

# 211 TEXAS

Opportunities to Strengthen the  
Statewide Front Door, Connector, and  
Data Resource for Communities



# ABOUT UWT

As the state association for Texas United Ways, UWT builds upon the power of statewide collaboration by equipping nearly 70 member organizations with resources to achieve their missions and meet their communities' most pressing needs. Our work focuses on both building local United Way organizational capacity and enhancing the impact of local United Ways in their respective communities.



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# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



United Ways of Texas would like to thank everyone who contributed their valuable time and expertise to bring this report to fruition. Our local United Ways who manage 211 call centers informed and provided key input on this report. We are very grateful for the time, expertise, and leadership.

We would like to thank Nataly Saucedo, MSSW who led the policy research and writing of this report. Her time, talent, and research expertise are truly appreciated and we are thankful for her continued contribution on our projects.

Lastly, we would like to thank our entire network of Texas United Ways who support the work of our organization and for their dedication to ensuring all communities have a front door and connector to critical community services.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 2-1-1 information and referral helpline is a federally designated dialing code—like 9-1-1 for emergency services or 4-1-1 for directory assistance—that provides callers with referrals to local health and social service agencies. Whether it’s a natural disaster, a veteran returning to civilian life, or a concerned parent looking for childcare, people from all walks of life can find themselves in need of assistance and confronted with a maze of agencies and programs that are challenging to navigate. United Way has long supported, invested in, and advocated for 211—the most comprehensive source of information about local resources and services in the country.

In Texas, 211 is a public-private partnership between the state and community-based organizations like local United Ways, who manage 12 of the 25 regional 211 call centers in the state. 211 Texas is unique in that it is one of the only 211s in the country to be managed, operated, and funded by a state government. As the front door to a variety of services—including information and referral services, state benefits and eligibility, and disaster support, 211 is a trusted state resource for all Texans.

In addition to being a comprehensive connector, 211 is a rich source of data regarding the needs of Texans and the availability of services in communities across the state. During the initial year and a half of the COVID-19 pandemic (March 2020-November 2021), 211 received a record-breaking 3.6 million calls from Texans seeking support with housing and shelter, food, utilities, and healthcare. Although it has been two years since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, 211 call volumes remain elevated (30-40% above historical levels).

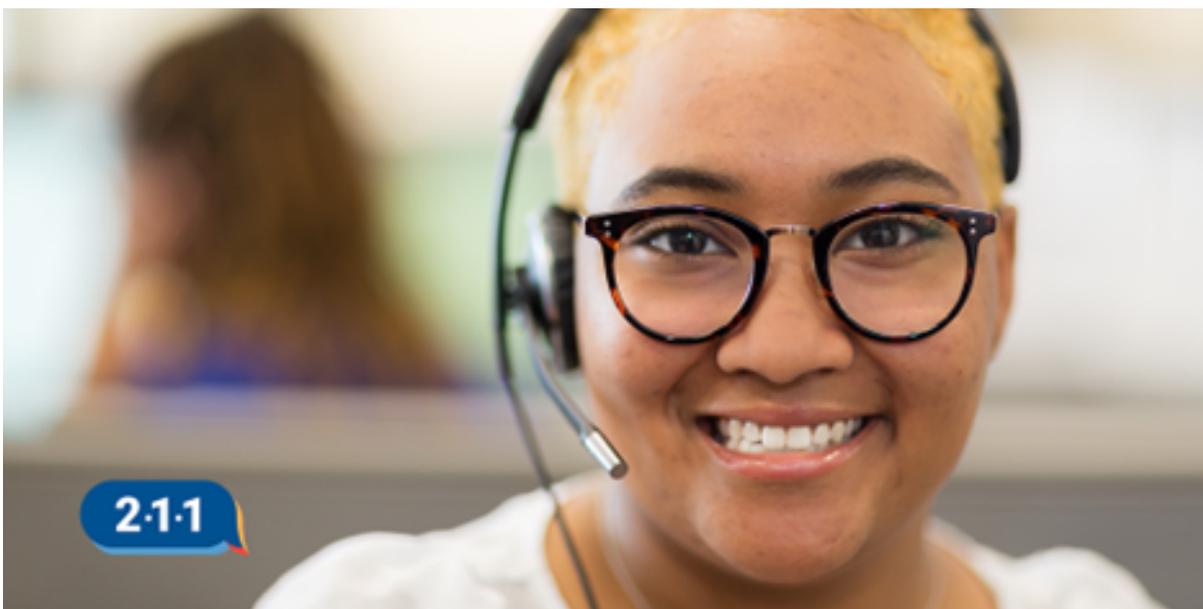
Unfortunately, challenges within the 211 Texas system pose obstacles for Texans seeking help and put strains on community organizations managing the state’s information and referral network. Funding for 211 Texas has remained relatively level for nearly 14 years despite an increase in call volume, operational costs, and contract expectations from the Texas Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC). Additionally, 211 Texas is behind other states in terms of efficiency, innovation, and system integration and is in need of critical technology and communications enhancements.

This report aims to provide information about the 211 system in Texas, discuss challenges limiting the system from supporting Texans in efficient and innovative ways, and highlight opportunities that would enhance 211’s ability to be a front door, connector, navigator, and data resource for all communities.

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**The final section of the report explores the following policy recommendations:**

- Increase investment in the operational capacity of regional 211 call centers and HHSC.
- Increase investment in state benefits and eligibility staff, including those at the 211, Option 2 call line.
- Invest in and activate technological capabilities that would allow regional call centers to better address their communities' needs.
- Encourage and allow partnerships between regional call centers and community stakeholders aimed at addressing local needs.
- Redesign the interactive voice response (IVR) system so that 211 callers can efficiently connect to the supports they need.
- Redesign the 211 Texas website to make it more user-friendly and integrated with the YourTexasBenefits website.
- Allow interoperability between 211 and other information and referral systems, such Help Me Grow and the Texas Childcare Availability Portal.
- Allow access to the 211 resource database by other state agencies, programs, and community partners.
- Leverage 211 for care coordination through collaboration with health partners.
- Leverage and enhance publicly available 211 data.

