane response was simply chaos. Nothing worked.

### *Lessons learned*

- **There was a lot of wasted energy and resources.** Volunteers really wanted to help but there was no way to direct them in any meaningful way. According to Carol Burger, President and CEO of the United Way in Jackson, “We didn’t have a system in place to help them do good. We failed two populations—people who needed the help and people who wanted to help.”
- **The 2-1-1 system should be statewide, with one central location and only a few sites, if necessary.** A disconnected system with hundreds of independent sites cannot service a state during a disaster of any magnitude, much less one as devastating as this was.
- **United Way of America needs to promote 211 as one of its top priorities.** Without that signal from United Way of America, many of the local United Ways will not take 2-1-1 seriously.

## The Alabama Story

The United Ways of Alabama has taken the lead, partnering with member United Ways and their call centers around Alabama, to make 211 Connects a statewide reality. The 211 Connects Alabama Steering Committee began developing the statewide 211 Connects initiative in 2001, with the first 2-1-1 call center going live in 2002. Hurricane Ivan, in 2004, made the development of a statewide system a priority. To date, five 2-1-1 call centers are operating, and the Steering Committee hopes by summer’s end that a total of 14 call centers up and running, making the system complete.



Hurricane Katrina impacted Alabama in numerous ways. Suffering a direct hit from the hurricane, 10 Alabama counties were declared disaster areas receiving individual and public assistance. Twelve more counties were declared eligible for public assistance. The state also became home to thousands of evacuees from Mississippi and Louisiana, many of whom had special medical needs, had limited or no income, and depended on government assistance and support. The only 2-1-1 operating during this time, located in Montgomery, played a very significant role during the disaster. The local office of Emergency Management and Assistance made 2-1-1 the “go to” number for shelter information and other social service information.

The value of 2-1-1 in Alabama is not in question. Similar to the Texas system, Alabama 2-1-1 will be a statewide system with 14 regional call centers. Each of the call centers will be connected by the same 1-800 number system. 2-1-1 calls will come into a central router and within a second be sent to the appropriate call center. In times of crisis, specialists will be able to see which centers have capacity to take overflow calls. This, in addition to the fact that all each call center's database will be networked with every other center, allows for maximum portability of service and for 24/7 coverage. Alabama also plans to keep their calls in state, although as the system is designed, if the staff needs to relocate to another state, they will have access to their data.

# CONCLUSION

---

The Hurricane Season of 2005 provided 2-1-1s in Louisiana, Texas, Florida, Mississippi, and Alabama with similar challenges, and each state dealt with those challenges as best they could. The majority of the 2-1-1s we interviewed agree that to be as prepared as possible to deal with a disaster-related crisis “next time,” the following things are important:

- Each state could have some type of integrated statewide system that includes specific agreements with all stakeholders will enable the state to know how things will work in times of crisis.
- There should be specific working agreements between 2-1-1s and their local Office of Homeland Security or Office of Emergency Operations, to give 2-1-1 staff access to real time information.
- 2-1-1s should be intentional about developing strong working partnerships with the major telecommunications providers in their state.
- A state-wide database or a system of regional databases that are accessible from a central access point would alleviate many of the problems faced this past year.
- Calls should be kept in the community or in state, to the extent possible.
- Because so few United Ways or other 2-1-1s know what it means to staff a very large call center, it would be helpful to identify those call center managers who have this experience and be able to call on them for support. Another option would be to create a SWAT-team of call center managers and staff who are specially trained and can be deployed to help in times of crisis.
- Volunteer management and training in times of crisis can strain a 2-1-1 to the breaking point; protocols and agreements should be developed to help alleviate this strain.





**United Way  
of America**

701 North Fairfax Street  
Alexandria, Virginia 22314-2045  
[www.unitedway.org](http://www.unitedway.org)



what matters.®