

ISSUES, BENEFITS, AND CONCERNS SURROUNDING 211

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WBA
September 9, 1999

INFO LINE of Los Angeles

ISSUES, BENEFITS, AND CONCERNS SURROUNDING 211

WHAT IS 211?

211 is a 3-digit telephone number, like 911, that the public could call for help in non-emergency situations. The national 211 Collaborative, a coalition of non-profit organizations and public/private partnerships, petitioned the FCC on May 28, 1998 to assign 211 for public access to community information and referral (I&R) services across the U. S. (See FCC, NSD File L-98-80). With one easily remembered number, people in need of vital services--like food and shelter, home health care, and child abuse intervention--could be referred to the right local service agency the first time, without struggling through hundreds of telephone listings and making many frustrating calls. With a national N11 number, the many agencies that have been providing these services for decades will be part of an integrated, national service-delivery system that will benefit all who participate in it.

Currently, 211 is available for I&R calls in the 13 counties of Metropolitan Atlanta and in the State of Connecticut. N11 numbers, like 211, can be assigned on a temporary basis by state regulatory agencies, but only the FCC can permanently assign an N11 code. Over 100 organizations in more than 30 states are seriously interested in becoming 211 centers. Along with the 211 Collaborative, they are awaiting a decision or next step from the FCC and could use the assistance of all interested parties in making this national resource a reality.

NEED FOR AND BENEFITS OF 211

What National Needs and Benefits Justify Assigning 211 to Information and Referral (I&R) Services?--The FCC has an exceptionally high threshold of public need to grant an N11 number. A few intervenors in the process have questioned whether I&R is the "highest and best possible use" of 211. 911 passed this test, because it is used for emergencies. 211 should also qualify, because it is the natural complement to 911. 211 fills the gap between easy access to emergency services and help with other urgent needs. It could also assist in reducing the number of non-emergency calls to 911.

Although not household terms, "information and referral" (I&R) agencies have a rich and long history of serving the U. S. public's need for knowledgeable referrals to community, health and human service organizations. An estimated 50 million people in the U. S. telephoned I&Rs for help in 1998. While not emergencies, these calls were often urgent and involved basic human needs. Callers were often facing a crisis in health, hunger,

housing, employment, or abuse. The I&R specialists on the other end of the line empowered callers, by helping them work through complex problems and develop service options to solve these problems. In this sense, 211 represents a powerful means for people to help themselves. In addition, it would responsibly extend society's safety net and support the national agenda of moving families from welfare to work.

211 could also play a key role in assisting with emergencies and disasters once the calamity has occurred. For more than twenty-five years, I&Rs have quietly played such a role without much public recognition. After hurricanes, floods, and earthquakes it is I&R agencies that connect victims with needed services. For example, it was INFO LINE of Los Angeles that the California Office of Emergency Services and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) turned to for assistance after the L. A. earthquake in 1994 and the riots in 1992. Not only did INFO LINE set up 800 numbers to help victims find resources but its staff sat in FEMA Disaster Assistance Centers as well.

It was also the national professional association of I&R, AIRS (The Association of Information and Referral Systems), that directed the National Emergency Resource Information Network (NERIN) project. In 1996-97 a multidisciplinary team involving FEMA, the Red Cross, as well as I&Rs "created an information infrastructure to be used nationwide by communities preparing for and responding to disasters and large-scale emergencies."

Beyond planning for emergencies, community planners will need comprehensive, detailed information on service requests, referrals, and gaps in service to plan for and track the impact of community funding decisions. 211 would provide them with this data, thereby doubling the benefit of a community's investment in 211.

Will 211 Create Efficiencies, Savings, and/or Eliminate Duplication?--There are several ways that a centralized I&R agency, operating as a 211 gateway for an area, would save time and money, but there is more than one level to answering this question.

First, on the public or community level, people would experience less confusion finding numbers, have fewer wasted calls and notice a sharp reduction in exhausting run-arounds with agencies. They would talk with a specialist who had the training to assess their core needs and access to a comprehensive database of local resources with which to make knowledgeable referrals. In short, they could get to the right service the first time. Also, many non-profit agencies to which 211 would refer callers could save resources spent on marketing their own 800 numbers.

