



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

**A Process and Impact
Evaluation**

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

Prepared by



Acknowledgements

& Disclaimers

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Shellie E. Solomon
Craig D. Uchida
21st Century Solutions, Inc.
Consulting on Crime and Public Policy
www.e-21stCenturySolutions.com
(301) 438-3132

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Introduction

Since 1967, 9-1-1 has been used to bring lifesaving emergency services to the scenes of innumerable crimes, fires, accidents, and medical crises. By the mid-1980s, 9-1-1 was being dialed increasingly by citizens who did not know whom to call for less urgent help, as well. This began to overburden the 9-1-1 system, interfering with the handling of genuine emergencies.

By the summer of 1996, non-emergency use of 9-1-1 had reached a magnitude that required national attention. The White House and the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS Office), U.S. Department of Justice, announced their intention to take corrective action. The COPS Office first requested the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to set aside 3-1-1 for use as a national help number for non-emergencies. In 1997, the FCC agreed, reserving 3-1-1 nationwide for use as a voluntary, non-toll, non-emergency telephone number. COPS budgeted funds for system implementation, and by FY 2003, thirteen jurisdictions had received financial assistance.¹

The subject of this report, the Austin Police Department (APD), was among those jurisdictions selected to receive federal assistance. In an earlier report, we described the necessary elements for APD's 3-1-1 system, including each step in the selection of hardware and software, procurement issues, training needs, system maintenance, and lessons learned.² In this report we evaluate the implementation process. We ask: How well does the system work? What were the obstacles and challenges faced by APD staff? Second, we describe the impact of the 3-1-1 system on police department operations and regional 9-1-1 call loads. We also discuss the perceptions of the project held by Department staff and the local community.

Our research methods included interviews with key stakeholders throughout the process; observations of weekly implementation meetings (June-September 2001); and observations of daily work meetings, especially during the critical implementation months of July and August 2001. The 3-1-1 stakeholders we interviewed included emergency operations executives and managers, Information Technology Department staff, technology vendor staff, Capital Area Planning Council (CAPCO) executives, Greater Austin Crime Commission (GACC) executives, call takers and dispatchers, Research and Planning staff, and APD police officers (although contact with the latter was limited). We participated in four training sessions, including vendor trainings on the telephony equipment and the customer relations software.

We observed Teleserve, 9-1-1, 3-1-1, and dispatch workers on the job before, immediately after, and 6 months following 3-1-1 system implementation. We monitored actual calls and observed operations during complete shifts across each of the three shift periods. We also conducted two surveys of call takers and dispatchers; the first survey immediately followed the 3-1-1 kick-off, and the second occurred six months after implementation.

Findings: Implementation Elements

We found that APD had implemented 3-1-1 without delays and within budget. APD staff partnered effectively with experts in key city agencies, community organizations, and vendor organizations to build the system. Although they faced obstacles, none prevented the launch of the system and its use for its primary purpose – to reduce 9-1-1 call loads. The Austin 3-1-1 team leveraged their strengths and partnerships to design and select 3-1-1 system components in a timely and effective manner.

We found one drawback. While all involved reported that they “nailed the implementation timeline,” on-time delivery of the front-end system may have come at the cost of essential back-end tools. These tools were important to the long-term management of 3-1-1 call loads. Considering the ultimate outcome -- diverting calls from the 9-1-1 call load as quickly as possible - APD benefited from expedited procurement options; however, having skipped the crucial, in-depth software evaluation steps required by the standard RFP process may have allowed them to overlook complications that the off-the-shelf software would later pose for their small staff.

In this process evaluation, we detailed implementation problems as well as successes in order to help APD and other jurisdictions recognize potential potholes along the road to 3-1-1 implementation or expansion. We commend the Austin team for its determination and ability to work through these issues during the design phase, as well as to avoid the many other problems frequently encountered with complex technology projects.

