

8 Recovery from Disaster: A Tip Sheet

Disaster Recovery: Two Cities Share Their Experiences

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Introduction

There's no way to foretell when and how hard emergencies and disasters will hit a community. But there is always a recovery period afterwards, when residents inevitably have questions. Two experienced 311 managers share their stories of the disasters that hit their communities and how their 311 call centers played a pivotal role in the aftermath.

City of Riverside, California 2007 Wild Fires

In October 2007, Southern California experienced several large wildfires that destroyed more than 1,600 homes. Most fires occurred in San Diego County, but smaller blazes also cropped up in nearby Riverside and San Bernardino counties, including near the city limits of Riverside. One of these fires melted a main power line feeding Riverside, causing a city-wide blackout that lasted over 6 hours.

Many Riverside residents contacted the 311 call center for general information about the fires, especially since ashes from the fires were blowing all over. The center received various questions, such as individuals asking about how to protect their property if the fires headed their way, where evacuated residents could find shelter, or how they could connect to other needed services. The center also heard from many volunteers who wanted to help, including offers to transport livestock, work at first aid stations, or provide equipment such as generators, blankets, and bottled water.

The wildfires were the first major emergency the 311 call center had had in its two short years of operation. When the power outage occurred, many city facilities went dark, including the center. 311 staff moved to the nearby police station and quickly established a temporary call center in order to answer incoming calls. Because the staff had not yet been through any major disasters, they had very little in



2007 Riverside, California Wild Fires

have set up service request types to track property damage and offers of support from other agencies or volunteers. They have intentionally developed relationships with the city's police, fire, and public utility departments, as well as the local 211 agency. A liaison from the 311 center collaborates with the emergency operations center (EOC) so the team is "plugged in" during any disaster activations. They have also created a backup work location in the event of a future power outage.

City of Hampton, Virginia 2003 Hurricane Isabel

Hampton's call center had operated for four years and was well established before Hurricane Isabel in 2003. Center employees are considered essential personnel during unusual events. Because it supports disaster recovery departments such as public works, codes compliance and parks operations, the call center must be available to receive calls and dispatch essential services to the community well after the initial response to an event.

Hurricane Isabel hit the Hampton Roads area September 18, 2003, and left major damage in its wake. Thousands of trees fell, the entire city was



2003 Hurricane Isabel

without power, and three coastal neighborhoods were destroyed. The storm surpassed records set by the storm of 1933.

The 311 call center began to see a major increase in calls long before the storm made landfall due to a mandatory evacuation order for low-lying area. The day before the storm—September 17—the center had record call volumes of more than four times the average.

On September 18, Isabel made landfall. By 11:00 a.m., downtown Hampton lost power and the call center went on its emergency generator. By early evening, the entire city was without power and major flood levels from the storm surge began to panic residents who had decided to ride the storm out.

Over the next several days, communicating with the public became problematic. With little power restored, residents had limited access to information. Television was not available to most and many radio stations were off the air for a period of time. Even the few radio stations that were on the air had limited information. The call center was often the sole source of information for a large portion of the community.

Rumors and problems began to surface due to the lack of news. Residents began reporting rumors of unsafe water, and asking about ice distribution points, food sources, and refrigeration for medications. Unsafe and condemned homes, dangerous trees, lack of gasoline and power, and sanitary problems such as spoiled food continued to alarm the community.

The call center stayed in an emergency operational mode for two weeks and staffed accordingly. Public works (tree and storm debris clean-up) and codes compliance (damage assessment and building permits) also continued to deal the effects of the storm. Since the call center supported the major storm clean-up departments, calls for service continued to be high. Call volumes did not begin to decrease until four weeks after the event.

The public relied on the call center for the most accurate and up-to-date information available. Newspapers did not always have the latest, information

and the electronic media did not always broadcast information specific to Hampton.