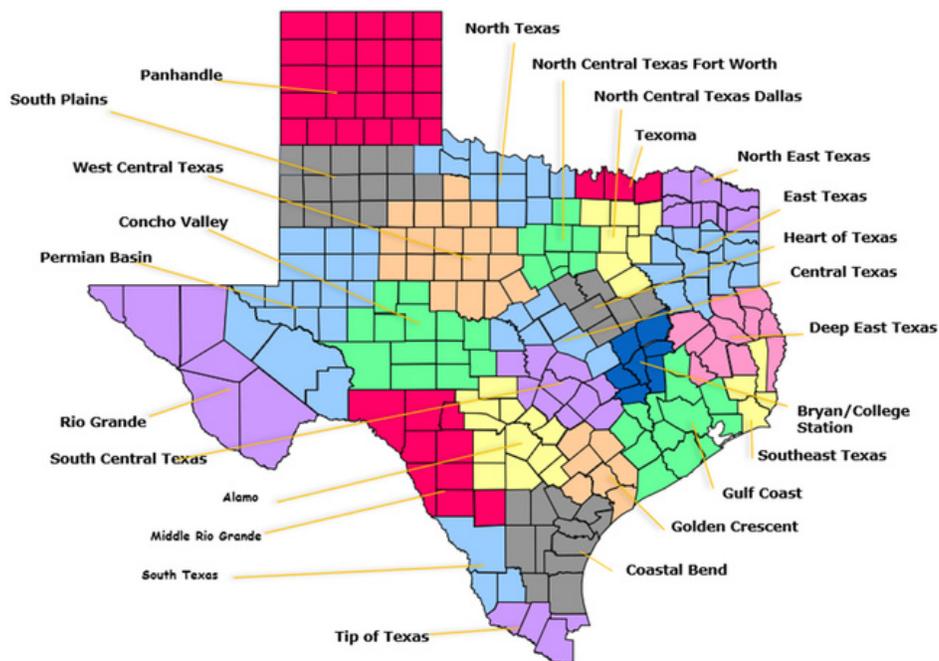


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# ABOUT 211 TEXAS

211 Texas is a public-private partnership between the state and community-based organizations. After receiving regulatory authority over all dialing codes by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), the Texas Public Utilities Commission (PUC) named the Texas Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC) as the agency responsible for the development, coordination, and implementation of 211 as the state's information and referral system, which has been available statewide since 2002.[i] HHSC carries out these responsibilities through the Texas Information and Referral Network (TIRN) program.[ii] HHSC contracts with a variety of vendors for the different components of the 211 system: the resource database software, public-facing website, and the telephony system.[iii]

## 25 Area Information Centers (AICs) Statewide



Source: Taken from HHSC map. See <https://www.211texas.org/add-or-edit-your-2-1-1-listing/>.

Additionally, HHSC contracts with and funds a network of 25 regional call centers (also known as Area Information Centers, or AICs) to manage 211, Option 1—the entry point for information and referrals to local community resources. These regional call centers are operated by organizations such as Council of Governments, Area Agencies on Aging, and Texas United Ways. As a result of these call centers being embedded in the community, they can provide localized support to callers within their service region. In addition to providing information and referral services, 211 Texas also serves as a comprehensive connector to other resources. For example, when dialing 211, callers are presented with a menu of call options that will redirect them to services such as enrollment for state benefits (e.g., Medicaid, WIC, and TANF).

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In times of crisis and disaster, state leaders have also designated 2-1-1 as the resource hotline for information and connection to state and local support, demonstrating how important the 211 system is to state leaders, agencies, and communities in Texas.

211 Texas’s ability to deliver comprehensive services is due to its unique structure. Texas is one of the only states that owns the 2-1-1 dialing code; allowing it to manage and operate the various call option services noted below through an integrated, statewide network. In other states, local nonprofits such as United Way state associations own the 2-1-1 dialing code and seek financial support from various state agencies and philanthropy to ensure information and referral services are available to communities across the state. Other state 211s—like Florida—operate in a fragmented way, where the dialing code has been designated to different regional organizations that operate independent of one another, often with no larger governing body to provide oversight and ensure integration, consistency, or collaboration.

## Connecting to 211 Texas

Currently, Texans have three ways of accessing information and referral services through 211. For self-guided searches of local resources, the 211Texas.org website is available. This site gives the public access to the available health and human service resources maintained in the 211 resource database. Users can type in a search term (e.g., diapers) and their zip code to find local resources, or they can use the Guided Search menu to look for resources by categories (e.g., Food/Nutrition, Veterans, Employment). Online chat is also available via the website.

### 211 Texas Call Line Options

<b>Option 1:</b> Information about and referrals to health and human services available in the caller’s area available 24/7. These calls are managed by 2-1-1 regional call centers.
<b>Option 2:</b> Information about state benefits programs (e.g., SNAP, CHIP, Medicaid), including intake and eligibility determination. HHSC’s Office of Eligibility Services contracts with a vendor to manage these calls. Only available Monday-Friday, 8am-5pm
<b>Option 3:</b> Reporting waste, fraud, and abuse of state resources to the Office of the Inspector General.
<b>Option 4:</b> Registration for the State of Texas Emergency Assistance Registry (STEAR), which helps vulnerable populations during times of disasters. Information is shared with first responders and other state agencies during a disaster.
<b>Option 5:</b> For disaster related services, including shelters.
<b>Option 6:</b> Get information and referrals to COVID-19 social services, including testing, community clinics, unemployment benefits and more.

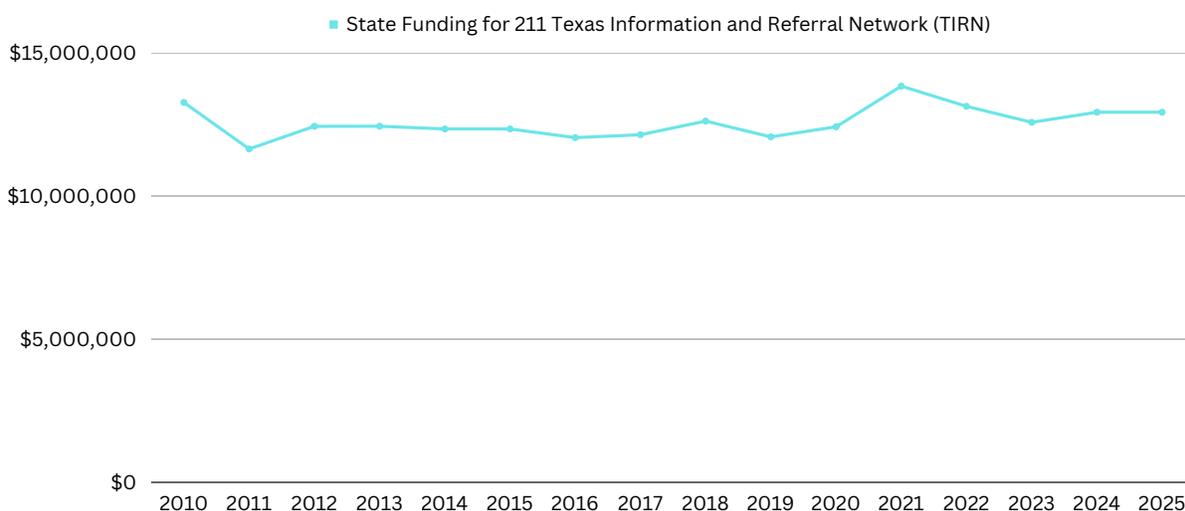
Source: Taken from HHSC website, 211Texas.org.

