

Background

Chapter I

On February 16, 1968, in Haleyville, Alabama, State Speaker of the House Rankin Fite placed the very first 9-1-1 universal emergency number call in America; the groundbreaking demonstration call was answered by Congressman Tom Beville. It had taken Congress and the President's Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice nearly 10 years, from 1958 to 1967, to reach this moment. In November 1967, the U.S. Senate, with the House of Representatives concurring, issued a resolution stating:

Resolved... That it is the sense of the Congress that the United States should have one uniform nationwide fire reporting telephone number and one uniform nationwide police reporting telephone number.

The Nation recognized a good thing when it saw it. A mere 30 years later, across the country, 9-1-1 was being used to bring lifesaving emergency services to the scenes of innumerable crimes, fires, accidents, and medical crises. By the mid-1980s, however, 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), U.S. Department of Justice, announced their intention to take corrective action. COPS 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.

Austin’s Need for 3-1-1

Although initiating a 3-1-1 system requires sophisticated planning, technology, and training, the greatest challenge lies in altering public behavior. Almost every American man, woman, and child knows to dial 9-1-1 in a police, fire, or medical emergency. But increasing numbers of citizens are in the habit of dialing the emergency number for almost any public service need. Callers using the number for non-emergency purposes can and do cause delays in emergency personnel’s response to true emergencies. APD Chief Stan Knee realized that in order to protect the integrity and effectiveness of Austin’s 9-1-1 system, he would have to give his constituents a viable alternative for non-emergency situations.

APD executives were already concerned that the 9-1-1 system was being stressed beyond its limits. During regional crises, such as weather emergencies, officials suspected that 9-1-1 lines were being overwhelmed – and that some callers were being placed on hold, or worse, were getting busy signals or no answer at all. However, they also suspected that as many as 40 to 50 percent of the incoming 9-1-1 calls were non-emergencies, situations that should be handled by someone other than police, fire, or rescue operations.

Apart from the stress on the system caused by civil emergencies, 9-1-1 call volumes appeared to be growing at a faster rate than Austin’s population. At the beginning of its COPS grant period, APD was on track to receive more than a million 9-1-1 calls for the year. The city’s existing technology and staff could not support the demands of this growing call load. At the same time, it would be neither logical

nor viable public policy simply to increase staffing to handle call volumes that were predicted to grow indefinitely. In addition, the existing 9-1-1 technology could not be upgraded to use more efficient and advanced software due to interagency compatibility issues and state regulations.

Bringing a new 3-1-1 non-emergency call system to Austin offered a potential solution to all of these problems and more, if it could be implemented and marketed effectively.

NEED for 3-1-1

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Austin: The Research Site

Austin is diverse, with a growing population. The city is the 16th largest in the country, with a population of 656,562; the metropolitan area³ is home to over 1.2 million people. Austin covers 232 square miles, served by four major highways. Since 1990, the Hispanic and Asian populations have grown exponentially; the Hispanic population has increased by 88 percent, while the Asian population has more than doubled. Fifty-three percent of the population is White, 31 percent is Hispanic, 10 percent is Black, and 5 percent is Asian. Austin’s citizens are well educated. High technology industries provide almost 15 percent of total non-agricultural employment.

Austin ranks as the third safest major city in the U.S. with regard to violent crime, and the 35th safest with regard to property crime, according to Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) 2000 data. When walking alone in their neighborhoods, 94 percent of residents reported feeling safe during the day and 70 percent reported feeling safe at night.⁴ Citizens are active in numerous neighborhood associations. More than

23,000 volunteer hours were logged in FY 2001 by the police department alone. Austin's tradition of citizen involvement served as a key factor in setting the goals for APD's 3-1-1 system.

The Austin Police Department serves the community with a sworn force of more than 1,270 officers and 600 civilians. Since 1998, APD has implemented Neighborhood-Based Policing, a philosophy that incorporates tenets of community policing. The last decade has seen an increase in police partnerships and collaboration with the community, major departmental organizational changes, and support for problem solving in facilitated settings on the part of police. APD's Chief articulates two primary responsibilities for his patrol officers: respond to calls for service and engage in problem-solving activities.

In a prior assessment of community policing in Austin,⁵ we reported that the practice of neighborhood-based policing permeated the Department. Everyone we interviewed and observed - executives, patrol officers, and civilian staff - was aware of the concept and of some ways in which it had been implemented. The majority were supportive of the approach, and had dedicated themselves to practicing neighborhood-based policing. The Department had made a number of organizational changes in support of its neighborhood-based approach. Among them were decentralization, permanent shift scheduling, installation in each command of District Representatives (DR) and Street Response Units (SRU), and civilianization, along with issuance of new general orders, policies and procedures, and accountability mechanisms.

Austin's Chief considered the 3-1-1 non-emergency call system as a logical extension of neighborhood-based policing. If they could more easily reach the Police Department in non-emergency situations, the Chief believed, Austin's citizens would become "another set of eyes and ears for the Department." In addition, APD managers believed that from 240,000 to 360,000 of all annual calls for service could be handled effectively by well-trained call takers instead of by police officers.

By the mid-1990s, non-emergency calls had also become a dilemma for 9-1-1 call takers, who had no place to route them. Call takers' options were to attempt to respond to the diverse questions, or to dismiss callers tactfully, but without resolution. In 1996, APD obtained a COPS MORE grant⁶ to create a Teleserve unit staffed by 10 full-time operators. By July 2000, Teleserve was operating 7 days a week, around the clock. When 9-1-1 call takers received non-emergency police reports, they could redirect callers to Teleserve operators. Teleserve could be reached by dialing a direct seven-digit number listed in the blue pages of the telephone directory, by transfers from 9-1-1 operators, or by leaving voice mail messages that would be returned by Teleserve operators. The majority of Teleserve calls involved property crimes, such as vehicle and residential burglaries where the suspect had already left the scene. Teleserve eventually had 28 operators fielding an average of 5,000 calls per month; meanwhile, the number of calls handled by 9-1-1 operators had decreased by almost 50 percent. Teleserve had succeeded in relieving the immediate pressure on 9-1-1, but the Chief did not regard it as the ultimate solution. In 1999, the Chief directed his staff to find a way to build a 3-1-1 system.

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: Technical Assistance Guide," Final Report submitted to the Austin Police Department and the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, March, 2002.

³ Austin-San Marcos, TX Metropolitan Statistical Area as defined by the Census Bureau includes Bastrop County, Caldwell County, Hays County, Travis County, and Williamson County.

⁴ Source: FY 2001-2002 City of Austin Budget, Police Department Section

⁵ Uchida, Craig D., Shellie Solomon and Edward R. Maguire, "Neighborhood-Based Policing, Austin Style, An Assessment." Washington, D.C.: 21st Century Solutions, Inc., September 2000.

⁶ The COPS Making Officer Redeployment Effective (MORE) program seeks to increase the amount of time existing law enforcement officers can spend on community policing, by funding technology, equipment, and support staff, including civilian personnel.