

Testimony of Janet Durden  
CEO, United Way of Northeast Louisiana  
Before the U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Government Affairs  
Ad Hoc Subcommittee on Disaster Recovery

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Chairman Landrieu, Senator Graham, and Subcommittee Members:

Thank you for inviting me to testify today on behalf of United Way's 2-1-1 information and referral system.

I'd like to provide the committee with some background on 2-1-1; I'll review the role of 2-1-1 in hurricane recovery over the last several years, including 2008; and, finally, I'd like to describe 2-1-1's vulnerabilities and where 2-1-1 will be in a few more years, with the help of Congress.

**Background on 2-1-1:**

2-1-1 is an information and referral line that connects people to vital social services provided by a range of nonprofit and government agencies. This easy-to-remember number saves time and frustration by eliminating the need for callers to navigate a maze of agencies and help-lines. When a person calls 2-1-1, specially-trained information and referral personnel analyze what services are needed and provide the appropriate resource and related information.

On July 21, 2000, the Federal Communications Commission designated 2-1-1 to be used for community information and referral services. The Commission ruled, "...that the Information & Referral Petitioners have demonstrated sufficient public benefits to justify use of a scarce public resource and we therefore assign 211 to be used for access to community information and referral services."

Start-up funds for 2-1-1 were provided by foundations and businesses. Today the primary funder of 2-1-1 is local United Ways. A dozen state governments provide some funding for 2-1-1. In addition, a few state, county and municipalities contract with 211s for services.

Currently 2-1-1 is available to nearly 80% of the U.S. population, with 236 active 2-1-1 call centers in 45 states. 2-1-1 call centers nationwide received more than 14 million calls in 2008, which is 44% higher than the call total for 2007. Reports indicate that 2009 volume will be dramatically higher, especially in the regions hardest hit by natural disasters and the current economic crisis.

2-1-1 plays a critical role in disaster response and recovery. However, I'd like to note that while today's hearing relates to disaster preparedness, 2-1-1 plays a major role in connecting people to important social services on a day-to-day basis. In most

communities, people can call 2-1-1 to find: mortgage and rent assistance, utility assistance, job training and education programs, food pantries and hot meals, shelters, health care services, crisis intervention, substance abuse intervention and rehabilitation, Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) assistance, transportation assistance, child care, Head Start centers, and services for seniors.

### **2-1-1 in Disaster Response and Recovery:**

But when any type of natural disaster hits, 2-1-1 Information & Referral Specialists are trained for crisis situations and respond in a caring and professional manner to a multitude of calls for disaster service information. This includes providing data on the local shelter locations, sandbag, food and water distribution sites and evacuation routes. 2-1-1 specialists also assist in the coordination of volunteers and donations; connecting callers to mental health counseling and social service resources; control rumors by evaluating and verifying shared information – a vital service during an emergency – and relieving 911 dispatchers of non-emergency-service calls.

### **2005 Hurricanes Katrina and Rita:**

As you are well aware, Madam Chairman, when Katrina and Rita hit the gulf coast, 2-1-1 was a bright spot in the response.

There are six 2-1-1 call centers in Louisiana and together they provide coverage for the entire state. After Hurricane Katrina hit on August 29th, 2005, the 2-1-1 call center in New Orleans (VIA LINK) was forced to close and its staff forced to evacuate the city. The 2-1-1 call center in Monroe, which is housed in my United Way, the United Way of Northeastern Louisiana (UWNELA), had agreed to take calls from VIA LINK in case this happened. An arrangement that everyone thought might last only a few days lasted for over three months.

As the horrors of Hurricane Katrina began to unfold, UWNELA realized that its four phone line call center could not handle the extraordinary influx of calls it was likely to receive. In a matter of hours, with the help of United Way of America and UWNELA's private sector partner, CenturyTel, the call center in Monroe went from a four seat operation to a 65 seat facility (50 seats for 2-1-1 and 15 seats for volunteer and donations management), transforming all of their board and meeting rooms into one large call center. The next day, the President of CenturyTel persuaded her colleagues in the cellular telephone industry to point all of their 2-1-1 calls to Monroe, which they did within an amazingly short 24 hour period.

United Way of America also arranged for hundreds of 2-1-1 call specialists from around the country to help manage the work related to disaster response, including emergency resource management and responding to callers. Life got more challenging when, with every government agency in Louisiana stretched to capacity (and beyond) and all emergency numbers slammed

continuously, the Governor selected 2-1-1 as the “go to” number for all social services, shelter, feeding station, volunteer and donation information.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Rita, with communities in Lafayette and Lake Charles severely impacted, even more calls from Louisiana were forwarded to Monroe. While at times the system was stressed beyond its capacity, it performed incredibly well. Together with hundreds of community volunteers and a staff that worked around the clock, the Monroe 2-1-1 responded to 70,538 calls in September and 40,875 calls in October, with call volume peaking at 7,358 calls per day during the height of the Katrina/Rita crisis compared to ‘peace time’ daily call volumes of less than 200 calls per day.