APD successfully implemented a 3-1-1 solution. Their enthusiasm, focus, skill, and dedication across the board allowed them to create a system that provides a viable option to citizens for non-emergency police calls. This system relies heavily on human elements rather than

technological advances. First, the public education and marketing campaign won acceptance and wide usage of the system by Austin citizens. In-depth staff training and understanding of call resolution policies, procedures, and expectations ensured citizen satisfaction with this non-emergency alternative to 9-1-1.

We encourage APD to bring the technological components of the 3-1-1 system up to par with the human elements. By doing so, they will begin to reap the operational, management, and problem-solving benefits that this type of technology can provide. Specifically, we recommend that APD consider renewing the partnership and collaboration with ISD with the objectives of fully accessing data captured by the call tracking software, fully populating the CRM system, and resolving outstanding GIS issues. Once the system is completely operational, we encourage APD to maintain system support staffing to manage the complex technology on a daily basis, including making system adjustments, creating management and operational reports, and partnering with the Research and Planning unit to analyze the data created by 3-1-1 call tracking, so that it can be used to troubleshoot, manage, and improve the operation.

Impact Evaluation

How effective is the 3-1-1 system in reducing 9-1-1 calls for service? Did the new operation improve the management of all citizen calls to police (both emergency and non-emergency)? Did response times for high priority calls improve? Did citizen satisfaction with the police handling of calls for service change? Was patrol officer time freed to provide more opportunities for problem-oriented and community policing activities? These are among the questions we asked in determining the impact of 3-1-1 on police services.

To answer these questions, we relied upon official data from within APD and conducted surveys of police officers, call takers, and those citizens who called 3-1-1.

Findings

Our analysis of the impacts of 3-1-1 in Austin reveals six principal findings:

1. Implementation of the 3-1-1 call system resulted in a reduction of 9-1-1 calls. During the first 12 months that 3-1-1 was in operation, 9-1-1 calls were reduced by 20 percent, a remarkable reduction considering the public safety environment following 9/11. From September 2002 through July 2003, 9-1-1 calls were reduced by 72,000; once data are available for the entire year, we may find that 9-1-1 calls were reduced by more than 25 percent in the second full year of 3-1-1's existence. (We do note that data from different source documents conflict with respect to actual 9-1-1 call loads; different reporting periods and reporting methods resulted in different results.)

Bringing the 9-1-1 call load back down to 1994 levels has allowed APD to maintain service standards during peak call loads. As the APD Emergency Communications manager states, 3-1-1 has been a "godsend to Austin" in this era of heightened public safety requirements. It is allowing true emergency calls to be received by 9-1-1 call takers within the 10-second period required by their performance goals.

2. The 3-1-1 system contributed to a significant increase in total calls for service. During the first full calendar year that 3-1-1 was in operation, calls for service to APD grew by 70 percent, from 854,136 to 1,445,271 calls. More than 700,000 calls were received by the new 3-1-1 center alone. Fifty percent of them were from citizens dialing 3-1-1, while the other 50 percent were redirected from other phone lines to the 3-1-1 switch. This explosion of calls for service far exceeds the rate of increase in any of the prior 10 years, and is evidence of the success of APD's public education and marketing campaign. Some of the increase probably is due to heightened public concern and interest in public safety issues following 9/11. Citizens have accepted the 3-1-1 system, and consider it a viable non-emergency reporting alternative to 9-1-1.

3. Dispatchable calls for service increased. Despite the reduction in 9-1-1 calls, APD tracked 23,000 more dispatchable calls than in the prior year. Priority One and Three calls decreased, but Priority Two and Four calls for service increased. Our analysis was unable to uncover the source of the increases or to determine whether they were associated with the introduction of 3-1-1. We infer (but cannot prove) that the increase in Priority Four calls is related to the overall increase in calls attributable to 3-1-1. The CAD system does not support analysis of the sources of CAD entries – that is, whether they originate with 9-1-1 or 3-1-1 callers. Call takers on the 3-1-1 system have the discretion to dispatch

an officer on any call. Since we do not know the nature of 3-1-1 calls, however, we cannot assess whether 3-1-1 call takers are simply receiving more dispatchable calls than expected or may be opting, on occasion, to dispatch as a way of meeting time-per-call performance goals.

