

# Integrating 311 into Disaster Response & Recovery

## 3 Pre-Event Planning Case Studies

### Hosting the 2008 Democratic National Convention

#### *The Role of the Denver 311 Contact Center*

**By Michael Major, Director,  
311 Operations, City and County of  
Denver, Colorado**

**Nick Scheidegger, Manager, 311  
Operations, City and County of Denver,  
Colorado**

**Mario Gonzales, Agent Specialist, 311  
Operations, City and County of Denver,  
Colorado**

**Anne Phelan, Consultant**

The 2008 Democratic National Convention (DNC) was the largest gathering in Denver's history, drawing 50,000 delegates, media representatives, and visitors to convention events from August 25 to 28, and a record-setting crowd of 75,000 to Barack Obama's acceptance speech on August 27 at Invesco Field. For the city and county of Denver, the smooth execution of these events built on months of planning and coordination, involving federal, state, and local government agencies; the Democratic National Convention Committee; Denver 2008 Host Committee; media; and other groups.

The Denver 311 Contact Center was an instrumental part of developing and implementing communications plans for the event. Introduced on July 7, 2006, at the initiative of Mayor John Hickenlooper, Denver 311 has three objectives: better customer service, greater efficiency, and fewer non-emergency calls to 911. Apart from day-to-day operations, 311 call centers also play a valuable role in helping communities prepare for, respond to, and recover from emer-

gencies or other situations that could potentially lead to a crisis, such as the 2008 DNC. Advance planning for such events benefits from inclusion of 311 professionals, who can anticipate the types of questions residents and visitors might ask and plan how to quickly relay reliable information to the public and media in changing circumstances.

Sound operational procedures and staff training gave Denver 311 a solid base to build upon. Denver 311 already had a defined role in the city and county's Emergency Operations Center (EOC) prior to working on the 2008 convention. The Center has a representative seat in the EOC and participates in EOC training and tabletop exercises. Two 311 agents report to the Joint Information Center (JIC) when a significant emergency arises, creating a two-way avenue for communication between 311 and the EOC/JIC.

All 311 agents complete National Incident Management System (NIMS) courses (IS-100 and IS-700) during their initial training. Lead agents conduct simulations to demonstrate to new staff where and how the emergency gathering place will be activated. Over the course of the year, emails remind agents about emergency procedures. With a limited training budget, those designated as floor wardens play an important role in keeping their colleagues up to date with any changes in internal emergency processes.

#### **COMMUNITY PROFILE**

##### **Form of Government:**

Mayor/Council

**Population:** 600,000

##### **Annual County Budget:**

\$850,000,000

**Annual 311 Budget:** \$1,550,000

##### **Major Components:**

Physical Location:

