

Indiana Government Officials and Local 2-1-1 Services

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Indiana Intergovernmental Issues Study

The Indiana Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations (IACIR) periodically collects information on current issues affecting local governments in Indiana and/or services available to Indiana residents. In 2010, the IACIR surveyed nearly 1,150 local government officials, including mayors, county auditors, county commissioners, county and town council members, school board members, and township trustees. The response rate was 35 percent. A summary of findings from the full 2010 survey can be found at the IACIR website (www.iacir.spea.iupui.edu).

The purpose of this briefing is to use the IACIR Local Government Official¹ survey results to assess to what extent local government officials (LGOs) are familiar with 2-1-1 services, both at large and within their own communities.

It is the first in a series of briefings from the *Indiana Nonprofits: Scope and Community Dimensions* project that focuses on nonprofit-government relations in Indiana. Subsequent briefings will examine responses by local government officials to other topics of interest to Indiana nonprofit and philanthropic policy-makers: nonprofit payments and/or services in lieu of taxes, relationships between local government and nonprofits, reliance on nonprofits to deliver government services, and the personal involvement by local government officials as volunteers or members of nonprofits.

What is 2-1-1?

The 2-1-1 program is a national telephone initiative to provide information and referral services to individuals seeking help or volunteer opportunities in the areas of health and human services. Trained Information and Referral Specialists connect callers, free of charge, with information regarding local organizations. This service helps individuals in need navigate available assistance in their local communities.

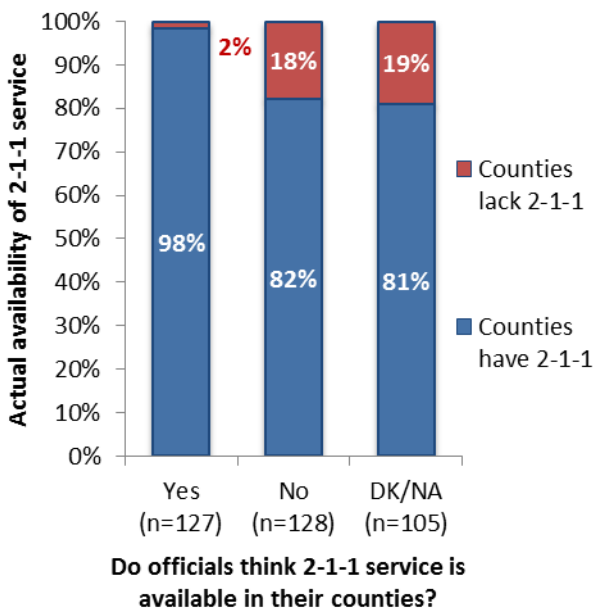
Currently, 2-1-1 services are available in part or all of 47 states, with features of the program varying from state to state and even county to county.² In Indiana, the 2-1-1 program is administered by the nonprofit *Indiana 211 Partnership* (www.in211.org). Of Indiana's 92 counties, 79 (85 percent) have access to 2-1-1 services, reaching over 95 percent of Indiana residents. In 2010, almost 500,000 Hoosiers called 2-1-1, and call centers made over 600,000 referrals. According to the Indiana Association of United Ways (a funder of 2-1-1), the state of Indiana ranked fourth in the nation for 2-1-1 calls as a percentage of population.³

In Indiana, the most common 2-1-1 call requests were for housing needs, such as help with utility or rent payments. Requests for information on help with food are the second highest need, followed by assistance with medical issues, employment, support for elderly persons, and legal counseling. The 2-1-1 services are also particularly important in coordinating relief after natural disaster situations like tornados and flooding.

Do local officials know when 2-1-1 service is available in their counties?

While 2-1-1 is available across most of Indiana, survey results indicate that a large proportion of local government officials mistakenly believed there was no 2-1-1 service in their communities. Over 80 percent of officials actually had 2-1-1 service in their counties, when they thought that they did not (Figure 1). These percentages are nearly the same for officials who were unsure of 2-1-1 availability in their counties.