Second, at the government level, several benefits would accrue. Fewer misdirected calls to county social service and health agencies, for example, would permit reallocation of staff time and resources saved by 211 to assisting other clients and serving more people. Also, bigger savings would result from identifying and solving problems at their initial stages of development. For instance, a person losing a job might avoid eventual homelessness by obtaining temporary assistance and other services in time to get on

his/her feet. Further, a 211 I&R agency would not only lessen the burden on entitlement programs, by referring callers to non-profit as well as government agencies, but it would, in effect, pre-screen a person's problems and refer him/her to the appropriate government agency.

Further efficiencies could be obtained in certain jurisdictions and circumstances. Los Angeles County, for example, has at least 29 different 800 numbers and over 100 more information lines that are not 800 numbers. While the objective of 211 is not to replace any existing agencies, where appropriate and desired, some government departments could choose to rely upon 211, instead of their own 800 number, for outreach. It would take careful planning, but the savings could be substantial.

HOW 211 WILL WORK

How will 211 Work across California and in Rural, Under-served Areas?--In the highly urbanized areas of the state, where local I&R agencies already function, roughly 80 % of the state's population will be able to dial 211 toll free at the outset for help. An I&R specialist will assess the nature and breadth of the caller's needs and then recommend agencies nearby that can assist. In those areas that do not already have I&R help lines, local not-for-profit agencies will need to be developed as a long-term solution. For the short term, agreements could be worked out whereby regional I&Rs in Los Angeles, the Bay Area, Sacramento, Orange County or San Diego would provide basic coverage under contract for the non-urbanized areas. Local agencies are ultimately needed for the long term, because optimal effectiveness of I&R depends upon being part of the community, knowing its resources first hand and being highly responsive to its members.

Is There a National Network Capable of Delivering 211 Efficiently?—Some intervenors argue that I & R services and networks are inherently local in nature and therefore do not have a legitimate national claim to 211. More importantly, they question whether a national unified network, capable of delivering 211 efficiently, exists.

These are surprising observations and potential requirements. The FCC did not require a national unified network or similar "means testing" of other N11 numbers. Nor do 911, 311, or 711 and their related uses (i. e., emergency services, non-emergency public safety, or disabled services) inherently form such a network. 911 and 311 operate locally, and their development is up to local initiative and local jurisdictions to make happen. Nor is their scope inherently any more national than 211's, which is bringing people together with key community services that are often related to crises and the aftermath of emergencies. In fact, the strength of these services, like 211, is that they are locally based, close to and knowledgeable of their communities.

These concerns are, nonetheless, worth raising. They have been anticipated and planned for by the 211 Collaborative, which is well prepared to address them. The Collaborative is taking concerted action to identify potential lead agencies within the states and to establish processes that will lead to efficient implementation of 211 centers.

Comprehensive training and technical support programs are being developed to help state, regional, and local I&Rs promote, design and implement successful 211 programs. This includes the compilation of background information, technical data and consultation, service impact statistics, model business plans, costing estimates and public relations/marketing materials.

How will Uniform, High Quality Service Be Assured in the U. S. and California?--In short, through the combined efforts of the professional organizations that have long represented the field of I&R nationally and in California. Nationally, these are the Alliance of Information and Referral Systems (or AIRS) and the United Way of America, who for 25 years have jointly set the standards for high quality I&R. AIRS, which has 990 members world-wide, accredits I&R agencies and through its network of state and regional affiliates brings AIRS standards, expertise, and training to the local level.

In California, AIRS's affiliate, CAIRS (California Association of Information and Referral Services), concerns itself with professional standards and the quality of service that is achieved by agencies providing I&R services. CAIRS would be the appropriate group to assist 211 development in the state, helping in the area of training, standards, and development of 211 centers.

How Will Non-English Speaking Callers Be Served?--Many I&R agencies already employ non-English speaking operators, particularly Spanish speaking, where local demand calls for it. There are also translation services, such as AT&T Language Line, that serve those who do not speak English.