Texans with limited or no access to the internet, those with complex needs, and those wanting support in navigating available resources can call 211 and press Option 1 for assistance from a Community Information and Referral Specialist (Community I&R Specialist). **However, Texans face barriers when accessing 211 through these entry points.** For example, Texas United Ways have noted that the 211 Texas website is not user-friendly and often requires specific search terms to be entered for certain resources to appear. This leads to an increase in calls by frustrated users to 211. **Additionally, 211 currently does not offer texting, meaning that any information callers receive from Community I&R Specialists must be written down using pen and paper.** Also, many Community I&R Specialists are receiving and rerouting state benefits and eligibility calls (Option 2 calls managed by a different vendor) due to poor design of the interactive voice response (IVR) system as well as Option 2 operational issues (e.g., limited staffing and hours of operation), which Community I&R Specialists have no control over.

### Investment in 211

Since 211 is owned and managed by the state of Texas, most of the funding for this system is included in the state’s budget; about half of the funding comes directly from the federal draw down for Medicaid. The Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC) receives funding every legislative session to manage 211 Texas Information and Referral Network (TIRN) under Integrated Eligibility and Enrollment.[iv] These funds are then used to contract with the various community partners who manage the information and referral (Option 1) calls and maintain local area resource databases. **Unfortunately, state funding for 211 Texas has been stagnant for nearly 14 years and does not cover the full costs of operations.**

Additional, one-time funding was provided to 211 call centers during fiscal year 2021-2022 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused record call volume to 211 (30-40% above historical levels). This increase in funding was made possible due to federal dollars that flowed to states to help with pandemic relief efforts[v] as well as one-time relief grants from organizations like the OneStar Foundation.[vi]



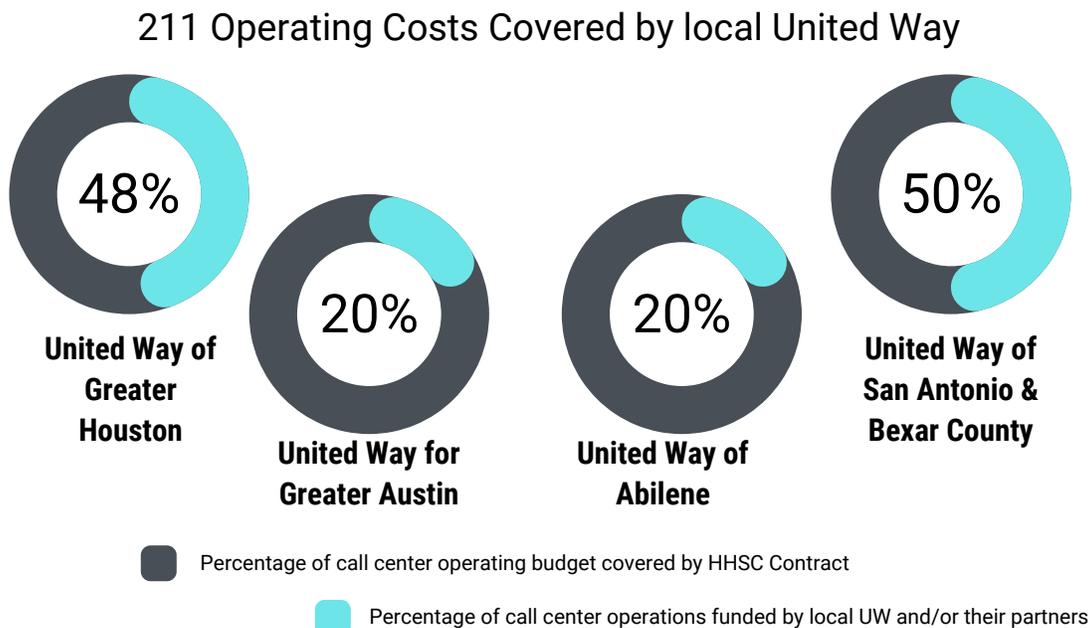
Source: Data from HHSC Operating Budgets and Legislative Appropriations Requests.

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## Financial Strain

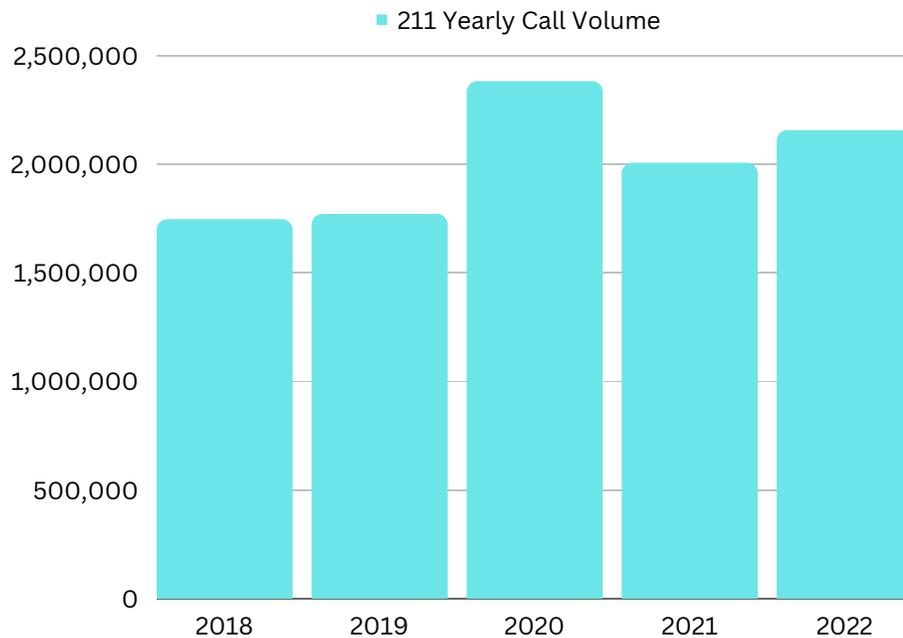
Prior to COVID-19, United Ways managing regional call centers were already experiencing challenges in meeting their communities' needs because of the state's stagnant and inadequate investment in the 211 system. As inflation has risen in the state over the years,[vii] **Texas United Ways managing call centers have experienced even more financial strains due to the state's lack of appropriate funding to match the real business costs of operating 211 regional call centers.** This has negatively impacted their ability to meet contract deliverables, maintain quality operations, as well as to retain and attract essential staff, who not only support call center functions but ultimately provide effective information and referral services to Texans.

