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Emergency Response Partnerships: The Critical Role Played by 211 Organizations in Canada during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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This research project was initiated after an informal conversation in the fall of 2018 between Robyn Edwards-Bentz (CEO of United Way Regina) and Lynn Gidluck, co-lead for the Western Hub of the Canadian Philanthropy Partnership Network (PhiLab). Gidluck indicated that funding was available from a six-year Partnership Grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, for community-driven research projects. She invited United Way Regina to join the PhiLab network and to suggest ideas for collaborative research projects.

The United Way team discussed several project ideas before coming to a consensus for the need to explore the role provincial 211 systems could play during large scale natural disasters like floods and wildfires. United Way Regina believed it was not a matter of “if” but “when” there would be a provincial or regional incident where Saskatchewan 211 could contribute their information and referral expertise to emergency response efforts. The research was meant to be a proactive effort to document the lessons of 211 service partners in other jurisdictions.

211 is a free information and referral service that helps people make sense of social, health, and government services information that is often buried on websites, social media channels, e-newsletters, and spread through networks of partners and community leaders. By contacting 211, community members are connected to internationally-accredited specialists who can direct them to the most appropriate program or service in their community. 211 Navigators direct callers to everything from job training, financial services, help for substance abuse or intimate partner violence, services for seniors, counselling for mental health issues, and more. Support is available in over 150 languages, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. 211 has become an especially important tool to people working for human service agencies, helping them more easily connect clients to services in the community (Teubner, 2019).

During emergencies, 211 can reduce the load on municipalities by providing a channel for authoritative information to the public about anything relevant to the emergency that does not require police, fire, or ambulance, such as the location of emergency shelters, where to get basic supplies, and how to donate goods. This helps alleviate the non-emergency calls that go to 911 and other municipal or provincial phone lines. In addition to the valuable public inquiry role, 211 staff have the capability to develop disaster databases of emerging information, as well as the ability to track and report on trends in caller needs and gaps in community services (ON211 North, 2023).

Methodology

The project began with a focus group in October of 2019 with members of the 211 National Service Partner table, an InformCanada sub-committee established in collaboration between InformCanada and United Way Centraide Canada (UWCC) in 2012. InformCanada is the national organization of information and referral (I & R) providers in the country and is the

Canadian affiliate of the Alliance of Information & Referral Systems (AIRS). (InformCanada, n.d.).

Thirteen follow-up interviews with regional 211 representatives were completed by early March of 2020. The original intention was to present the findings from the focus group and interviews to local leaders in Saskatchewan as part of Emergency Preparedness Week (a national awareness event that traditionally takes place during the first full week of May). When the COVID-19 pandemic was confirmed to have reached Canada, and across the country a state of emergency was declared, it was clear that the research focus should shift. The original project was investigating the role that 211 could play during emergencies. The COVID-19 pandemic was clearly one of the greatest emergencies in Canada's history. Almost immediately, 211 service partners gained the opportunity to demonstrate the value they could offer to the emergency management ecosystem. Until this time, emergencies that 211 partners supported were local or regional in nature.

Given this new reality, the research team shifted their focus to documenting the role 211 played during the pandemic. Service partners signed a memorandum of understanding with each other in 2020, renaming their network the 211 Canada Leadership Table (CLT). The CLT met bi-weekly throughout the pandemic to learn from each other and discuss ways to collaborate. Nelson attended the meetings as a contributing member. Gidluck joined as an observer whenever possible. Interviews were conducted in July and August of 2020 with eight members of the CLT to document the work that was done in the early months of the pandemic. In addition, CLT members were invited to share their experiences through a qualitative survey in September 2021. This survey (filled out by 12 members), asked for reflections on their team's accomplishments during the pandemic, the challenges they faced, lessons they learned, and what they would do differently in the future if other large-scale emergencies were to occur. Information gleaned from the interviews and survey was supplemented with extensive analysis of media accounts, websites, annual reports, and other online resources and internal documents between March 2020 and December 2023. A draft of this report was shared with 211 leaders in January 2024, with feedback and further information incorporated into the final report.

History and Evolution of 211

The original idea for a 211 service was developed by the United Way of Atlanta, Georgia in 1997. Its success led the Federal Communications Commission to approve use of the three-digit number for community information and referral services throughout the United States (Lisoway, 2004). InformOntario, the Association of Community Information Centres in Ontario Canada, decided they wanted to move towards having a 211 number, so they created InformCanada as a national partner to work with United Ways (P. Hillier, personal communication, February 27, 2020). In 2001, InformCanada, United Way Centraide Canada, United Way of Greater Toronto, and Community Information Toronto filed an application to the Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC), requesting that the dialing code 211 be assigned for public access to community information and referral services throughout Canada. The United Way of Greater Toronto, in partnership with Community Information Toronto, officially launched Canada's first 211 service in June of 2002 (Lisoway, 2004).

The level of United Way-Centraide investment and participation in 211 is different in each area in Canada. In some regions United Ways are the leading partner in 211 operations while in other communities they play more of a supportive role. Though funding arrangements vary, one thing all 211 service partners have in common is that they are accredited through Inform USA (formerly known as the Alliance of Information and Referral Systems), the professional membership association for community information and referral organizations in Canada and the United States. Accreditation provides objective evidence of achievement across twenty-seven standards covering every facet of an information and referral operation (Inform USA, 2023).

“One of the great things about 211 is our accreditation. When I show people the standards we have to adhere to, the training of our people who answer the phones, and how we maintain our data, with at least 85% of the records being updated annually, it gives people a comfort level that we have very high standards” (J. Hoyles, personal communication, February 26, 2020).

211 in the Pre-COVID era

In the early stages of 211 development, some provinces were reluctant to bring another three-digit phone line into the emergency management sphere. Many provinces that had previously operated 311, 811, and 911 phone lines were hesitant to bring on another three-digit phone line for fear of confusing the public. Emergency management officials also tended to view 211 and other non-profits as resources addressing a single point in a disaster. Some provinces had already established emergency protocols that were nation-wide such as the Canadian Red Cross (D. Webster, personal communication, February 25, 2020; P. Wolfart, personal communication, October 22, 2019), whereas 211 services were, and continue to be, developing and expanding. As Mathieu Chaurette of QC211 stated: “When we're talking about provincial or even national roles in emergency situations, well, we don't cover the province. So, the whole province wants to have the same message” (M. Chaurette, personal communication, January 31, 2020).

Challenges with multiple phone lines

311 is a special telephone number supported in many communities in Canada and the United States. The number provides access to non-emergency municipal services. The Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) reserved the use of 311 for non-emergency municipal services throughout Canada in March of 2003. The first Canadian 311 service opened in Calgary in May 2005 (Wikipedia, 2023).

Ontario was the first province in Canada to establish a 211 service, thus they were already well connected and had been communicating with other three-digit phone line services which made the incorporation of 211 smoother. ON211 in Toronto developed a partnership with their provincial 311 service early on that allowed them to support each other and transfer calls when necessary. During a 2013 ice storm, 211 was not the primary resource for the public, but they were able to aid 311 in responding to calls and providing helpful resources and information (A. Finateri, personal communication, March 2, 2020). As John Hoyles with Community Navigation of Eastern Ontario/211 East said: “We have a great relationship with 311. We do cross-training. We train them for what we do and they train us for what they do. We make referrals back and forth” (J. Hoyles, personal communication, October 22, 2019).

For provinces that developed their services later on, and sometimes with provincial resistance, connections had to be built—one relationship at a time. Stephanie Wright of Alberta 211 in Edmonton said: “In smaller communities we end up getting treated like a 311 because people want to know about by-laws, garbage pickup, transit, and all of those things” (S. Wright, personal communication, February 25, 2020).

811 is the number assigned by the CRTC for non-urgent health triage/telehealth services. In May 2008, Quebec was the first province to adopt 811 for this purpose (Wikipedia, 2023). There are some provinces, or regions within provinces, where previously established three-digit phone lines have taken on rolls like that of the 211 service. In Quebec, the 211 Capital-Nationale et la Chaudière-Appalaches region had trouble establishing themselves as a necessary addition to the region. Thierry Durand said that 811 handles health calls but they also play a referral role similar to 211. Despite their similarities, Durand noted that 211 service provider’s strength is connecting with partners. He said: “811 can’t do that. It’s a government phone line. It’s huge. It’s really hard to connect. So, what we have that’s unique is that we can connect, make very specific projects, extract really specific statistics really quickly” (T. Durand, personal communication, August 27, 2020).

Canadians are much more familiar with 911 than they are with other phone lines. In many provinces, hundreds of calls made to the 911 emergency line are classified as non-emergencies and are better dealt with by a 211 Navigator. No comprehensive data currently exists that documents the number of non-emergency calls for service to 911 that have been diverted to 211 lines. However, police forces across the country are seeing the benefits of collaborating with 211. The Edmonton Police Service (EPS) reported approximately 60% of calls to 911 in 2013 were non-emergencies (Braid, 2012). The CEO of Distress Center Calgary stated: “When someone is experiencing a mental health crisis, it can be an urgent and distressing situation but

often does not require a 911 response. When someone contacts 211 they'll speak to a live person who can connect them with the right resource and services for their issue" (The City of Calgary, 2022).

Kristin Nelson of Saskatchewan 211 also spoke to the non-emergency 911 calls and emphasized the importance of educating community members on the role that 211 can play in diverting those calls. She said: "Oftentimes if people don't know that 211 exists, it might not be an emergency, but they don't know where else to go" (K. Nelson, personal communication, 2020).

Saskatchewan has taken a unique approach to diverting non-emergency 911 calls through their partnership with the RCMP to create co-branded business cards. Ontario has been successful in diverting calls to 911 by partnering with paramedic services. In February of 2020, Pam Hillier of ON211 said: "211 reduced the repeat calls to 911 by almost 30%, so those paramedics are promoting 211 which helps us into the door" (P. Hillier, personal communication, February 27, 2020).

Jerilyn Dressler, former Executive Director of Distress Centre Calgary, 211 service partner for Alberta South, commented on the hesitancy as it pertained to Calgary 211's battle to assert themselves as a key player in emergency management. She said: "People don't want to muddy the messaging. They want to have one service that they frequently refer to and it's just that they want one thing to be the answer. But the problem is that everyone has a different perspective on which line or access point is the right answer" (J. Dressler, personal communication, February 27, 2020).

Provincial reluctance is not the only concern for having multiple three-digit phone lines; rather, public confusion regarding what services each phone line offers has led to unnecessary calls to a particular service. In 2019, an awareness campaign launched by United Way Centraide Canada, 211 ambassadors, and provincial 211 service partners named, 'Make the Right Call' was launched (211, 2019). The campaign began to divert non-emergency calls made to 911 but has grown to include other three-digit phone services. The City of Edmonton established their own 'neighbourhood response tool' that allows community members to "make the right call at the right time" (The City of Edmonton, n.d.). This tool covers a range of situations from witnessing vandalism, intoxication and substance abuse, to property and business concerns and offers steps to increase safety and minimize risk" (The City of Edmonton, n.d.).

One of the biggest downfalls for 211 was that there has never been enough money to promote it to the public. Overcoming misinformation that 211 is just a service that gives out phone numbers is also a significant challenge.

John Hoyles describes the work of 211 Navigators.