How Will Callers With Disabilities be Served?--Most I&Rs currently provide TDD access to their services for individuals with hearing and speech impairments and have practices, procedures, and agreements for serving callers with disabilities. I&Rs will need to formalize similar agreements with operators of 711, the national number the FCC has reserved for telecommunications relay services, when these services become available in the year 2000. 211 should be accessible through 711 and/or the 800 numbers that are currently in use in many states.

How will 211 Work with Mobile Calls?-- Wireless callers would be able to access 211 in the same easy manner as landline customers, but they would not have the same level of access. First, although toll free over landline facilities, these calls would likely be charged for minutes of use by their wireless carriers. Second, there would be resolvable technical issues and agreements to be worked out between carriers and 211 providers over which of adjoining 211 gateways a given call should be routed. Since the local telephone company's switch could not pinpoint the location of the mobile call, it would not know automatically which 211 center in large densely-populated areas should receive the call.

Is It Essential That 211 Utilize ALI or ANI (Caller ID)?--Automatic location and number identification (ALI and ANI) are common features of 911 and some 311 systems. They are not essential to the basic operation of 211.

ALI is important for 911 because the exact location of the call is critical in responding to emergencies. In contrast, callers to 211 do not need or receive their I&R service at a particular mobile location. If, in fact, one mistakenly called 211 with an emergency, the person would be asked to hang up and dial 911 to ensure that his/her exact location were automatically displayed for the 911 operator. For many 211 callers it would be their place of residence that would be most applicable in obtaining services. Furthermore, anonymity and confidentiality, which have been traditional hallmarks of I&R, as well as the prohibitive cost of ALI, argue strongly against the incorporation of ANI or ALI in 211.

However, there is a portion of ANI or Caller ID that could prove helpful to some 211 gateways, by directing callers automatically to specialized I&Rs or services in their local area. This is especially true in large urban regions like Los Angeles, where callers looking for services in high demand (such as those devoted to child care, seniors or the disabled), could be automatically transferred to an agency in their neighborhood by pressing a button on their telephone sets. This feature would be accomplished by the 211 agency integrating "auto attendant" functions with the area code and prefix of the calling party. This information could easily be provided by caller ID, which I&Rs would be able to obtain from their local telephone company at reasonable rates.

Will 211 Support Internet Access, and How Will Such Access Impact the Need for 211?--Information and Referral providers are committed to helping people in need obtain services in any way they can. The greater the number of options the better. The Internet is a very powerful tool, to which some 58% of U. S. households are expected to have access by 2003. I&R searchable databases--like those operated by government, private companies, and non-profits--should be available on the Internet and maintained by their sponsoring organizations.

Internet access may affect call-volumes somewhat, but it should not have a dramatic effect on 211. In short, the kinds of complex problems people call I&Rs for help with cannot be adequately resolved by self service over a computer. They require professional assessment by a trained specialist. These specialists not only have an extensive database of organizations and services but they are familiar with many of the organizations in their databases. That knowledge, as well as the human interaction that many in need require, will not be available on the Internet. Also, many of those needing basic services do not have the wherewithal to own a computer or the training to utilize it with ease to search complicated databases. In addition, they are often sufficiently stressed that they will not seek help through such an involved medium as the Internet.

The key to 211 is the easily used and remembered access to community resources. The Internet will undoubtedly help keep demand for 211 in balance, as the computer-literate utilize it to seek volunteer opportunities and other assistance, but it will not replace 211 specialists on the other end of the line.

How Will the Privacy of Callers to 211 Be Assured?--Preserving the confidentiality and privacy of inquirers or callers is a top priority at I&R agencies and would also be at 211 centers. The policy of AIRS--the professional association that oversees the field of I&R, accredits I&R agencies and certifies I&R specialists--is very clear. The identity of inquirers and the information given them shall not be communicated to others unless it is required by law, it is necessary to reduce serious harm or risk, or the inquirer gives explicit permission to do so. This policy is one of the standards by which I&Rs are established and evaluated.

