



**State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations**  
Executive Office of Health and Human Services

**Statewide Human Services Call Center (2-1-1) Study**

Submitted to:  
**The Rhode Island General Assembly**  
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Submitted by:  
**Jane A. Hayward, Secretary**  
**Rhode Island Executive Office of Health and Human Services (EOHHS)**

## **Introduction**

Article 42-7.2-12.1 of the enacted state budget for Fiscal Year 2007 called for the Rhode Island Executive Office of Health and Human Services (EOHHS) to conduct a feasibility report relative to the implementation of a statewide 2-1-1 human services telephone information and hotline.

The study was to include a comprehensive listing of existing social and human services hotlines in the state including those operated by state agencies, the private sector and not-for-profit organizations in the state. It would also include an analysis of whether consolidation of some or all call centers into a centralized 2-1-1 information and referral line would be “economically and practically advantageous for both the users and agencies that currently operate separate systems” and a cost analysis.

The statute required that the report, and recommendations based on the findings of the study, be submitted to the General Assembly no later than February 1, 2007.

## **2-1-1: Origin & Background**

United Way of Atlanta created the first three-digit telephone number dedicated to community assistance in May 1997, when the Georgia Public Service Commission assigned the 2-1-1 number for that purpose. In July 2000, the Federal Communications Commission assigned the 2-1-1 dialing code for the exclusive purpose of providing access to community information and referral services across the country. The number was then available for use by states and communities interested in launching 2-1-1 call centers.

2-1-1 caught on quickly as a very easy to remember number to dial 24 hours a day, seven days a week as a single point of entry for those individuals looking for social and human service information and referral. As of November 2006, 193 million Americans, or 65% of American households, have access to 2-1-1 in 41 different states. A number of other state, county or local government agencies, Rhode Island included, have efforts underway to activate 2-1-1 systems in the near future.

Similar to both the 4-1-1 and 9-1-1 systems which were created to provide telephone information and emergency services (fire, police, rescue) respectively, 2-1-1 is an easy to remember telephone line created to connect individuals with often vital human and social service information and referrals in the area in which they live.

While individual 2-1-1 systems may vary by community, the majority provide information and access to services including those relating to food banks, clothing, shelter and rental assistance; health insurance program information, Medicaid and

maternal health, children's health, medical intervention lines, crisis services, counseling and drug and alcohol intervention and rehabilitation; employment services, financial assistance, job training and transportation; adult day care, Meals on Wheels, respite care, home health care and homemaker services; childcare, after school programs, Head Start, summer camp and recreation programs, mentoring and protective services. A virtual clearinghouse for human and social services information and referrals, the 2-1-1 system increases access by providing a simpler and well recognized point-of-entry for those in need.

The United Way has served as the catalyst for launching and administering all of the nation's 2-1-1 systems and has the experience and background in this area to make additional 2-1-1 launches succeed.

### **Rhode Island 2-1-1: Background:**

For the past 30 years, Information and Referral (I&R) assistance via the telephone has been available to those in need on a limited basis in the form of Rhode Island's Helpline, most recently administered through the non-profit organization, Crossroads Rhode Island. Helpline has been funded for a number of years by the state (with assistance in compiling the database by the RI Department of Human Services) and the United Way of Rhode Island (UWRI). Approximately 1,700 health and human services-related services provided by 720 agencies and organizations in Rhode Island are represented on the database used by Helpline. Approximately 40,000 calls were received in 2004 on Helpline's 10-digit phone number.

Though Helpline has done an admirable job in providing assistance to the community, it is widely believed that, due to understaffing and the difficult to remember 10-digit phone number, more complete penetration in the community will not be possible without some type of expansion and increase in resources.

In 1999, Helpline initially looked at the possibility of implementing a 2-1-1 system in Rhode Island. The United Way of Rhode Island board supported the concept and put together a workgroup to further examine the idea. In 2003, following its review, the workgroup recommended that a full feasibility study be conducted. Meanwhile, in 2004, the *Rhode Island Community Summits – People and Neighborhoods: From Crisis to Security* were held. Sponsored by the United Way of Rhode Island in cooperation with the Governor's Office, the Senate President and the House Speaker's Office, the Poverty Institute, Rhode Island College and Rhode Island Kids Count, the events led to the identification of common issues and potential action strategies for providing assistance to individuals and families on our communities. Calling it a "feasible goal (that) provides a good chance for short-term success," transforming the Helpline into 2-1-1 as part of an effort to centralize the state's information and referral resources, was identified as a key recommendation. The UWRI had a feasibility study conducted and full business plan

was written. The UWRI board approved funding for the implementation of a 2-1-1 system in Rhode Island in May 2006.

