

211 Service Reassures Callers during August 2003 Blackout

... a caring voice during a long, dark night

When the power went out mid August 2003, Canada's first 211 service continued to provide uninterrupted 211 service to more than a thousand Toronto callers who needed information and reassurance in the first hours of the crisis.

The experience of callers to 211 and Community Information Toronto staff, as well as data on how the staff and organization responded to the blackout, illustrate CIT's organizational commitment to excellent customer service. 211 is delivered by Community Information Toronto (CIT), in partnership with the United Way of Greater Toronto and the City of Toronto.

Currently, monthly use of 211 results in approximately 30,000 calls to 211 and 50,000 website visits to www.211Toronto.ca. The considerable value of 211 to the Toronto community infrastructure becomes more visible when incidents such as the power outage impact on the lives of residents, services and businesses in the city.

Trusted 211 Service Provides Reassurance

Within ten minutes of the power failing, people started to call 211. Callers wanted to know whether they alone had a power problem and what was happening. Many callers expressed thankfulness at being able to speak to someone. When informed that the 211 call centre had no power, many callers expressed appreciation that 211 was there to serve them despite the staff

undergoing some of the same inconvenience and difficulties that they were facing. "I can trust 211 to be there for me," said one caller. "Thank goodness you guys aren't closed, I am very pleased to hear your voice," said another.

CIT conducted a survey to determine the impact of the blackout with 35 callers randomly selected from people who had called 211 in the past. The people surveyed were without power for an average of 19.5 hours. They described themselves and their families as stressed, confused, isolated, unprepared, worried, uncertain and alone. A quarter of the people surveyed called 211 during the blackout.



The rate of calls during the blackout was over three times that of the same period the previous week, and the flow of calls remained unbroken for ten hours. In the days following the blackout, city and other government services were reduced and the reason for calls shifted to inquiries about what was open, when a caller could resume work, and how to manage with lost wages and extra expense resulting from lost food. Almost sixty percent of the people surveyed had lost money due to the

blackout, and about half had missed meals. In addition to lost wages, people estimated that they had thrown away food valued at an average of \$120 per family.

A key role played by 211 when the power went off and lights and equipment failed to work was for those Toronto residents who feared for their safety. Seventy percent of the people surveyed indicated that they were concerned about the safety of one or more members of their family because of the lack of power. Among callers to 211 were a high percentage of seniors for whom lack of power was a cause for missing meals, anxiety about isolation, and uncertainty about how to manage diabetes and recuperation from heart surgery. Seniors in apartments on the upper floors of high rise buildings described having no way to get food and water.

Many people lacked confidence in how to look after themselves for a few days without power. One couple reported feeling safer sleeping in their car in a shopping centre parking lot, than sleeping in their apartment.

Other residents felt anxiety about how to care for young children alone, how to reassure parents who were disoriented, and how to feed and care for children without water and food. Others were concerned about a terrorist attack, and others that their electricity had been cut off for some reason.

Many of the 964 calls answered during the first 10 hours of the blackout were from people who had no one else to call.

As usual, information and referral (I&R) specialists helped callers to deconstruct their problems and suggested alternatives, and in doing so alleviated anxiety and stress.

One aspect of assistance provided by 211 staff was providing common sense advice to people anxious

about safety, for example taking care if using candles, filling a jug of water to ensure having liquids, not opening the fridge and freezer unnecessarily, contacting neighbours if help was required, informing people that the subway was not working, and reassuring people about the length of time family members might take if travelling from work. I&R specialists also passed on public health advice to not consume food and milk that callers were anxious might have spoiled.

The survey also identified some Toronto residents who described only minor inconvenience or who revelled in having unplanned time together with family without television and work schedules.

Uninterrupted 211 Service

“There was never any question that the 211 service would continue uninterrupted,” said staff. The professional attitude was attributed partly to I&R specialists and managers at CIT being social service staff, with community experience and a corresponding spirit.

Very quickly, a management team assembled at CIT to provide guidance in managing the impact of the blackout. Keeping the call centre up and

operating as long as possible was the goal. The fail safe mechanism for the phone system for 211 includes an Uninterrupted Power Supply (UPS) for up to 30 hours. Calls can be

manually transferred after that time.

Informing callers of the source of the information, staff at CIT passed on information received over battery operated radios, including requests not to call Toronto Hydro. For those callers seeking shelter and other community services, staff

“We all agreed we were committed to keeping the service going during the blackout,” said CIT Executive Director, Cheryl May. “After that it was pretty simple to figure out how.”

searched the 'ultimate back up', the Blue Book, the directory of community services, by flashlight.