Moreover, because United Ways understand the importance of 211 to their local communities, many have invested their own resources, including limited unrestricted donor dollars, to "band-aid" the state's lack of investment in the Texas 211 network.



Source: Information provided to United Ways of Texas by local United Ways managing 211s.

**Although it has been two years since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, 211 call volumes remain elevated.** This is due in part to 211 regional call centers carrying the burden of answering, transferring, and attempting to meet the needs of individuals seeking benefits and eligibility support (Option 2 calls) without additional funding from the state.



Source: Data from 211 Counts, the Big Count by United Way Worldwide, and other HHSC documents.

**While state leaders rely on 211 during times of disaster, they have not made further investments to the system**, leaving the organizations operating regional call centers to manage with already strained resources during the times when Texans need 211 the most. 211 call centers remain committed to addressing the needs of people across Texas but cannot provide additional capacity or maintain operations at current levels without funding from the state. An increase in funding for 211 is needed to provide overdue staffing and operational support to the organizations managing regional call centers, who are committed to connecting Texans to the local resources and support they need to thrive.

Additional state investment in the 211 network is also needed to fully maximize and leverage the system's capabilities, which would enable it to be a stronger front door, connector, navigator, and data resource to all communities. **At present, 211 Texas is behind other states in terms of efficiency, innovation, and system integration.** Conversations with United Way-operated 211s across the country have revealed that 211's resource database, communication capabilities, and data are being utilized to provide enhanced services such as closed-loop referrals, care coordination, and outcomes tracking to address non-medical drivers of health as well as support specialized populations such as families with young children. Technological and communications enhancements to 211 are needed to ensure that this state resource is efficiently and effectively meeting the needs of all Texans.

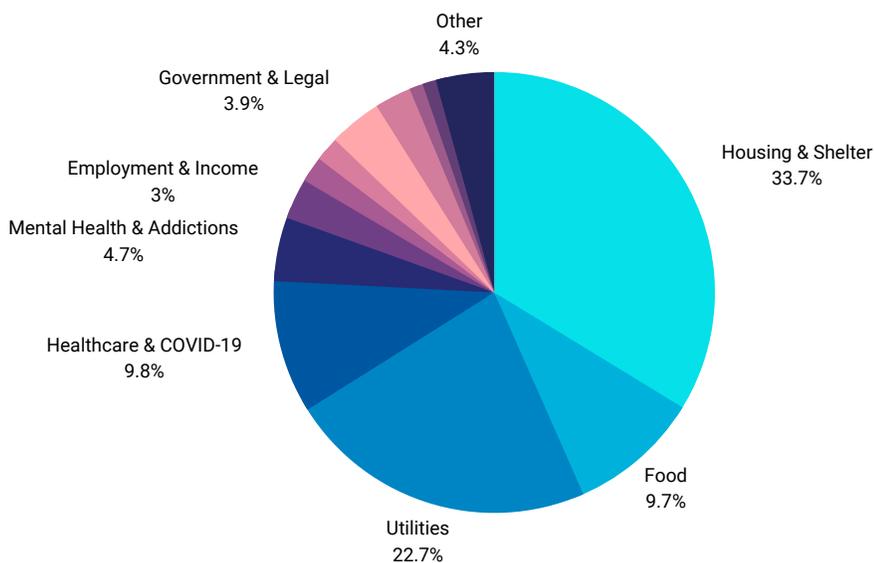
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# NEEDS OF TEXANS

211 data is a powerful asset for decision makers since it reflects the needs of Texans across the state as well as the availability of local services in a community. Thanks to advocacy efforts by Texas United Ways during the 86th legislative session, data from 211 calls is now publicly available through 211 Counts.[viii] 211 Counts is an online platform that provides real-time, searchable, and visual presentations of 211 call data.[ix] This public-facing website lists top service requests (e.g., housing & shelter, food, utilities), provides subcategories of requests for more detailed information (e.g., electric, gas, water subcategories of utilities), notes the percentage of unmet requests (i.e., for which there were no community resources available), and lists the highest rates of requests for any given resource by zip code and any custom date range. 211 Counts also provides detailed snapshots of community-specific needs by county, political district, school district, or zip code.

In 2022, Texans struggled with rental assistance, electricity bills, and securing enough food.[xi] **As compared to 2021, 211 Texas saw increases in requests for Housing & Shelter (24%) and for Utility Assistance (7.5%) in 2022.**[xii]

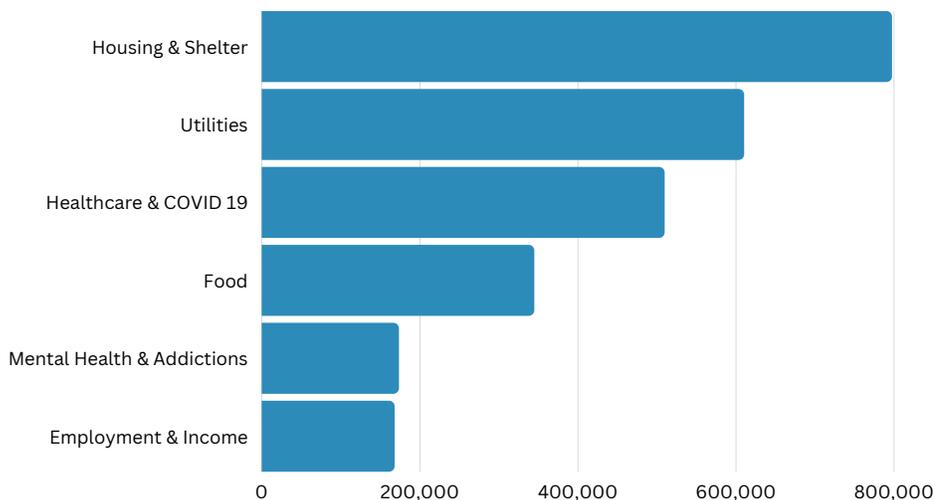
## Top Service Requests in 2022



Source: Data from 211 Counts. Data retrieved using custom data range noted above.

