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Calling 311: Guidelines for Policymakers

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This Research for Policy is based on “Managing Citizen Calls to the Police: An Assessment of Non-Emergency Call Systems,” by L. Mazerolle, D. Rogan, J. Frank, C. Famega, and J. Eck, final report to the National Institute of Justice, October 2001, NCJ 199060, available at www.ncjrs.org/pdffiles1/nij/grants/199060.pdf.

Any citizen in the United States can mobilize the local police by dialing 911. Since their introduction 35 years ago, 911 emergency call systems have revolutionized emergency response, especially for police services. However, many 911 systems have become severely overloaded with nonemergency calls.¹ By the mid-1990s, a national movement was under way to implement a universal number to reduce nonemergency calls to 911 call systems. In 1997, the Federal Communications Commission designated 311 as the national nonemergency phone number.

Why 311?

Like 911, 311 is easily marketed and remembered. Modern telecommunications systems allow customized configuration of 911/311 call management systems to meet a wide variety of requirements, from alleviating an overloaded 911 system to improving handling of citizens’ requests for local services (see “Technology Considerations”). Calls can be instantly switched between

311 and 911 call centers and other city agencies.

311 works. Nonemergency 311 call systems can greatly reduce the 911 burden, according to a study sponsored by the National Institute of Justice.² In its first year of operating a 311 system, the Baltimore Police Department experienced a 25-percent reduction in 911 calls (about 5,000 fewer calls per week). Lowest priority calls to 911 dropped by 99.7 percent.³ Most of these calls migrated to 311.

Baltimore citizens readily diverted their nonemergency calls to 311, and the goal of reducing the 911 burden was achieved. But the study also showed that nonemergency 311 systems offer a broader opportunity to police—to craft their response to fit the call. If police administrators and city planners comprehensively reexamine call handling protocols, change patrol dispatch policies, and closely manage patrol officer free time, a 311 system could present a way to significantly improve community policing.

TECHNOLOGY CONSIDERATIONS

Although they are not yet universal, nonemergency 311 call systems are gradually being implemented across the country. Systems generally fall into two categories:

- Police-run systems intended to reduce the burden on 911 and improve police response to emergencies.
- Systems run by city or county governments to improve municipal services, including police services.

An example of the latter is the Dallas system, in which officials consolidated 28 customer-service numbers and 7 call-taking centers (including links to 911) to give citizens easy access to a full range of city services. This integrated approach is likely to improve city services overall but, without changes to police policies and practices, is not likely to improve police response or foster community policing.^a

Caller identification or caller anonymity?

Police-run 311 systems (such as Baltimore's)^b not only can relieve overburdened 911 call centers, they also may change citizen patterns of reporting nonemergency incidents and crimes. For example, after implementation of 311, citizens in Baltimore reported more quality-of-life problems such as loud noise complaints. This may have been due in part to caller anonymity, since the 311 system did not have Automatic Number Identification/Automatic Location Identification (ANI/ALI). Citizens may be more likely to report certain crimes or problems when their anonymity is assured. Unless other tracking mechanisms are used, however, call anonymity may preclude collection of ANI/ALI data that can be useful for problem-oriented policing.

Thinking it through. Setting up a 311 number for nonemergency calls to police or other city services is not just a matter of purchasing some telephones and communications lines. Systems are complex and expensive.^c They require extensive planning as well as changes in policy and practice. Planners need to consider such hidden costs as—

- Networking with local police districts and other government communications systems and installing adequate backup.
- Modifying 911 call-taking protocols to be consistent with 311 protocols.
- Monitoring and evaluating system impact and effectiveness.

Other considerations include staffing call centers; training and cross-training; marketing the system to the public; and communicating system goals to staff, officers, and citizens.^d

Notes

a. See Mazerolle, L., D. Rogan, J. Frank, C. Famega, and J. Eck, "Managing Citizen Calls to the Police: An Assessment of Non-Emergency Call Systems," final report to the National Institute of Justice, October 2001, NCJ 199060: chapters 8 and 9.

b. Since the study, Baltimore has adopted a system that resembles the Dallas system in some respects. See Mazerolle, L., D. Rogan, L. Frank, C. Famega, and J. Eck, *Managing Calls to the Police With 911/311 Systems*, Research for Practice, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, 2005, NCJ 206256.

c. See Mazerolle et al., "Managing Citizen Calls to the Police," chapter 2, for a description of technologies used in the four 311 call systems studied.

d. See *ibid.*, chapter 11, for technical and resource considerations.