WHAT 211 WILL COST

How Much Will 211 Cost?—The cost of 211 would vary according to: (1) whether one or more I&R agencies already exists to provide the service in a given local area, (2) the volume of 211 calls received, and (3) the level of service provided. In Los Angeles County, for example, where INFOLINE of L A--a large and well established I&R--is already in place, the additional cost would be an incremental overlay to INFO LINE's existing budget, which is roughly \$4 million a year. With a 10% increase in call volumes, the 211 system would cost an additional \$230,000 in expenses per year. The extra cost would rise to \$700,000 with a 30% increase in call volumes and \$1,050,480 with a 50% increase in demand. Call volumes currently run around 220,000 a year for a population of 11 million, and these budget increases have been anticipated.

Most importantly, costs can be contained, by regulating the amount of advertising, which directly affects call demand. The more money expended on advertising the greater the increase in call volumes and vice versa. Money spent on advertising has the additional benefit of reducing possible confusion among the public between 211 and other N11 numbers. There are also strategies available to keep down the cost of advertising and education, like public service announcements, donations, and coordinated programs with other agencies.

In the City of Atlanta start-up costs in 1997 totaled an additional \$340,893 over what was spent in 1996. This represents a 37% increase in budget for a 27% rise in call volumes (i.e. 30,450 more calls). In the State of Connecticut, which started its 211 system in January 1999, their Infoline agency budgeted \$885,500 more for capital costs alone. Both of these examples include desirable, yet optional, upgrades to their existing systems and were designed to increase service capacity considerably. These upgrades involved state of the art call distribution and other telecommunications technology as well as office space.

Should an area be without an I&R, interim call coverage agreements would need to be worked out with regional agencies, while a local I&R was being developed. Starting from scratch would require the creation of basic infrastructure and related costs. Depending on the level of service desired (e.g., volunteers versus paid staff; weekday only versus 24 hour coverage; manual versus automated call answering, etc), an I&R

could be started for \$150,000 to \$200,000, and an existing I&R could become a 211 gateway, offering minimal service, for as little as \$50,000 to \$60,000 more a year.

The ultimate drivers of cost in the state would be increased call volumes, their handling, and the establishment of a minimum level of service (e.g., % of the population to be served).

WHO WILL PAY FOR 211

Who Will pay for 211?--Unlike the funding for 911 or 311, there is no requirement for new taxes or telecommunications tariffs to institute a 211 gateway to community resources. In most urban areas, an information and referral infrastructure already exists and receives funding. Basic 211 would involve an overlay to this infrastructure, replacing and/or connecting existing 800 numbers.

Current funding of I&Rs does vary considerably from one area to another. INFOLINE of Los Angeles, for instance, relies on federal government funding though the County of Los Angeles' Department of Social Services, government contracts, foundation and corporate giving, as well as United Way funding and sales of various services. Metropolitan Atlanta's 211, on the other hand, has no government funding and relies heavily on corporate and foundation funding. In some states, like Connecticut, Texas, and Massachusetts, where public-private partnerships have formed I&Rs, government funding plays a significant role.

In general, both public and private funds have been used to create I&Rs. Expansion to a 211 system, linking I&Rs in a region or state, could well involve significant additional funding, depending on variables discussed in the previous section. There are so many factors and states involved, however, that it is difficult to make blanket statements regarding who will pay what for expansion. The FCC petition makes no requests for public funding, and since I&Rs have traditionally raised funds from a mixture of local sources, both private and public, we can expect more of the same for 211.

In most metropolitan areas of California, for instance, funding currently exists for at least a basic level of community I&R. Local I&Rs will work with CAIRS (the California Association of Information and Referral Services), local United Ways, and existing contributors to expand needed resources for 211. They are not looking to the state to lead this effort.

