

How 311 Call Centers are Transforming Municipal Emergency Responses

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When 311 call centers were initially launched more than 15 years ago, many municipalities welcomed them as a channel to off load a huge influx of non-emergency calls that were flooding 911 dispatch centers. The 311/non-emergency call centers have been successful in meeting that objective. Based on the more than 50 311 projects in which I have worked over the past 10+ years, we have seen a drop in 911 calls of 20-40% when 311 or a non-emergency call center has been introduced. However, call off loading was low hanging fruit. The 311 call centers are playing a much more pivotal role in supporting communities when emergencies occur. Let's look at some examples.

Many cities have been deluged by snow in the past few years, and those cities that have deployed a 311 call center have been leveraging it as a communications tool to keep citizens informed of road closures, plowing updates, and even school and municipal office closures. During this previous winter, Buffalo and Boston used 311 to inform citizens of how they were addressing weather-related issues. In Illinois, Chicago and Elgin used a multi-channel approach to keep citizens aware of their success in addressing snow issues, leveraging Facebook, a mobile app, and even texting to communicate weather updates to their citizens.

Miami-Dade County, which has one of the oldest 311 centers, has been for years using technology to proactively communicate with its citizens regarding storm updates. Most notably in 2005, the 311 center was used to provide citizens warnings about Hurricane Wilma, including how to board up houses, safe places to go, and even how to address post-storm insurance issues. More recently in August 2015, 311 was used to share information about tropical storm Erika.

In January 2015, Winnipeg 311 was used to communicate about a water boil which lasted for nearly three days and was driven by the detection of bacteria in water samples. Winnipeg acted quickly in conjunction with the city's utilities team to ensure that citizens were informed and health issues related to water consumption were minimized.

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Another excellent example of 311 supporting emergency operations was the Minneapolis bridge collapse in 2007. At that time, the 311 was relatively new but rose to the occasion by informing citizens of road closures and re-routes, offering information on passengers who may be stranded and sending updates on clearing vehicles. This allowed the public safety personnel to focus on the true emergency issues and ensure the safe removal of people trapped by the collapse.

There are so many other great examples of 311 being used to support emergency operations, such as Philly311 and NYC311 being used to support residents before, during, and after Hurricane Sandy. Another example is how Albuquerque and Houston's 311 call centers were utilized to help support the re-location of residents fleeing Hurricane Katrina.

As 311 systems become more sophisticated and offer more channels to communicate with their citizens, they can increasingly play a more critical role in supporting their municipality's emergency response teams. Municipalities should push their CRM vendors to include functionality on how to optimally integrate and support their critical mission

About Spencer Stern

Spencer is the founder and president of Stern Consulting, a boutique Chicago-based consultancy founded in 2008 that helps public sector organizations align their strategy and related tactics with their technology deployments. In recent years he has directed, implemented, and participated in software and wireless communications projects, including: ERP and CRM implementations, social media deployments, and website re-design initiatives. He is a recognized industry expert on constituent engagement strategies.

Spencer holds a BS in accounting from the University of Illinois and an MBA in corporate finance and strategic management from the Wharton School of Business. He is also a CPA and a 6 Sigma Green Belt. Spencer may be contacted at spencer@sternconsultinginc.com or 773.965.1650. Find him on Twitter at @spencerstern1.