During Hurricane Isabel, the city of Hampton's 311 call center was an accurate, timely and trusted source of information that never lost contact with the public. Hampton was able to control rumors and track trends using effective communications between 311 and the emergency operations center. Residents could make one phone call to 311 and get information, ask for storm debris trash pick up, damage assessment of their home, or ask where they could get a hot meal.

Tips for Disaster Recovery

- 1. Help staff prepare.** During emergencies, it is likely that 311 staff will be asked to work longer hours and possibly even to remain at the center overnight. Keeping up the strength and morale of the representatives is crucial. Routine training and review of plans helps prepare them, as does offering support with preparing their families when they are away from home for extended periods. Finally, have a quiet room where staff can go and take a quiet break when needed.

Representatives should also be encouraged to have an emergency kit under their desk with some essentials, including a comfortable change of clothes, walking shoes, a blanket, towel, toothbrush, and some non-perishable snacks (hard candies are especially good during stressful situations). If possible, have food catered and provide relief through breaks and time to communicate with their families.

- 2. Additional resources for call taking.** Particularly for extended events, is there a plan to supplement staff? Coordinate with other departments not directly involved in recovery to assist in the call-taking and information dissemination functions. Can library or recreational staff be trained to assist in relieving call center staff? Is there a volunteer organization(s) that can provide resources?
- 3. Conduct a SWOT analysis.** After any disaster or major incident, meet with the key departments and groups involved to find out what worked well and what didn't. Use this information to improve operations, communications, and quality of information dispensed. This will help 311 centers to be better prepared for the next event—putting new processes in place if needed and updating information in the knowledgebase related to handling disasters, identifying shelter locations, documenting reported property damage, tracking offers from volunteers among other things.

Likewise, conduct a debriefing session with call center staff after the worst of the event is over

and elicit their feedback on how the operation went. Feedback from staff can provide insight on what they see as strengths and weakness in their own performance.

- 4. Work closely with the emergency operations center (EOC).** Accurate and timely information is critical before, during, and post—incident. The call center needs to be included in yearly EOC exercises and have a specific role in the overall emergency operation plan for the community.

Residents will rely on 311, so have multiple response plans in place. The call center becomes essential for public information and will need to be able to operate during events. Generators, back—up systems, and plans to evacuate should be in place and practiced on a routine basis.

- 5. Continue to build and maintain good working relationships.** Develop relationships with other departments, local government agencies, and business partners before disaster strikes. Having such relationships can allow you to share resources, borrow equipment, cut costs, and coordinate efforts during and after a disaster. From a 311 perspective, this might be with other cities or local counties that have contact or 311 centers, 911 police and fire call centers, or 211—type call centers that offer social services and referrals. Put service agreements or memorandums of understanding in place if necessary. These relationships should be nurtured on an ongoing basis so they are available when needed.

- 6. Review and update information in the knowledgebase.** Be sure to have current information in the knowledgebase regarding the types of questions that came up during or after disasters. Post—disaster, the needs of the public change from what is going on—where can I evacuate, find my loved ones, or report damage—to other less urgent but equally important requests such as how to handle insurance claims, reconstruction questions, and requests for financial assistance. Be sure to recap



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what comes up in this area and have answers to those types of questions on hand during the recovery period.

Also be sure to update any phone number or contact lists periodically – numbers for agencies or services most requested, such as the Red Cross, shelters, animal services, and social services for food, clothing, or medical assistance. Also, keep hard copies of your contact lists and other important information in case computers go down or 311 staff need to relocate.

- 7. Coordinate post—event information.** Information sharing between internal departments, EOC, and outside agencies is critical. Periodic or even daily briefings to update respective agencies are essential so call center staff have accurate information as circumstances change.
- 8. Conduct background research to help with future preparations.** Research is always helpful. As with this toolkit, the idea is to learn from information shared by others who have been there, and to use that information to make all the preparations you can to help your 311 group successfully navigate a crisis.