



Building A 3-1-1 System For Police Non-Emergency Calls

A Case Study of the City of
Austin Police Department:
Executive Summary

AUSTIN POLICE DEPARTMENT
AUSTIN'S ANSWERS
FOR POLICE NON-EMERGENCIES
GREATER AUSTIN CRIME COMMISSION

Prepared by



Acknowledgements

& Disclaimers

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Executive Summary

Overview

This Technical Assistance Guide for 3-1-1 describes the decision-making process of the Austin Police Department (APD) as it implemented its 3-1-1 system in 2000-2001. We cover issues of vendor selection, costs, call-routing

and call-tracking system options, marketing strategies, staff hiring and training options, educating the public on 3-1-1 use, system maintenance and performance, and provide lessons learned in putting together a 3-1-1 system. This executive summary provides highlights of the Guide.

Background

In 1996 the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS Office) announced its intent to relieve the burden of 9-1-1 calls that had been placed upon law enforcement over the last 30 years. The COPS Office had requested that the FCC reserve 3-1-1 for use as a national number for non-emergencies. The FCC responded to the request and, in 1997, reserved 3-1-1 for use as a national, voluntary, non-toll, non-emergency phone number. By FY 2000, the COPS Office had awarded funding to 10 jurisdictions to establish 3-1-1 systems, with the Baltimore Police Department being the first to receive such funding. Other jurisdictions receiving COPS funding were: Birmingham (AL), Dukes County (MA), Framingham (MA), Houston (TX), Los Angeles (CA), Miami (FL), Orange County (FL), Rochester (NY) and Austin (TX). For more information on the history of COPS Office 3-1-1, please refer to the 3-1-1 Fact Sheet located on the COPS web site at www.cops.usdoj.gov.

The Austin Police Department

The Austin Police Department (APD) provides police services for a city of over 650,000 people, with a sworn force of over 1,200 officers, and 600 civilians. In 1998 APD implemented

“Neighborhood-Based Policing,” a philosophy that incorporates tenets of community policing. Since 1998, partnerships and collaborations with the community have increased, major organizational changes have occurred, and problem solving by officers has been encouraged and facilitated. The Chief has set two important goals for patrol officers – respond to calls for service and engage in problem solving activities.

To achieve the goals of the department, APD recognized the limitations of its 9-1-1 system. Call volumes were growing faster than the city’s population. Existing technology and staff levels could not support a continually growing call load. It was not logical or viable public policy to hire more and more 9-1-1 operators as the call volumes were predicted to grow indefinitely. 9-1-1 system technology could not be improved to use more efficient and advanced software because of interagency compatibility issues.

In rare instances, such as weather emergencies, APD suspected that some 9-1-1 callers were not able instantly to reach emergency operators. Callers instead would hear a ringing phone or be placed on hold or receive a busy signal because all of the phone lines were busy. In potential life-and-death emergency situations, this outcome was alarming to any emergency service provider.

APD believed that 40-50 percent of their 9-1-1 calls were either police non-emergencies or situations that were not appropriate for police, fire, or rescue operations. They knew this was the case in city-wide crisis situations, such as weather emergencies. 3-1-1 offered a potential solution, if implemented and marketed correctly.

At the same time, however, the department wanted citizens to participate in neighborhood based policing. The Chief wanted citizens to become the “eyes and ears” for the police. APD made a number of organizational changes to encourage better customer service and more citizen feedback. 3-1-1 is one of these changes.

Implementing 3-1-1

At the most basic level, implementing 3-1-1 requires changing citizen perceptions. Citizens know to contact police by calling 9-1-1. What seems to have been lost over time is that citizens should use 9-1-1 to request emergency services from police, fire and/or rescue services. Put differently, citizens must realize that not all “emergencies” are equal. Some “emergencies” cannot or should not be handled by the police, fire or rescue services. However, citizens often do not have a readily accessible alternative number when faced with a non-emergency issue requiring police assistance or when faced with an “emergency” that can or should not be addressed by police, fire or rescue officials. 3-1-1 can be the alternative in these situations.

