

How Well are We Doing? A Plan for Evaluation of 2-1-1 Service in New York State

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2-1-1 New York
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Summary

CGR was engaged by 2-1-1 New York to develop an evaluation plan that would help regional call centers and their staff members, state and local leaders and the larger community gauge the performance of the 2-1-1 system in New York. After interviewing representatives from each 2-1-1 region and national experts on 2-1-1 metrics, CGR worked with the 2-1-1 Quality Assurance committee and call center directors to reach agreement on a set of desired outcomes and measures to be used to measure progress toward each outcome. The following eight outcomes provide 2-1-1 with a vision of where it is going, and the evaluation plan describes how to measure its progress:

- The community knows about and uses 2-1-1.
- Calls are answered in a timely fashion.
- Callers are satisfied with the service they receive from 2-1-1.
- Callers receive appropriate and professional service.
- Information databases are accurate.
- 2-1-1 is prepared to assist the community the event of a disaster.
- Disposition of crisis calls is effective.
- 2-1-1s report unmet needs to the community.

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Staff Team

Kirstin Pryor conducted interviews and research and provided insights contributing to this report.

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INTRODUCTION

Background

Under the leadership of the United Way of New York State and the New York State Alliance of Information and Referral Systems, New York State is implementing a regional network of 2-1-1 call centers. Part of a national movement, 2-1-1 will serve as the number to call to access community information and referral services for non-emergency situations.

2-1-1 is currently operating with physical call centers in four of nine regions: New York City, Finger Lakes, Hudson Valley and Western New York. Planning is underway to provide 2-1-1 service in the remaining five regions: Long Island, Northeastern New York (Capital Region), Leatherstocking (Utica), Susquehanna River region (Binghamton) and the North Country.

2-1-1 New York secured the services of the Center for Governmental Research (CGR) to assist with developing an evaluation plan.

Scope

The primary focus of CGR's work was to help 2-1-1 New York determine the desired outcomes for 2-1-1 and to develop an approach to assess performance on these outcomes. This evaluation model should be viewed as one component of an overall approach to assess quality and effectiveness. 2-1-1 centers are members of a professional association, the National Alliance of Information and Referral Systems (AIRS), and must meet a set of rigorous standards covering all of their core activities to receive national accreditation.

In addition, New York 2-1-1 centers must meet additional standards in order to receive state designation as a 2-1-1 center. These quality assurance mechanisms guide operations and practice and clearly have an impact on how well the centers achieve desired outcomes.

This evaluation plan is a collaborative effort among the 2-1-1 regions and state leadership to evaluate program areas that are particularly important to guaranteeing quality.

Process

This plan attempts to represent the collective best thinking of 2-1-1 stakeholders throughout New York State and nationally. CGR interviewed representatives from each 2-1-1 region to get their input about what should be in the plan and collected their feedback on initial versions

of this plan. The evaluation model was also informed by interviews with national experts on 2-1-1 metrics and by CGR's experience helping to develop an evaluation plan for the 2-1-1 Finger Lakes Collaborative in 2006.

An Evolving System

Each of the nine 2-1-1 regions is in a different stage of development, covering a spectrum from those that are still getting off the ground to those that have reached a state of maturity. For this reason, regions are in different positions relative to the targets included in this plan, and in some cases, regions may not be able to meet targets until they have additional operational experience.

EVALUATION PLAN

Purpose of Evaluation

The purpose of this evaluation is to measure the performance of 2-1-1 as a system and 2-1-1 regions call centers on the things that matter most to callers, funders and other stakeholders. It is intended to be comprehensive but focused -- broad enough to help centers engage in continuous improvement in all the important areas of service, but focused on the outcomes and measures that call centers can fairly be held accountable for. It should be a tool to help call centers learn from each other about best practices.