In times of disaster, crisis, or economic uncertainty, 211 data can be used to identify statewide trends and subsequently inform targeted investments in services and communities most in need. **Between the start of the COVID-19 pandemic to roughly a year and a half later, 211 received nearly 3.7 million calls and 3.2 million requests from individuals in need across the state.**[xiii][xiv] Texans were primarily seeking support with housing and shelter, food, utilities, and healthcare.

### Top Service Requests During COVID-19 Pandemic

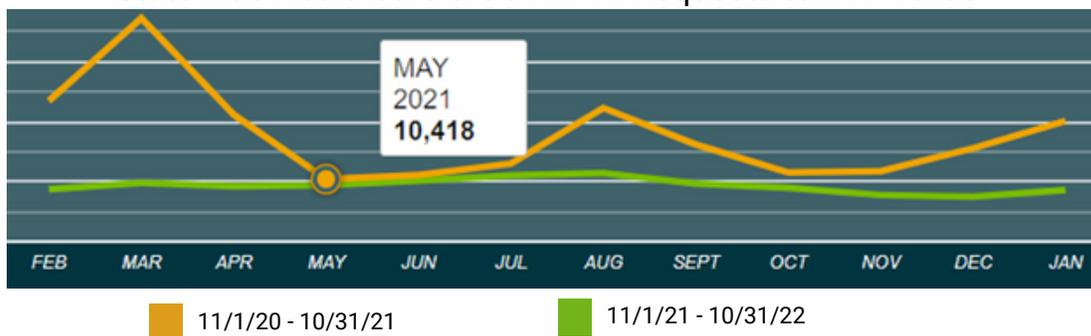


Source: Data from 2-1-1 Counts Texas. This data was retrieved by entering the custom data range of March 13, 2020- November 1, 2021.

**Of note, just over 58% of housing calls were specifically for rental assistance, 67% of utilities calls were related to electricity bills, and nearly 52% of healthcare calls were for information about COVID-19 prevention, testing, and vaccination.**[xv]

**Additionally, 211 data shows how the fall in Healthcare & COVID-19 requests from March 2021 (37,261) to May 2021 (10, 418) coincides with national distribution efforts for the first COVID-19 vaccine, with an uptick in calls in August 2021 (22,285) as the Delta variant began impacting communities.**[xxii]

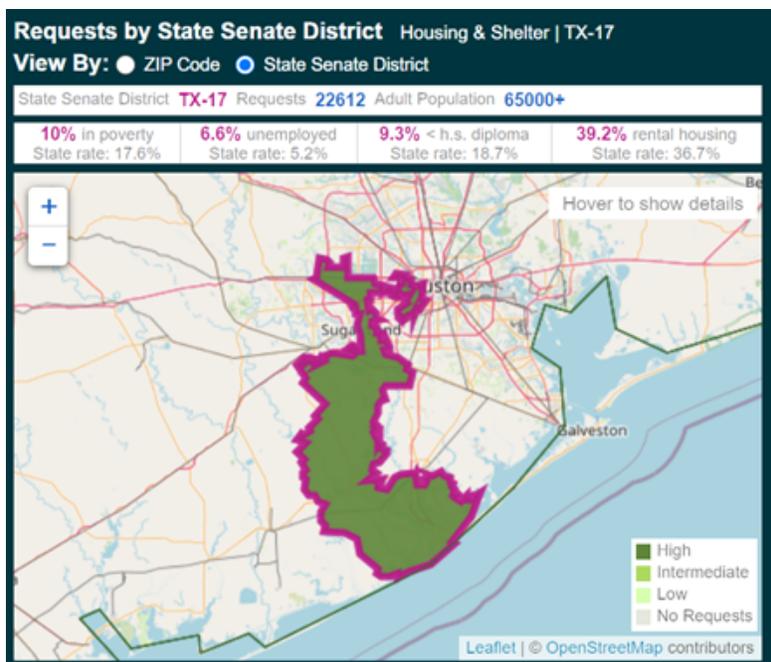
### Statewide Healthcare & COVID-19 Requests to 211 Texas



Source: Data from 2-1-1 Counts Texas. Data retrieved by entering the custom data range noted above.

As inflation has steadily risen over the last year,[xvi] it is important for lawmakers, funders, and other leaders to leverage 211 data to support Texans most in need. **From November 1, 2021 to November 1, 2022, Texans struggled with rental assistance (53.3% of 444,507 housing calls), electricity bills (73.9% of 299,057 utilities calls), and securing enough food (food pantries were 51.1% of the 122,859 food related calls).**[xxv] Texans have also needed various health services, including access to health insurance (27,798 calls), nursing home and adult care (24,612 calls), medical care (27,866 calls, includes dental and eye care requests), COVID testing (20,808 calls), and medical expense assistance—of which **18% of 6,629 requests went unmet.**[xxvi]

These statewide trends can also be seen in specific communities. In State Senate District 17 (TX-17), nearly 40% of residents live in rental housing. **In 2022, 211 received 23,312 housing-related calls from residents of TX-17 district, the majority of which were requests for rental assistance (59.5%).**[xvii] Compared to other state senate districts, this district ranked 7th in terms of housing requests made to 211 Texas during this time, indicating that more investment is needed to help residents of this district secure stable housing.



Source: Data from 2-1-1 Counts Texas. Data retrieved by entering the custom data range of 11/1/2021-11/1/2022 into the 2-1-1 Counts Texas website and selecting the State Senate District display option.

