



Finding help is easier when  
you make the right call

## **211 and Emergency Preparedness Week May 3-9 2015 - Q&A**

### **What is Emergency Preparedness Week?**

Emergency Preparedness Week is an annual event that takes place each year during the first full week of May. This national event is coordinated by Public Safety Canada, in close collaboration with the provinces and territories and partners. Ontario 211 and their supporters will be supporting Emergency Preparedness Week May 3-9<sup>th</sup> 2015 to raise awareness of the 211 service and its benefits to residents during emergencies and every day.

In Ontario, we are using the opportunity to partner with United Ways, municipalities and first responders to build public awareness of the 211 service, and to encourage residents to make the right call when they need help.

### **What is 211?**

211 is an award-winning 3-digit phone and online service helping Ontarians connect to the complete range of government and community-based health and social services. Calls are answered 24x7 by professional information and referral specialists who are trained to assess caller needs, and to refer callers to the most appropriate resources.

211's resource database contains more than 60,000 records, making it the most comprehensive human services database in the province. Combined with the demographic and caller needs information collected through our calls, 211 provides individuals, agencies and planners with rich data on the supply and demand for human services in Ontario.

211 in Ontario is supported by the Province of Ontario (Ministry of Community and Social Services), local United Way organizations, and some municipalities. 211 also receives project support from public and private sector partners such as Ontario Trillium Foundation and Green Shield Canada Foundation.

### **Where is 211 available?**

Since late 2011, 100% of Ontario residents have access to 211 through the phone or through the online portal at [211ontario.ca](http://211ontario.ca). 211 is also available in all of Nova Scotia, parts of BC, Alberta, and Quebec. In Saskatchewan and Nunavut, residents can search an online portal for information, but telephone service is not yet available. Visit [211.ca](http://211.ca) for details.

211 service began in Atlanta, Georgia in 1996, and has grown in many communities and states since that time. Today, more than 92% of Americans and 60% of Canadians have access to 211.

### Who calls 211, and what do they call for?

In 2014, more than half a million calls were answered by 211 in Ontario. The majority of our callers (75%) are women, with approximately one third being over the age of 55, one third in the 35-54 age group, and the other third being under the age of 35. More than 35% of our callers identify themselves as low-income individuals, many of whom are on some form of social assistance. Many callers are looking for help themselves, while close to 30% are calling on behalf of a friend, family member or client.

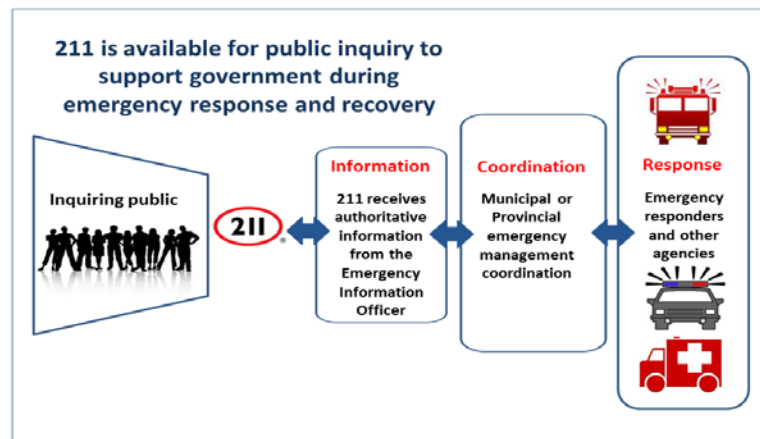
The reasons why people call are quite varied. 211 is for everyone, so we get questions on everything from affordable child care options, to mental health supports, to care for an aging parent, to supports for very basic needs such as housing, food programs and financial assistance. Last year, the top reasons for calling in Ontario included Health Services, Income & Financial Assistance, Housing, Legal & Public Safety and Food & Meals. At a local level, caller needs may be slightly different based on local environment or emerging issues, but at a provincial level, these represent a good snapshot of why people are calling 211 in Ontario.

### 211 During Emergencies

During and following an emergency such as a tornado, ice storm, flood, fires, or water main break, residents call 211 for non-emergency information. Examples include: where have residents been evacuated to, where will the water truck be located or which shelter should be used.

Across Ontario, Municipalities are developing communication

protocols with 211 services to ensure that the public will get the information they need. Using 211 for non-urgent calls during an emergency is a better use of resources. It reduces non-emergency calls to 911.



### Does 211 follow-up with callers?

211 is a confidential service, therefore the majority of callers do not provide contact information for follow-up. Sometimes, callers might need help accessing programs, or might need a reminder to follow-up on the referrals made. With their consent, a small percentage of callers are contacted at a later date to ensure that they have successfully connected with the recommended agencies or programs. From time to time, 211 also provides advocacy in situations where the caller may not have the capacity to make the next call on their own.

## **How do United Ways and other community organizations support 211 and why?**

United Ways have been a driving force behind the creation and proliferation of 211 services in communities all across the U.S. and Canada. United Way is a major funder of 211 so by supporting United Way, people are supporting 211.

For United Way and for the agencies they work with, 211 is critical to advancing priority goals. There are so many people in our community who don't know where to turn when faced with challenges in their lives. 211 helps residents to navigate the system and find the support they need, which takes the strain off agencies and other services like 911 which would be handling these calls. 211 also provides community organizations with meaningful data about the types of services people are looking for in what neighbourhoods, which helps to better serve the needs of the community.

## **What is the difference between 211, 311 and 911?**

The N11 numbers are assigned by the CRTC to create easier pathways to help for Canadian residents, but it can be confusing if you aren't sure which one to call.

By now, most residents (including children) are aware that **911** is the number to call for life-threatening emergencies.

In larger Ontario cities, **311** is the number established to access information about municipal services (such as by-law enforcement, road repairs, garbage collection, municipal recreation programs, property taxes, etc.).

**211** is the number to call for information on community-based health, social and government services. It is the number to call when you need help, but aren't sure where to turn.

## **Why is the message *Make the Right Call*?**

Often, calls are made to 911 that aren't life-threatening emergencies. Some callers know they need help, and may not be aware of their options, so they call the number they know. These calls, and the subsequent response from Police, Fire and Paramedics, can tie up emergency resources when support is available elsewhere. 211 (and 311 where it exists) can take pressure off of the 911 system by providing residents with another easy-to-remember number to call for non-urgent needs. By educating people about the 211 service, and encouraging them to make the right call, emergency resources can remain focused on emergencies.

## **Where can I learn more about 211?**

Visit our website at [www.211ontario.ca](http://www.211ontario.ca) to search for services, watch our video, or read our Annual Report. If you want to know what happens when people call 211, pick up the phone any time of day or night and speak with an Information & Referral specialist, or ask for a 211 presentation in your community.