

Report on 2-1-1 Texas Information and Referral Network Improvements

As Required by

**House Bill 1, 86th Legislature,
Regular Session, 2019 (Article II,
HHSC, Rider 174)**

**Texas Health and Human Services
Commission**

December 2020



TEXAS
Health and Human
Services

Table of Contents

Executive Summary	1
1. Background	2
2. Interstate Agreements	3
3. Technology Enhancements	4
Web-Based Chat.....	4
One-Way Text Messaging	4
4. Real-Time Data Transparency.....	6
5. Specialized Populations.....	7
6. Funds	8
7. Conclusion	9
List of Acronyms	10

Executive Summary

The [2020–21 General Appropriations Act, House Bill 1, 86th Legislature, Regular Session, 2019 \(Article II, HHSC, Rider 174\)](#), requires the Texas Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC) to submit a report on improvements made to the 2-1-1 Texas Information and Referral Network (2-1-1 TIRN) Help Line System.

2-1-1 TIRN is the program responsible for the development, coordination, and implementation of a statewide information and referral network that provides the public with accurate, well-organized, and easy-to-find information from state and local social services programs 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days per year. During natural disasters and pandemics, 2-1-1 TIRN is the state’s primary source for providing public disaster information, community resources, and referrals.

In accordance with the rider, HHSC made the following improvements to further modernize the 2-1-1 TIRN system:

- Interstate agreements designed to improve disaster response;
- Technology enhancements;
- Real-time data transparency solutions; and
- Measures designed to connect specialized populations with available state and local services.

The improvements strengthen and enhance the system’s infrastructure, use cutting-edge technology and interfaces to streamline access to information, improve customer service through the reduction of service times, and employ additional self-service options. Together, the new capacity, new communication modalities, and specialized outreach enable Texans to receive relevant statewide resource information, even in times of a disaster or pandemic.

1. Background

2-1-1 TIRN collects and organizes information about state and local health and human services programs and provides this information to the public online at 211Texas.org, by phone 24 hours a day, 365 days per year and by web-based chat Monday–Friday, from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Additionally, 2-1-1 TIRN provides information and referrals to communities before, during, and after a disaster or other related event. 2-1-1 TIRN responds by providing timely and accurate information for basic needs, such as shelter, housing, food, ice, and other services, when a disaster disrupts the daily lives of Texans. 2-1-1 TIRN maintains up-to-date information on more than 30,000 agencies and services. The top caller needs for fiscal year 2020 include:

- Electric service payment assistance;
- Rent payment assistance;
- Food pantries;
- COVID-19 diagnostic tests and information;
- Food stamps/Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program applications;
- Water service payment assistance;
- Housing authorities;
- Homeless shelters; and
- Low-income housing.

HHSC administers 2-1-1 TIRN through contracts with 25 area information centers (AICs), including United Way agencies, local councils of governments, community action networks, and municipalities. 2-1-1 TIRN handled nearly 2.3 million calls and had over 1.5 million website pageviews at 211Texas.org from September 1, 2019, to August 31, 2020.

The goal of the improvements to 2-1-1 TIRN is to enhance disaster response capabilities, system integration, data transparency, and system effectiveness within the 2-1-1 TIRN system. Rider 174 provided \$150,000 in All Funds for fiscal year 2020 and \$25,000 in All Funds for fiscal year 2021 to achieve these purposes.

2. Interstate Agreements

Rider 174 directs HHSC to implement “interstate agreements designed to improve disaster response.” Call and contact volumes can increase beyond the AICs’ capacity due to the impacts of disasters or other related events. When capacity is reached, HHSC may seek additional call and contact handling capacity through interstate agreements with other states’ 2-1-1 TIRN programs.

HHSC established interstate agreements with Connecticut, North Carolina, and Wisconsin to improve disaster response. The interstate agreements establish reciprocal call and contact handling, allowing the other states to handle calls and web-based chat sessions, if applicable, during a disaster or other related event on behalf of HHSC.

The three partner states were identified through information and referral industry interviews. The interviews helped to reveal key selection criteria for objectively assessing possible partners. Those selection criteria included location (i.e., geographically spread across the United States, likelihood of simultaneous impact, and diverse time zones); previous experience with out-of-state call and contact handling; and capabilities (i.e., text-capable, workforce size, and hours of operation). Based on industry leader recommendations and selection criteria, 2-1-1 Connecticut, 2-1-1 North Carolina, and 2-1-1 Wisconsin were selected. All agreements were executed by July 21, 2020.