We actually assess, probe, and ask what the problem is because a lot of the time people call thinking they know what the problem is and what they need. For example, someone said: 'I'm about to be evicted.' 'Well why?' 'Well because I haven't paid my hydro bill and the landlord is going to kick me out.' 'Well, did you know that there's a program that you can get money from the Ontario government to help pay your hydro bill?' 'No.' So it

turned out it wasn't about being evicted, it was about getting them some money to pay their hydro bill (J. Hoyles, personal communication, February 26, 2020).

Even with public education efforts, there was a recognition that when people are in crisis, they are likely to call whoever they can reach. "Sometimes people start shopping around with the numbers of 311, 211, 811 so we have to be one step ahead and have protocols and procedures in place so that all of us have the same information (A. Finateri, personal communication, March 2, 2020).

Despite the challenges, 211 service partners with experience providing service during emergencies like wildfires and floods proved that 211 was relevant at every stage of a disaster, including the long-term recovery, whereas 911 or 311 were only relevant for the initial stages" (J. Dressler, personal communication, February 27, 2020). By stepping up and proving themselves, some regional 211 service partners were able to make the case for provincial or municipal funding to increase their capacity (J. Hoyles, personal communication, February 26, 2020). The case was made easier by the data 211 was able to share with other partners. The breadth of the data analytics is one element that sets 211 apart from other information and referral services.

As Mike Myette with Nova Scotia 211 noted:

211 can be sort of an early warning ... the canary in the mineshaft because what tends to happen is you get a trickle in of certain needs at a very low level, and then at some point, many more people are affected. It might be that the power has been out for two days and we need to find a place to charge our cell phone or a place to get a shower. Knowing when those needs start to appear and having the ability to communicate that through to the emergency managers can really be valuable to them in being prepared when those needs escalate to a higher level (M. Myette, personal communication, February 5, 2020).

211 proves its value during local and regional emergencies

For years, 211 service partners across Canada tried to gain the attention of people working in emergency management roles. Presentation after presentation was made about the rigorous accreditation process 211 Navigators go through and the role they could play during and after a crisis. As Emma Potter, with Alberta North 211 said: "We spent forever trying to get even a seat at the table to talk about how 211 could be involved in emergency management at a city level" (E. Potter, personal communication, October 22, 2019). When disaster struck with the Fort McMurray and Wood Buffalo Wildfires, Potter's team was able to demonstrate their value. This experience was similar across the country where other 211 service partners just rolled up their sleeves and proved how valuable their contributions could be during their community's time of greatest need. Others like Tammy Durand with 211 Central South in Ontario learned about an emergency communications network in Niagra. She volunteered to serve as the secretary. "This keeps me embedded and it's a constant reminder about the role of 211. Our message is: 'We're just here to support you'" (T. Durand, personal communication, October 22, 2019).

In many communities, 211 service partners play the lead role in information and referral because not every locale has the capacity for a telephone system. Thanks to this expertise, instead of having to create a call centre or a hotline for a specific emergency, response teams can utilize 211 to provide information about the situation to relay to the public on their behalf. Some municipalities formalized the relationship through memorandums of understanding but in many cases 211 just jumps into action, updating information, tracking the sources of calls, and directing people to the resources they need (A. Finateri, personal communication, March 2, 2020).

Calgary Flood, 2013

The flood in Calgary in 2013 is one example where 211 showed what they could do during a devastating natural disaster. Heavy rainfall on the melting snowpack in the Rocky Mountains caused rapid and intense flooding. A state of emergency was declared and more than 80,000 people in 26 communities were evacuated (City of Calgary, n.d.). In Calgary, the Distress Centre manages 211. As soon as it became clear they were needed, the Distress Centre joined with service delivery partners in Edmonton and BC to make counselling, crisis lines, and 211 services available, so that even when the Centre was evacuated for 24 hours, there was no interruption in service (Distress Centre, 2020).

“Because part of our 211 mandate is to provide disaster services, we had a plan, so when the flood came, we basically just pulled the plan off the shelf and used it,” said Joan Roy, Executive Director at the time. “We learned a lot about what worked and didn’t work. The report that was done after the flood said that the Distress Centre was one of the best prepared agencies” (Distress Centre, 2020).

Paul Bartel, then Manager of 211 shared his account of how the Distress Centre served as a place people could turn to for information, support, and updates on what was going on. “We were supporting 5 or 6 evacuee reception centres for 72 hours,” he said. “We met several times with the Red Cross and arranged for their phone line to have an option to get connected to 211. In the middle of all the recovery efforts we expanded 211 to High River and had to learn very quickly about all the resources available in the community” (Distress Centre, 2020).

Fort McMurray and Wood Buffalo Wildfires, 2016

Wildfires began on May 1, 2016 and within days quickly threatened the lives of Fort McMurray and Wood Buffalo region residents. Tens of thousands of people were evacuated. During this time, Alberta 211 added online chat services and 35% of information calls that came in were related to the fires. Extra staff were called in to manage the volume of inquiries. Jerilyn Dressler, with the Distress Centre recalled: “People leaving Fort McMurray on the plane had nothing, and the only information they got was to call 211 when they got off in Calgary” (Distress Centre, 2020).

Various organizations invested in providing 211 service across the province met to discuss the role they could play in helping evacuees. A data team tracked rapidly changing information during the initial days of the evaluation to ensure the list of essential services was up-to-date,

responsive, and accessible. People who wanted to donate items or volunteer time could also connect with 211 (Distress Centre, 2017).

Emma Potter with Alberta North 211 said that most people evacuated from the fires ended up in Edmonton. Though nothing was formalized, Alberta North 211 worked closely with the Red Cross. “Anyone who wasn’t registering as an evacuee and who wasn’t applying for the financial assistance from Red Cross was sent to 211 to get other resources because they did not have time to navigate all of the other supports available to people in the moment beyond the really basic stuff that they were handling and distributing themselves in Edmonton” (E. Potter, personal communication, January 16, 2020).

The 211 team began tracking and updating information through a live document via GoogleDocs (S. Wright, personal communication, February 25, 2020). This document listed and vetted community supports to build a resource list for community members. It allowed the public, stakeholders, partners, and information and referral agencies across Canada to access and edit the available resources (E. Potter, personal communication, March 6, 2020). The data team identified evacuation, food, shelter (humans and animals), clothing, and emergency funds as the priorities during the response phase. The recovery phase prioritized resettlement – specifically emergency funds and long-term shelter. The GoogleDoc was discontinued and the information was then updated in the InformAlberta database (Belayneh et al., 2017).

211 also ended up being asked by the city for help in connecting displaced people to culturally appropriate support services like translators and interpreters because that wasn’t built into their plan. As Potter said: “By nature of us being 211, we knew where to go and we were able to make sure families were connected to the right people without having to scramble (E. Potter, personal communication, January 16, 2020).

This tragedy illustrated the necessity for 211’s involvement in emergency planning and encouraged AB211 staff to continue fighting for a seat at the table. Potter reflected on the situation, noting: “The city’s emergency plan was really for the immediate, right now” (E. Potter, personal communication, March 6, 2020) The collaboration between Red Cross and AB211 during the fires demonstrated the value of developing relationships. The Red Cross was particularly valuable in spreading the word about AB211 and in distributing the resources collected by AB211. Following this disaster, AB211 was better able to connect to people and become more involved in emergency planning. Potter credits individual staff at partner agencies for the increased recognition, stating: “It was based on the people, and not the structure, that we were even invited in” (E. Potter, personal communication, March 6, 2020).

Viruses, tornadoes, floods and hurricanes: 211 in Ontario proves its value

Throughout the years, 211 has proven to be invaluable in Ontario during many emergency situations. A number of local protocols have been signed in Ontario communities which demonstrates that they see the value in engaging 211 during times of an emergency (T. Dumas, personal communication, March 5, 2020).

In 2009, ON211 provided the public with information regarding the H1N1 virus (ON211, 2014, April). In August of 2011, the town of Goderich, Ontario was hit by a devastating tornado that destroyed 40 homes and 20 commercial buildings, injured 30 people, and killed one person (Lee-Lincoln, 2021). The municipality asked 211 Central East Ontario to manage donations and requests for offers of assistance. They created a Google Sheets document to track and categorize the type of help that was being offered and the municipality would contact those whose offers best met the needs of the community (P. Hillier, personal communication, February 27, 2020). In May of 2012, ON211 was contacted by the Emergency Operations Group of the City of Toronto to ensure citizens had access to up-to-date information (ON211, 2014, April). Later that year, ON211 was involved in providing accurate information regarding the tracking of a hurricane threatening citizens of Niagara (ON211, 2014, April). In July of 2013, Toronto experienced a flash flood, resulting in the loss of power and hydro for thousands of citizens. ON211 took calls from 2,082 citizens in the first 17 hours of the emergency (ON211, 2014, April). During devastating floods in Ottawa, Muskoka, and Bracebridge, 211 was called upon to be an information channel for residents, connecting them with available supports (ON211, 2020).

211 North, which serves over 100 First Nations communities and nine districts located in Northern Ontario, has also had many opportunities to demonstrate the important role it can play during natural disasters. A major flood in Thunder Bay in May of 2012 was one of 211 North's first chances to jump in to work with the community's Emergency Operation's Control group to ensure critical information was provided to and from the public. Roads were washed out or closed and flooding at the sewage treatment plant resulted in sewage backing up in many homes.

In some areas of town, residents reported several feet of water or sewage in their basements. As the Emergency Operations Control Group shifted into recovery mode, 211 North became the number to dial for information on the Disaster Relief Fund (Lakehead Social Planning Council, 2013).

211 North also played a vital role in February 2019 when frequent snowstorms and fluctuating weather hit Blind River, Ontario. Blind River is a small community in northern Ontario that has a population of approximately 3,400. On the afternoon of February 23, 2019, the North Shore Health Network requested 211 North's assistance to serve as the public inquiry line when a partial evacuation of the acute and long-term care units took place. 211 North also served as the public inquiry line in July 2019, over 80 millimetres of rain fell in the Municipality of Machin, a small community in Northern Ontario. The municipality declared a state of emergency when there were many areas of the community became inaccessible due to multiple washouts and damage to roads (K. Tomcko, personal communication, January 31, 2024).

Hurricane Dorian, 2019

During Hurricane Dorian, the powerful and catastrophic Atlantic hurricane that struck the Maritimes in August of 2019, 211 become the official source of contact for information about comfort centres. Initially the Nova Scotia government's Emergency Management Office (EMO) was the official keeper of the list. However, local community organizations stopped contacting governments with updates to the list and communicated directly to 211. The province eventually

authorized 211 to be the official point of contact for disaster assistance programs because of how reliable their updates proved during this catastrophic storm (Myette, interview, Feb 5, 2020 and focus group, October 22, 2019).

Help for Refugees

The Syrian refugees coming to Calgary and Vancouver was not a typical disaster response, but much of the same planning for 211 was used to support these newcomers to Canada. “At the time, the immigrant serving sector organizations were getting inundated with calls from people in the community wanting to donate and help out,” said Robyn Romano, with the Calgary Distress Centre. “They just didn’t have a way to navigate or manage the offers as they were also trying to support the refugees themselves.” Romanow said that 211 played an important role in coordinating these responses, as well as assisting the refugees who were phoning in with questions (Calgary Distress Centre, 2020). In British Columbia, 211 played an even bigger role in assisting with the Syrian refugee crisis. Louise Ghossoub with BC211 said: “We started getting a lot of asylum seekers at ports of entry to BC. Eventually we were contracted by the Canadian Border Services Agency to help the refugees settle” (L. Ghossoub, personal communication, October 22, 2019).