Even in communities with lower rates of housing requests, 211 data can be used to identify gaps in services. For example, residents of State House District 24 (TX-24), which covers parts of Galveston, made nearly 1,400 housing-related calls to 211 from November 1, 2021 to November 1, 2022.[xviii] **As noted below, Community I&R Specialists were not able to provide resource referrals to some residents because no resources existed in their district to meet a caller’s particular housing need.** The percentages of unmet requests are important because they reflect the gaps in available services and unique needs of Texans—those for whom current systems and supports are not enough.

TOP HOUSING & SHELTER REQUESTS		UNMET ①
Shelters ②	191	10%
Low-cost housing ②	383	12%
Home repair/ maintenance ②	67	37%
Rent assistance ②	663	5%
Mortgage assistance ②	76	1%
Landlord/ tenant issues ②	8	13%
Contacts ②	2	100%
Other housing & shelter ②	4	50%
<small>0 = No requests made            Not Available = Data not collected            Some requests are only computed at the category level</small>		<small>Requests &gt;100            AND &gt; 50%</small>

Source: 2-1-1 Counts Texas. Data retrieved by entering the custom data range of 11/1/2021-11/1/2022 into the 2-1-1 Counts Texas website and selecting the State House District display option.

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# CHALLENGES

As a vital part of Texas communities, 211 needs to be leveraged and properly resourced to best meet the needs of individuals across the state. Current challenges within the 211 system pose obstacles for Texans seeking support and ultimately hinder their ability to thrive.

## **211 Texas website is not user-friendly**

The current design of the 211 Texas website creates an obstacle for people needing a simple and efficient way to access information and referral services, often leading users to contact regional call centers for information that should otherwise be easily searchable online. By not making improvements to the website, an increased burden is put on regional call centers in terms of call volume and time taken away from assisting callers with more complex needs.

A redesign of the 211 Texas website should also include integration with the state's benefits and eligibility website (YourTexasBenefits.com). Considering that 211 is the resource hotline for both information and referral services (Option 1) as well as state benefits eligibility and enrollment (Option 2), virtually housing these services together would create an easier, less confusing pathway for Texans looking to connect to multiple services. This is the case in Kentucky, where the KYNECT website is a one-stop shop for residents looking to connect with multiple programs and services, including applying for state health coverage, enrolling in state benefits (e.g., SNAP, Medicaid, child care assistance), and finding local help with food, transportation, and other needs (e.g., information and referral services).[xix] This example demonstrates the potential to create more efficiency within the 211 Texas network, ultimately benefiting Texans by decreasing confusion and time spent searching for resources as well as potentially encouraging more eligible individuals to enroll in needed services. [xx]

## **Inefficient design of the IVR system**

As previously mentioned, when Texans call 211, they are presented with various call options to a range of services, such as benefits and eligibility, disaster support, and fraud reporting. Unfortunately, as Texas United Ways have experienced, this current set up of the Interactive Voice Recording (IVR) system has led to costly inefficiencies mostly felt by 211 regional call centers managing information and referral calls (Option 1).

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According to the Gulf Coast Region Call Center managed by United Way of Greater Houston, nearly 300,000 calls to their call center in 2022 were from Texans across the state looking to connect with eligibility and benefits services (Option 2). Since 211, Option 1 is operational 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, Texans know that, regardless of the service they are seeking, they will be able to speak to a live person by pressing this option.

However, having 211 Community I&R Specialists reroute these calls to the other call lines is not only costly but also takes time away from their ability to help Texans with complex information and referral needs. **Furthermore, Texas United Ways have noticed that callers become confused and frustrated by the inability of Community I&R Specialists to meet non-information and referral needs since callers do not know that 211 call options (Option 1 and Option 2) are each operated by different entities.** A redesign of the 211 IVR system would help callers efficiently connect to the services they need while also reducing unnecessary call volume to 211 regional call centers.

### Lack of texting

At present, 211 callers must use pen and paper to write down any information received from 211 Community I&R Specialists. **Community I&R Specialists are, in turn, limited in the ways they can respond to and follow up with 211 callers, increasing time spent on the phone when, in some cases, texting would result in more efficient and cost-effective communication.**

Some 211 call centers have implemented texting at the request of their communities by investing their own resources, such as the 211 Gulf Coast Call Center managed by United Way of Greater Houston (UWGH). This service allows this regional call center to share local information via text messaging with 211 callers who opt into the service. This example demonstrates the appetite among Texans to use texting when interacting with 211 as well as the readiness of regional call centers to implement this new function.

### State benefits and eligibility (Option 2) operational issues

211, Option 2—the call line for support with state benefits (e.g., WIC, TANF, and SNAP) and eligibility inquiries—is unfortunately falling short when it comes to supporting eligible Texans. **As previously mentioned, a high percentage of calls to Community I&R Specialists (Option 1) are from Texans looking for support with state benefits and eligibility services instead of community services and supports.** The benefits and eligibility call line has limited staffing and hours of operation, which leads to longer wait times for Option 2 callers and prevents them from reaching staff outside of standard business hours.[xxi]

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**Moreover, the Community I&R Specialists managing Option 1 calls cannot help Texans with their Option 2 issues (e.g., password reset, eligibility status, changes to benefits) since these issues are outside of their scope of contracted work; also, the eligibility and benefits system is separate from the information and referral system.** This increases frustrations among callers needing assistance and exacerbates already strained 211 call centers.

Additional investment in the state’s eligibility and enrollment system is needed, including more state eligibility workers, increases in community-based outreach and application assistance support, and ensuring the Option 2 call line is properly staffed. This investment would decrease the call volume burden currently placed on 211, allowing for more appropriate, efficient, and cost-effective use of state resources.

### **Limited staffing and operational support**

Due to inadequate state funding, 211 call centers have struggled to retain and hire additional staff, leading to a decreased ability to answer local calls from within their 211 region. **For example, the 211 West Central Region Call Center—managed by United Way of Abilene (UWAb)—estimates that 50-60% of their calls are being answered elsewhere in the state; by other regional call centers who have greater capacity to quickly respond to calls quickly.** Regional call centers function best when the local knowledge and expertise of their call specialists is utilized to help residents seeking local, community-based resources. While regional call centers remain committed to addressing the needs of all Texans, they cannot provide additional capacity, without additional state investment.