APD’s implementation of 3-1-1 focused on developing highly trained and skilled call takers, building critical partnerships and changing public perceptions of 9-1-1. APD assured 3-1-1 callers that 3-1-1 staff were cross-trained as 9-1-1 operators capable of handling potential emergencies. They also provided these call takers with advanced technological tools to resolve caller issues effectively.

APD partnered with key city departments and private entities to ensure that 3-1-1 was implemented appropriately in a timely manner. Technology partners built the tools for call takers. Civic and community leaders notified the public of the upcoming service and the need for this service.

In the Technical Assistance Guide, we document how APD identified their needs for a 3-1-1 system, designed and procured that system and marketed it to the residents and businesses of Austin. We note that at each phase of the project, APD maintained a citizen focus. APD purchased technology to improve efficiency and reorganized their internal emergency communication operations. When they introduced 3-1-1, they explained the problems of overtaxing 9-1-1 and provided an alternative at the same

time. They encouraged citizens to continue to partner with them to create safer neighborhoods by using 3-1-1 to report non-emergency public safety concerns.

Timing played an unexpected role in the implementation of APD’s 3-1-1 system. Exactly one week after the national tragedies of September 11, 2001, 3-1-1 became operational in Austin. September 17, 2001 was the planned start up date, even before the tragedies. APD seized the moment of additional media coverage of public safety to stress how important it was to keep 9-1-1 reserved for emergency calls.

The Need for 3-1-1

When a city or community considers implementing a 3-1-1 system, it is important that they first assess the environment and audience. APD executives understood who they were serving and what concerns they sought to remedy.

The police department and city recognized that the Austin metropolitan area had grown by 41 percent from 1990 to 2000. They saw a growth in the Hispanic and Asian communities as well as an increase in residents between the ages of 20 and 44. With the growth in population came an increase in the number of 9-1-1 calls. The department estimated that calls increased slowly from 1992 to 1997, but increased by about 11 percent per year since 1997. In 2000-01, the department estimated that it was on track to receive over one million calls, a 43 percent increase from the 692,000 calls received in 1992.

As part of its assessment the department estimated that about 40 to 60 percent of its 9-1-1 calls were not true emergencies. This meant that about 240,000 to 360,000 calls could be handled by highly trained call takers rather than police officers dispatched to the scene. The executives within department also examined how they handled calls, the alternative non-emergency numbers they currently used, the types of call takers they employed, and their vision for a 3-1-1 system.

Based on this assessment and vision, the department sought to achieve technological benefits, increase the education of the public about 9-1-1 and 3-1-1, lay the foundation for an easy-to-remember city wide number, and improve problem solving activities.

Choosing a 3-1-1 Model

Nationally, cities are implementing three different models for their 3-1-1 systems. These include:

- Model 1. Basic police: 3-1-1 as a police only non-emergency
- Model 2. Basic city: 3-1-1 as a city services, not including police
- Model 3. Integrated: 3-1-1 as a total city, including police non-emergency.

The Austin Police Department selected Model 1, the basic police model, for three primary reasons: funding availability, ease of implementation, and intended purposes for the system.

Lessons Learned. Agencies that are considering a 3-1-1 system should consider the desired outcome they wish to achieve, the political realities of their communities, and available resources.

Partnerships

Partners played a key role in ensuring the implementation of Austin’s 3-1-1 operation in a timely and effective manner. Key partnerships included:

- Coordinating with the 9-1-1 oversight organization in the Austin area for conceptualizing and planning for 3-1-1 – Capital Area Planning Commission (CAPCO);
- Relying on the city’s Information Systems Department (ISD) for technical advice and expertise;
- Working closely with the City Purchasing Department to learn about procurement

policies and to purchase equipment and training;

- Building strong ties with the technology and phone vendors to understand data needs, phone systems, and costs;
- Leveraging the support of the Greater Austin Crime Commission to market 3-1-1;
- Linking with the City Public Information Office to broadcast the 3-1-1 message.