Re-imagining ‘disaster’

One possible explanation as to why provincial authorities may not immediately consider 211 when faced with a disaster is that the discourse surrounding the word ‘disaster’ is limiting. As Kristin Nelson of SK211 suggests: “I think that it tends to be easy to jump to, when we hear in this context: emergency or disaster, things like wildfires or floods, or more of those kinds of natural disasters”. Nelson argues that there are a whole host of other types of disasters that may be more defined as social disasters that 211 can play a massive role in. “I think that we also need to be prepared to respond to those at an emergency level” (K. Nelson, personal communication, January 16, 2020).

Pam Hillier of ON211 echoed Nelson, stating: “A disaster emergency response is really around urgent community situations.” Referencing homelessness, she continues: “We have a crisis in Canada. We’re just all used to it so we don’t necessarily perceive homelessness as a crisis or emergency, but it’s definitely one” (P. Hillier, personal communication, February 27, 2020). Another example of a community crisis worthy of an emergency response, is the opioid crisis. Prior to the pandemic, the top reasons for 211 contacts were mental health and substance use. Just months after the pandemic first broke, SK211 reported that mental health and substance use was already the number two contact issue, the first being healthcare. Re-imagining ‘disaster’ to include these critical social crises, and considering that definition at an emergency management level, requires different types of support. As Nelson noted: “It’s going to require more emotional support, maybe more counselling, starting to look at some of the flip sides where it’s not necessarily always a physical need” (K. Nelson, personal communication, July 15, 2020).

COVID-19 and 211

When the 211 Canada service partners met in Edmonton in October of 2019, they had enough experience by now to know that in situations like wildfires and floods 211 had important roles to play. One of the items on their agenda was how their disparate offices could work together in a nimble fashion to respond to emerging crises. A subcommittee focused on emergency management was created and a draft memorandum of understanding around how to work together during future emergencies was written. At that meeting, Pam Hillier with Community Connections (Ontario's Central East Region's 211 service partner) summed up the sentiment that everyone in the room had when she said: "There's a huge opportunity for cross-provincial work because disasters don't stop at borders" (P. Hillier, personal communication, October 22, 2019). There was also a sense of optimism that the federal government was starting to recognize the potential of 211 to help in emergency situations. Anita Khanna, National Director for Public Policy and Government Relations for United Way Centraide Canada noted: "As climate change becomes more of a reality, the Federal Government is looking to understand preparedness, adaption, and how Canadians and residents of Canada can become more resilient and what the gaps are in the service system when it comes to emergencies" (A. Khanna, personal communication, October 22, 2019).

Little did the people sitting around the 211 table know that less than six months from the time they had their in-person meeting that an international pandemic would strike. COVID-19 offered them their big chance to prove the value 211 could play in emergency management. Signs were already there by early in the New Year that something "big" was about to happen. On February 27, 2020, the Co-Chair of the 211 Canada Leadership Network reached out to all of the 211 providers across the country to ask if they had set up business continuity plans to ensure service could continue to be provided if a mass quarantine were to take place and 211 Navigators needed to work from home. She also circulated a short survey to her colleagues to understand if they had been engaged by local health and provincial officials or if they themselves had reached out to help and to understand what kind of joint response they might be interested in partaking in. "It was clear that 211 could play a role in offering information referrals and helping the public find out where testing centres were and where they might be able to access food delivery if they were vulnerable" (A. Khanna, personal communication, March 13, 2020).

In March of 2020, as COVID-19 cases spread, people working for 211 were more prepared than many organizations were. Teams across the country made the transition to working from home. The pivot required updates to existing technology to access systems from home. Regular verification work of program records rapidly shifted to concentrate on updating program closures, service interruptions, and changing records to reflect how support services were operating differently in response to the pandemic (Saskatchewan 211, 2021). Nova Scotia 211's Mike Myette put the challenge in context. "We normally in a week would do something in the order of 100 or 120 service record updates. We did 1,000 the first week after the onset of COVID. So a 10-fold increase in the data management piece (M. Myette, personal communication, July 30, 2020). Other 211 offices faced the same challenges while at the same time experiencing a huge surge in the calls from people reaching out for information.

“Every time there was an announcement, whether it was a restriction on travel, or whether it was the extra money that someone might get, we would start to get calls almost immediately from people about whether they were eligible for the benefit or they were exempted” (M. Myette, personal communication, July 30, 2020).

As Chloe McBean with the Calgary Distress Centre put it: “The COVID pandemic was quite serendipitous in terms of having more people know about 211 and the role that it can play when it comes to disaster management—not just the community and service partners, but also at higher levels of government and decision makers” (C. McBean, personal communication, August 20, 2020). John Hoyles, with ON211 East agreed with McBean’s assessment of the opportunity the pandemic provided. He noted that 211’s profile grew exponentially, and that funders and policy makers were keen to see the data on needs and unmet needs. At the same time, new sources of funding emerged as various organizations and government departments realized that 211 was one of the best ways to get people connected to the information they needed the most (J. Hoyles, personal communication, July 30, 2020).

Many provinces’ 211 services shared common needs and concerns from their respective communities. There were monthly meetings where Canada 211 team members got together to share advice and feedback with one another, as well as data (J. Baker, personal communication, July 2020). This data provided a portrait of the national and local needs and helped inform the needs of communities and resources that required further support. With this knowledge, funders were able to focus their response and investments to help the people who were struggling the most and to measure the impact of these efforts (United Way Eastern Ontario, n.d.).

National expansion of 211 service

As Canadians struggled with the effects of COVID-19, the national 211 network experienced a dramatic surge in demand. In April of 2020, 211 received more than nine times as many requests for food-related needs, and more than three times as many requests for financial assistance compared to baseline call volumes in January and February. Governments at all levels created new support programs and existing programs adapted their services (United Way Centraide Canada, 2021b).

When United Way Centraide Canada was approached by the federal government to help administer the Emergency Community Support Fund, they included a request for funding to create a national 211 system and to increase the capacity of existing 211 operations. Thanks to this funding from Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC), United Way Centraide Canada was able to convene partnerships to set up new 211 services in New Brunswick, Newfoundland and Labrador, and all three Territories, and phone service in Manitoba and unserved parts of Quebec. Establishing new service partners to manage calls from the expansion regions was not within the budget or scope of the project. Instead, they leveraged the expertise and knowledge of existing 211 service partners to service the new regions. 211 service partners in Alberta, British Columbia, Ontario, and Quebec took responsibility for providing 211 service and infrastructure for one or more of the expansion regions (United Way Centraide Canada, 2020).

It was no small undertaking to expand 211 service to the new regions. Databases of available services for those regions needed to be built and maintained. To expedite the process, United Way Centraide Canada partnered with a number of community partners. Kids Help Phone shared elements of their databases with 211 Newfoundland and Labrador and 211 Yukon. 211 Northern Ontario was able to share data they had created to build a searchable 211-style website for Nunavut that had been abandoned when the project funding ran out. Similarly, in New Brunswick the Saint John Human Development Council had built a services database that was foundational for New Brunswick 211. Both databases served as a good starting place (United Way Centraide Canada, 2020).

Thanks to support by telecommunications service providers, who activated and forwarded 211 calls to the appropriate service partners, 211 became an active number in many expansion regions in a matter of weeks. By October 15, 2020, 211 service was available everywhere in Canada except parts of Quebec, which became active in mid-December. The next step was to inform the public of the existence of 211 and the role it could play. A national public relations campaign was undertaken by United Way Centraide Canada, local United Ways, and 211 service partners (United Way Centraide Canada, 2020).

211 service partners supporting new access areas

211 Service Partner	New Access Area
Findhelp Information Services/211 Central Ontario	Manitoba, New Brunswick, Newfoundland and Labrador
Canadian Mental Health Association Edmonton Region/Alberta 211	Northwest Territories and Nunavut
211 British Columbia Services Society/BC211	Yukon
Centre de Référence du Grand Montréal/211 Grand Montréal and Centre d'Information et de Référence de la Capitale-Nationale et de Chaudière-Appalaches/211 Québec Regions	New areas of Québec bringing access to the 40% of the provinces' population previously unserved

Source: United Way Centraide Canada (2021c).

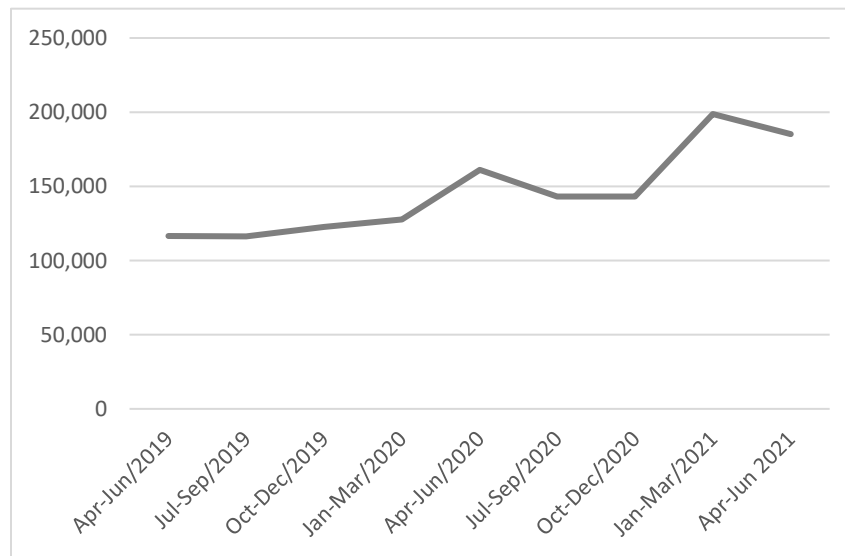
A pandemic success story

Over the full period of the federal funding (April 2020-June 2021), 211 answered 6.1M contacts (calls, website sessions, and online chats). As a point of comparison, in the year preceding the onset of COVID (March 2019-February 2020), 211 responded to 3.3M contacts. The number rose to 4.5M from March 2020 to February 2021, an increase of 38%. While website sessions make up a large part of the numbers, calls are the method people who need the most help turn to for support. Again, for context, in the year preceding COVID (March 2019-February 2020), 211 Navigators answered 475K calls compared to over 630K the following year from March 2020 to February 2021, an increase of 33%. This annualized growth only tells a partial story. At its peak in March and April 2021, 211 providers answered 145,040 calls which represented a 77% increase over the same period in 2019 (81K calls). (United Way Centraide Canada, 2021c).

In the new access areas, nearly 28,000 calls were answered by 211 between October 2020 and June 2021. There was a month-on-month increase which peaked in March 2021 at 4,172. It is important to note that these areas that previously had no 211 service are remote areas with low population numbers (United Way Centraide Canada, 2021c).

Total calls answered is one measure of the service that the federal funding supported. A clearer measure of the need is the constant growth in volume of calls, reflecting the crisis situation many Canadians experienced over the 16 months of COVID. From March 2020 through June 2021, the volume of calls answered grew quarter on quarter, peaking in January-March 2021 at nearly 200,000. Although the numbers dropped slightly in the second quarter of 2021 (7%), they remain 59% higher if compared to the same period in 2019 pre-COVID (United Way Centraide Canada, 2021c).

211 CALLS ANSWERED IN CANADA BY QUARTER FROM APRIL 2019 TO JUNE 2021



Source: (United Way Centraide Canada, 2021c).

