



2-1-1 Texas/United Way Helpline Works Diligently During January 2010 Ice Storm

Despite taking more than 732,500 calls in 2009, the 2-1-1 Texas/United Way Helpline refuses to rest on its laurels. When National Weather Service forecasters predicted, snow, ice, and extreme cold weather conditions in early January, the Helpline implemented its disaster protocol to be prepared. “We felt it was especially important to be proactive during this event,” said David Jobe, LMSW, Director of 2-1-1 Texas/United Way Helpline. “The most vulnerable Greater Houston-area people were depending on our ability to help them stay safe during the cold weather.

United Way of Greater Houston staff liaisons with the homeless community verified cold weather procedures and availability of shelter bed capacity. This information was quickly relayed to 2-1-1 Texas/United Way Helpline in advance of the event. In addition, contacts with the Texas Gulf Coast Regional VOAD (Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster) began sending preliminary resource information to Helpline staff as soon as it could be verified. Additional shelters that were on standby were entered into the disaster database, yet were not active for searching by call specialists since these shelters were not yet available to the public.

Other efforts included were listening to statewide emergency management conference calls to learn how efforts in other areas may impact call volume. Since 2-1-1 Texas/United Way Helpline is the largest in Texas (and largest volume center in the nation), many calls from other areas of the state area answered in Houston when other centers need to close during disasters, after regular business hours, and on weekends and holidays. The widespread nature of the ice storm mean that calls could arrive from anywhere in the state, and Houston’s call specialists needed to be prepared with reliable resources.

Harris County and City of Houston emergency management officials kept 2-1-1 informed about what could help people who may be affected in the event of a power outage that would endanger those who no longer had electricity-generated heat to keep them safe at home. Keeping close ties with local emergency management officials was a critical component of success during this event in order to keep the public informed about resources and keep rumors of services down to a minimum.

At the end of the early January event, 2-1-1 Texas/United Way Helpline assisted more than 350 individuals who needed information about school closures, road conditions, shelter options, and locations of warming centers. The most common unmet need recorded during this event was for individuals who requested heaters from non-profit agencies. (NOTE: This resource was not available except under extreme conditions and only on a limited basis.)

The response by 2-1-1 Texas/United Way Helpline demonstrates an even greater connectedness to local emergency management resources. During disasters and for every day needs, 2-1-1 Texas/United Way Helpline continues to be the place to call when people don't know who else to call.

To learn more about 2-1-1 go to

<http://www.harriscountycitizencorps.com/volunteer/orgabstract.asp?org=6>