HOW 211 WILL INTERRELATE WITH OTHER SERVICES AND PROGRAMS

How will 211 Relate to 911, 311 and Other Related Services?— The concept of 211 is both distinct from and complementary to 911 and the 311 services being considered in many communities. The most important priority of 311 service is to reduce the overload on 911 by handling those non-emergency requests currently being received by 911. But

some local governments, like Dallas and the City of Los Angeles, are also using or considering 311 to serve as a gateway for obtaining non-emergency local government services--most typically public safety services such as repairs to roads, traffic lights, and water mains. These are usually short, simple, straightforward service requests from the local government entity operating the 311 system.

Requests made to information and referral (I&R) programs typically involve an extensive health and social services assessment to determine the exact needs and life situation of the caller. The assessment is critical for developing an effective and comprehensive service referral plan. This plan may include referrals to city, county, state, and federal government offices as well as community-based, non-profit organizations. The time and skills necessary to provide effective community I&R requires a separate service system like 211. Such calls could quickly overload the 311 system, unless it were manned with sufficient attendants, and limit its ability to reduce call volume on 911.

The combination of 911 for emergencies, 311 for government non-emergency public safety, and 211 for health and human services would provide a powerful, integrated and comprehensive service delivery strategy for the U. S. In this way 211 would fill the gap between emergencies and urgent non-public safety needs, like food and shelter, and round out both 911 and 311. Where local jurisdictions chose not to implement 311, 211 could help to fill that gap as well.

Won't the Public Be Confused by So Many Numbers?— Possible confusion is a legitimate concern that must be carefully managed, but it is not a reason to deny the deployment of 211. Confusion can be greatly reduced and overall effectiveness enhanced by developing local education and advertising programs when 211 and 311 are introduced, by dovetailing those introductions, and by providing well-coordinated access and referrals between 911, 311, and 211 providers.

Don't Other Feasible Alternatives to 211 Exist, and Why Not Use 311?—A number of intervenors argue it is premature to assign a precious resource like 211 before other alternatives are exhausted. Suggestions range from dialing the operator and asking for "public assistance," or dialing "O" followed by the "#" sign, to dialing *HELP. Others suggest utilizing 311 for access to community services as well as non-emergency police calls. The 911 Commenters, for example, recommend that I & Rs collaborate with local and state governments to design a comprehensive referral system similar to the 311 service operated by the City of Dallas (*Reply Comments* of NENA and NASNA, pp. 6, 7).

As a concept, the use of 311 is an intriguing suggestion; unfortunately, it is impractical. There are several reasons why 311 will not work for I&Rs. Many clients in urgent need, such as the homeless or those with spousal abuse or drug problems, would be very reluctant to call law enforcement for assistance or referrals. 311 operators would not provide the professional assessment and time that I&R Specialists offer, since they are trained for an entirely different and more limited purpose. Moreover, it would be counterproductive for 311 to expand into 211 functions. The more extensive assessments

involved with 211 (I&R) could overload the 311 system and undermine its principal goal of reducing call volume to 911. Also, significant first and fourth amendment problems would arise if, through the co-branding of 311 and 211, confidential and possibly incriminating evidence were given to and used by the police inadvertently or otherwise.

In any case, the FCC did not assign use of 311 to non-governmental services and is highly unlikely to mandate local jurisdictions to include these services in their 311 offerings. The FCC did not even mandate 311, but offered it to local jurisdictions that felt the need to reduce non-emergency calls to 911 and/or provide easy access to other government services. Relatively few jurisdictions across the U. S. have applied for 311, which would make for inconsistent use of the N11 number if it were then applied to community resources as well. If 311 absorbed I&R applications, it would add to the cost of 311, which is already quite high, especially where ANI and ALI features are included.

Officer Richard Taylor, who was instrumental in developing Dallas' 311 system, supports an independent 211 to handle community and social service needs. Dallas' 311 operators refer callers to non-governmental agencies, but they are not trained to do the assessments that I&R specialists do, nor could the city afford this additional expense. He does not envision government taking on 211 functions, yet he sees a great need for the service in Dallas.