211 Navigators provided information on a wide range of services, with needs changing over time. At the beginning of the pandemic, callers were seeking basic support for needs like food, community services, income support, and employment. By the Fall of 2020, calls related to individual and family support spiked. In the Spring of 2021, there was a sharp rise in calls related to healthcare. Data also showed a slow and steady rise in calls for mental health and substance use disorder services. People working the phones reported that calls during the pandemic were longer and more complex, with individuals expressing higher levels of emotional stress. Many of the callers had never accessed social services before COVID (United Way Centraide Canada, 2021c).

Increased collaboration and partnership

During the pandemic all 211 partners saw an increase in the number of community tables and partnerships they were involved in, with many reporting the creation of new COVID response tables, and existing tables refocusing onto COVID responses. 211 service partners were actively involved in over 364 different community tables that involved over 1,675 organizations (United Way Centraide Canada, 2020).

In late 2021, the Calgary Police Service (CPS), Calgary 911, and Calgary 211 developed a call-diversion and co-location initiative. Calgary 911 and 211 operated in the same space to “allow for the learning and understanding around processes and procedures between Calgary 911 and 211” (The City of Calgary, 2022) and began diverting calls. During the trial period, call takers for Calgary’s 911 were virtually co-located with 211 Navigators that help callers experiencing a mental health crisis or needing advice about domestic abuse or food and housing assistance. Funding for the pilot project were reallocated from the Calgary Police Services budget (CBC News, 2021; Tran, P., 2021).

During the first quarter of 2021, the Winnipeg Police Service's Domestic Violence Support Services Pilot Project, determined that more than 880 hours of police response time was saved just through this initiative alone (Kavanagh, 2021).

The power of data

United Way Centraide Canada and the members of the 211 Canada Leadership Table are constantly exploring ways to use the data they collect to help funders and policymakers direct resources in the most impactful ways. Significant effort was directed to developing a data collection strategy that can provide standardized socio-demographic information across the country. Financial support from Employment and Social Development Canada allowed the CLT's National Demonstrating Impact Group to pilot a national data equity survey in late 2020. The pilot identified barriers to demographic data collection and suggested considerations for how to reduce those barriers. The result was the opportunity to advance equity through a more consistent framework and opened new opportunities for impact (Turner Consulting Group Inc., 2021).

There are numerous examples of how United Way Centraide Canada and 211 service partners have already used 211 data. One example is an online mapping tool called Radar that provide a sociodemographic profile of Greater Montreal area neighbourhoods, cities, and towns. Radar became a critical information tool during COVID-19. Among other things, it tracked which community agencies were open. 211 data also helped Centraide prioritize where new funds from government and grants from the philanthropic community and private donations from individuals and corporations could be directed (McArthur & Miall, 2020).

Regional 211 Case Studies

British Columbia

British Columbia 211 can trace its origins to Vancouver's Community Information Service which was established in 1953. In 1958, the first edition of the *Directory of Health, Welfare and Recreation Services* (also known as the "Red Book") was published. The 211 British Columbia Services Society (BC211) was launched in 2010, serving people living in Metro Vancouver, Fraser Valley, and Squamish-Lillooet Regional Districts. The *Red Book* evolved into BC211's online database. There was a gradual expansion over the years, with phone service being expanded to the Sunshine Coast Regional District in 2014, text service added in 2015, and phone service expanded to Vancouver Island and the Gulf Islands in 2017. A webchat service was introduced in 2017 (BC211, n.d.). In 2017 BC211 also collaborated on projects with many organizations and non-profits. They worked alongside the Red Cross to connect refugees seeking shelter or food with contacts in BC, and aided in the development of *Arrival Advisor*, an app that connects immigrants and refugees with settlement services (PeaceGeeks, n.d.). BC211's involvement in the community continued growing. In June of 2018 during Seniors' Week, BC211 partnered with *Seniors on the Move* to launch a Seniors Transportation Hotline. Seniors on the Move had been running for several years prior to the partnership; however, through meetings with the Seniors Advisory Committee, the need for a hub and hotline was recognized. With the help of BC211, seniors looking for transportation information in Metro Vancouver could call 211 and receive many transportation options (Seniors on the Move, n.d.).

BC211 faced the same difficulty as their 211 counterparts in gaining a seat at the Emergency Management table. BC211's connection with Canadian Border Services was pivotal to finally joining forces with Red Cross Emergency Management. The Executive Director of BC211 at the time, Louise Ghousoub, remarked that: "because I talk about trying to get at the table, working closely with Canadian Border Services has really been helpful" (L. Ghousoub, personal communication, October 22, 2019).

When the pandemic began many older British Columbians who lived independently with the help of family and friends found those supports unavailable and required more assistance to remain connected and engaged (Hannah, 2020). BC211 was at the centre of an innovative partnership to respond to these challenges. Through their partnership with United Way British Columbia Healthy Aging, the Office of the Seniors' Advocate, and the Ministry of Health, "*Safe Seniors, Strong Communities*" (SSSC) was developed. SSSC worked to match seniors who required essential, non-medical support with volunteers who were willing to help. Thanks to this partnership, BC211 served as the "front door" to register seniors and volunteers. To fulfill this role, BC211 expanded its service region to the whole of BC to allow people to call 211 if they needed help with groceries, prepared meal delivery, medication pick up, a social connection buddy, and/or other types of supports (Hannah, 2020).

Operationally, SSSC is a product of United Way British Columbia Healthy Aging whose network includes *Better at Home* providers (Hannah, 2020). *Better at Home* is a program that helps seniors with simple non-medical, day-to-day tasks so that they can continue to live

independently in their own homes and remain connected to their communities (Better at Home, 2023). *Better at Home* is funded through the United Way by the Ministry of Health (Nelson, 2022) and its service providers make up the twenty-four social service agencies that serve as HUB Response Agencies throughout B.C. Over 140 B.C. agencies support the HUBs and strengthen and support the accessibility of SSSC for all older residents of B.C. (Hannah, 2020).

Because the demand for the SSSC program was beyond the capacity of BC211, there was a call to increase funding to better meet service requests. In response, the Provincial Government directed \$50M to the United Way of the Lower Mainland to develop and enhance seniors' supports in late March of 2020 (British Columbia Ministry of Health, 2020). To help meet demand, over 50 call takers were seconded from the Ministry of Health to help manage the volume of registrations in the early days of the program. Complications arose in the day-to-day operations, specifically the shift from in-person to remote operation contributed to communication issues. To address this challenge, BC211 increased the variety (e.g., Zoom, chat, direct messaging, etc.) and frequency of communication (I. Chanin, personal communication, October, 2021).

BC211 continued to expand their services to better meet the changing needs of BC residents. One of their recent efforts, *United for Ukraine*, provides support to displaced Ukrainians in the area by providing critical resources. Resources include, but are not limited to legal services, health care, mental health care, employment, housing, and financial assistance. *United For Ukraine* was born from a partnership between Service BC and United Way to respond to the increase in calls that Service BC was receiving (British Columbia Municipal Affairs, 2022). Some of BC211's services continue to provide support to community members within changing environments. *VictimLink BC* is one service that is consistently necessary. *VictimLink BC* is funded by Victim Services who provide funding and support to over 160 police and community-based programs (Province of British Columbia, n.d.).

Alberta

Prior to their merging, both major cities in Alberta (Edmonton and Calgary) ran their own respective 211 services. The Edmonton 211 service was launched in 2004 and was supported by the United Way Alberta Capital Region (Alberta 211, n.d.). Calgary followed in 2005 with support from the United Way of Calgary and Area and the City of Calgary. The 211 online database of community resources was initially managed by the City of Calgary's Information Centre (Distress Centre, 2019). The cities operated this way for several years, expanding service to Cochrane in 2007 and the City of Leduc and Leduc County in 2009 (Alberta 211, n.d.). In 2011, 211 joined forces with InformAlberta to become data partners (Alberta 211, n.d.). InformAlberta is owned by Alberta Health Services and provides an online directory of community, health, social, and government organizations and services (InformAlberta, n.d.). In 2012, the cities merged to create Alberta 211 allowing for the expansion of services province-wide. This merge was funded by the United Way Capital Region. During this time, the structure of Alberta 211 changed to include a project manager and a coordinator out of the United Way Capital Region (E. Potter, personal communication, March 6, 2020).

In 2014, the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) became a partner of 211 Edmonton, managing the operation and maintaining the database for Northern Alberta. In 2019, the Distress Centre of Calgary took over from the Calgary Information Centre in managing the online database. This allowed for the Distress Centre to continue building 211's community resource knowledge and capacity. In the same year, a text service was launched (Belayneh et al., 2017).

Presently, Alberta 211 operates from three major organizations. The CMHA remains an operating partner for Northern Alberta, while the Distress Centre Calgary is an operating partner for Southern Alberta (E. Potter, personal communication, March 6, 2020). Both cities are joined through United Way Alberta Capital Region. Alberta 211 receives provincial funding as well as local funding from United Way via budget lines and government ministries (i.e., the Ministry of Health; E. Potter, personal communication, March 6, 2020). AB211 also receives funding from Family and Community Support Services (FCSS) through Distress Centre Calgary. Every municipality has an FCSS department that provides funding to direct to unique needs in their community. The province provides 80% of the funding, with the municipalities picking up the rest (S. Wright, personal communication, February 25, 2020).

Despite their efforts to aid in the organization of responses to spontaneous emergency situations, AB211 struggled to secure a spot with emergency management. Difficulty getting a seat at the table is an experience that has been common across provinces. In the 2019 focus group, Dressler lamented that “[Calgary] has 311, so they're reluctant to market 211 in a time of disaster” (J. Dressler, personal communication, October, 2019). The Alberta government had been hesitant to bring on non-profits to emergency management discussions since the province was already funding services that performed similar roles. In a one-on-one interview with Dressler, she spoke to this issue stating that “it is not that it's mistrust, it's just a lack of integration and a lack of pre-existing partnerships” (J. Dressler, personal communication, February 27, 2020). One pre-existing partnership AB211 maintained is in the field of mental health and addictions where they have been regarded as a primary point of access. Their “warm transfer protocols and partnerships with 811, Kids Help Phone, the Distress Center in Calgary, CMHA in Edmonton” paint a picture of successful collaboration (J. Dressler, personal communication, February 27, 2020). Operationally, Alberta 211 staffers and volunteers receive extensive training including both the mandatory 211 call centre training, as well as an additional ~70 hours related to crisis intervention (E. Potter, personal communication, March 6, 2020). Despite their extensive training and ability to assist communities at every stage of disaster, AB211 had been “seen as a jack of all trades, master of none” for a long time prior to the pandemic (J. Dressler, personal communication, February 27, 2020).

Edmonton and Calgary experienced slightly different hurdles. Acceptance for a 211 service did not come easily to the city of Edmonton. Rather, the value of 211 was largely unrecognized since the city had been using either the 311 service, or *Disaster Social Services* to address emergent and persistent crises. Wright highlighted a key difference between Edmonton and Calgary during the 2019 Focus Group. “The difference between Edmonton and Calgary is that Calgary at least had that community, or community organizations, that have emergency social services tables and Edmonton has nothing of the sort. And that was the problem; we had no connection to any

community-serving agency” (S. Wright, personal communication, October, 2019). Being the larger known service, Red Cross received many funding opportunities that Wright says AB211 did not, making it difficult to expand services. According to Emma Potter, CMHA Edmonton Manager, Red Cross provided grants to AB211 following their partnership with United Way, which funded the expansion of the delivery of services to text.

