

# Operator, Can You Please Give Me the Number for Atlanta, Georgia?

*Mark O'Connell and Lori Warrens*

First came the Olympics to help the Atlanta, Georgia metropolitan area build and bond its regional civic community. The latest showcase is "United Way 211," the nation's first three-digit telephone number dedicated to community life. It's an innovative approach toward increasing regional cooperation and citizen involvement taken by United Way of Metropolitan Atlanta.

Citizens in 13 counties comprising the metro area can become involved in their community or tap into its resources by simply dialing 211. What 911 is to accessing emergency services, 211 is to connecting individuals to their community.

Those involved in United Way of Metropolitan Atlanta believe that human services remain absolutely necessary even in a healthy community, but they are not sufficient to build that healthy community. Civic involvement and community economic development are essential parts of the mix. The 211 system provides simple access to benefits.

United Way 211 can be reached anywhere within metropolitan Atlanta's three area codes, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Callers speak directly with a referral agent who assesses the caller's situation and uses a database to provide appropriate referrals and information. Service quality is evaluated through a call followup program and the analysis-of-call statistics.

An automated call distributor monitors call volume and offers optional automated

referrals during peak call periods. Automated referrals are provided by an interactive voice response system that provides information based on the caller's location and need. United Way 211 also provides access to a searchable database through an internet site at [unitedwayatl.org](http://unitedwayatl.org).

Last year, the United Way helped more than 600,000 people through the efforts of agencies supported by United Way's annual fundraising campaign. Yet, the major problems that citizens face every day, such as crime, drug abuse, and poverty, did not improve. Although funding services is vital to improve the lives of many individuals, more is needed to address larger community concerns and their underlying causes.

What is needed is a balanced approach that includes new investments in economic development, innovative funding, civic involvement and greater coordination of existing resources. And of these four investment strategies, the greatest potential for solving the problems of our communities lies in expanding civic involvement and the coordination of existing resources, supported by expanded and improved information sharing.

Margaret Mead observed: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."

United Way 211 provides the tangible connecting point needed to bring people to-

gether and the simplicity and efficiency of a three-digit phone number to make accessing that connection point easy.

Collaboration and information sharing among community planners are key tactics for supporting regional development. The Atlanta Regional Commission and other organizations have laid a strong foundation for regional cooperation. As regional outcomes are identified and new initiatives started, stakeholders have a central place to “check in” to see who else is involved in an issue. 211 becomes the logical connection point for people and organizations to share their strengths, resources, and information to better serve the community.

### **Improved Regional Data and Resources**

United Way 211 also offers an unprecedented opportunity for creating a source for regional data collection by pooling and centralizing available data, improving the quality of existing information, and facilitating the collection of new data. Currently, 211 records information from more than 13,000 callers monthly (the number of calls is expected to triple within the next two years). This information can be used by regional planners to map community assets and unmet needs. The impact of many community initiatives also can be measured on an ongoing basis.

United Way’s commitment to building an expanded database through 211’s benefits creates an invaluable resource for organizations of all sizes. Instead of investing resources to create new databases to support their initiatives, organizations are now turning to 211 for support. For example, the Atlanta delegation to the President’s Summit for America’s Future has chosen to use 211 as the connecting point for organizations and individuals who want to become involved.

Improving regional information is an-

other goal of the service. Information kept to track the impact of volunteers is not currently standardized or shared, making it difficult to measure civic involvement. By examining existing formats, United Way 211 will lead an effort to develop standardized record formats that are easily merged. Customized reports can then meet specific needs.

The addition of the community-building library represents another body of information made accessible to the public by 211. Regionalists can access such writers as David Rusk, author of *Cities Without Suburbs*, Allan Wallis (“Inventing Regionalism: A Two Phase Approach”), and Henry Cisneros. Relevant periodicals, including those published by the National Civic League, are also available. Library users can also tap into other 211 resources, and request internet research on community development topics. “Leaders are indispensable, but to produce a major social change many ordinary people must also be involved,” wrote Anne Firor Scott. Access by “ordinary people” to the community-building library accelerates citizen impact.

### **Civic Involvement**

Citizen impact can begin when a newcomer calls 211 for information about community organizations and opportunities for participation in civic life. Civic involvement also begins with the region’s youth. In 1998, 211 will introduce school curricula to promote civic involvement and the 211 service in the schools. Beginning with an elementary school 211 coloring book and following youth through their high school years with a teen yellow pages, 211 will engage youth in civic involvement.

United Way 211 opens the door to citizen participation in the development of regional planning. Regional planners can solicit input from the community on key issues by offering the 211 number as the place to

call to make their feelings known. The service's interactive voice response system can conduct surveys or opinion polls. Staff can also target specific questions to callers based on their geographic location or other factors. Currently in Atlanta, no immediate method of engaging citizens and capturing their input in detail exists.

Expanding the 211 database from exclusively health and human services, to include other civic opportunities, gives callers more ways to become involved in their community. Supported by 211, a relationship is built between the citizen, other people, and organizations.

### **Catalyst for Change**

United Way 211 becomes a focal point for coordinating community services. Recently 211 staff agreed to convene a task force to improve access to furniture through the Metropolitan Atlanta Furniture Bank. As a result, agencies that previously had not worked together on this issue developed a plan that increased both access to furniture and donations to the furniture bank.

United Way 211 is also becoming a connecting point for media involvement. The 211 number simplifies the process of connecting viewers and readers. A television story on the need for free school supplies was seen by the president of a school supply manufacturer, and a new partnership was formed when he offered his company's assistance.

"We are just beginning to scratch the surface of 211's potential. It will in the future change the way we communicate in the Atlanta region," says Harry West, director of the Atlanta Regional Commission.

### **Conclusion**

Atlanta now has one number to call to connect to community, regardless of whether that community is a neighborhood or a region. Our vision is to have the Federal Communications Commission designate 211 nationally as a community information number so that the concept can be replicated. Our experience has shown us that if you build it, they will come and they will make it better. ■

***Mark O'Connell** is president of United Way of Metropolitan Atlanta. Under his leadership, the organization has moved into projects that seek to make measurable improvements in areas of community life that Atlantans have deemed important. These include United Way 211 and an innovative social capital fund. He received his Masters of Social Work from Boston College.*

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