

NJ 2-1-1 Success Story

Passing the Ultimate Test



NJ 2-1-1 Partnership

NJ 2-1-1 is a statewide network of local 2-1-1 information and referral providers for New Jersey and a five-county area of Philadelphia.

Customer Profile

- Headquartered in Whippany, NJ
- Two call centers and 58 staff
- Available 24/7, 365 days a year

Industry

- Referral Resources, Disaster Response
www.nj211.org

Challenges

- Lacked secure, cloud software capable of handling tens of thousands of calls during major disasters without interruption
- Required ability to quickly add staff and outsource calls to partners during periods of high volume
- Needed automated messages to relay critical information to callers

Solution

- Five9 Virtual Contact Center
- Fast, flexible call routing and integration with other providers
- Ability to quickly add licenses during emergencies

When Hurricane Sandy slammed into New Jersey, the Five9 Virtual Contact Center preserved access to critical information and resources for residents that needed them most.

Company Background

NJ 2-1-1 is a free phone number and online database that connects New Jersey residents quickly and effectively to community resources and emergency information. It is part of a growing national model that provides 190 million Americans in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico with free information ranging from affordable housing, shelters, food assistance, employment training programs, senior services, medical insurance, and much more simply by dialing 2-1-1. The NJ 2-1-1 system was launched in 2005 and is managed by the NJ 2-1-1 Partnership, a subsidiary of the United Ways of New Jersey.

During natural disasters, the staff at NJ 2-1-1 works with government officials, voluntary organizations, and 2-1-1 centers in other areas to deliver information to affected residents and relay calls to government agencies and first responders who can help. “We have many different lines of business,” says Laura Zink Marx, executive director of the NJ 2-1-1 Partnership. “During a disaster, our challenge is balancing the volume and flow of our inbound calls, so that we’re giving the best attention to every single person.”

Choosing Five9

In August 2011, Hurricane Irene slammed into New Jersey, causing the flooding of many rivers, roads, and rail lines, displacing thousands of residents from their homes, and causing an estimated \$1 billion in damages. Due to the extraordinary call volume that took place during and after Irene, NJ 2-1-1 decided to upgrade its inbound contact center to a virtual, cloud-based system.

After a rigorous selection process, NJ 2-1-1 chose the award-winning Five9 Virtual Contact Center (VCC) Platform, which enables information and referral agencies such as NJ 2-1-1 to run and manage their entire contact center operation in the cloud. With Five9, agencies can route calls based on priority and type of request, as well as provide important information through recorded messages and point callers to other resource hotlines.

Weathering the Storm

Eight months after being installed, the Five9 system was put through the ultimate test. In late October 2012, Hurricane Sandy struck the Atlantic coast, eventually causing billions of dollars in damages and costing the lives of more than 250 people in seven countries.

New Jersey was among the hardest hit. “Quite honestly, I don’t think anyone anticipated what this storm was capable of doing,” Marx recalled. “Even though you knew it was big and it was 900 miles wide, you never really believed it was going to cause the destruction that it did.”

As Sandy hit, NJ 2-1-1 left its former call center system in place as a backup solution. But the old system relied on three T-1 lines, each of which went down during the hurricane and remained down for three weeks. If NJ 2-1-1 had not upgraded its system to Five9, says Marx, “The situation would have been really bad.”

The Five9 solution, on the other hand, worked perfectly, handling nearly 90,000 calls during and in the weeks after the hurricane. “With the quantity of calls that were coming in, I was really concerned about the quality of service,” Marx said. “But I don’t think it flickered once. It was very impressive.”

“With Five9, we got exactly what we wanted in terms of the phone system features, the flexibility, and how easy it was to manage the ebb and flow of calls with our partners. It was flawless.”

Laura Zink Marx
Executive Director

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www.Five9.com

Managing the Flow

However, NJ 2-1-1's goal was not just to have a contact center that could stand up to Mother Nature. It also needed help when call volume became too high for NJ 2-1-1's specialists to handle.

By choosing the Five9 VCC Platform, all of NJ 2-1-1's hurricane resources were now web-based, which allowed other 2-1-1 partners to access the same information as NJ 2-1-1's staff, in real time.

On the second day of the hurricane, the decision was made to dispatch 30 percent of inbound calls to Palm Beach 2-1-1 in Florida, then increase or decrease that flow as needed. “All day, we monitored it to see how many calls were coming in and if they could handle it,” Marx said.

During the next several days, NJ 2-1-1 directed thousands of calls to other partners, eventually sending a percentage flow of inbound calls to four different locations—Palm Beach 2-1-1, Houston 2-1-1, Vermont 2-1-1, and a second NJ 2-1-1 call center. The routing was handled by Bill Kay, NJ 2-1-1's telecommunications manager, who was trained by Five9 on managing call distribution.

“Five9 allowed me to do everything so fast—I was able to make any kind of change within minutes,” Kay said. “We had calls going out to other places, like a portal, and I could split up the traffic based on how busy they were and how busy we were.”

“It was very simple,” he added. “For almost anything that came up, I was able to figure it out and do what we needed to get done.”

Flexible and Fast

While NJ 2-1-1 was able to offset the high number of calls by leveraging its partners, it needed extra staff and additional software licenses due to the severity of the storm. According to Kay, Five9 made that easy, too.

As 211 calls reached the tens of thousands, “I called Five9 and asked for 15 more licenses,” Kay said. “I got them within hours—and along with the licenses, we received extra line capacity. It was all built in; there was nothing hidden, and it was fast. In a situation like that, it was everything you could ask for.”

Without the help of Five9, Kay says, NJ 2-1-1 would have had to install extra phones, a process that could have taken weeks. But instead of a busy signal, 2-1-1 callers got the resources they needed.

No Call Left Behind

The Five9 VCC Platform had other valuable benefits. It enabled NJ 2-1-1 to set up a voicemail box for calls that could not be immediately addressed, and allowed its Vermont 2-1-1 partner to retrieve and return about 800 voicemails. It also allowed NJ 2-1-1 to route additional calls to specialists who were working from home. And it was able to set up an unlimited number of recorded messages relaying important information based on the prompts that callers selected.

This last benefit proved very handy for countering rumors and misinformation. For example, says Marx, in the days after the storm, NJ 2-1-1 received 35,000 calls about the Disaster SNAP/Food Stamp Program. But the food stamps did not arrive until three weeks after the hurricane.

“If we had to answer all of those calls, I don't know what would have happened,” Marx said. “So we added an automated message and gave callers the option to leave a voicemail or go to a website for help, such as where to find the closest mobile kitchen.”

The Five9 system also enabled about 3,000 callers who had health concerns—whether it was sewage problems, drinking water, or bad food—to be sent directly to the New Jersey Department of Health's telephone hotline. Says Marx, “All they had to do was dial 2-1-1 and there was a prompt saying that, ‘If you would like to speak to a medical professional about a health concern, press here,’ and the caller was sent right to that call center.”

A ‘Flawless’ Performance

Marx, who is also chair of the 2-1-1 U.S. Steering Committee, has been preparing for disasters and managing referral providers for years. She says NJ 2-1-1 knew what it needed in a cloud contact center solution, and got it with Five9.

“The beauty of the Five9 system is that you can always be ready,” she said. “With Five9, we got exactly what we wanted in terms of the phone system features, the flexibility, and how easy it was to manage the ebb and flow of calls with our partners. It was flawless.”