The United Way has, since 2004, worked with a widely represented implementation planning team which included state government and non-profit organizations. The work of this team is reflected in the business plan for implementing a 2-1-1 system in Rhode Island.

The report you are reading today, submitted by the Executive Office of Health and Human Services, uses and relies on much of the data compiled throughout the United Way's exhaustive and comprehensive examination of the 2-1-1 concept and references many of the report's findings and highlights. In fact, representatives from each of the departments of the EOHHS were active participants on the planning team and their involvement and concern for the needs of the populations they serve have been at the forefront of the planning process.

### **Benefits of the 2-1-1 system:**

The benefits and advantages of a 2-1-1 system compared to the current Helpline format are numerous.

- First and foremost, expanding access by promoting a simple, three-digit, easy to remember phone number will result in an increase in calls, which equates to an increase in linking the people who need social and human services assistance, to those who provide it. No longer will individuals in need be daunted by long phone numbers and a myriad of often confusing resources. The network of providers in Rhode Island is vast, however accessing the correct phone number or entry points can be extremely difficult and challenging to a point where people may become discouraged and end their attempt.
- Second, all of the highly-trained I&R representatives who will be manning the phones at 2-1-1 will be able to provide referral assistance on a full-range of different services and resources. These I&R specialists will be trained to assess the needs of the caller and direct them to appropriate services and programs in a culturally appropriate manner. Operating on what has been called a "case management" model, the specialists will see a caller through to a satisfactory linkage to services and/or programs – state run or otherwise.
- Third, the 2-1-1 call center will not replace state agency phone lines and hotlines, but will enhance services delivery provided by state agencies, as well as non-profits and others. Currently, the key to providing services to someone in need is to become aware that they need services in the first place. If people in need do not know how to directly access state programs and agencies, that connection may never be made. 2-1-1 operators will enhance the state hotlines and other phone

numbers by routing people calling 2-1-1 to those state lines when appropriate. 2-1-1 will become a valuable tool in the state's efforts to reach Rhode Islanders eligible for a multitude of programs and services, including food stamps, heating assistance, medical assistance and much more.

- The 2-1-1 system will also provide the United Way and the state with the tools to identify and track what types of services and programs are most needed and most referred. This highly valuable information will go a long way in targeting ever-decreasing resources to where they would be most effective. There is currently no centralized source or means of conducting this type of evaluation in Rhode Island on this projected volume level.
- Information and Referral Assistance will be available to Rhode Islanders 24 hours-per day, 7-days per week, 365-days per year. State agencies, as well as those run privately and by non-profits, for the most part, do not have the resources to offer continuous phone coverage, potentially limiting access to those in need.
- The 2-1-1 system could also be of great value to the state as a mechanism of communicating vital information and instructions to the populace during local or national emergencies or natural disasters.
- 2-1-1 would be an ideal partner for the state in promoting certain initiatives and programs. For example, as has taken place in others states with 2-1-1 capacity, the state could (in addition to its agency phone number) use the 2-1-1 number in its outreach efforts relating to any number of programs, including heating assistance, child care assistance, medical assistance and more.

The United Way's 2-1-1 business plan outlines many more advantages to implementing the system and is attached for your further review.

### **Impact on state agencies & clients served:**

As outlined in the previous section, the impact of a 2-1-1 system on Rhode Island social and human service agencies and the clients they serve would be significant and positive. By serving as an easy to remember resource, 2-1-1 would make available services more accessible to those in need – a clear benefit. In addition, I&R specialists would, in effect, become the partners of state agencies and providers, resulting in increased linkages between callers and providers. Those linkages, as stated previously, would also be tracked, providing crucial information to policy makers on trends and potential service gaps. And, while a number of individuals would still call the agencies directly for assistance, the safety net of having a 2-1-1 system of “catching” all of the calls that did not end up in the right place on their own, is a benefit that cannot be underestimated.