Main floor of Wellington Webb  
Municipal Building

Square Footage: 3,000

Number of 311 agent phones: 28

Number of computers: 28 with  
dual-monitor workstations

##### **311's Location within County**

##### **Government:**

Technology Service

**Number of 311 Employees:** 32

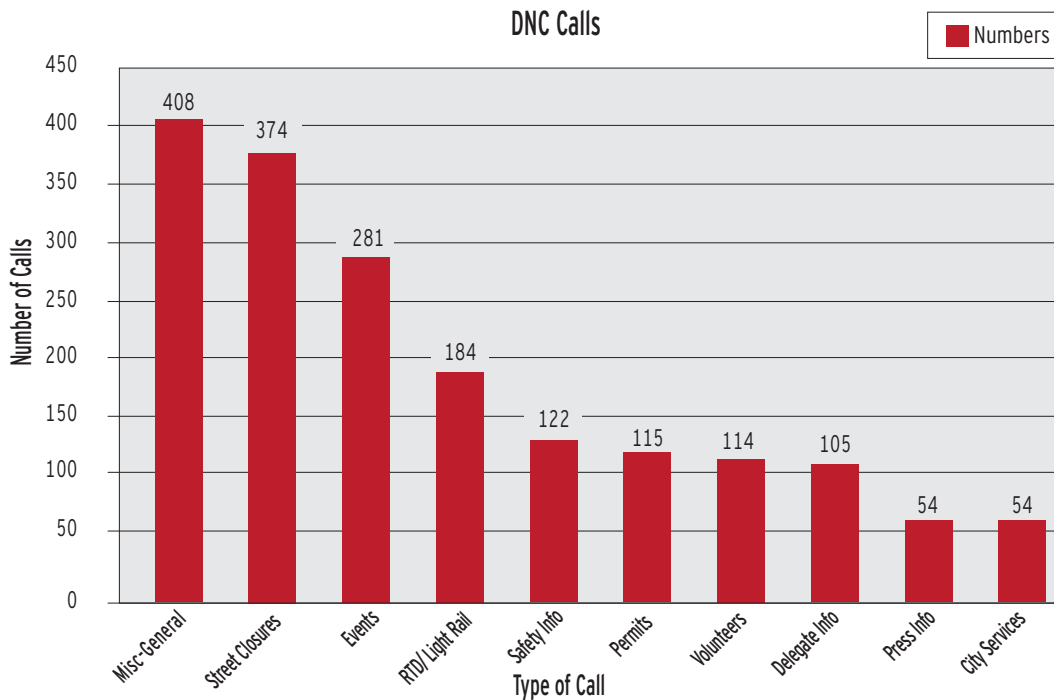
**Type of System:** Centralized customer service system includes 311 call center, e-mail, self-help online request forms, Twitter, TTY and walk-in.

##### **Unique System Features and Management Tools:**

Oracle PeopleSoft CRM software,  
Cisco/Nortel phone systems,  
WebEOC.



**Figure 1: DNC-related Cases August 13-29, 2008**



Note: The miscellaneous category included a range of inquiries, such as a list of delegates, phone numbers for DNCC headquarters or Obama headquarters, and other one-off requests that did not fit one of the other designated categories

Prior to the DNC, the Denver call center had not had any experience with an event of that magnitude. As officials anticipated thousands of additional calls during the month of the convention, they saw the value of creating a well-defined communications role for the 311 center and ensuring appropriate levels of staffing and training.

Denver 311 became part of the multi-agency planning process for the DNC. Its management team participated in workshops and tabletop exercises with the Secret Service, Office of Emergency Management (OEM), Denver Police Department, Denver Fire Department, Denver Health, Public Health Information, Public Works, Solid Waste Management, Denver Human Services, Animal Care and Control, Red Cross, and other groups. Call center agents were given additional training on DNC-specific information and were included in the distribution of daily updates of significant information. 311 leaders also reached out to their

professional counterparts in Chicago, New York, and Boston to learn about their experiences with hosting earlier conventions.

Denver 311 designed its plans so that it could remain responsive to normal calls about city business and services, even as it met additional DNC-related responsibilities. “Regardless of the call volume for convention inquiries, we don’t want delays for any resident seeking assistance on any issues related to city services,” Denver 311 Director Michael Major said at the time. Therefore, the majority of the service’s 32 full-time employees would continue to respond to these types of calls during the month of the convention.

Officials decided to launch two auxiliary call centers during August 2008 to meet the increased demand related to the state’s primary elections (held August 12) and the DNC. The first was activated on August 4, to handle inquiries about the election. A second was opened on August 13, with both auxiliary centers handling

the increased inquiries associated with the DNC. When people contacted 311, a recorded greeting asked if they were calling with an inquiry about the DNC or general city services. DNC calls were dropped into the auxiliary queue and city service inquiries into the existing 311 queue. All equipment, including computers and phones, and the PeopleSoft citizen relationship management (CRM) application were available for both centers.

The auxiliary center staff was supplemented with volunteer call agents, recruited through the DNC Host Committee and managed by 311 operations personnel. Screening of potential volunteers began on July 15. Ninety volunteers were selected, all of whom had some previous experience working in a call center. A four-hour training session for volunteers reviewed customer service practices, gave an introduction to the Cisco VOIP phone system and the CRM application, and highlighted the quick codes to be used during the DNC.