The areas we deem most important to measure are:

- Awareness of 2-1-1
- Timely answer of calls
- Satisfaction of callers
- Professional handling of calls as rated by supervisors
- Accuracy of information provided by 2-1-1
- Participation by 2-1-1 in local disaster planning
- Effective handling of crisis calls
- Communication to community about gaps in needed services

Format of Plan

There are eight outcomes included in the evaluation plan. For each, we present:

- Measures used to assess progress on the outcomes.
- A performance target for measures. In some cases, graduated targets will reflect the performance level expected from call centers that are just getting started vs. those that have been in operation for a while.
- A statement of significance regarding the outcomes and measures.
- Method to obtain the data.
- Benchmarks reflecting targets set by 2-1-1 centers across the country, where available and applicable.

Quarterly reports of all data and information will be submitted to 2-1-1 New York State.

Working Document

2-1-1 New York shall do periodic reviews and updates of this working document based on the experience of 2-1-1 New York and its component regions.

Use of Evaluation

This evaluation is a tool to help 2-1-1 document and assess its performance on outcomes. The goal should be to establish baseline data and then to track data on key measures over time. 2-1-1 New York will use evaluation results for program accountability purposes and to drive program and system improvements.

OUTCOMES AND GOALS

Outcome 1

The community knows about and uses 2-1-1.

Measure: Penetration rate of 2-1-1 service in each county within a call center's service region.

Target: 5%

Significance

As a relatively new endeavor in New York State, 2-1-1 needs to establish itself as the number to call for non-emergency help. The New York 2-1-1 collaborative convened in 1999, and 2-1-1 was assigned as a phone number in 2002. Building community awareness is a key challenge for 2-1-1 – call centers can do a wonderful job of providing information and referral, but if few area residents know about the service, the impact will be minimal.

Method

A penetration rate will be calculated for each county in a call center's region by dividing the number of calls by the county population. Calls will be measured as the number of calls with a person on each end, that is, an agent answering the call and a caller making the call.

Benchmarks

Nationally 2-1-1 call centers generally report penetration rates and targets in the range of 4% to 8%.

Outcome 2

Calls are answered in a timely fashion.

Measure: Percent of calls answered within 30 seconds.

Target: 80%

Significance

Timeliness of response is an important aspect of the caller's experience with 2-1-1. Tracking this measure will also allow call centers to examine the trends and relationships between response times, call volume and staff resources to determine whether adjustments are needed in organizational capacity to achieve the target.

Method

Call centers will obtain the data from their automatic call distributor systems, which will measure the time to answer from either the initiation of the call or the end of an automated greeting (if such a greeting is in use) to the time the call is picked up by an agent.

Centers that wish to also report response time to emails should feel free to do so.

Benchmarks

Targets for timely answer of calls vary considerably, from 80% of calls answered within 20 seconds to 70% answered within 60 seconds.

Outcome 3

Callers are satisfied with the service they receive from 2-1-1.

Measure 1: Percent of callers who report that the agent was helpful.

Measure 2: Percent of callers who report that the agent seemed to understand their needs.

Measure 3: Percent of callers who respond that they would use 2-1-1 again.

Target – Year 1: 90% on each measure

Target – Year 2: 92% on each measure

Target – Year 3: 94% on each measure

Target – Year 4 and beyond: 95% on each measure

Significance

2-1-1 centers exist to help callers, and delivering the service in a way that yields high satisfaction is critical to building credibility as a community resource. These measures will provide essential feedback to guide continuous quality improvement strategies.

Methods

Call centers will obtain the data through surveys of callers. The surveys may be conducted through follow-up calls or through immediate transfer to an automated system. Call centers design surveys to meet their own needs, but each survey will contain the three common questions that will enable reporting on these measures.

Call centers can choose from a variety of methods to random select callers to be surveyed. Two possibilities are requesting to survey every n^{th} caller, such as every 8th caller or 15th caller, or choosing a time period during which call agents request to survey every caller, such as a week or two-week period. In both of these scenarios, callers in crisis would be excluded from the survey requests.