When the pandemic struck in 2020, AB211 teams sprung into action and developed extremely valuable and long-lasting partnerships. AB211 faced a drastic increase in demand for services and saw a 72% increase in 211 contacts from January 26th to December 31st, 2020 in comparison to the previous year (Distress Centre, 2022). According to Chloe McBean, former 211 program manager with Distress Centre Calgary, 211 was approached by the government of Alberta asking for support in the mass distribution of non-medical grade face masks (C. McBean, personal communication, July 29, 2020). AB211 also helped with increased call volumes regarding domestic violence and support for seniors by taking on other agencies’ phone lines or by diverting calls to more appropriate agencies/services (C. McBean, personal communication, July 29, 2020).

AB211 was finally being seen as a comprehensive program that did not require many new resources and was being recognized by the community at large. “Larger scale systems, action tables, and the government are now seeing that they can’t do it all by themselves, and they need help. And 211 is already an infrastructure that is set up.” (C. McBean, personal communication, July 29, 2020). Many stakeholders developed an interest in the 211 database as a means to track community needs and inform policies. McBean states: “211’s spirit and purpose is to connect people with needs to resources; if we can do that in any way and reduce some of the barriers and the linkages that are needed to do that. I think that we have an ethical obligation to do that” (C. McBean, personal communication, July 29, 2020).

The demand for 211 services in Alberta has remained high since the pandemic. This, coupled with the recognition of its value, led the Government of Alberta to announce an increase in funding for Alberta 211 on November 23, 2022 (Jones, 2022). The Government of Alberta announced that it will be doubling funding to more than \$15 million dollars. Nicholas Milliken, Minister of Mental Health and Addiction stated that the “increasing funding for 211 is part of our government’s efforts to build a recovery-oriented system of care for mental health and addiction” (Thomson, 2022). This change will occur over the next three years and will increase 211’s capacity to take calls and provide resources to the public. Many members of the community are hopeful that the funding will help people to access evidence-based addictions services and other opioid related services for those struggling with addictions (Jones, 2022).

Alberta 211 continues to provide support to vulnerable populations such as the Alberta Indigenous and LGBTQ2SIA+ communities. The federal government announced in December, 2022, that \$2 million dollars will be provided to several Alberta-based organizations including Alberta 211 (Swensrude, 2022). This funding addresses gender-based violence particularly among Indigenous women and girls, and LGBTQ2SIA+ individuals. That same month, the Alberta government also announced a partnership with Alberta 211 and the federal government to further address gender-based violence (Swensrude, 2022). Over \$3 million dollars will be

directed to 211 to improve coordination between the agencies and direct survivors towards much needed support. Marci Len, Minister for Women and Gender Equality and Youth, announced the funding stating: “In Alberta, the surge continues as several crisis hotlines reported a 50 percent or higher increase in calls from 2021 to 2022” (Babych, 2022). This announcement followed reports from multiple women’s shelter agencies in Alberta regarding the inability to shelter thousands of women due to lack of capacity and resources (Swensrude, 2022).

Saskatchewan

The 211 service was officially launched in Saskatchewan in 2013, first operating only as a searchable website (Streck, 2013). In 2018, SK211 was able to expand their services to allow users to interact with trained professionals through a phone call, text message, or webchat (Community Initiatives Fund, 2018). This was made possible through expansion funding provided by the Community Initiatives Fund (CIF) and CanPacific Potash (K. Nelson, personal communication, January 16, 2020). The CIF is a Special Purpose Fund created by the Government of Saskatchewan through *The Saskatchewan Gaming Corporation Act* (Community Initiatives Fund, n.d.). For CIF, the decision to fund SK211 was simple. The CIF recognized the value 211 data from urban and rural communities could serve in identifying and developing services to some of the province’s most vulnerable populations, including rural and Indigenous communities in the north (Community Initiatives Fund, 2018).

When the pandemic hit Saskatchewan, the provincial 811 Healthline became overloaded with calls from people who required resources they had previously not needed (K. Nelson, personal communication, June 15, 2020). In response to the community’s demand for resources, SK211’s resource team began working from home to update their records. Nelson stated: “One of the decisions that we made really early on, and acted quite quickly on, was making sure that services were being updated in our database, so that when people were looking for what was available to them, they had the most accurate information possible” (K. Nelson, personal communication, June 15, 2020). As anticipated, SK211 experienced an extreme surge in calls – an increase of about 244% in the month of March alone (K. Nelson, personal communication, June 15, 2020.).

Prior to the onset of the pandemic, mental health and substance use were among the top reasons for contacts in Saskatchewan (“Saskatchewan 211 COVID-19 Response Update,” 2021). However, within the first six months of the pandemic, health care became the primary reason for contacts followed by food security, and income support (K. Nelson, personal communication, June 15, 2020). Nelson noted an increase in requests to address food-related needs of 30% compared to pre-covid times (K. Nelson, personal communication, May 25, 2021.). The province faced challenges with maintaining records amid closing and re-opening businesses, as well as with callers using the 211 line for health advice or information. Speaking to the confusion, Nelson stated: “We decided really quickly that we needed to make it very clear that if you’re experiencing symptoms call 811; we don’t want to duplicate a service” (K. Nelson, personal communication, June 15, 2020). Updates were provided by service partners and, on a local level, community partners. Service providers also used their platforms to recommend clients to 211, and social media provided a platform to promote and share 211 resources for basic needs (Saskatchewan 211, 2021).

Saskatchewan 211 developed and enhanced many notable relationships following the onset of the pandemic. One relationship was with the Saskatchewan Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP). On November 30, 2020, the RCMP released a statement announcing their partnership with SK211 to create co-branded business cards (Royal Canadian Mounted Police, 2020). The cards include both RCMP contact information (on the front of the card), and Saskatchewan 211 information (on the back of the card) presented in both English and French. This project had been piloted prior to the pandemic but lacked the necessary funding (K. Nelson, personal communication, June 15, 2020). This partnership was funded through the RCMP's Family Violence Initiative Fund. The project allows officers to present their cards and empower survivors of domestic violence to seek services within their community, anonymously. Front line officers use the business cards to inform clients of Saskatchewan 211 and provide them with an avenue of outreach when a social issue is beyond their scope of ability to help with (Royal Canadian Mounted Police, 2020).

The SK211 and RCMP partnership is expected to remain of critical necessity since Saskatchewan has historically had some of the highest rates of police-reported interpersonal and domestic violence. According to the most recent data from Statistics Canada, Saskatchewan has the highest rates of police-reported intimate partner violence (Statistics Canada, 2023). SK211 has also been involved with the Ministry of Justice to create *Face the Issue*, a public awareness campaign addressing interpersonal violence and abuse (Government of Saskatchewan, n.d.-a). In January 2022, the Government of Saskatchewan released a statement announcing the launch of the second phase of the campaign. SK211 partnered with the Ministry of Justice to develop a website specific to those experiencing violence and abuse seeking information, resources, and support (Abuse SK, n.d.)

A second notable partnership was developed with the Saskatchewan Blue Cross in 2021. This three-year sponsorship invested in the service's sustainability (Saskatchewan Blue Cross, n.d.). In April that same year, SK211 partnered with the Ministry of Education to develop *Parent Central*. *Parent Central* is an online portal that helps parents or caregivers find and access licensed childcare, information, programming, or services for children from the ages of zero to six" (Government of Saskatchewan, n.d.-b). The need for a resource like this became particularly apparent during the first year of the pandemic when more families were operating from home. In the Government of Saskatchewan's news release, Robyn Edwards-Bentz, CEO of United Way Regina, stated: "COVID-19 has demonstrated that accessing quality child care, as well as parenting information and services, is imperative for all. We are proud to partner with the Ministry of Education's Early Years Branch to launch this portal" (Government of Saskatchewan, n.d.-b). *Parent Central* was funded by the Government of Saskatchewan through the *Canada-Saskatchewan Early Learning and Childcare Agreement*. This ongoing relationship with government officials provides a hopeful future for the success of Saskatchewan 211 (Government of Saskatchewan, n.d.-b).

Manitoba

Manitoba's 211 service is relatively new. The province officially launched their MB211 website in 2017. Since the 1970s, Volunteer Manitoba had previously offered similar services under

Volunteer Manitoba. Volunteer Manitoba evolved from the Central Volunteer Bureau (CVB), which had a history of providing volunteer services during wartime (Volunteer Manitoba, n.d.). At this time, the CVB recruited, trained, and placed volunteers; this later became the volunteer referral program of today. In 1978, Volunteer Manitoba began offering information and referral services through their CONTACT Community Information Database (Volunteer Manitoba, n.d.-a). CONTACT served to provide individuals and social service providers with the best available information to help citizens and agencies become better informed about community services. In 2015, Volunteer Manitoba and United Way Winnipeg worked together to transition the CONTACT database into MB211” (Volunteer Manitoba, n.d.-a. p. 4).

In 2019, on Thanksgiving, Winnipeg fell victim to a violent snowstorm that created immense damage to the city, leaving more than 50,000 residents without power. Approximately 30,000 trees on public property were damaged, costing the city approximately \$10 million (The City of Winnipeg, 2020). The city received over 6,700 service calls and received help from other cities, namely Regina, Saskatoon, Calgary, and Toronto, in the cleanup (McKendrick, 2020). Philip Wolfart, Manager of Manitoba 211, went to work updating 211’s site, compiling resources for the public focusing on insurance claims, settlement services, etc. Reflecting on the disaster, Wolfart stated: “These emergency situations are not short-term events. And the challenges that these folks are facing is that the Red Cross deals with the short-term events” (P. Wolfart, personal communication, October 22, 2019).

Though MB211 struggled to be a part of emergency management, unbeknownst to them, their name was becoming public knowledge. According to Wolfart, local organizations and social services were promoting their services or listing their website without their knowledge (P. Wolfart, personal communication, October 22, 2019). Thus, when COVID-19 broke out in Manitoba, MB211 became a critical resource. They were flooded with emails from seniors and family members expressing their concern of food security. In response to the pandemic in March of 2020, the Federal Government released the New Horizons for Seniors Program grant (\$9 million) to support older adults across Canada (United Way Centraide, 2020). This grant was distributed through the United Way Centraide Canada Network. One of MB211’s agencies, Aging Opportunity, was already providing older adults with resources. However, since MB211 did not yet have a phone line, they cleverly struck a partnership with City Services in Manitoba (311) to triage older adults and concerned relatives’ calls to Aging Opportunity (J. Baker, personal communication, October 22, 2019). According to Jodene Baker, director of impact, innovation, and evaluation at United Way Winnipeg, they reached out to the city of Winnipeg and their 311-call line to see if they would be interested in opening up that call service for calls that they typically wouldn’t deal with” (J. Baker, personal communication, October 22, 2019). CAA Manitoba offered their support by driving to the city’s central foodbank operator, Harvest Manitoba and delivering food hampers to the doors of seniors. Other community organizations such as the Bear Clan Patrol adjusted their day-to-day operations to help with food hampers as well (J. Baker, personal communication, October 22, 2019). In this incredible display of teamwork and cooperation, MB211 helped provide immediate care to some of Manitoba’s most vulnerable community members.

In Manitoba, statistics on website usage showed an increase in searches for food, clothing, and housing support. Similarly, many individuals were seeking information on COVID-19. To meet this need, MB211 created a tile on their website where users could find information on the virus in a blog-post style (J. Baker, personal communication, October 22, 2019).