The safety and well being of CIT staff was given immediate attention. Staff who were non essential and could get home were released as soon as possible if their safety could be assured. They were encouraged to share vehicles or walk together. Those who were willing and had flexible personal situations, such that they did not need to be with children or parents, stayed to staff the 211 service.

Staff pointed out that “*everyone pulled together to make it happen.*” The front line I&R specialists were central to the effective response. Scheduling for the hours and days ahead, including a manager in place at all times, began by drawing on knowledge of staff flexibility and location of where people lived. The bargaining unit and management staff worked closely together and effectively to develop a contingency plan for three days, involving 38 staff. The total increased cost of salaries, benefits and supplies resulting from the blackout was \$10,250.

An inventory of battery operated radios, first aid kits, food and water, and other resources that might be required was assembled. Supplies of food, drink and batteries were procured quickly before shops that had remained open closed as evening set in. Building security was addressed including lighting, with tea candles, the unlit stairwells that provided the only access in and out of the building. As the lack of air conditioning took effect, staff took more frequent fresh air breaks.

When the power outage occurred, information technology (IT) staff checked fuses, then called the Internet service provider to determine how widespread the outage was. IT staff then followed procedure, taking down the computers as prioritized. CIT's server room UPS provides about 15 minutes of back up power, enough to take down the computer system so that it is easily recoverable.

An IT staff person is at CIT or on call at all times. Following the resumption of power, IT staff conducted verification, determined that there had been no corruption, and supported the system until the environment was stable. The power later went down again for two hours; the servers were taken down again, and were restored the following day.

What We Learned

Further preparation for unusual occurrences such as power outages include ensuring enhanced procedures are in place, and that an inventory of supplies including flashlights, batteries and an operational battery radio are available at all times. While this was easily resolved, there are several longer term challenges that we are working on.

A more powerful UPS device would allow at least one server and one printer in the computer room to remain operational. This would enable information

on a common drive to be available, such as the lists of daily meal programs and contact information and addresses of staff so that they could be informed about shifts that were cancelled, or to call in people who lived close by.

The contribution of the 211 service could have been strengthened if 211 had been part of a more formalized emergency response system for Toronto emergencies.

While 211 played an important role in linking the city's most vulnerable residents to essential services, such as food banks and cooling stations, 211 staff identified a lack of resources available to assist callers who did not have bottled water, flashlights or canned food and did not appear to be prepared to take care of themselves for a few days. More emergency services such as home support for the ill and elderly and emergency food for those who could not afford to replace spoiled food were necessary.

“Lots of the help we gave was common sense, giving ideas, letting people know they could call back if they felt anxious,” said I&R Specialist, Madhu.

Summary



People called 211 looking for support and services, and received the help they needed. An integrated emergency response system would mean that 211 could have been connected with other public service operations in the City during the power outage, and provided an even better level of service.

While the phone system can stay online for up to 30 hours with UPS, investments in additional UPS devices to keep computers operating



minimally and a generator to operate heaters or fans are necessary to provide service over a period of time greater than 12 hours.

Additional expenses related to service provision during a crisis represent an unanticipated drain on limited agency resources. Additional costs to the agency during the August power outage amounted to approximately \$15,000.

“211 has shown itself to be responsible and capable of handling callers’ concerns and need for information on available community services. It truly is a community connector.”

Frances Lankin, President and CEO
United Way of Greater Toronto
A founding partner of 211

“There are many options out there for people, but the reassurance of speaking to an actual person was a lifeline for many callers.”

Angela Shiga
211 Call Centre Manager

“It is important to have this service going, especially during an emergency. We had so many calls and so many people needing reassurance.”

Louise
211 Information & Referral Specialist

“211 has once again proven itself to be invaluable. We have made 211 a UWC-CC national priority. Our goal is to build partnerships that will realize the vision of making this important service available in other communities across Canada.”

Al Hatton, President
United Way of Canada/Centraide Canada

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This report can be accessed at www.211.ca.

211, a partnership between United Way of Greater Toronto and Community Information Toronto, is Toronto’s 24-hour information line, providing information and referral on community, social, health and government services in Toronto. Callers can reach the service by dialing 211 in the 416 and 647 area codes. Outside of Toronto, callers can reach 211 by dialing 416-397-4636.

**Community Information Toronto
United Way of Greater Toronto**