Call centers should strive to obtain survey results representative of the entire caller population with a confidence level of 90% and a margin of error of no more than plus or minus 5 percentage points. The desired

sample size will depend on each call center's total call volume. Call centers can consult sample size calculators (available on the Internet, for example: <http://www.raosoft.com/samplesize.html> or <http://www.surveysystem.com/sscalc.htm>) to determine the necessary sample size.

Call centers that are conducting follow-up calls should keep in mind that they may need to dial three or more callers in order to obtain one completed survey as they design their process for conducting the survey. In addition, the agent who took the original call should not make follow-up calls.

Outcome 4

Callers receive appropriate and professional service.

Measure: Percent of monitored calls that are rated highly by supervisors.

Target: 95%

Measure: Percent of full-time staff that is certified by the Alliance of Information and Referral Systems.

Target: 75%

Measure: Percent of shifts covered by a paid and certified supervisor on-site.

Target: 100%

Significance

Any 2-1-1 operation is only as good as the staff members providing the service. In addition to asking customers for feedback, the level of service and professionalism as measured by call-monitoring results and proportion of certified staff members will be reported.

Methods

Call centers will use a common call-monitoring form to rate calls. The form will use a Likert scale of 1 to 5 to rate agents on a variety of skills, including establishing rapport with the caller, using simple explanations, speaking clearly, exercising patience, etc. To be highly rated, calls must receive an average rating of 4 or 5.

Certification by the Alliance of Information and Referral Systems is required for 75% of staff for a region to become a 2-1-1. Certification not only of staff members but also of supervisors is one indication that employees can carry out their duties professionally.

Outcome 5

Information databases are accurate.

Measure: Description of how agency records are updated, and percentage updated in the current quarter.

Target: 100% of records updated annually.

Significance

The information provided by 2-1-1 needs to be accurate for the service to be valuable to callers. The database is the core tool used by agents in providing information and referral services.

Method

Call centers will describe the process used to update and ensure the accuracy of agency records in the database, including number of requests for updated information sent out in the current quarter, along with the response rate to that request. Call centers will also describe their attempts to follow up with agencies that did not respond and their success rate with these organizations.

Outcome 6

2-1-1 is prepared to assist the community in event of disaster.

Measure: Participation in local disaster planning efforts.

Target: High level of participation.

Significance

2-1-1s are critical community resources in times of disaster, directing area residents to the services they desperately need. Advance planning and coordination with other service providers ensure that call centers can be as effective as possible in the event of an emergency.

Method

Call centers will report their activities to prepare for a disaster, including their participation in local planning efforts and organizations and their internal plans to call in extra staff, produce community resource guides, etc. This would include a description of any agreements (MOUs) that centers have with local emergency service providers.

Outcome 7

Disposition of crisis calls is effective.

Measure: Description of quality processes for handling crisis calls.

Target: Robust processes for ensuring their quality.

Significance

Crisis calls may be a small fraction of the total calls received by 2-1-1s, but the stakes for professional and effective treatment of crisis callers are obviously high.

Method

Call centers will describe the processes used to ensure that crisis calls are handled, answering the following questions:

- How is the risk of harm to self and others assessed on each call?
- What is the procedure for reviewing crisis calls? Is this procedure strictly followed?
- Is the success of crisis calls measured?

Call centers that transfer crisis calls to another location will report the quality processes used by that resource. This can be reflected in annual updates to agreements (MOUs) between the centers and their crisis-call takers.

Outcome 8

2-1-1s report on unmet needs to the community.

Measure: Description of activities to share information.

Target: High level of communication.

Significance

2-1-1 centers maintain a wealth of information about community needs and services and can serve as a vital resource for planning. By effectively sharing information about the needs expressed by callers that are not adequately met by community resources, 2-1-1s can become drivers for more comprehensive and effective services.

Method

Call centers will describe the ways they report to the community about unmet needs (regular reports, responses to requests for information, etc.).