Thanks to federal funding in October 2020, MB211 was able to add a 24/7 phone line to their service (Derksen, 2021). The phone line allowed MB211 to build a relationship with Winnipeg Police Services where calls may be diverted from 911. This allows for callers to receive more appropriate information/resources faster, and for the 911 call lines to remain strictly for emergencies (Kavanagh, 2021).

In March of 2021, the Province of Manitoba provided \$510,000 to United Way Winnipeg to support the operation of their 211 service for one year (Province of Manitoba, 2021). This funding allowed MB211 to expand their service platforms to include text and web chat. Connie Walker, president and CEO of United Way Winnipeg, stated in the province's news release: "More than 6,500 Manitobans from across the province have been able to access the right help at the right time since the launch of 211 phone service in October" (Province of Manitoba, 2021).

MB211 partnered with the provincial government and other community organization during the pandemic. In April of 2021, a new program was launched to help connect seniors and those with mobility issues, to transportation services for COVID-19 vaccination appointments. People calling MB211 could speak directly with a 211 service navigator who would listen to their needs and work with them to identify transportation options and other resources in their community (Province of Manitoba, 2021).

The Province of Manitoba continues to see the benefit of 211, allocating \$510,000 in core funding in 2022-23 to United Way Winnipeg to support MB211 (Province of Manitoba, 2022a). The Province also reached out to MB211 to partner with them to create a single-access-point welcoming centre for Ukrainian refugees (Province of Manitoba, 2022b).

Ontario

In 2002, the City of Toronto was the first community in Canada to establish a 211 service. The service was operated by Community Information Toronto, the leading information and referral service at the time. Community Information Toronto was rebranded as *Findhelp Information Services* in 2004. Ontario 211 had previously been under the leadership of the Ministry of Consumer and Business Services. However, in 2005, it was announced that 211's provincial government leadership would be under the Ministry of Community and Social Services (MCSS). The Legislative Assembly of Ontario earmarked \$1.4 million in its 2006-2007 budget for a start up investment to expand services to other Ontario communities (Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs, 2008; ON211, 2014). An additional \$3 million was provided by the Ministry of Finance to expand the 211 data collection system. The MCSS committed \$13.8 million over the course of 4 years to continue developing and expanding the 211 service (ON211, 2014).

By the end of 2008, seven other 211 call centers were established in Ontario, managed by information and referral service agencies. These agencies already had established connections which made the transition smoother (ON211, 2014). Ontario had thus been established as the ‘governing body’ for all other 211 provincial services. This meant that ON211 was responsible for distributing government funding to service partners and for developing the infrastructure required to tie the system of service partners and stakeholders together (ON211, 2014). By 2011, all residents of Ontario had access to 211 and was the first province to have 100% coverage. As such, ON211 helped to develop data standards for other provinces to follow, ensuring accurate, up-to-date information (ON211, 2014).

ON211 Services is governed by a voluntary Board of Directors and includes six regional hubs managed by existing information and referral services (ON211, n.d.-b). The Central Region is managed by *Findhelp Information Services* in Toronto. The Central East Region is managed by *Community Connection* in Collingwood. The Northern Region is managed by *Lakehead Social Planning Council* in Thunder Bay. The South West Region is managed by the City of Windsor. The Central South Region is managed by *InCommunities* in St. Catharines, and the Eastern Region is managed by *Community Navigation of Eastern Ontario* (ON211, n.d.-b).

ON211 has 213 active partnerships in various sectors including health, community, and legal services/public safety (ON211, 2022). Partners of ON211 use 211 data to inform their programs (ON211, 2020). There are 36 local data providers that collect, maintain, and update service records for their respective areas (ON211, 2014). This data is then merged and entered into the provincial database (ON211, 2014). Both the United Way and Regional Governments in Ontario act as ambassadors for 211 in all Ontario communities. Thus, ON211 receives government support in many ways including promotion of services and agency/service provider connections (ON211, 2014).

ON211 utilizes technology to aid in the delivery of services and to inform gaps in services based on the needs of the communities. Findhelp Information Services (the information and referral service for 211 Central Region), uses an Interactive Voice Response (IVR) phone system. This system allows callers to quickly access information or resources for a current crisis. IVR is a proactive tool that gives people the information that they need without making them wait to speak to you in the instance of call volume spikes (A. Finateri, personal communication, March 2, 2020).

ON211 also uses business intelligence (BI) to collect data on the needs of callers and to gain an understanding of who is accessing sites and services and what they are looking for (C. Moody, personal communication, July 30, 2020). The BI technology has led to the development of visual data in the form of service maps. These maps allow the public to see the needs of callers reflected in a particular 211 service area. For example, between the dates of March 18 and May 18, 2020, the top three needs of adults in Ottawa, Ontario were: income support/financial assistance (19.27%), information services (14.47%), and food/meals (13.99%; ON211, n.d.-a). BI allowed 322 Central to move strongly into supporting partner research (C. Moody, personal communication, July 30, 2020).

ON211 has a long history of playing a role in emergency management and preparedness. A protocol was developed for municipalities to follow when they require 211's services. Municipalities must call 211 and identify the geographical location that they would like monitored. 211 will then provide that municipality with the most recent, up-to-date information (J. Hoyles, personal communication, February 26, 2020; P. Hillier, personal communication, February 27, 2020). 211 also produces post-disaster reports for municipalities detailing the number and content of calls. These reports are free through provincial funding when the disaster is short-term (~1 month). For long-term disasters, 211 requires compensation to produce a report (J. Hoyles, personal communication, February 26, 2020).

In the case of an emergency, ON211's business continuity plan allows each of the six regions to communicate and support one another (A. Finateri, personal communication, March 2, 2020). After hours, 211 Toronto (including the City of Toronto, Durham region, York region, and Peel region) acts as the sole 211 service provider for all of Ontario. 211 Toronto has both informal and formal roles in an emergency. Informal roles refer to monitoring the incoming data from callers, and formal roles refer to the active participation in providing information to callers and in registering volunteers (A. Finateri, personal communication, March 2, 2020).

Leading up to the pandemic, between March 16th and March 30th, total contacts were up 50%. During that time, schools and community programs had closed their doors (ON211, 2020). When the pandemic emerged, organizations everywhere had to adapt to remote operation. Previously, community navigators had access to spaces that allowed them to debrief and receive support following difficult conversations with callers (J. Hoyles, personal communication, February 26, 2020). During the pandemic however, community navigators were more isolated and concerns of mental health and wellbeing for service providers were illuminated. To address this issue, 211 began using Microsoft Teams as a platform allowing community navigators to instantly connect with team members in a virtual space (J. Hoyles, personal communication, February 26, 2020). As demand for 211 services rapidly increased, ON211 needed to shift their attention. Their focus became: getting staff ready, increasing capacity, increasing external communication, forming new partnerships, and highlighting the value of 211 (ON211, 2021). "Across the province, regional services providers sat on community response tables where leaders within those regions identified the greatest needs and the best way to serve the most vulnerable populations" (ON211, 2021, p. 5).

ON211 understood that COVID-19 would disproportionately impact vulnerable populations and, as a result, acted quickly to identify those populations. One of the resulting actions 211 Central took was an equity project that would collect – and use – data from callers in a way that was anti-racist and anti-oppressive (C. Moody, personal communication, July 30, 2020). ON211 also understood that seniors would be disproportionately impacted, particularly given their increased risk for symptom severity. Seniors were a population left particularly vulnerable and in need of support. The data told a stark story—46% of the seniors that called 211 Central Region were having difficulty accessing food. It wasn't necessarily about not being able to afford food. It was about not understanding or knowing how to access food when they had to stay at home (C. Moody, personal communication, July 30, 2020). Another concern exacerbated by the pandemic

was mental health. 211 Central Region teamed up with the City of Toronto and multiple other organizations to create the Toronto Mental Health Support Strategy (City of Toronto, 2020).

The partnerships made during the 2020-2021 year were crucial for identifying and addressing urgent needs in each region. To address mental health during the pandemic, ON211 partnered with the Ontario Psychological Association to ensure frontline workers without health benefits had access to support at no cost (ON211, 2021). ON211 also developed partnerships to address food security, including with the Ontario Community Support Association, the Windsor-Essex Food Security Response Group, and the Regional Food Distribution Association in Thunder Bay (ON211, 2020; ON211, 2021). In October of 2019, ON211 partnered with United Way Simcoe Muskoka to develop the Urgent Needs Fund which provided emergency financial assistance in the form of a one-time grant to community members (ON211, 2021; P. Hillier, personal communication, February 27, 2020).

United Way Simcoe Muskoka is made up of six sub-regions in the community; one agency in each sub-region received \$10,000 for a total of \$60,000. People living in the community could access this urgent need fund up to \$250 and pick up the cash in a very short turnaround time, in about 24 hours or so (P. Hillier, personal communication, February 27, 2020). ON211 managed the assessment, screening, and intake of applicants, and created and managed the online tools necessary for tracking the project and reporting its success (ON211, 2021; United Way Simcoe Muskoka, n.d.).

During the pandemic, across the country many food banks were forced to close, and more people than ever before needed emergency food. Food banks had to change the way they had traditionally operated. In northern Ontario, a partnership between the Regional Food Distribution Association in Thunder Bay and the Anti-Hunger Coalition in Timmins, Ontario. 211 North assisted these programs by registering individuals and families for available food banks and food delivery programs. In August 2020, 211 North also served as a public inquiry and registration line for the community of Red Lake, Ontario, after a state of emergency was declared due to threatening forest fires (ON211 North, 2021).

ON211's data sharing has been instrumental in developing and keeping partnerships. The City of Toronto utilized 211 data to create *Wellbeing Toronto*, a web app that shows the resources available in a user's neighbourhood (United Way Centraide, 2020, February 11). The app shows data on 140 neighbourhoods in Toronto and has illuminated the gaps in resources for certain populations. For example, city officials discovered that a lot of services on the map appeared to coincide with where Chinese people appeared to live. However, when they dissected the information, they found that not all services would serve the Chinese population well — because, for example, people who understand Cantonese may not speak Mandarin” (United Way Centraide, 2020, February 11).

Quebec

Quebec 211 and Regions operates through the Information and Referral Center of Greater Montréal (IRCGM; 211 Québec Regions, n.d.). IRCGM has been serving vulnerable Montreal residents and providing them with public and community resources since 1956 (Centre de

Référence du Grand Montréal, 2022). The territory of 211 Québec and Regions includes the regions of Centre-du-Québec, Côte-Nord, Capitale-Nationale, Chaudière-Appalaches, Mauricie, MRC Haute-Yamaska, MRC deBrome-Missisquoi and Nord-du-Québec (Centre de Référence du Grand Montréal, 2022).

Centraide of Greater Montreal helped make 211 accessible for residents beyond the Montréal region including the City of Laval in 2016, and the regional county municipalities of L'Assomption and Thérèse-De Blainville in 2017 (211 Grand Montréal, n.d.; Centre de Référence du Grand Montréal, 2022). In 2018, the Board of Montreal Metropolitan Community (CMM) approved the implementation of the 211 service in the Greater Montreal Area, allowing citizens of 82 municipalities in the CMM to have access to the full service (211 Grand Montréal, n.d.).