Figure 1: Are local government officials aware of 2-1-1 service in their counties? (n=360)



Source: 2010 IACIR Survey

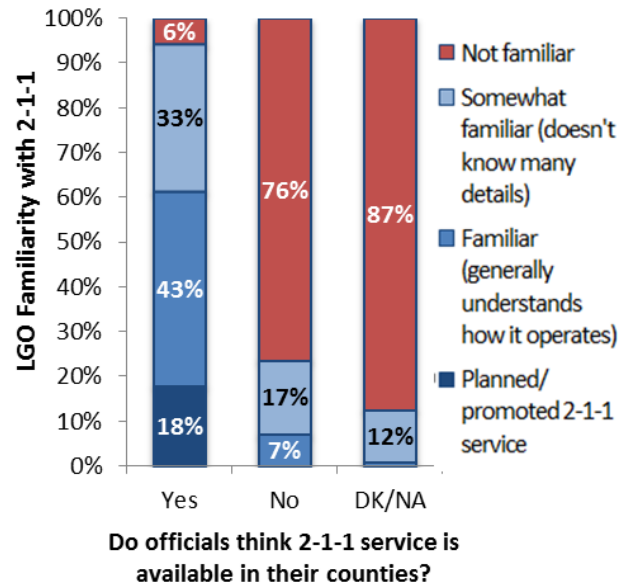
However, nearly all officials who thought they had 2-1-1 service were correct. These findings suggest that information regarding the availability of 2-1-1 services is either not reaching or not having an impact on local government officials (Figure 1).

How familiar are officials with 2-1-1?

Local government officials who said 2-1-1 services were available in their communities were also more likely to be familiar with the details of the service. Indeed, almost a fifth (18 percent) had participated in its planning and promotion. Another 43 percent indicated familiarity with 2-1-1 operating details (Figure 2). By contrast, more than three-fourths (76 percent)

of LGOs who did not believe there was 2-1-1 service in their county were unfamiliar with the service overall.

Figure 2: How familiar are officials with 2-1-1 service in their counties? (n=266)



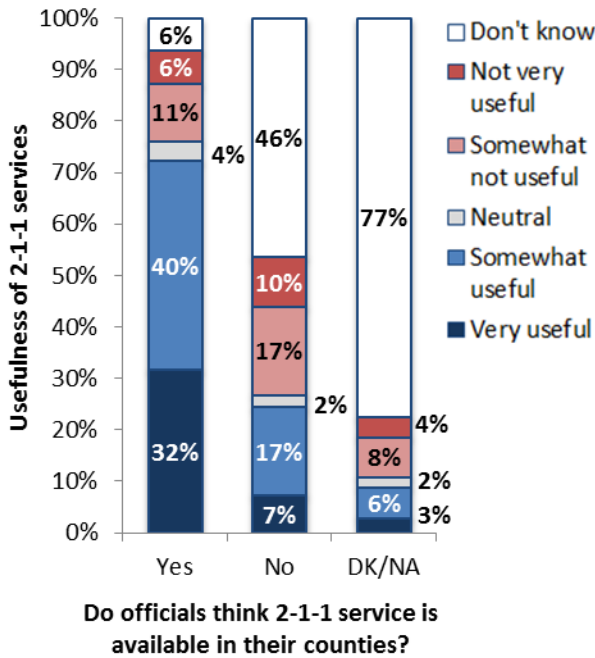
Source: 2010 IACIR Survey

What do officials think about the usefulness of 2-1-1?

A cost-benefit study conducted by the University of Texas Ray Marshall Center for the Study of Human Resources found that 2-1-1 services are much more useful than traditional “yellow page” listings (4-1-1 service). These services are also available at no additional charge to the caller (which is not the case for 4-1-1).⁴ The study also analyzed several 2-1-1 operating models and found that the one used by Indiana had net benefits that outweighed the costs to participants, taxpayers, and society as a whole.

In our analysis, one-third of Indiana local government officials who were aware of 2-1-1 services in their counties also thought it was very useful. Another 40 percent thought it was at least somewhat useful. LGOs who believed they were without 2-1-1 service in their counties were significantly less likely to see it as useful as those who thought it was available (Figure 3).

Figure 3: What do local government officials think about the usefulness of 2-1-1 services? (n=269)



Source: 2010 IACIR Survey

Interestingly, one respondent commented that Information and Referral Specialists advising callers do not know the township boundaries and therefore often direct callers to the wrong trustees. As local service needs are often very specific to local boundaries, this observation, if correct, suggests the need for more accurate and timely updating of service information, better training of 2-1-1 Specialists, and/or improved software with mapping capabilities.

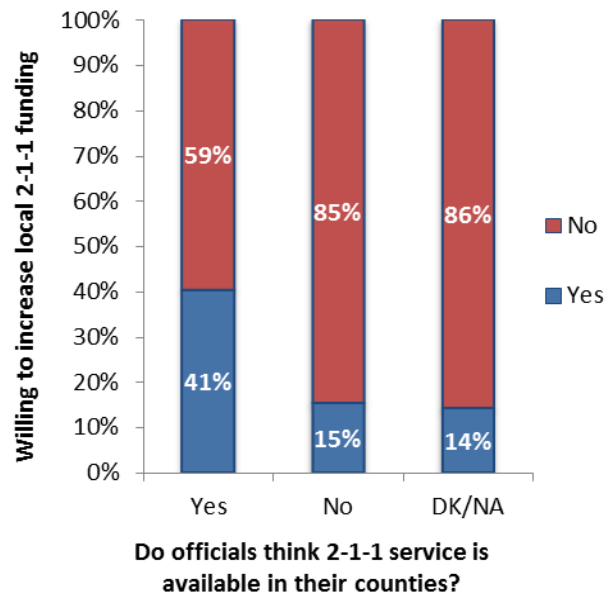
Are officials willing to increase funding for 2-1-1 services?