2-1-1 in nearby states such as Georgia, Oklahoma, Arkansas and Tennessee helped support the immediate and long-term needs of evacuees. Likewise, 2-1-1 centers further away such as Minnesota, Wisconsin, Kentucky and Indiana assisted Gulf Coast residents. The 2-1-1s in these states helped these voluntary and formal evacuees with shelter, food, clothes, public benefits, school enrollment and, if returning to Louisiana, transportation home.

Whether near or far from the affected areas, 2-1-1s across the country played an integral part in helping individuals and families affected by Hurricanes of 2005 to begin their recovery.

### **2008 Hurricane Season:**

As everyone did, we learned a number of important lessons after Katrina and made improvements that were in place in 2008. Going into the season, we had six integrated 2-1-1 call centers; statewide coordinated disaster plans; a centralized disaster information and resource database interface; more consistent standards and protocols; 24 hour, 7 day per week coverage, and direct access to 2-1-1 for wireless callers.

During the 2008 Hurricane Season the Texas and Louisiana Governors urged citizens to dial 2-1-1 for information about resources and assistance available for evacuees. This number was highlighted on several local and national television programs, including The Weather Channel and MSNBC.

2-1-1 Louisiana answered 117,601 calls between August 31, 2008 and September 16, 2008. They received assistance from 2-1-1 California at the peak of the storms.

2-1-1 Texas answered 157,217 calls between September 9, 2008 and September 17, 2008. The UWA/AIRS National Disaster Response Team provided volunteers to help with information and referral, data collection and management at the peak of Hurricane Ike.

2-1-1s across the Midwest participated in the Hurricane Ike disaster response because this storm left unprecedented flooding and wind damage across states such as Missouri, Iowa, Indiana and Ohio. In Indiana, 2-1-1 was the “go to” number for connections with sandbags, food, shelter and, later, volunteers to muck out homes and begin recovery. Several of the 2-1-1s in Indiana and Ohio were left without power for extended periods. Lessons from the 2005 hurricanes produced interoperating agreements and telecommunications solutions that allowed calls to be answered by other centers.

2-1-1s across the U.S. are learning from each disaster and increasing our ability to respond. We have learned to make sure we are engaged with local, state and federal emergency personnel. Our national organizations continue providing training and tools to prepare local 2-1-1s and communities. 2-1-1s across the country continue to develop Memoranda of Understanding to improve coordinated disaster response and maximize resources. And our national organizations are planning with other three-digit numbers like 911, 811, 711 and 511.

### **Vulnerabilities and the future of 2-1-1:**

Our diligent preparations and learnings are not enough. The hurricanes of 2008 stretched the 2-1-1 system in Texas to its limits. And the current economic crisis has surged call volume beyond the current capacity of our nation’s 2-1-1s. United Ways joined with state governments and FEMA as partners in disaster response. The private sector— such as United Way, corporate contributors and other donors and volunteers—have laid the foundation for a national 2-1-1 system. Through our efforts, 80% of Americans can call 2-1-1. But we desperately need Congresses’ help.

To ensure reliable response to disasters, most 2-1-1s still need generators, remote call-taking ability and Telephone Service Priority arrangements with telephone companies. Along the Atlantic coast, the State of Delaware, Long Island, New York, the panhandle of Florida and certain rural areas in Georgia and North Carolina coastlines do not yet have access to 2-1-1, creating inequities and vulnerabilities for hurricanes. All states along the Atlantic and Gulf coasts are struggling to ensure adequate capacity—especially during this economic downturn.

2-1-1s across the U.S. need to unify their telecommunications, technology and standard operating procedures in order to be responsive to regional, state and national emergencies—natural and manmade. 2-1-1s need to assure that every resident is able to reach a local 2-1-1 center from any kind of telephone or telecommunication device (such as cell phones and IP phones). 2-1-1s need a system for interoperability with each other and with other three-digit numbers (such as 911 and 711). 2-1-1s need to have sufficient capacity in technology, training and staffing to support the everyday needs as well as the surges created by disasters. Through unifying our telecommunications, cost efficiencies will be achieved and 2-1-1 will be positioned to be the complete response tool as was envisioned.

### **The Calling for 2-1-1 Act:**

The Calling for 2-1-1 Act, S.211, is currently pending in the Senate HELP Committee. S.211 authorizes a matching grant program at the Department of Health and Human Services. These grants would provide the 2-1-1 system with the funding necessary to meet the demands as I've outlined above.

We are so grateful for Chairman Landrieu's steadfast support for this legislation and her cosponsorship of the bill. We are also grateful that she was able to deliver dedicated federal funding for Louisiana 2-1-1 this year. With that funding, we'll be able to take 2-1-1 to the next step to ensure Louisiana can meet the needs of its citizens in all times of crises.

I'd also like to thank the Subcommittee's Ranking Member, Senator Graham, on behalf of the South Carolina United Ways and the entire United Way system for his recent decision to cosponsor S.211.

We hope the other Subcommittee Members will consider signing on to this vital legislation.

I'm prepared to answer questions about 2-1-1 or United Way. Thank you, again, for allowing me to testify.