With the landfall of Hurricane Laura on August 27, 2020, 2-1-1 TIRN added specialized call handling for people impacted by the hurricane. The specialized call handling connected individuals to 2-1-1 TIRN call center agents for hurricane-related information and referrals. Texas and Louisiana residents called to have their information and referral needs addressed both before and after landfall of the storm. To support the work of AICs, HHSC leveraged the interstate agreements with Connecticut and North Carolina. Each state provided call handling support during the week of August 31, 2020, and together handled almost 500 calls.

3. Technology Enhancements

Information and referral modalities are rapidly changing due to technological advances. The improvements required by Rider 174 give Texans access to a multi-platform approach to receiving information and referrals through 2-1-1 TIRN.

Rider 174 directed HHSC to provide “technology enhancements, such as texting and web-based chat capabilities.” To address this requirement, HHSC implemented web-based chat and is implementing one-way text messaging. These functionalities improve the technologies for accessing information and referrals.

Web-Based Chat

During the COVID-19 pandemic, 2-1-1 TIRN experienced higher than normal call volume (a 54 percent increase when comparing March 14–August 31, 2019, with March 14–August 31, 2020) as Texans sought information and referrals about COVID-19 testing sites, unemployment benefits, and basic public health questions. Although web-based chat was slated for implementation in July 1, 2020, COVID-19 prompted an early execution of the project to better serve Texans needing information and referrals. HHSC implemented web-based chat in April 2020.

Web-based chat consists of real-time transmission of web-based messages from sender to receiver using an easily accessible web interface. 2-1-1 TIRN web-based chat is accessed through 211Texas.org. When a requestor visits 211Texas.org, the user sees a box on the home page that reads “Chat Now.” Once activating the “Chat Now” box, the requestor is redirected to a registration page and then connected to a 2-1-1 TIRN contact specialist. Web-based chat is offered in English and Spanish and is available Monday–Friday, from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.

Since implementation of web-based chat through the end of fiscal year 2020, 2-1-1 TIRN handled over 8,000 chat sessions.

One-Way Text Messaging

HHSC is implementing one-way text messaging to enhance information and referral access, assist with call volume, decrease caller wait times, improve customer service, and disseminate relevant and timely information to Texans. During disasters and other related events, one-way text messaging is expected to enhance statewide communication regarding infectious virus or disease testing sites, food stamps information, help lines, mass distribution centers, state benefits

information, free vaccination sites, and childcare locator tools. One-way text messaging is also expected to further increase the 2-1-1 TIRN network capacity and allow Texans to easily find needed community services through self-service modalities.

In August 2020, HHSC procured a solution to implement one-way text messaging, and by December 1, 2020, the functionality will be available for potential future disaster or event-related campaigns. One-way text messaging refers to the sending of text messages without the ability to receive replies. Push notifications of this type have been particularly useful in other states to support disaster information and referrals and Disaster Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program information and referrals.

Once operationalized, one-way text messaging will allow Texans to sign up to receive push text and/or email notifications. Texans will enroll through an online portal or by texting a keyword to an established five- or six-digit short code, such as TEX211, or other random five to six digits. Registered individuals will receive informational messages during and after disaster events such as hurricanes or pandemics.

4. Real-Time Data Transparency

Rider 174 further directed HHSC to provide “real-time data transparency solutions, such as 2-1-1 Counts or similar programs.”

Each year, 2-1-1 TIRN receives approximately 2 million calls from Texans seeking help with basic needs like food, shelter, and emergency services. 2-1-1 TIRN collects basic data about callers, including call date, ZIP code, gender, age, military status, military branch (if applicable), language, need(s), information or referrals offered, and lack of available resources for each call. This data can be shared at the aggregate level for the benefit of agencies, planners, nonprofits, and grantors.

In August 2020, 2-1-1 TIRN procured 2-1-1 Counts, a real-time data visualization solution administered by Health Communication Impact. The tool allows HHSC to display aggregate-level community needs data for Texas through 211counts.org and a customized state dashboard. 2-1-1 Counts provides real-time searchable and visual presentations of data from 2-1-1 call centers across the United States and provides a snapshot of community-specific needs displayed by ZIP code, region, or call center as recent as the previous day. This allows users, such as community leaders and service agencies, easy access to trend data with the capability to compare and share information. This functionality will be available to the public on December 1, 2020.