**The lack of investment in 211 and other contracting barriers by HHSC has also negatively impacted local initiatives.** For example, the 211 West Central Region Call Center was approached by their local workforce development board (Workforce Solutions) for navigation services through 211 to provide Texans upskilling or reskilling with wraparound support. Due to limited funding and staff shortages, the United Way had to pass on this partnership since they couldn’t take on any projects outside of their 211 scope of work. Ensuring all regional call centers are appropriately staffed and funded would allow the 211 system to be more responsive to community stakeholders and to better support Texans struggling to connect to needed resources.

Properly resourced 211 regional call centers could also enhance the role of Community I&R Specialists to better support callers with complex needs. A 2019 DFPS report on the development of a Kinship Navigator Program in Texas identified 211 Community I&R Specialists as having the potential to provide enhanced navigation services to kinship caregivers to ensure these families were connected with appropriate services in the community, including case management.[xxii]

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Previously, 211 call centers were part of an effort between DFPS and HHSC to utilize 211 to identify kinship caregivers across the state, assess their needs, connect them to community resources, and identify gaps in services. Though this was a time-limited project, it demonstrates 211's ability to identify target populations, conduct screenings to better understand the needs of callers, and provide more tailored and appropriate resources.

### **Lack of technological enhancements to the 211 system**

211 Texas is behind other states in terms of efficiency, innovation, and system integration. **211's resource database software, iCarol, has many functionalities that are not currently being leveraged, including bidirectional communication between systems (e.g., health, childcare, state agencies), closed-loop referral and outcomes tracking, and enhanced screening of callers.**<sup>[xxiii]</sup> For example, since there is no interoperability between 211 and the Texas Childcare Availability Portal,<sup>[xxiv]</sup> when families call 211 looking for childcare, Community I&R Specialists at regional call centers must use the public-facing Portal website to search for available childcare resources (which a family then writes down with pen and paper). In contrast, Nebraska's 211, which is also supported by the iCarol software, has been leveraged to support families with young children as the point of entry to Help Me Grow (HMG) <sup>[xxv]</sup>—a national initiative connecting families to existing community resources related to child development with the goal of reducing disparities in early childhood health.<sup>[xxvi]</sup> Beyond being the point of entry for HMG, 211 also provides enhanced screening of families, refers eligible families to the appropriate community providers through a closed-loop referral process, and is able to track a family's outcomes as well as identify gaps in services.

Technological enhancements would also allow 211 Texas to collaborate with health partners, who are increasingly looking to information and referral systems for care coordination services. In North Carolina, 211 has partnered with a care coordination platform (Unite US) to create NCCare 360, the first statewide network that connects health care and human service organizations on a single platform to better facilitate communication, ensure efficiency in service delivery, and measure outcomes with improved data collection. The goal of NCCare 360 is to improve the health of North Carolinians by addressing non-medical drivers of health (e.g., food, housing, transportation) and creating cross-sector partnerships that will transform care delivery.<sup>[xxvii]</sup>

### **Inefficient review process for community-focused project requests**

211 regional call centers in Texas are often approached by entities such as health organizations, school districts, and other stakeholders interested in leveraging 211 to reach targeted populations.

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**Unfortunately, there is a cumbersome approval process required of all regional call centers before engaging in partnerships with stakeholders, which has discouraged many partners from leveraging 211 to solve local issues and has led to a duplication of information and resources.**

This has also led to a decreased perception of 211 as an efficient, accessible, and trusted resource. For example, despite following special project request protocol required by HHSC, the 211 Brian/College Station Region Call Center (managed by United Way of the Brazos Valley) did not receive a timely response regarding their request to register 211 callers for holiday assistance from local organizations (e.g., Thanksgiving meal delivery, Christmas gifts for children). As a result of this experience, United Way of the Brazos Valley has shied away from seeking other community partnerships. Similarly, the 211 Gulf Coast Region Call Center (managed by United Way of Greater Houston) was approached by a local mental health initiative interested in using the 211 resource directory to avoid duplicating information. However, due to the lengthy approval process, the local partner moved forward in creating their own, separate resource directory.

### **Limited use of 211 data and lack of disaggregated data**

As previously demonstrated, the 211 Counts website offers rich, publicly available data that can be used to identify trends, compare the needs of a specific community against those being reported statewide, and discover gaps in services. **Unfortunately, HHSC is not regularly analyzing, compiling, and presenting this data to elected officials or other state agencies, impacting their ability to make informative investment and planning decisions on critical community needs.**

Moreover, data collection can be enhanced by capturing important demographic characteristics of 211 users, such as race/ethnicity, disability status, child caregiver status, foster care status, justice involvement, and housing status. Though 211 regional call centers currently collect demographic data such as age, sex, and veteran status from callers, this information is not publicly accessible through the Texas 211 Counts website.

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## Inaccessibility of the 211 resource database

Currently, the database housed within HHSC is inaccessible to other state programs, agencies, and community partners leading to the duplication of information and referral services. For example, the state's Aging and Disability Resource Centers (ADRCs) staff, who are also housed within HHSC and provide information and referral services, must use the public-facing 211 website to access information. This inefficiency within the same state agency forces staff to create their own internal information and resource database, which contributes to duplication and waste of taxpayer dollars.

**As evidenced in other states, when 211 is aligned across state agencies its comprehensive, curated resource database—managed by highly trained Community I&R Specialists—can be seamlessly integrated within other, state-operated information and referral platforms.** In Wisconsin, the Department of Workforce Development has integrated 211 into their system by leasing the 211 resource database from United Way of Wisconsin—who manages the statewide 211 system—to bolster both their external website for residents (e.g., searching for work boots) and internal job center staff platform. 211 Wisconsin maintains the database such that the department's system automatically updates as the 211 system updates. Similarly, Louisiana's Department of Corrections has a database licensing agreement with 211 that allows probation officers and case managers to use this resource database to provide re-entry information to residents returning to their communities. Louisiana 211—which is managed by the Louisiana Association of United Ways (LAUW)—estimates that a state database licensing agreement that would allow all state agencies to access the database would cost roughly \$350,000 a year; a cost-effective strategy that could be easily implemented in Texas.

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# RECOMMENDATIONS

211 Texas is a data resource, community connector, and tool that can help improve the health and wellbeing of all Texans. By investing in and fully leveraging this system, leaders can provide vital support and resources to those in need, decrease the burden on Texans to connect to help, and support community organizations that are contributing to better outcomes for all Texans.