311 changes the police-citizen dynamic. Calling 311 empowers citizens. By choosing 311 instead of 911 to make a report, citizens can indicate to police that their problem does not require immediate patrol response. Moreover, citizen reports on 311 can contribute important data regarding neighborhoods and crime patterns. Police managers can facilitate community-oriented policing by setting up 311 in conjunction with 911 and establishing new response protocols to ensure call-takers know what data to capture and how to code it. Reports from 311 can help police determine trends, locate hot spots, and assist with other problem-solving objectives. Research has confirmed that the street blocks with 311 problems tend to be those with 911 problems as well. Thus, problem solving is likely to occur at crime-prone as well as disorderly places.⁴

What should managers know?

In addition to the technical and resource factors that must be considered before implementing 311, a police department

must consider whether and how to respond to and track nonemergency calls. Many 311 systems do not use Automatic Number Identification (ANI) or Automatic Location Identification (ALI). Anonymity may encourage some citizens to call, but police may lose valuable data (see “Technology Considerations”).

During the first year of 311 implementation in Baltimore, the researchers found no improvement in 911 response times or in patrol officers’ perceptions of their available time for problem solving. This was mostly due to call-handling deficits—911 and 311 calls were not dispatched differently, too many 311 calls were dispatched, and some 311 calls were double dispatched.⁵

Improving services. A highly touted potential benefit from implementing 311 is the freeing of patrol officer time for problem-solving policing. Although researchers found that 311 implementation in Baltimore created some free time for officer discretionary activities, most of this time was dissipated in self-initiated random activity, not problem

solving. This demonstrates the need for management's involvement in setting goals and priorities.

The study's researchers recommend that departments capitalize on the time 311 saves patrol officers by using split-force and dual-dispatching techniques—some officers respond to calls for service; others handle problem-solving activities. Low priority calls can be referred to a community-policing resource for tracking, scanning, or followup. For this approach to be successful, 311 advertising should make it clear that a patrol response is unlikely.⁶

Building on citizen trust. Is all the expense and restructuring that a 311 system demands worth it? Citizens in Baltimore seem to think so: 80 percent of 311 system users surveyed felt that 311 improved city services, and 70 percent felt that 311 improved police-community relations. Perhaps most pertinent, citizens overwhelmingly used 311 for nonemergency calls and were satisfied with the results, *even if the problem remained unresolved*. This unequivocal approval

suggests a strong potential for citizen-police cooperation that police can tap into by linking the nonemergency system's operations with a strong community-oriented policing program.

Notes

1. Researchers estimate that 60 to 90 percent of 911 calls are not emergency calls.
2. Funded by the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Community Oriented Policing Services.
3. This finding may be somewhat confounded by policy decisions unrelated to the implementation of 311. See Mazerolle, L., D. Rogan, J. Frank, C. Famega, and J. Eck, "Managing Citizen Calls to the Police: An Assessment of Non-Emergency Call Systems," final report to the National Institute of Justice, October 2001, NCJ 199060: 4-33.
4. See Mazerolle, L., D. Rogan, J. Frank, C. Famega, and J. Eck, "Managing Citizen Calls to the Police: The Impact of Baltimore's 3-1-1 System," *Criminology and Public Policy* 2(1)(November 2002): 119–121.
5. Baltimore has upgraded its 911/311 system to address shortcomings identified by the study.
6. Most citizens in Baltimore did not expect that their 311 calls would be dispatched.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

See the NIJ Research for Practice: *Managing Calls to the Police With 911/311 Systems*, by L. Mazerolle, D. Rogan, J. Frank, C. Famega, and J. Eck, 2005, NCJ 206256, available at www.ncjrs.org/pdffiles1/nij/206256.pdf.

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