Consistent with many provinces trying to establish themselves in emergency management, QC211 was met with resistance. In the early stages of establishment, the City of Montreal removed emergency management from the 211 agreement. The City of Montreal was concerned that, in an emergency, a 211 service would create confusion amongst the public (M. Chaurette, personal communication, January 31, 2020). The city already utilized a well-established 311 line, as was the case in both Longueuil and Laval. Former Director at Information and Referral Centre of Greater Montreal, Mathieu Chaurette, stated: "They already had all their protocols. They already had different things in place and they didn't want to have a new actor to play a role in emergency management." 311 typically dealt with emergency situations by providing people with information from civil society (i.e., updates from the municipality) while other non-profit organizations were generally not utilized in this way (M. Chaurette, personal communication, January 31, 2020).

When Quebec was involved in Canada's response to the Syrian refugee crisis in 2015/16, the City of Montreal enlisted 211 to handle donations and volunteer requests. However, according to Chaurette, the donations and volunteers were not organized prior to referring people to 211 which created problems. He stated: "We were able to take those calls, but the city didn't know what to do with all those donations. The city didn't know what to do with all those volunteers, and they were way too much" (M. Chaurette, personal communication, January 31, 2020). QC211 would not fully establish their role in emergency management until 2020 when the pandemic struck.

The emergence of COVID-19 meant that the people of Quebec had to adjust to an era of uncertainty, and 211 was there to help. Operationally, prior to June 2021, the Capitale-Nationale, Chaudière-Appalaches served northern and eastern regions of Quebec while IRCGM was serving the South West region of Quebec (211 Québec Regions, n.d.). Before COVID-19, 211 Greater Montreal typically received around 3,000 phone calls in March and April; in 2020 they saw closer to 9,000 calls throughout March and April (M. Chaurette, personal communication, August 5, 2020). To manage these increases, more staff were trained and hired. Amidst these increases, Chaurette was tasked with transitioning his team to remote work which required quick adaptation on the part of the community navigators to adjust to new technology, a new environment, and higher call volumes. The 211 team also had to shift their focus to ensuring

their records were verified and updated constantly whereas, prior to the pandemic, records would only need verifying annually. Although there were challenges along the way, the entire transition from in-person work to remote work only took about a week (M. Chaurette, personal communication, August 5, 2020).

In contrast, Thierry Durand, former executive director of 211 Capital-Nationale et la Chaudière-Appalaches, noted that in his region, increases in call volumes for 211 were not incredibly significant. Durand recalled that the calls 211 Capital-Nationale et la Chaudière-Appalaches received were primarily from community members seeking testing kits rather than seeking aid for social issues (i.e., housing, food security, economic security). Rather, other call centers such as 811 and 311 received the majority of call traffic during the peak of the pandemic. According to Durand, 211's major role was providing reliable information to partner organizations; this is where the value of 211 was realized (T. Durand, personal communication, August 27, 2020).

Municipal and health authorities noticed 211's abilities to support senior citizens and help with food provision. In April, a significant portion of calls taken by 211 Greater Montréal were related to food insecurity. 211 Greater Montréal partnered with the three major cities (Montreal, Laval, and Longueuil) to promote communication and provide updates regarding food-providing organizations (M. Chaurette, personal communication, August 5, 2020).

Funding from the federal government's Emergency Community Support Fund meant that the 40% of Québécois who did not have access to 211 prior to the pandemic were now able to do so. (211 Grand Montréal, n.d.). COVID-19 led the 211 team to many insights regarding their place in the information and referral services in Quebec. Durand stated: "Now we know what we can do and what we *can't* do; what we don't have to do, and what we must not do. I think it clarified a lot: how 211 can be useful in a community, and it also clarified what 211 can be useful for." Durand also reflected on the many connections that were built or strengthened as a result of the pandemic. They were able to strengthen and continue their connections with Quebec City, different health organizations, and the United Way (T. Durand, personal communication, August 27, 2020). Similarly, Chaurette reflected on the gains made during the pandemic: "I think we gained a lot of respect. And with new partners." The data collected by 211 during the pandemic, regarding the status of businesses (i.e., are they open? How are they operating? What services are they offering?) was of particular importance" (M. Chaurette, personal communication, August 5, 2020).

Despite the successes 211 experienced throughout the pandemic, they continue to argue their value to the province, especially operating alongside established services such as 811 and 311. The primary hurdle that QC211 is working to overcome is to acquire sustainable funding that would allow 211 to reach all areas of the province and to establish themselves as a vital resource for the province of Quebec. 211 service in Quebec is no longer province-wide. As of January 1st 2022, the 211 Greater Montreal service is offered only on its main territories: the Communauté métropolitaine de Montréal, Vaudreuil-Soulanges, and Jardins-de-Napierville (211 Grand Montréal, n.d.).

New Brunswick

New Brunswick 211 was established on October 15, 2020, offering services via a 24/7 call centre (New Brunswick 211, n.d.; Government of New Brunswick, 2020). The service was launched by the provincial government in partnership with the federal government and the United Way (Government of New Brunswick, 2020). The following year in August, 2021, the provincial government announced the expansion of NB211 to include an online, searchable database. This expansion was made possible due to partnerships between the Department of Social Development, United Way Centraide Canada, regional United Ways in New Brunswick, FindHelp Information Services, and the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation (ESIC). The Department of Social Development provided \$350,000 in funding and ESIC provided \$200,000 to fund operational costs (Government of New Brunswick, 2021).

Prior to the development of the NB211 service, many community members were demanding a “One Stop Shop” for services in New Brunswick. This demand prompted ESIC to assess options for such services in the spring of 2017 (Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation, 2015). Through their research, ESIC recommended the implementation of a 211 service for New Brunswick. United Way Centraide Canada and Nova Scotia 211 aided in the extensive research and provided ESIC with tours of the NS211 operation (Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation, 2015). The Executive Director of Ontario 211 Service, Karen Milligan hosted a webinar where she outlined the increasing value and recognition of 211 services by stakeholders. The priority of this webinar was to examine 211’s ability to address poverty (Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation, 2015). The research done by ESIC was valuable to both Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland who later expressed interest in developing their own 211 services (Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation, 2015).

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic illustrated the importance of NB211 services to stakeholders and community members. As many families were encouraged to isolate themselves to prevent the spread of the virus, issues regarding domestic violence became apparent. In November 2021, NB211 created a domain for information on programs and services for victims of family, intimate partner, and sexual violence. This call centre is run by 211 volunteers who have received additional training specific to gender-based and domestic violence. The Women’s Equality Branch provided training to volunteers regarding available services in the area, identifying and understanding patterns of behaviour, risk factors, and supportive ways to engage with callers subjected to violence (Government of New Brunswick, November 2021). In late December of 2022, NB211 experienced increased call volumes regarding the striking cold weather. Many individuals were calling the 211-line seeking information on shelter and services for themselves and their families (TAPInto New Brunswick, 2022).

NB211 answered over 16,000 calls between its launch in October 2020 and March 31, 2022 (United Way Central New Brunswick, 2022). The top reasons for contact included housing (28.5%), health (11%), income (10.5%), and mental health (9%). In March of 2023, it was announced that United Way Saint John, Kings and Charlotte reached their 2022 campaign goal, raising over \$1.7 million dollars. A portion of those funds will be allocated to New Brunswick

211. NB211 continues to establish themselves as a critical hub for resources and data for the community (Perry, 2023).

Nova Scotia

Nova Scotia's 211 service formally launched on February 11th, 2013. In 2017, NS211 received international accreditation through the Alliance of Information and Referral Systems. Its funding partners include the Province of Nova Scotia and the United Ways in Cape Breton, Pictou, Colchester, Cumberland, Halifax, and Lunenburg (Nova Scotia 211, 2021). Through the national 211 business continuity plan, FindHelp Information Services (host of 211 Toronto) provides after-hours navigation service for Nova Scotians (M. Myette, personal communication, July 30, 2020).

The 2013 launch of 211 in Nova Scotia was incredibly successful with over 50,000 people using the service over the first 11 months (Nova Scotia 211, 2014). The following year, NS211 responded to over 100 requests for presentations, call volumes and website usage increased by approximately 30%, and public awareness for the service was growing (Nova Scotia, 2015). Partnerships were formed with The College of Family Physicians of Nova Scotia, fire officers and paramedic associations, caring professional organizations, and the Association of Chiefs of Police (Nova Scotia, 2015). NS211 also participated in several events for United Way organizations across the province and presented to various council members (e.g., School Advisory Councils and Community Health Boards). (Nova Scotia, 2015).

In 2015, call volumes had increased by 45% and website visitation increased by 67% from the previous year. NS211 continued forming lasting partnerships, one of which was with the Department of Seniors to address senior abuse through two phone lines previously operated by the department. That same year, NS211 received funding from the Nova Scotia Chiefs of Police Association, Halifax Regional Police, and Anixter International (a local telecommunication equipment provider) to upgrade their website. The upgrade allowed Nova Scotians to search for programs in and near their communities directly from their mobile device and included embedded links to resources (Nova Scotia, 2016).

Also in 2015, the Federal Government pledged prioritization of immigration of Syrian refugees to Canada. NS211 was eager to help and in 49 days, 211 staff responded to more than 2,800 contacts and documented over 3,500 offers of assistance in the form of material goods, volunteerism and financial support (Nova Scotia, 2016, p.3). In 2016, call volumes had increased by 22% and website usage doubled from the previous year (Nova Scotia, 2017). That year, NS211 provided location-based reports on resources and needs to over 30 organizations, updated over 10,000 resource records, delivered 82 presentations, and attended 20 outreach events (Nova Scotia, 2017). Over the next two years, web usage became the primary method of contact for information seekers (Nova Scotia, 2019). In their 2020 Annual Report, NS211 announced plans to provide contact center services to Prince Edward Island (United Way Nova Scotia, 2020).

NS211 had always maintained an orientation towards emergency management and recognized the potential impact 211 has on emergency situations. Mike Myette, with Nova Scotia 211 (2011-2021), emphasized the importance of emergency preparedness in a pre-covid interview.

He stated: “Knowing when those first needs start to appear and having the ability to communicate that through to the emergency managers can really be valuable to them in terms of being prepared when those same sorts of needs escalate to a higher level” (M. Myette, personal communication, February 5, 2020).

In March of 2020, when the full effects of the pandemic were being realized, NS211 upheld its reputation as a go-to source for vital information during an emergency. Quality of service remained a critical piece of NS211’s identity even in unprecedented circumstances. Though NS211 team members had to transition to a “work-at-home” model in mid-March, they were prepared to continue delivering services remotely. To aid in the increase of call volumes, NS211 installed a new telephone system and launched a redesigned website that was easier to navigate (Nova Scotia, 2021). According to Myette, they “had a conduit set up through the Emergency Management Office” in partnership with the provincial government (M. Myette, personal communication, July 30, 2020). Director of Communications at the time, Angie Zinck, processed large volumes of information and produced “easily digestible key messages” that the community navigators referred to when responding to inquiries (Nova Scotia, 2021, p. 5). In the first quarter of the year, the Nova Scotia 211 team also provided service provider services to residents of Prince Edward Island under the national 211’s business continuity plan (Nova Scotia, 2021).

Gathering and providing data continued to be one of the most valuable services that NS211 provides, but managing the surge, and keeping up-to-date on changing information, was a challenge. NS211 utilized social media to keep up-to-date on non-profits’ operation status. Within a 10-day period, changes were made to over 1,100 service records, “a tenfold increase in pre-pandemic activity” (Nova Scotia 211, 2021, p.5). The top three needs identified in the 2020 Annual Report, were related to food, health, and finances. Community navigators also experienced a spike in requests for mental health support. To address food insecurity and mental health, NS211 partnered with Nova Scotia’s Department of Community Services and non-profit sector organizations. Through this partnership, they were able “to provide central intake services for specially designed COVID-19 support programs” (Nova Scotia 211, 2021, p. 5). in those areas, serving over 3,000 families in the province.