Most 2-1-1 services in Indiana are privately funded by the United Way, community foundations, and other donors. Only a few receive support from local government agencies. However, additional ongoing financial support is needed to make sure all Hoosiers have access to 2-1-1 on a continuing basis. Such funding must be sufficient to keep up with new technical requirements. Additionally, support is needed to educate government officials (state and local) and the public regarding the availability of these services, and to create a supplemental web-based portal with information about health and human services.

The cost to provide basic 2-1-1 services to the entire population of Indiana is estimated at \$1.00 to \$1.50 per person (or \$6.5 million to \$9.8 million) annually. This includes updating service information and training Specialists, but not additional enhancements or outreach efforts. Proponents argue that the 2-1-1 service is a cost effective alternative to maintaining multiple 1-800 numbers and duplicative databases for various service organizations and that tangible benefits outweigh costs.

While there have been efforts at the state and federal level to create more sustainable funding for 2-1-1 services, these efforts have not yet come to fruition. Our findings suggest there is also limited support from local government officials. Overall, fully 75 percent of local government officials did not support increasing local government funding for 2-1-1 services. However, those who thought the service was available in their county were notably more likely to support such funding (41 percent) than those who thought the services were not available or did not know (15 and 14 percent, respectively) (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Willingness to increase 2-1-1 funding based on availability of 2-1-1 (n=199)



Source: 2010 IACIR Survey

Conclusions and Policy Implications

The 2-1-1 service is designed to provide one-stop shopping for Indiana residents who need help finding health and social services, whether in the aftermath of disasters or during personal or family crises. It is a free service, available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. It is superior to the traditional “yellow page” 4-1-1 service. Callers have to know the name of the service provider when they call 4-1-1, and then will only receive a phone number from the operator. In contrast, 2-1-1 Information and Referral Specialists provide callers the names and details of multiple service providers depending on the caller’s needs. Since the start of the Great Recession in late 2007, calls to 2-1-1 have increased from 273,480 in 2007 to 472,879 in 2011, providing clear evidence of the importance of this service to local residents.

The service also benefits local service providers because it makes information about their services available to the general public and other service providers and therefore reduces their need to advertise their services. It also alleviates the need for service providers to pay for toll-free numbers and reduce demands on their staff or volunteers to answer phone calls for services that they do not provide. By the same token, local government officials can refer constituents to the 2-1-1 service when called upon for help, thereby alleviating their own need to keep abreast of the availability of specific services.

While some local government officials are aware of and support the 2-1-1 services, many do not know that the services in fact are available in their communities, much less how these services benefit their constituents. These findings suggest there is an urgent need to educate local government officials about the availability and utility of these services.

Our findings also underscore the importance of efforts to enhance and fund referral services in Indiana, including 2-1-1. Indiana House Enrolled Act 1159 requires the Indiana General Assembly to study how to achieve these goals, though it is unclear what progress has been made in this regard.

Acknowledgements

This analysis of local government and nonprofit sector relations is a joint effort with the Indiana University Public Policy Institute, the Center on Philanthropy, and the School of Public and Environmental Affairs at Indiana University. We seek to help community leaders develop effective and collaborative solutions to community needs and to inform public policy decisions by providing baseline information about the Indiana nonprofit sector.

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¹ Palmer, J., Wyeth, D., with Chang, J. (2010). "Intergovernmental Issues in Indiana: 2010 IACIR Survey." Indiana Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations.

² For more information about 2-1-1 service nationally and in Indiana, please visit: the Indiana 211 Partnership (www.in211.org), 2-1-1 US (<http://211us.org/>) or your local United Way Agency.

³ Indiana Association of United Ways, 2011 Annual Report (www.iauw.org/aboutus/annualreport.pdf).

⁴ O'Shea, D., King, C. T., Greenfield, S., Shelton, E., Sullivan, L., Taber, E., and Olson, J.A. (2004). "National Benefit/Cost Analysis of Three Digit-Accessed Telephone Information and Referral Services: Final Report." Ray Marshall Center for the Study of Human Resources, Austin.