As for the use of alternative, feasible numbering schemes, the FCC and state regulatory commissions would have to approve of whatever scheme it might be. If the number were not the same across America, a given state or even a region, the value of an easily remembered, universal access to community resources would be lost, particularly to travelers who could benefit from the service. Providing help to people with urgent and basic needs for shelter, food, and protection--about as close to emergencies as one can get-- warrants the assignment of an N11 number, which has the potential for universal awareness and acceptance. For this reason alternative schemes fall far short.

Would 211 Have a Negative Impact on Other I&Rs and Community Organizations?

Some I&Rs might think that 211 would diminish their agencies by taking away direct access to clients that have called their 800 numbers in the past. This is a natural and understandable concern that needs to be addressed. Far from undermining other agencies, 211 will significantly benefit them.

Most of these benefits will flow from the integrated and coordinated I&R service-delivery system that will be developed with 211. Like all systems, the whole will equal more than the sum of its parts. All I&Rs, whether specialized or generic, will have increased opportunities to collaborate and share their unique expertise and resources so that the capacity and effectiveness of all services in the system will be enhanced. For example, today's technology can actually foster more efficient sharing of call volumes, by distributing incoming calls on the basis of topic, geography, and/or availability to I&Rs best suited to handle these requests. Calls regarding child care could be automatically directed to Child Care Resource and Referral programs in the caller's neighborhood. The

same could be done for requests related to senior services, disabilities, AIDS, the homeless, etc.

Conversely, calls for these specific needs made after working hours could be shifted to a generic I&R service open 24 hours a day seven days a week. In this way callers could get immediate or interim assistance regardless when they happened to call. Likewise, callers could be redirected to an alternative I&R service provider when the primary provider's capacity became overwhelmed. Also, as public awareness of 211 grew, help-lines and community organizations would receive more referrals, not less, and the calls they received would be relevant and more informed.

These various benefits would require leadership, guidance, and commitments from all I&Rs working together to develop the 211 system in their respective service areas. Such enhanced coordination would not only serve the public better it would expand what is currently possible for all involved.

Who Has 311 in California, and Who Pays for it?--The City of San Jose is the only jurisdiction that has a 311 system operating as of August 1999, and it is a pilot project funded by the State of California's 911 program. The number is for non-emergency police calls. It is automated, menu driven, and has no live operators. There is also a trial underway in the City of San Diego to test the public's use of a seven digit local number for non-emergency public safety calls. These are part of the California Department of Justice's 311 Strategic Plan, which grew out of AB 1198 (Hertzberg), that became law on October 11, 1997. A report to the Governor, comparing these two trials to see which is more effective in reducing non-emergency calls to 911, is expected in December 1999.

There are also efforts underway to create local 311 systems in the City of Los Angeles, the County of Los Angeles, and the Cities of Chicago and Milwaukee, but they are in the early stages. Across the U. S. and in addition to San Jose, there are model 311 systems operating in the Cities of Baltimore and Dallas.

Will 211 Increase Overall Demand for 911 Operators and other Community Services?--The first concern is that the more time-consuming assessment or intake process related to 211, mixed with increasing demand, could result in longer hold times and busy signals. These, in turn, would lead 211 callers to call 911 in frustration. If so, this could reverse the desired goal of minimizing non-emergency calls to 911 operators. The second concern is that increased awareness of 211 will generate greater demand for community services.

It is extremely unlikely that 211 would increase demand for 911 operators. On the contrary, it should help remove inappropriate calls to 911. In the opinion of Officer Richard Taylor of the Dallas Fire Department and 311 system, a person is unlikely to call 211 unless they have a real reason to do so. Otherwise, they would have called 911 or 311 anyway. Because of the close public-safety connection between 311 and 911, there is a greater likelihood the so-called "reverberation effect" could occur with frustrated 311

callers. In any case, longer hold times and busy signals result from not having sufficient operators to handle demand. That is a challenge I&R agencies and Dallas 311 deal with all of the time. It is manageable, and an important means of control is the amount of advertising that is done. The concern does, of course, highlight the importance of educating the public where to call for what service, which is an essential ingredient of implementing and growing 211 service.