4. Time available for community policing has not increased following the introduction of 3-1-1. Officer surveys showed that after 3-1-1 was introduced, officers reported working about the same amount of time on problem solving. They also reported answering roughly the same number of calls for service per shift. Added public safety responsibilities associated with homeland security appeared to absorb time that otherwise might have been available for increasing community policing efforts.³

5. Citizens report satisfaction with emergency communication services in general, and with 3-1-1 services in particular. Surveys conducted by the City and as part of our research show that 94 percent of Austin’s citizens are pleased with the 9-1-1 system, and 75 percent believe that 3-1-1 has contributed to improvements in service.

6. Communication between police officers and citizens, and between police officers and city agencies, does not appear to have changed due to the 3-1-1 system. Although 3-1-1 provides citizens with a viable way to report non-emergency concerns to police, it has not yet allowed them to become “another set of eyes and ears” for the police, as the APD Chief had hoped. This is probably due in large part to the way citizen information is handled. APD is not yet collecting, tracking, analyzing, and managing information about 3-1-1 calls, so opportunities to move in this direction are likely being missed. New incoming information is not systematically being disseminated to police officers or District Representatives. Likewise, APD is not systematically communicating citizen-reported public safety and quality of life issues to other city service agencies. According to discussions with the Emergency Communications Director, however, plans are underway to begin limited tracking of calls using the CRM system. The City Manager is expecting to expand 3-1-1 city-wide in the near future.

Summary. The use of 3-1-1 reduced 9-1-1 calls by 20 percent, achieving one of APD’s major goals for the system. Overall, total call load to APD, including 3-1-1 and 9-1-1, increased by over 70 percent during the first year of operations. In addition, dispatchable calls increased, especially in the Priority Four calls. Time available for community policing by patrol

officers did not increase as a result of the implementation of 3-1-1. Seventy-five percent of citizens surveyed believe that 3-1-1 improved emergency communications in Austin. APD is not systematically tracking or analyzing the information from 3-1-1 calls.

Recommendations

The above findings suggest that APD has successfully addressed its most critical issue – migrating non-emergency calls away from the 9-1-1 system has reduced the overall 9-1-1 call load and secured it for true emergencies. This accomplishment is especially remarkable post-9/11, when call loads were reported to have surged nationwide. As we said in the process evaluation, APD is to be commended for its focus on achieving its primary goal in a timely, cost-effective, and customer-oriented manner.

At the same time, although APD has achieved success with this highly visible outcome, it has yet to use the full capabilities of the call-tracking and analysis software to achieve long-term management and customer service benefits. The following recommendations are intended to suggest how APD might expand 3-1-1's external success to include internal management and problem-solving gains.

Based on the above findings, we make the following recommendations:

- 1. Before expanding the system city-wide, APD and City executives should confer to consider the budget, staffing, and other consequences of 3-1-1's success for APD, and project the implications for the City of potential future call loads.**

Strategic decisions about the next goals of the 3-1-1 system need to be carefully evaluated. As the Baltimore study⁴ suggests, police departments and cities need to think carefully about whether they want to increase or reduce calls for service.

APD's Chief sought through 3-1-1 to involve the community in gathering relevant, useful information to use in making policing decisions. Some argue that greater citizen involvement provides police with "better information about the spatial distribution of crime and quality of life problems and thus a more accurate picture of the locations of ongoing problems."⁵ Conversely, others argue that public education campaigns should dissuade citizens from calling police about

low-level neighborhood problems, in order to reserve police resources for the most serious law enforcement matters.

We assert that cities can and should do both – encourage citizen interaction with the department, while disseminating information that citizens can use independently to improve their quality of life and mitigate area problems. As chronic problems are addressed, call loads should theoretically decrease. Regardless of which objective is right for a given city, however, making a conscious decision about the objectives for a 3-1-1 system is critical not only to guide its actions, but to prevent unintended consequences. Without clearly defining its intentions, Austin could inadvertently create a new workload and another call center overload in the future.