Lessons Learned. Partnerships were critical at each stage of the 3-1-1 implementation process. Once partnerships were established, roles and expectations were made clear, lines of communication were drawn, and the decision-making structure was clarified.

Equipment/Technology: Procurement Process

Selecting and purchasing the proper equipment for 3-1-1 was dependent upon the model (police only, non-emergency number) and the plan envisioned by APD managers.

Hardware requirements. Eleven new workstations and a dedicated server with appropriate wiring were purchased and installed. Monitors with “touch screens” were important additions.

Telephony requirements. “Soft phones” – a phone number pad that appeared on the computer monitor and personal headsets were purchased. Call management software allowed APD to track calls from different sources. Voice recording software was also purchased. A 5-cent tariff for routing calls was charged by the phone company.

Software requirements. APD team members considered numerous software components. Decisions were based on balancing needs versus desires. One of the primary concerns was selecting software that would assist call takers in handling with citizens who called in. Call takers needed tools that would allow them to collect accurate addresses, document caller concerns, highlight situations where multiple callers were

reporting the same information, and ask pre-determined questions that were specific to the nature of the call.

Procurement planning for the 3-1-1 operations began almost one year prior to implementation. Five phases took place: project definition; analysis phase, design; procurement; construction, and implementation.

Lessons Learned. Partner with the purchasing department experts to determine the options that are available for procuring equipment. Currently, the marketplace for 3-1-1 solutions is limited. Only a few companies are providing products focused on government needs.

Equipment/Technology: Call Routing and Call Tracking

APD learned that the public has a number of ways to contact and gain access to the police department. These include:

- Calls from a home or business within the city limits.
- Calls from a home or business outside the city limits.
- Calls from pay phones.
- Calls from cellular phones.
- Call from within the police department.

While these appear straightforward, they involve different phone companies, different costs, and different ways that calls need to be routed and tracked.

Lessons Learned. Think through different scenarios in the development phase. Observe call takers over an extended period of time and track the types of calls they receive. Develop a baseline of 9-1-1 calls prior to the implementation of 3-1-1.

Staffing

To staff the new 3-1-1 operation (24 hours, seven days a week), APD used existing Emergency

Communications personnel and added ten new positions. Thirty-three full time equivalents (FTEs) were assigned to 3-1-1. APD Emergency Communications personnel are cross-trained to work in 9-1-1 and 3-1-1.

Call takers were faced with changes in their job description and in their skill requirements. Managers were faced with morale issues and training concerns. Acceptance of these changes required a change in attitude by call takers about the purpose and scope of their job. Managers reassured call takers about their new jobs, built excitement about the changes, and addressed harmful rumors. They also set new standards for performance and realigned the 3-1-1 call taker position with department priorities.

Lessons Learned. Realize that staff is half of the focal relationship between the callers and the police department. It is critical that staff fully understand and accept the 3-1-1 concept prior to implementation. Focus on morale issues and rumor control.

Training

Call takers, supervisors, technical staff, and patrol officers were provided different levels of training about the new 3-1-1 system.

Because changes were made to policies and procedures regarding the way in which call takers related to the public, extensive training and re-training of communications staff occurred. Class room training, “hands-on” experience, and one-on-one training were provided to call takers.

Technical support staff received training from the vendor and supervisors received a training session on call tracking software. In addition, supervisors were trained on using the new voice recording software. Patrol officers received an introduction to the 3-1-1 concept at roll calls.

Lessons Learned. Use the train-the-trainer method to build acceptance. Provide training, especially

refresher training, at multiple points during the implementation process. When conducting computer training, use “live” systems in a hands-on setting. Hold vendors accountable for documentation.

