



# COPS Fact Sheet

COMMUNITY ORIENTED POLICING SERVICES  
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE

www.cops.usdoj.gov

## 311 for Non-Emergencies: Helping Communities One Call at a Time

### The COPS Office Responds to a National Crisis

Within 30 years of its introduction to the U.S., the success of the 911 emergency call system had resulted in its use expanding beyond true emergency service calls. The highly recognized direct method for citizens to contact emergency services, such as police, was so effective, that according to a U.S. News and World Report (June 1996), an estimated 50 to 90 percent of all calls being made to 911 were for non-emergencies.

The growing dependence on 911 caused backlogs and inefficiencies for police agencies, leading to frustration and sometimes deadly consequences for callers with emergency needs. A response to this crisis was needed to reduce the number of non-emergency calls to 911, stop the reactive cycle of police officers racing from one 911 call to another, and keep 911 phone lines open for true emergencies.

On July 23, 1996, the COPS Office made a formal request to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to reserve 311 as a national non-emergency hotline. In February of 1997, the FCC approved this request, designating 311 as a national, voluntary, non-toll, three-digit phone number for non-emergency calls. Today, 311 is regarded as a viable easy-to-use alternative to 7 and 10-digit phone numbers used for handling non-emergency calls.

### Community Policing and 311

As a vehicle for advancing community policing, 311 systems can create an avenue for citizens to share information with police, report quality of life issues before they escalate into larger crime and disorder problems, and gain access to police and other municipal services. By diverting non-emergency calls from 911 and reserving police resources for true emergencies, 311 systems can alleviate the cycle of reactive policing and enhance police service delivery [See National Impact of 311].

### COPS 311 System Funding Timeline

Since 1996, the COPS Office has awarded approximately \$6 million in funding to support the implementation, enhancement, and evaluation of 311 non-emergency systems.

#### Telecommunications Pilot Program (FY'96)

Baltimore (Maryland) Police Department was awarded COPS funding to launch the first 311 system in the country.

#### 311 Technology Grants (FY'99)

COPS funding under this grant program was awarded to establish 311 systems in the following jurisdictions; Baltimore was awarded funding to expand its existing 311 system:

- Birmingham, Alabama
- Dukes County, Massachusetts
- Houston, Texas
- Los Angeles, California
- Miami, Florida
- Rochester, New York

#### 311 Technical Assistance for Start-Ups (FY'00)

Police agencies in these jurisdictions were awarded COPS funding to establish and evaluate 311 systems, providing guidance for others wishing to learn from their experience:

- Austin, Texas
- Orange County, Florida

#### 311 for Homeland Security and Crisis Management (FY'03)

Police agencies in these jurisdictions were awarded COPS funding to establish and evaluate 311 systems that incorporated multiple public service agencies and enhanced homeland security and/or crisis management plans and practice:

- Charlotte-Mecklenburg, North Carolina
- Columbus, Ohio
- Minneapolis, Minnesota

"311 has been a miracle. It has been a godsend for us. 311 saved us not only from having our 911 system swamped but saved our citizens who had true emergencies, such as heart attacks and crimes in progress, from getting a busy signal."

Ed Harris,  
Deputy Director  
Technical Services  
Austin Police Department

## National Impact of 311

### Austin, Texas

Launched 6 days after September 11, 2001, Austin Police Department used 311 to field questions about terrorism and anthrax scares. Between October 2001 and October 2002, officer response time to Priority 1 calls decreased from 9 minutes, 7 seconds to 7 minutes, 32 seconds and between September 2001 and September 2002, non-emergency 911 calls decreased by 37%.

### Baltimore, Maryland

The first city to have an operational, non-emergency number, Baltimore's 311 system resulted in a reduction of 911 call answer time (50%), abandoned calls (50%), and police calls dispatched to field units (12% between September 1996 and September 1999). One of the many benefits experienced by citizens in Baltimore as a result of 311 "was giving the public a ready source of knowledge to answer their questions regarding police policy and procedure." (Baltimore Police Department, Final Reports, 2000 and 2005).

### Birmingham, Alabama

Birmingham's 311 Call Center has improved public service delivery and was instrumental in providing citizen access to these services during Hurricane Ivan in 2004. (Birmingham Police Department, Final Report, 2005)

### Charlotte-Mecklenburg, North Carolina

The Charlotte-Mecklenburg 311 system provides a measure of redundancy to the 911 Communications Center. The 311 system has decreased 911 call volume, allowing 911 staff the time to accompany police officers to community meetings, where they educate citizens on the use of 911 emergency lines. The establishment of 311 has also fostered consideration of new organizational objectives:

"Attending community meetings is just part of what the Communications Division Director looks to accomplish with a lower call volume. Perhaps of greater importance, will be more involvement with community oriented policing initiatives... The Director's vision is that his dispatchers will work with officers in the assigned Patrol Divisions, using the SARA model, to develop workable solutions to problems occurring in their respective Divisions."

(Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department, COPS Progress Report, 2005)

### Houston, Texas

Between 2001 and 2002, Houston experienced a 14% drop in non-emergency 911 call volume. During Super Bowl XXXVIII, citizens were encouraged to call 311 for taxi services to prevent drunk driving.

### Miami, Florida

The 311 Call Center was critical to helping citizens recover from Hurricane Wilma in 2005 and received calls for post-hurricane related services, such as flooding and downed trees. 311 call-takers also provided recovery information on services (ice, water and food distribution points), benefits and programs (city and FEMA sponsored recovery funds and assistance).

### Orange County, Florida

The launch of the Orange County 311 system on June 7, 2005 coincided with the launch of their hurricane preparedness program. Citizens were encouraged to use 311 for non-emergency requests, such as where to locate tarps and get help with debris removal.

### Rochester, New York

In 2003, almost 40% of the total crime reports generated in the city of Rochester were being taken through the 311 system. The system was heavily utilized during local emergencies such as a train wreck, ice storm, and the massive power outage of August 2003. Rochester police "were able to reduce the load on 911 by providing citizens a number to call to request information, get numbers for gas and electric crews, provide updates on the situation, etc." (Sergeant Dan Holmsten, Rochester City Police Department, 2003)

## The Future of 311

311 is being increasingly viewed as a tool to enhance citizen access to government services. Its original police non-emergency role is expanding into public services and crisis management planning. A valuable complement to 911, cities and counties are setting up 311 systems to divert non-emergency calls from emergency lines and provide support for 911 in times of crisis.

The future of 311 finds citizens with increased access to government and improved service delivery. The COPS Office supports 311 systems as a vehicle for enhancing the lives of police and the citizens they serve, and helping communities meet their needs one call at a time.

COPS offers a variety of publications, products, and training opportunities to advance community policing and support its grant programs. COPS publications and products offer insights and experiences from others in the field addressing specific problems including:

- Building a 311 System for Non-Emergency Calls: A Process and Impact Evaluation
- Call Management and Community Policing
- Calling 311: Guidelines for Policymakers
- Local Law Enforcement Responds to Terrorism - Lessons in Prevention and Preparedness
- Managing Calls to the Police with 911/311 Systems
- Misuse and Abuse of 911
- Promising Strategies from the Field: A National Overview

### Contact COPS

For more information about COPS 311 Initiatives, contact the COPS Office Response Center at 800.421.6770 or visit COPS online at [www.cops.usdoj.gov](http://www.cops.usdoj.gov).