- 2. Establish a systematic process for reporting the number of 9-1-1 and 3-1-1 calls received.** For operational purposes, APD Emergency Communications Managers meticulously tracked the number of calls coming into both call for service systems. APD Research and Planning Division staff needed the tracking system for analysis and reporting requirements. Statistics generated within and across these two divisions varied, due to differences in reporting periods and data extraction techniques. Nevertheless, both sets of numbers were publicly available. As with many statistics, the specifics of how particular figures were generated are often lost as the number is used. Understandably, APD’s statistics are generated and used for differing purposes, but we suggest that APD document the differences between how the various statistics for call loads are generated in order to maintain credibility and to ensure that those who generate and use call load statistics fully understand the differences and the reasons for them.
- 3. Use the full capacity of Customer Relations Management (CRM) software systematically to track the nature of 3-1-1 calls.** With deployment of the upgraded CAD and record management systems, we anticipate that APD will have a much better system for tracking the nature of 9-1-1 calls. This information will be critical if APD wants to continue to analyze and manage information about calls for service by priority classification. For example, with more information about the nature of Priority Four calls, APD might be able to manage or reduce the number of dispatched “report only” calls, freeing more officer time for problem solving and other needs.

Tracking the nature of 3-1-1 calls with the CRM system was an early goal set for the 3-1-1 system. In order for APD to make full use of information provided by citizens, that information must be recorded. Once recorded, it can be used for a variety of purposes, such as reducing calls through public education or solving quality of life problems with the help of police officers and District Representatives.

Understanding the nature of 9-1-1 and 3-1-1 calls is essential to managing them effectively and to allocating APD resources. One reason APD pursued 3-1-1 was to avoid adding more telephone switches and call takers to handle growing call loads. Without tracking and managing the issues that underlie the call load, history may repeat itself – the same problems that plagued the 9-1-1 system may soon plague 3-1-1. Without more complete data, APD also runs the risk of limiting its ability to make well-grounded policy decisions about how to use their resources.

- 4. Finally, renew and redirect the public education campaign.** APD has demonstrated how human element rather than technological wizardry are at the heart of improving the public safety environment for citizens. The department reduced 9-1-1 call loads essentially by asking citizens to be more conscientious in their use of 9-1-1, and then giving them the means to comply. We encourage APD to build on this success and to continue to inform constituents about 3-1-1 as the non-emergency call alternative. Using data collected with the CRM system, for example, APD might target neighborhoods that under-use the system.

The 3-1-1 non-emergency call system allows citizens to become part of the solution for the problem of managing demand for police resources. It gives them some discretion about whether they need a patrol car dispatched, with 3-1-1 call takers having seamless access to the dispatch system.

To reduce the need for dispatching officers, a targeted public education campaign could address recurring crime and quality of life issues, identified by using CRM software to monitor 3-1-1 call loads. We encourage the Department to use the information created from collective citizen input to educate the community about their problems and to involve them in the response.

End Notes

¹ Baltimore Police Department was the first to receive 3-1-1 funding. The subject of this report, the Austin Police Department, also received funding. The other 11 recipients were Birmingham (AL), Charlotte-Mecklenburg (NC), Columbus (OH), Dukes County (MA), Framingham (MA), Houston (TX), Los Angeles (CA), Miami (FL), Minneapolis (MN), Orange County (FL), and Rochester (NY). For information on the program history, see the COPS 3-1-1 Fact Sheet and other related publications at www.cops.usdoj.gov.

² Shellie E. Solomon and Craig D. Uchida, "Building a 3-1-1 System for Police Non-Emergency Calls: A Case Study of the City of Austin Police Department," Final Report submitted to the Austin Police Department and the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, September, 2003.

³ The relationship between 3-1-1 and time available for community policing is unclear. We could not verify time-related data using the CAD system data because the system does not track time information in a consistent and accessible manner.

⁴ Lorraine Mazerolle, Dennis Rogan, James Frank, Christine Famega, and John E. Eck, "Managing Citizen Calls to the Police: The Impact of Baltimore's 3-1-1 Call System," *Criminology & Public Policy*, Vol. 2, No. 1, Nov. 2002, at page 119.

⁵ Ibid.