Consistent with many other 211’s experiences across the nation, new partnerships developed from the pandemic and previous connections were strengthened. In May, Nova Scotia 211 proudly partnered with Feed Nova Scotia to bring a new, short-term initiative that provided home delivery of food to Nova Scotians who needed food support and couldn't get to a food bank or other food support program (Nova Scotia 211, 2021). Another notable partnership was with the Family Service of Eastern Nova Scotia to establish a 24/7 Men’s Mental Health Line (Nova Scotia 211, 2021; MacDonald, 2021). This helpline developed in response to the unique struggles male-identifying individuals face in seeking support for mental health. These struggles were exacerbated during the pandemic. Men who are concerned for their own wellbeing and safety, or the wellbeing and safety of others can dial 211 and be transferred to the help line (Nova Scotia 211, 2021; MacDonald, 2021). In 2021, this help line was expanded to include access for Women’s and All Genders (Nova Scotia 211, 2022).

In September of 2022, Nova Scotia was struck by a tropical storm (Fiona) resulting in a loss of power, displaced Nova Scotians, and astonishing amounts of damage (Peddle, 2022). Nova Scotia's Emergency Management Office partnered with non-governmental organizations to supply necessities (i.e., food and water) to displaced residents. NS211 was also available to refer callers to those resources and to accept requests for wellness checks (Peddle, 2022). NS211 attributes their success within the community to their ability to provide reliable information and data that is of a high quality (M. Myette, personal communication, February 5, 2020).

NS211's former executive director reflected on the outpouring of appreciation the service received stating: "I read notes received during the years and I am always humbled by how grateful Nova Scotians are that 211 service is here" (Nova Scotia 211, 2021, p.10). NS211 has always been accessible to the community and has upheld the quality standards necessary when operating within emergency management (M. Myette, personal communication, February 5, 2020). 211 continues to be a well-established resource for community members, proving time and time again, their ability to handle emergency situations.

PEI, Newfoundland and Labrador, Nunavut and Yukon

The United Way of Prince Edward Island (PEI) announced the establishment of a PE211 phone service and website in June of 2020 (United Way Prince Edward Island, 2020). PE211 was developed by the United Way of PEI and the Province of Prince Edward Island under the province's Poverty Reduction Action Plan (United Way Prince Edward Island, 2020; Yarr, 2018).

PE211 had its first major post-pandemic test of the critical resource it could play in emergency management when post-tropical storm Fiona hit the island on September 23-24, 2022 with hurricane force winds and significant rainfalls. PEI experienced widespread and substantial damage to its coastlines and forests. For many islanders, it was one of the few places they could turn to speak with a real person who could help them (United Way Prince Edward Island, 2023).

Amy MacManus with PE211 said they were the only live-answer service at the time where people could call 24 hours a day. "We were able to answer multi-faceted questions which is so important because a lot of times if you're looking for shelter, you're just scrambling. You might also need to know about food or when your electricity is come back on. We were able to answer all of those questions for people (A. MacManus, personal communications, February 9, 2024).

MacManus said that Fiona served as a test for future emergencies and showed where the system was a bit weak. She said it also demonstrated the strength of the national 211 network to quickly pivot to support other regions that need help. Fiona hit Nova Scotia the same time it hit PEI. Since Nova Scotia 211 also answers calls from PEI, people from the island weren't getting through because of the huge surge in calls. "Within a very short turnaround period the phone line switched to Find Help Information Services in Toronto. They were able to pull staff off other areas to answer thousands of calls. Because we had that national relationship we could respond very quickly to the needs of the community. Nova Scotia now has the same system as Find Help Information Services so this shouldn't happen again" (A. MacManus, personal communications, February 9, 2024).

Not long after Fiona hit, the Government of PEI announced that that financial assistance would be offered to eligible islanders. The Government looked to PE211 for help with the registration process for Hurricane Fiona Senior Grocery Card Support (Government of PEI, September 28, 2022). “We were able to register thousands of people and answer questions about it” (MacManus, personal communication, February 9, 2024).

Yukon’s partners include United Way Yukon, United Way Centraide Canada, BC211, and the Government of Yukon through the Department of Health and Social Services (211 Yukon, n.d.). Nunavut’s partners include: Nunavut Kamatsiaqtut Helpline, Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated, United Way Centraide Canada, and Canadian Mental Health Association – Edmonton Region (211 Nunavut, n.d.). Nunavut Kamatsiaqtut Helpline offers telephone and counselling services for Northerners, and Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated “coordinates and manages Inuit responsibilities set out in the Nunavut Agreement and ensures that the federal and territorial government fulfill their obligations” (211 Nunavut, n.d.). Newfoundland’s partners include the United Ways of Newfoundland and Labrador, and their partners (United Way Newfoundland and Labrador, n.d.). PE211’s partners include the Government of Prince Edward Island and PEI Mutual Insurance Company (Prince Edward Island 211, n.d.).

Conclusion

Across Canada, 211 became part of the COVID-19 response infrastructure. A contribution agreement held by United Way Centraide Canada with the federal government under the Emergency Community Support Fund started on April 1, 2020 and ended on June 30, 2021. Additional support from provincial and territorial governments, local United Ways, and United Way Centraide Canada, allowed provinces and territories that established 211 during the pandemic to be able to continue to provide the helpline. Though communication and marketing to the general public about how they can benefit from 211 still remains a challenge, level of awareness increased, as did the efforts of 211 service partners to work together and to share best practices and resources. Funders and policy makers recognized how valuable 211 data was and new sources of funding emerged as various organizations and government departments realized 211 was one of the best ways to provide information to people.

United Way Centraide Canada and the members of the 211 Canada Leadership Table continue to explore new ways to help policymakers grapple with some of the most pressing challenges facing Canadians. For instance, in 2022, funding was secured through Infrastructure Canada to launch a homelessness prevention program. Teams from Alberta, Ontario, New Brunswick, and Newfoundland and Labrador were brought together to design a pilot project to proactively identify people at risk of homelessness and help connect them with preventative supports. The two-year pilot entails comprehensive training for 211 Navigators in recognizing housing-related risks, employing trauma-informed methodologies when working with vulnerable individuals and conducting assessments of social determinants of health. Local partner agencies pinpoint those requiring assistance and refer them to 211. Subsequently, 211 Navigators directly engage with these individuals, marking a departure from the conventional approach wherein clients initiate inbound calls to 211 to access information (United Way Centraide Canada, 2023b).

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Pre-Pandemic National Roundtable (October 21, 2019)

Mathieu Chaurrette, Director, Technology and Social Analysis, 211 Grand Montréal
Jerrilyn Dressler, former Executive Director, Calgary Distress Centre
Tammy Dumas, Executive Director, 211 Central South Region-Niagara, INCommunities,
Thierry Durand, directeur du 211, 211 Québec Régions
Louise Ghossoub, former Manager, Information and Referral Services, BC 211
Pam Hillier, Executive Director, Community Connection and Service Delivery Partner for ON211
John Hoyles, Executive Director, Community Navigation of Eastern Ontario/211 East
Anita Khanna, National Director, Public Policy and Government Relations, United Way Centraide Canada
Karen Milligan, Executive Director, ON211 Services
Kristin Nelson, Director, Saskatchewan 211
Emma Potter, Director, Crisis and Navigation Support Services, Canadian Mental Health Association, Edmonton (Alberta North 211).
David Webster, Former Director, Community Impact, PE211
Philip Wolfart, Manager, MB211
Stephanie Wright, Alberta 211 Manager, United Way of the Alberta Capital Region

Pre-COVID Interviews

Mathieu Chaurrette, Director, Technology and Social Analysis, 211 Grand Montréal (January 31, 2020).
Jerrilyn Dressler, former Executive Director, Calgary Distress Centre (February 27, 2020).
Tammy Dumas, Executive Director, 211 Central South Region-Niagara, INCommunities (March 5, 2020)
Angela Finateri, Director, Information and Referral Services, FindHelp Information Services, Toronto (March 2, 2020).
Pam Hillier, Executive Director, Community Connection and Service Delivery Partner for ON211 (February 27, 2020).
John Hoyles, Executive Director, Community Navigation of Eastern Ontario/211 East (February 26, 2020)
Anita Khanna, National Director, Public Policy and Government Relations, United Way Centraide Canada (March 13, 2020).
Mike Myette, Former Executive Director, 211 Information and Referral Services Nova Scotia (February 5, 2020).
Kristin Nelson, Director Saskatchewan 211 (January 16, 2020).
Emma Potter, Director, Crisis and Navigation Support Services, Canadian Mental Health Association, Edmonton (Alberta North 211). (January 16, 2020).
David Webster, Former Director, Community Impact, PE211 (February 25, 2020).

July/August 2020 Interviews

Jodene Baker, Director, Impact Innovation and Evaluation, United Way Winnipeg (July 23, 2020).
Mathieu Chaurrette, Director, Technology and Social Analysis, 211 Grand Montréal (August 5, 2020).

John Hoyles, Executive Director, Community Navigation of Eastern Ontario/211 East (July 30, 2020)

Chloe McBean, 211 Program Manager, Calgary Distress Centre (August 20, 2020).

Carrier Moody (July 30, 2020).

Mike Myette, Former Executive Director, 211 Information and Referral Services Nova Scotia (July 30, 2020).

Kristin Nelson, Director, Saskatchewan 211 (July 15, 2020).

Philip Wolfhart, Manager, MB211 (July 23, 2020).

September 2021 Survey Participants

Brigitte Gagnon Boudreau, Director 211 and Partnerships, 211 Greater Montreal

Irene Chanin, CEO, BC 211

Thierry Durand, former directeur du 211, 211 Québec Régions

Pam Hillier, Executive Director, Community Connection and Service Delivery Partner for ON211

John Hoyles, Executive Director, Community Navigation of Eastern Ontario/211 East

Mischka Jacobs, former New Brunswick 211, Director of Community Engagement

Daniel Leonard, MB211 Director

Amy MacManus, PE211 Service and Data Coordinator

Karen Milligan, Executive Director, ON211 Services.

Carrie Moody, Director of Strategic Solutions, Findhelp Information Services, Toronto.

Emma Potter, Director, Crisis and Navigation Support Services, Canadian Mental Health Association, Edmonton (Alberta North 211).

Alena Sleziak, 311/11 Call Centre Manager, City of Windsor.

2024 Interviews

Amy MacManus, Manager, Prince Edward Island 211 (February 9, 2024).

Judy Shum, National Director 211 and Community Partnerships, United Way/Centraide Canada (January 22, 2024).

Kristen Tomcko, Manger, 211 Norther Region, Ontario (January 31, 2024).

About the authors:

Dr. Lynn Gidluck is a partner in the Regina-based strategic communications and marketing firm Benchmark Public Relations. Kristin Nelson is the Director of Saskatchewan 211, an initiative of United Ways of Regina and Saskatoon. Nelson and Gidluck hired Brendan Anderson, then a senior undergraduate student at the University of Regina, to be a research assistant for the first phase of the project. Anderson was “embedded” at the United Way in Regina for most of the time that he was a member of the project team. Adriana Davis is a PhD student in psychology at the University of Alberta who helped Gidluck and Nelson with phase two of the research and analysis for the report.