### **Operations & Funding of the 2-1-1 system:**

The United Way of Rhode Island would assume primary leadership and administration responsibility for the operation of a 2-1-1 system in Rhode Island. It will, however, contract with Helpline at Crossroads – which have decades of direct experience in providing social and human service information and referrals, to operationally manage the system, including staffing and training. The United Way would work in close partnership with the state and private philanthropy throughout.

The United Way, according to its business plan, projects calls to number approximately 70,000/year initially, growing to 110,00 within three years. It is projected to cost approximately \$5.2 million over the first five years, which averages about 94 cents per year for each Rhode Island citizen. This cost is somewhat lower than the generally accepted national estimate of \$1 - \$1.50 per resident due to the cost savings resulting from leveraging existing resources (Helpline) and developing a strong partnership between the UWRI and state government.

The United Way of Rhode Island would fund a significant portion of the costs associated with operating 2-1-1 and would take on the fund-raising efforts to assist with operational costs. The United Way is, however, planning to utilize state dollars, which have annually funded the Helpline for many years, when Helpline rolls into the 2-1-1 system. The UWRI has made a multi-year pledge of \$500,000/yr. and the state funding level to Helpline has averaged \$200,000/year over the past several years. The UWRI is confident that this funding total of \$700,000 will be adequate to launch and operate 2-1-1 initially. The UWRI is also in the midst of securing private and/or corporate donations to help fund 2-1-1 in our community. Meanwhile, federal legislation will, as it has for the past several years, likely be introduced once again. Passage of this legislation on the federal level would provide matching funds to states operating 2-1-1 call centers.

### **Implementation Status:**

After many years of planning, extensive community involvement, ongoing training, technical upgrading, and resource building, the United Way of Rhode Island is prepared to launch the Rhode Island 2-1-1 call center at some point over the summer of 2007.

A soft launch, which will be limited in scope, will occur prior to that in order to work out any technical or operational issues that become apparent. A full marketing and communications effort will coincide with the official launch notifying all Rhode Islanders of the existence of 2-1-1 in Rhode Island and detailing what the intent and purpose of the line is.

### **Conclusion & Recommendations:**

The Executive Office of Health and Human Services was asked to review the efforts in Rhode Island to establish a 2-1-1 health and human services call center and report recommendations to the legislature.

The EOHHS, and in particular, its Secretary, Jane Hayward, has been aware of and involved in the process that has unfolded over past several years, spearheaded by the United Way of Rhode Island. Representatives of each of the state's health and human services agencies have also had varying levels of continued participation in the process and have contributed data, resources, expertise and advice relative to implementing a 2-1-1 system in the state.

The United Way has worked tirelessly to make the process as inclusive as possible, including stakeholders from across the state representing government- on the state and local levels, service providers, community leaders, non-profit organizations, advocacy groups, and many more. And, it has contributed significant resources – both human and financial – to this effort. The concept appears to be fully supported by all involved. In fact, the level of excitement for launching the 2-1-1 system is significant, as the benefits inherent to the system are widely recognized and appreciated.

The level of ongoing and comprehensive Information and Referral specialist training has been extensive and will continue. When the 2-1-1 system is operational, callers will benefit from the knowledge of these specialists who will be in a position to assist callers inquiring about a vast number of resources and topics 24-hours a day, seven days a week, 365-days a year.

Based on the volume and quality of work spearheaded by the United Way of Rhode Island, with assistance from Helpline at Crossroads; the track record the national United Way has developed in administering 2-1-1 call systems across the country; and, the clear benefits to those Rhode Islanders in need of often vital health and human service related information, the EOHHS finds that the planned 2-1-1 system in Rhode Island to be an effective and efficient means of providing vital health and social service information and referral services to Rhode Islanders. My recommendation would be that the state of Rhode Island continue its support of this new entity. Further, we should transition current state information and referral contracts (Helpline), as planned, to the United Way as the agency prepares to launch 2-1-1 statewide during the summer of 2007.

Attachments:

United way of Rhode Island 2-1-1 Business Plan  
List of Helpline/2-1-1 Resources  
2-1-1 Advisory Committee members

