



# The Call Center Manager's Guide to 3-1-1

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COMMUNICATIONS CENTER MANAGERS CAN PROVIDE IMPORTANT INSIGHT AND LEADERSHIP IN THEIR JURISDICTIONS REGARDING PLANNING FOR AND IMPLEMENTING 3-1-1 SYSTEMS.

3-1-1 WAS ORIGINALLY CONCEIVED AS A PHONE NUMBER THAT COULD BE used for redirecting non-emergency calls away from overloaded 9-1-1 PSAPs. In the 1990s, the FCC reserved 3-1-1 as a nationwide access number for non-emergency police or other government services, including police, public safety and general government.

A period of experimentation followed, and several leading sites, such as Baltimore, received significant attention. Now the concept has become well established. It has been adopted by most of the largest cities in the country, such as Chicago, Houston, New York City and Los Angeles. Other smaller and midsize cities, such as Akron and Des Moines, also are implementing 3-1-1. In addition, counties are now beginning to do the same.

## 3-1-1 Benefits

3-1-1 can address a range of problems as well as create opportunities for improving delivery of services to the public. Examples include:

### *Excessive Non-Emergency Calls to 9-1-1*

Excessive non-emergency calls to 9-1-1 is still an important reason for implementing 3-1-1. Agencies without 3-1-1 have reported that up to 80 percent of 9-1-1 calls are for non-emergencies. This can create many problems, including a reduced ability to address true emergencies, an increased number of dropped or abandoned calls and stress on PSAP personnel.

### *Improving Public Access to Government*

This is now the biggest reason that cities and counties are moving forward to implement 3-1-1. People increasingly expect from government what they receive from the private sector—convenient, 24/7 access to information and service. Governments recognize the need to meet these rising expectations or risk losing credibility with the public.

### *Improving Business Processes*

Cities and counties also understand the potential of 3-1-1 for streamlining service delivery, which can result in a variety of benefits including potential reduction in costs.

For these reasons, 3-1-1 can be a powerful force in your jurisdiction. Understanding the drivers for 3-1-1 can help ensure that 3-1-1 is implemented in the best way.

## Key 3-1-1 Implementation Choices

Jurisdictions that implement 3-1-1 must first address several strategic choices, including the following:

- Relieving 9-1-1 answering points from non-emergency calls

- Providing a simple way for the public to access government services
- Providing extended service hours for answering calls, up to 24/7
- Providing centralized assistance to callers, eliminating or reducing the number of times a caller is transferred
- Acting as the front end for a uniform system for recording requests for service
- Acting as the front end for a uniform service request management system, like a work order system for all departments.

These are obviously very fundamental choices. The decision regarding the purpose of 3-1-1 needs to be made at the leadership level for the entire organization. The key question is what is the organization trying to achieve; once that objective is defined, various tactical decisions can follow. If the organization is not familiar with the choice for 3-1-1 and the associated implications, then a feasibility analysis can often be very a useful process. A feasibility analysis also can determine if the objectives should be achieved in phases or implemented at one time.

## Important Tactical 3-1-1 Issues

### *Which Organization Should Manage 3-1-1?*

If the purpose of 3-1-1 is only to offload calls from 9-1-1, then the PSAP could potentially manage 3-1-1. However, if the purpose of 3-1-1 is broader, then an organizational unit with other responsibilities may take on the management role. It is not unusual for the city manager or the mayor's office to have responsibility for 3-1-1.

### *Where Should 3-1-1 Calls Be Physically Answered?*

Again, there are several options. The 9-1-1 center could be used, although space can be an issue. There may be space in another department or facility. Many jurisdictions have established separate 3-1-1 call centers. Options include using existing office space or even finding a new facility.

### *How Many 3-1-1 Call Takers Are Needed? Where Do They Come From?*

A good process for determining the answers to these questions is to first develop statistics regarding current non-PSAP call taking in your jurisdiction. This may require a survey that should determine facts such as:

- The primary departments that receive calls from the public
- The number of FTEs in those departments who handle calls from the public (full-time call takers as well as others who take calls as a part of their job duties)
- Call volumes, including peak periods
- The hours of operation for call taking

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In developing the costs, make sure to account for the current costs of doing business; this may reduce any incremental costs associated with implementing 3-1-1.