As more people use 211, demand for the community services to which callers are referred for help will naturally increase. This increase will need to be anticipated and managed. Although difficult to predict how much it will be, the growth should be gradual. The increase would actually be good news, because more people would be taking action to help themselves, which can only have positive societal benefits.

WHAT IS THE STATUS OF 211?

Where Does The Issue Stand Now?--The 211 Collaborative is awaiting a decision or next step by the FCC, while over 100 organizations in 30 states prepare to move forward with 211. The California Public Utilities Commission's (CPUC's) position is not to assign 211 while the FCC is making a decision on the issue. Public support for 211 as expressed through local, state and federal lawmakers, would help to move the issue forward. For further information on the issue nationally, contact Peter Aberg, Executive Director, Alliance of Information & Referral Systems, who can be reached at (206) 632-2477 or P. O. Box 31668, Seattle, WA 98103. For California information, contact Richard Stahl, Treasurer, California Association of Information & Referral Services, at (626) 350-1841, extension 2100.

Who Supports 211?--Of 190 Commenters on the 211 Collaborative's application to the FCC, 176 supported the petition. Besides I&R Services, supporters ranged from state and local public officials to health and human service providers, universities, and public service agencies. Most others were neutral, many expressing concerns about FCC rulings rather than the concept of 211.

In California, early supporters include Lieutenant Governor Cruz Bustamante, United Way of Los Angeles, the California Association of Information and Referral Services, and INFOLINE of Los Angeles, with more to come.

Who is Opposed to 211, and How Will Payphone Owners Be Compensated?--Of the 190 Comments submitted to the FCC on assigning 211 for access to community services only 12 were in opposition. These ranged from 911 providers, like NENA and NASNA, to competitive telecommunications firms. Communications firms raised either policy-related questions, technical issues regarding implementation, concerns that 211 was already being used for other purposes, or preferred a commercial application for the number. The substantive objections have been addressed in this document.

Through collaboration, a means can and will be found to compensate payphone operators.

Where Does 211 Exist Now, and How Is It Working? --The use of 211 for information and referral to local community resources is up and running in the thirteen counties of Metropolitan Atlanta and in the State of Connecticut. Both are operating very successfully and pacing their growth to ensure quality service. The Texas I&R Network is poised to petition their public service commission to offer 211 service, and over 100 organizations in more than 30 states have expressed serious interest in becoming 211 gateways. I&Rs have already petitioned their regulatory commissions for 211 in the states of Wisconsin, Massachusetts, North Carolina, Utah, and Alabama; and organizations are preparing to do so in California, Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania, New York, and Idaho.

The telephone code 211 is also in use for various commercial purposes on a temporary basis in several states across the U. S. State commissions can assign the number until the FCC decides on its permanent use. The California Public Utilities Commission's position is to await a decision by the FCC before assigning it to any providers

Is Anyone Else Requesting 211?--Various telecommunications vendors would like to use 211 for commercial purposes, as is the case in several states now, but the 211 Collaborative is not aware of any other organization specifically requesting the FCC to set aside 211 for their use nationally.

Is there an Application for 511, and How Might it Impact 211 before the FCC?--In March 1999 Vice President Gore announced that the Department of Transportation will petition the FCC for an N11 number for traffic and other information related to transportation and travelling, such as road conditions and bus schedules. No specific N11 number was requested. This project supports the Administration's Livability Agenda, which includes reducing traffic congestion, pursuing "smart growth," and other strategies.

There is no direct connection between this initiative and 211. It could, however, delay consideration of 211 as the FCC explores public comment and analysis of the DOT's application.

What are Other N11 Numbers Used For and How Many Remain?--N11 numbers are 3-digit telephone numbers ending in 11 and beginning with any digit other than 1 or 0. Of the 9 possible numbers only 211 and 511 remain to be allocated by the FCC. The other 7 are set aside for access to the following applications: 311 (non-emergency public safety or local government services), 411 (directory assistance), 611 (repair service for local telephone companies), 711 (telecommunications relay services for the disabled), 811 (business offices for local phone companies), 911 (public safety emergencies).

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September 9, 1999