**Figure 2: DNC Call Center**

Date	ASA	SL	#Calls	#Cases
13-Aug	0:08	98.20%	110	43
14-Aug	0:32	90.50%	116	59
15-Aug	0:16	86.20%	123	55
16-Aug	0:07	96.00%	25	24
17-Aug	0:15	94.10%	17	16
18-Aug	0:06	98.50%	137	92
19-Aug	0:10	95.50%	133	99
20-Aug	0:08	94.60%	147	83
21-Aug	0:11	93.70%	142	106
22-Aug	0:13	92.80%	167	123
23-Aug	0:11	94.80%	115	91
24-Aug	0:30	93.00%	199	183
25-Aug	0:18	84.20%	387	305
26-Aug	0:28	80.50%	344	243
27-Aug	0:31	80.00%	375	273
28-Aug	0:39	71.90%	520	250
29-Aug	0:36	84.60%	39	19
<b>Totals</b>	<b>0:18</b>	<b>89.95%</b>	<b>3096</b>	<b>2064</b>

By the time the convention was under way, the auxiliary call centers were running from 8:00 a.m. to 11:00 p.m., with a lead agent or supervisor present at each to oversee operations. Notebooks with DNC-related information, such as maps, lists of daily activities, and local hotel phone numbers, were available. Important new information was posted on a large whiteboard easily visible throughout the call center as it was received. An online chat feature also facilitated communication among the three call centers. Having a 311 agent in the JIC also proved to be of significant value in staying up to date with new developments

During the August 13-29 period, 311’s DNC auxiliary center received 3,096 calls. Many of the calls were about street closures (374) or the location of events (281), but the largest number of calls (408) were categorized as “miscellaneous,” reflecting the

one-off nature of many of the inquiries (Figure 1). These included requests for a list of delegates, phone numbers for the Democratic National Convention Center and the Obama headquarters, information on acceptance speech security screenings, and other calls that didn’t fit a designated category. Any calls about city services that reached the DNC auxiliary center were transferred to the main 311 call center.

Supervisory staff found technology, specifically the online tool Web-EOC, to be extremely useful before and during the DNC. This tool provided a complete, real-time picture of events as they unfolded, keeping 311 staff aware and enabling them to respond effectively to new developments. For example, Web-EOC kept 311 staff informed of all police activity, road closures, public disturbances, detours, and other activity.

Denver 311 was not only well-prepared for the DNC, it exceeded

the challenge of handling such a large-scale event. Its average speed of answer (ASA) for DNC-related inquiries was 18 seconds, putting it close to 90 percent of its service level goal (Figure 2). Michael Major reports that staff were able to handle almost all questions and situations that arose. Because Denver 311 remained in constant communication with agency partners throughout the event, and had the online tools to keep track of real-time developments, it was able to coordinate responses effectively.

Hosting the DNC gave Denver 311 valuable experience that can be applied to other situations, whether it is responding to an unanticipated emergency or a planned, large-scale event. Staff training remains an important piece of preparedness: as Denver’s emergency plan is improved, 311 center staff participate in related training and exercises. Since the DNC concluded, OEM, 311, and 211 (operated by Mile

High United Way) have met to develop even better ways to communicate during an emergency. “The DNC was a great way to prepare for a significant event,” Major said, but “the real test of 311’s emergency preparedness will occur as a result of an event that comes without warning.”

## **Study Methodology**

ICMA conducted a series of conference call discussions with representatives of 311 centers across the country in the spring of 2010. Select cities then responded to a questionnaire and follow-up interviews to elicit additional information about their preparation

for specific emergency situations or large-scale events.

*ICMA thanks the staff of the Denver 311 Contact Center for sharing their time and experience with planning for emergencies. Their contributions to this case study were invaluable.*



*Leaders at the Core of Better Communities*