Gathering and analyzing these statistics will help to determine if existing call takers, spread throughout the organization, are enough to staff a 3-1-1 center, or if there will be a need for additional staff. This is obviously an important issue for several reasons. First, most agencies are typically very

cautious about adding additional staff. Also, if one of the purposes of 3-1-1 is to provide more hours of service there will need to be a strategy for covering nights and weekends. Some sites have found that call takers prefer the flexibility offered by a non-traditional schedule. This should be just one

of the areas where the experience of PSAP personnel should be very valuable in reaching decisions on staffing.

### Phone Company Issues

You will need to work closely with your local carriers. First, they need to be able to support 3-1-1 calls for your geographic boundaries. Another important issue is billing for calls. Unless other provisions are made, the carrier will typically charge the organization for each 3-1-1 call; an order of magnitude estimate is approximately \$.05 to \$.08 per call. If you want to have the carriers bill users for that service as a surcharge (similar to 9-1-1) there may potentially be considerable effort required with the carrier(s) as well as regulatory agencies.

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Just as the explosion in telecommunications options has created numerous challenges for 9-1-1, so too for 3-1-1 although perhaps less urgent. These issues include wireless calls, and the various landline carriers from which the public can choose.

### Neighboring Jurisdictions

Consider whether it will be a problem if callers in your city can reach your 3-1-1 center, but callers in a neighboring city can't reach a 3-1-1 center in their city or vice versa. Will there be pressure in your city to keep up with the Jones's? Countywide approaches (including the incorporated cities within the county) must especially deal with how 3-1-1 will be implemented across multiple jurisdictions.

### What Technology Is Needed?

Call distribution systems will be needed. One decision is whether one-touch transfer back to 9-1-1 is needed in case a legitimate 9-1-1 call comes to 3-1-1.

An important technology choice involves service request management systems. A

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variety of vendors sell these types of systems. Some are designed specifically for this function. Others have evolved from traditional work order systems that were originally targeted toward public works-type departments. Other vendors that originated in the private sector CRM market now market to the public sector.

If the objectives of 3-1-1 involve improving the delivery of public services, more comprehensive systems may be required. If different departments already use various work order tracking systems, a decision will be needed—replace the existing systems with the new service system or develop interfaces into the existing systems. Some systems also may provide a knowledge base that is used to help call takers answer a wide variety of questions from the public. Again, depending on the objectives of 3-1-1, these capabilities may translate into requirements for information systems.

### The Costs

How much this is all going to cost is always important. Develop realistic esti-

mates for both one-time and recurring costs. Categories to consider include hardware, software, equipment, facilities, personnel and management, phone lines, incoming calls, and marketing and public education.

In developing the costs, make sure to account for the current costs of doing business; this may reduce any incremental costs associated with implementing 3-1-1. In addition to the costs, don't forget to identify the benefits. Quantify them where that is possible. Many benefits may be qualitative, but that doesn't make them invalid. There is definitely a reason why 3-1-1 continues to be implemented in places like Akron and Des Moines.

### Next Steps

Following is a quick summary of the necessary steps to take if 3-1-1 is on the agenda in your jurisdiction:

- Establish an executive-level project champion who will drive the project forward.
- Develop a thorough planning process that will result in clear definition of

objectives, scope and readiness.

- Establish metrics to measure current and future operational efficiency.
- Confirm the feasibility of moving forward including a cost/benefit analysis.
- Gather information on other leading sites via research and site visits.
- Determine the staffing, facilities and technology approach.
- Develop a public education plan.
- Evaluate results against metrics and make adjustments as needed.
- Consider using an experienced, independent consultant to assist with planning, feasibility analysis, and technology selection and implementation oversight. **ENPM**

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