



REPORT TO: Co-Chairs and Members of Public Health and Social Services Committee

SUBJECT: 211 Niagara

RECOMMENDATION

That this Committee recommend to Regional Council that the report on 211 Niagara be received for information.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 211 Niagara answered 41,803 calls in 2007.
- Information Niagara website received over 3.6 million hits.
- Niagara Region will be leveraging the resources of 211 Niagara through the Newcomers Portal, posting of the Community Services Resource Guide - 2008 Edition of 211 and support to the Corporate Communications Emergency call centre during a disaster/emergency.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no financial implications associated with this report.

PURPOSE

To provide information to Committee and Council on the service provided to Niagara by 211 Niagara and the benefits for local citizens.

BACKGROUND

211 is an easy-to-remember telephone number that connects people to a full range of non-emergency social, health, community and government services. By calling 211, an individual would immediately reach an information specialist, trained to assess their needs, to understand their questions and concerns, and to link them to the best available information and services, all on a confidential, multilingual, 24 hours a day basis.

Call centres for 211 have been launched in Toronto, Edmonton, Calgary, Niagara Region, Simcoe County and more recently with support from the Provincial Government in Thunder Bay, Peel Region, Halton Region and Windsor-Essex with Ottawa to be launched in September 2008. These initial centres now serve 15% of the Canadian population and 50% of Ontarians. The service of 211 Niagara launched in November of 2005. In contrast, almost two-thirds of U.S. residents have access to 211.

A long-standing problem in community, health and social services is the immense difficulties faced by people in finding out what resources are available to them. A family with acting out teenagers, a new arrival seeking re-training, or an individual with mental health issues, may suffer unnecessarily because they do not know how to find the services to help them. 211 provides a simple, easily-remembered means to talk with a certified information specialist, whose sole purpose is to link the caller with the needed service. Nearly all 211 callers indicate they would use the service again and would also recommend it to family and friends.

REPORT

In an effort to gather support for 211 in Ontario, a report entitled Who Benefits from Ontario 211 was commissioned by United Ways of Ontario for presentation to the Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO). This report was prepared by a committee that had membership from municipal officials, information and referral staff and other advisors across the Province. The committee was tasked with looking for evidence based benefits that were real rather than theoretical. This Committee concluded that 211 and the associated databases improves access to community services and results in improved cost-effectiveness of municipal services. The committee identified 30 benefits to municipalities, callers and community agencies.

Benefits identified include:

- Increases access to human service programs
- Assists citizens in poverty situations and supports neighbourhood development
- Crisis assistance to governments
- Municipal Councillors community connectors service provision
- Planning and decision-making based on current data
- Supports newcomers and strengthens diverse communities and volunteer brokerage service

In Niagara Region, 211 answered 41,803 calls in 2007, representing a 5.2% increase over 2006. Phones are staffed in Niagara from 7:00 am to 7:00 pm 5 days a week, and the remainder of the time the lines are answered from the 24 hours a day 211 call centre in Toronto, where the Niagara database of supports and services is available to call takers. Individuals can also seek assistance from 211 through email and in person. In 2007, 170 emails were received and 1,947 visits in person for information.

In addition to the phone service of 211, the web site allows individuals to look for information on a self service basis. In Niagara there is an Information Niagara website as well as a 211 Niagara website. The Information Niagara site received over 3.6 million hits in 2007, a 27% increase over 2006 and of these there were 280,961 unique visitors, a 39% increase. 211 Niagara received 6,256 hits.

Caller demographics have been compiled to determine the clientele in Niagara, and the results are consistent with other municipalities' experience. Callers to 211 are 72% female and 78% are adults with 94% of callers speaking English. Currently 82% of the calls come from the municipalities of St. Catharines, Niagara Falls and Welland, however this is likely due to the marketing of 211 to date which has focused on these communities. Future marketing plans will focus on the remaining municipalities in Niagara Region.

Through analysis of the calls in Niagara the following are the five main reasons that individuals contact 211:

Consumer Inquires or Complaints	19 %
General Community Services	12.7 %
Health	12 %
General Government	10.7 %
Financial Assistance	7.1 %

The nature of the calls that 211 Niagara receives would support the conclusions of the Committee that prepared the report to inform AMO of the benefits of 211, in that a significant number of calls pertain to community services, health and general government assistance and that the services of 211 aid in addressing the challenge of communicating with individuals in our communities on the services available to them.

In addition to tracking the demographics of callers and purpose of calls, 211 also keeps a record of "unmet needs", which are the questions of callers for which Niagara does not offer a service or can not meet their need. These can be used to inform future community requirements and help identify trends in citizens needs.

The Niagara Region currently leverages the databases of 211 Niagara in a number of areas. The Newcomers Portal project will link to the 211 data to provide current information to newcomers, without duplication of efforts on the part of the Region. In addition, Niagara hosts a copy of its Community Services Resource Guide – 2008 Edition on Sherpa on the Community Services page to provide additional resources to our staff in assisting clients in a timely matter and identifying a wider array of resources that may be

available. The Fall Prevention Network Niagara, of which Public Health is a partner, includes the logo and reference to 211 on promotional materials to ensure clients have an additional source to call for assistance.

In the event of an emergency in Niagara, an arrangement is in place and documented in Niagara Region's Crisis Communications Response Plan to have 211 provide additional call centre service to support Corporate Communications Emergency call centre operations. In addition, information would be posted on the 211 Niagara website and Information Niagara website. This provides Niagara with one additional tool to get information out to residents in their time of need.

Submitted by:

Approved by:

Brian Hutchings
Commissioner of Community Services

Mike Trojan
Chief Administrative Officer

This report was prepared by Cathy Cousins, Director Operational Support Services.