- **Increase investment in the operational capacity of regional 211 call centers and HHSC.** Though they have not received an increase in funding for over a decade, 211 regional call centers have done their best to meet contract deliverables and continue supporting Texans seeking information and referral services. Additional funding would allow call centers to attract and retain trained, quality staff necessary to support call center functions as well as support effective business operations. Overall, these efforts would support effective information and referral services and best connect Texans to critical services.
- **Increase investment in state benefits and eligibility services.** Timely enrollment in and access to state benefits is important for Texans, especially pregnant women and children who need important services during critical points in their health and development. To ensure that eligible families are not hindered from receiving state benefits, and to decrease the burden Community I&R Specialist answering calls via Option 1, additional investment is needed in benefits and eligibility staff is needed. More funding would allow for the hiring and retention of benefits and eligibility staff, which would help decrease wait times for all 211 callers, allow for more timely support, and decrease the number of non-information and referral calls to Option 1.
- **Invest in and activate technological capabilities that would allow regional call centers to better address their communities' needs.** Additional state investment in the 211 network followed by timely implementation is needed to fully maximize and leverage these technological capabilities, which would enable 211 to be a stronger front door, connector, navigator, and data resource for all communities. With these technological and communication enhancements, 211 Texas could provide enhanced services such as closed-loop referrals, care coordination, and outcomes tracking to both address non-medical drivers of health and support specialized populations such as families with young children.

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- **Encourage and allow partnerships between regional call centers and community stakeholders aimed at addressing local needs.** A redesign of HHSC’s lengthy and cumbersome approval process is needed to encourage more collaboration between interested partners and regional 211 call centers. An efficient and time-sensitive process would discourage the creation of duplicative information and referral systems by interested partners while also increasing the perception of 211 Texas as an efficient, accessible, and trusted resource.
  - **Redesign the interactive voice response (IVR) system so that 211 callers can efficiently connect to the supports they need.** The current 211 IVR system places an undue burden on Community I&R Specialists who must spend time rerouting or attempting to answer non-information and referral calls from 211 callers unable to reach their desired call option line. A redesign of the current IVR system could help eliminate the ineffective use of Community I&R Specialists’ time while also helping 211 callers reach the services they need with less confusion. Moreover, a redesign of the IVR system should allow the system to be nimble so that it is responsive to fluctuating statewide needs. Allowing the call options and messages to be flexible ensures that 211 can be both readily deployed in times of crisis and easily integrated into statewide initiatives aimed at reaching all Texans.
  - **Redesign the 211 Texas website to make it more user-friendly and integrated with YourTexasBenefits.** Texans are already overwhelmed in trying to navigate complex, and often disjointed, health and human services systems. A redesign of the 211 Texas website that makes it more comprehensive and user-friendly would decrease website-related call volume to 211 regional call centers while also creating a one-stop shop for Texans needing to connect with multiple services or programs. Furthermore, website redesign efforts should include input from regional call centers, 211 callers, community-based organizations, and other community stakeholders that can speak to the challenges of using the current site and offer ideas for enhancing this state resource.
  - **Allow interoperability between 211 and the Texas Childcare Availability Portal.** Activation of 211 technological capabilities would allow a closed-loop referral system to be implemented so that Community I&R Specialists could make a direct referral to childcare providers, eliminating the burden on families to make additional calls. Additionally, this would allow 211 to better track the needs of Texas parents and families as well as identify gaps in childcare services. Interoperability between 211 and the Texas Childcare Availability Portal would create more efficient communication between these two systems, helping Texas families seamlessly connect to needed services.

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- **Allow access to the 211 resource database by other state agencies, programs, and community partners.** Allowing the 211 resource database to be accessible to interested partners, including other state agencies, is a cost-effective way to increase efficiencies and decrease duplication. The use of the 211 resource database within state programs or agencies would also foster greater interdepartmental communication and collaboration. Additionally, leasing out the 211 database to interested partners would create new sources of revenue that could be used towards the maintenance of and enhancements to the 211 system.
  - **Ensure 211 TIRN supports Help Me Grow initiatives in Texas.** Help Me Grow (HMG) is a national initiative aimed at reducing disparities in early childhood health by connecting families with young children to existing community resources. Other states use 211 as the front door for parents and families looking to connect to HMG, demonstrating the opportunity that exists for 211 Texas to support HMG efforts statewide.
  - **Leverage 211 for care coordination through collaboration with health partners.** Health systems and partners are increasingly looking to information and referral networks for care coordination to address non-medical drivers of health (e.g., food, housing, transportation). By being properly resourced, having the needed technological capabilities, and partnering with health systems, 211 can play an important role in addressing health inequities in Texas.
  - **Leverage and enhance publicly available 211 data.** Elected officials, philanthropists, and community leaders can learn about the needs of Texans by visiting HHSC's 211 Counts website. HHSC can further leverage available 211 data through periodic analysis and reporting of this information to elected officials and state agencies, both of whom would benefit from understanding the needs of Texans statewide as well as in local communities (e.g., zip codes, state house and senate districts). Additionally, access to 211 data disaggregated by age, race/ethnicity, and other relevant demographics would allow leaders to make more informed and effective funding, programmatic, and crisis planning and response decisions.
  - **Provide screening and navigation services for specialized populations by leveraging call specialists.** Other states are already using 211 call staff to provide comprehensive support to patients in health systems, ensuring that non-medical drivers of health are addressed and, subsequently, that overall health outcomes improve for patients. With properly resourced 211 regional call centers, more opportunities exist for screening and navigation services to be delivered to Texans who would benefit from a 211 experience more tailored to their needs.

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# CLOSING

As the state’s front door to a variety of important services, 211 is a vital resource to all Texans. During times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, people across the state rely on 211 for accurate information and connection to local services. As a state-owned resource, state leaders have a duty to properly resource and leverage 211 to ensure the system operates efficiently and effectively for Texans when they need it most. Other states have exemplified the potential of 211 to be a front door for a variety of programs, a connector to other systems (e.g., health care), a navigator for populations with complex needs (e.g., families with young children), and a data resource to stakeholders interested in improving the lives of residents. However, without proper investment in 211, the system will continue to face challenges that increasingly hinder Texans from accessing needed services and ultimately prevent 211 from fulfilling its potential.



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