5. Specialized Populations

The fourth requirement of the rider directs HHSC to implement “measures designed to connect specialized populations with available state and local resources.” To better serve and support specialized populations, 2-1-1 TIRN partnered with other agencies and HHSC programs.

- **Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) Kinship**

Navigation: In collaboration with DFPS, HHSC 2-1-1 TIRN used Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) grant funds to enhance 2-1-1 TIRN services to kin caregivers across Texas. Activities for this effort included:

- ▶ Enhancements to network and telephony infrastructure to support kinship-related calls which included a one-time network and telephony infrastructure support to strengthen 2-1-1 TIRN equipment and security;
- ▶ Development of comprehensive training related to cultural competency, kinship, trauma informed care, and kinship-related call handling to enhance the support that 2-1-1 TIRN staff provide to kin caregivers; and
- ▶ Targeted outreach to promote kinship care resources at AICs. Efforts included a targeted marketing campaign for kin caregivers to increase their knowledge of resources.

HHSC continues to partner with DFPS to evaluate other ways to enhance the 2-1-1 TIRN system to better support kin caregivers with additional FFPSA grant funds.

- **HHSC VetConnect:** A collaboration between HHSC Office of Veteran Services Coordination and 2-1-1 TIRN that provides service members, veterans, their families, and first responders a direct link to a veteran-trained call specialist for information and referral to resources and benefits in their community via the HHSC Texas Veteran’s App.
- **HHSC Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities Behavioral Health Services:** 2-1-1 TIRN partnered with the Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities Behavioral Health Services department to share community resource information from the 2-1-1 TIRN social services directory of mental and behavioral health and substance use providers for monthly distribution at mentalhealthtx.org.

6. Funds

Rider 174 provided \$150,000 in All Funds for fiscal year 2020 and \$25,000 in All Funds for fiscal year 2021 to complete 2-1-1 TIRN improvements. This funding is to improve disaster response capabilities, system integration, data transparency, and system effectiveness within the 2-1-1 TIRN system. Table 1 outlines how each fiscal year funding allocation was used to support the legislative implementation.

Table 1. Expenditures by Fiscal Year (FY) Allocation

FY Allocated	Purchase	Expense
FY20	One-way text messaging platform and short code (for one-way texting campaigns)	\$137,500
FY20	Real-time data visualization solution	\$12,500
FY21	Expanded service support for web-based chat	\$25,000
		\$175,000

Interstate agreements and “measures designed to connect specialized populations” did not require additional 2-1-1 TIRN administrative funds.

7. Conclusion

In accordance with Rider 174, 2-1-1 TIRN implemented interstate agreements, web-based chat, one-way text messaging, the 2-1-1 Counts real-time data visualization solution, and support of specialized populations. These changes will improve disaster response capabilities, system integration, data transparency, and effectiveness of the 2-1-1 TIRN system.

In times of disaster, with acute caller needs and often above-average call volumes, the interstate agreements allow for improved response capabilities to serve callers quickly and efficiently. HHSC leveraged these agreements for additional call handling support during Hurricane Laura. These agreements will continue to yield improved disaster response in the future.

HHSC implemented web-based chat to support Texans with information and referrals without having to dial 2-1-1. Web-based chat allows 2-1-1 TIRN to reach a new audience of users who are less likely to call. One-way text messaging, at the launch of its first campaign, will improve the effectiveness of the 2-1-1 TIRN system by allowing HHSC to push information and referrals to those impacted by disasters or other related events.

Real-time data visualization provided by 2-1-1 Counts will support the transparency of 2-1-1 TIRN's aggregate-level community needs data. Instead of having the data available only upon request, the community needs data will allow for an understanding of community needs statewide to all citizens of Texas.

Finally, HHSC leveraged 2-1-1 TIRN to support special populations by providing specialized training for kin care callers and by providing callers direct access to specially trained call center representatives in DFPS and VetConnect projects. Together, these improvements have strengthened the system's capability to respond to disasters and have enhanced the support of Texan's information and referral needs.

List of Acronyms

Acronym	Full Name
2-1-1 TIRN	2-1-1 Texas Information and Referral Network
AIC	area information center
DFPS	Texas Department of Family and Protective Services
FFPSA	Family First Prevention Services Act
HHSC	Texas Health and Human Services Commission