Logistics

In Austin, the 3-1-1 unit is under the direction of the Emergency Communications Division of APD. This division manages all emergency communications for the city. Call takers and dispatchers for police, fire, and emergency services were housed at police headquarters, with separate locations for the call takers and dispatchers. The 3-1-1 unit was located on a separate floor from the 9-1-1 operation and the dispatchers. A new facility resolved the physical space limitations faced by the city and police. In late 2003 a new communications center will fully integrate 3-1-1, computer-aided dispatch, and the records management system under one roof.

Lessons Learned. Recognize the impacts of physical space on morale and on system operations.

Timeline

Concept to implementation of 3-1-1 in Austin took two years. A full year was spent on planning, securing funding, and creating support for change. The equipment and technology phase, including project definition, analysis, design, procurement, construction and implementation took another year. During the second year, the marketing strategy was developed and implemented. Training occurred about three months prior to full implementation of the system.

Lessons Learned. Establish and distribute a formal timeline at an early stage of the process. Include details about the tasks, responsibility for the tasks, due dates, and the linkages between tasks. A project manager should be responsible for tracking progress according to the timeline. Maintain momentum with frequent meetings that require action, not just discussion.

Public Education/Marketing

The success of APD’s 3-1-1 effort relied on the department’s ability to change public perceptions and use of 9-1-1.

APD took critical steps in marketing 3-1-1 to the public. Working with the Greater Austin Crime Commission, APD formed a marketing team, developed a plan, and formed partnerships to ensure that the message about 3-1-1 would be broadly disseminated.

The team produced a new logo, brochure, wallet cards, and bookmark quiz in English and Spanish. A media briefing and kick-off event brought newspaper and television coverage to the project.

Lessons Learned. Recognize that changing public perceptions about 9-1-1 is the key to success of a basic police model. When developing a public education strategy and budget, be creative and set goals high. Rely on key stakeholders such as the Public Information Office to assist with the effort.

System Maintenance

Once the 3-1-1 system was established, APD developed processes and procedures to maintain it. System maintenance includes developing provisions for anticipated problems with the equipment and operational levels. APD believed that the system should operate 99.9999 percent of the time and be out of service for less than four hours in the event of a disaster. They anticipated that 3-1-1 would receive about 1,500 calls per day. If more calls came in, a “hold” system was included. That is, callers were placed on hold and told how long they would have to wait before a call taker could respond. Callers could also leave a voice message which would be retrieved by a supervisor.

A longer term maintenance issue involved ensuring the software did not become dated or obsolete. APD negotiated with the vendor to provide updates as they were developed for one year.

A maintenance agreement for off-site technical support was also included. For phone equipment and computer hardware, maintenance agreements were also in place.

APD was also concerned about personnel turnover. In the past, the turnover rate for call takers was 47 percent annually. The development of a single policy and procedures manual, new operating principles, overtime and rotation opportunities, better salaries, and a “quasi-career” track reduced the turnover rate to 5 percent.

Lessons Learned. In general, the 3-1-1 operation is relatively stable. However, hardware and software glitches do occur and maintenance agreements should be in place. Work with technical staff to develop acceptable levels of down time. In addition, some staff turnover should be anticipated, though this can be minimized.

System Performance

APD was concerned about tracking a number of performance measures. In particular, the department wanted to measure the individual performance of call takers and supervisors. On a department wide scale, they wanted to demonstrate the value of 3-1-1 by determining whether a reduction in the number of non-emergency calls on 9-1-1 occurred; how much time was spent per phone call; whether the system was overwhelmed as indicated by ‘hang-ups’; and whether citizens complained about non-responsiveness.

These measures were built into the system and can be analyzed on a daily, weekly, monthly or quarterly basis.

Lessons Learned. Track 3-1-1 performance daily. Use measures that provide in-depth information about what the system is accomplishing and how call takers are performing.