

## **--United Way 211**

### **Overview**

The Greater Twin Cities United Way, a non-profit agency, provides 24-hour call center responses to citizens in need for a regional 7-county area including Minneapolis/St. Paul, Minnesota. This confidential and free service provides referrals to appropriate community resources such as health, legal, transportation, counseling, youth services, childcare, food and housing organizations.

In starting their telework program .the Greater Twin Cities United Way in Minnesota contracted with a large non-profit agency (Minnesota Resource Center) to provide information to callers in the community who are seeking assistance with food, housing, medical, legal and crisis issues. The results and experiences to date should be of interest primarily to communities that have or will have 211 and 311 systems, as well as to companies considering development of telework through a contractual relationship.

### **Not Your Average Call Center**

Because the United Way 211 service is currently the only one with teleworkers in the nation, it can truly serve as a model for other systems. The employer, supervisor, and teleworkers all agreed that the 211 systems worked extraordinarily well during the Hurricane Katrina period. Staff received 10 times the normal number of calls during that time and performed exceptionally well in meeting callers' needs and in their reaction times. Employees not only needed to work at least double their normal hours, in some cases they needed to go to the main 211 call center.

It proved to be a gratifying experience and one that they are all proud of In addition to basic computer and employment preparatory skills, the teleworkers must have an Internet search, service orientation, be resourceful and self-disciplined, without being too compassionate. Because some callers are in difficult personal situations, teleworkers must be able to provide assistance in a timely manner without becoming overly involved with any caller, which would detract from assisting other callers. In essence, they are not counselors; they refer individuals to needed community resources.

### **Need or Problem Being Addressed**

The current 211 Service evolved from an earlier program called First Call to Help. While the volume of calls could be handled adequately by the United Way's call center staff, few staff were willing to work second or third shifts, holidays, or weekends. Because of a desire to provide more effective services during those times, and because the Minnesota Resource Center wished to create telework positions for persons with disabilities, a project was started with funding through Hennepin County.

211 now responds to more than 400,000 in bound calls annually. United Way contracted annually with the Minnesota Resource Center (MRC) to manage teleworkers through a contract for after-hours and weekend call services. In terms of absenteeism and turnover of teleworkers, there is no doubt about performance. Last year one person left after it was discovered broadband was unavailable in his neighborhood. Other than that, there has been no turnover, and absenteeism has been minimal.

Eight teleworkers with disabilities, six women and two men between the ages of 30 and 70, provide services from their homes during evening and early morning hours. The teleworkers are classified as employees of the Minnesota Resource Center (MRC). They work no more than 20 hours per week and are ineligible for medical and other benefits.

Candidates had computer skills and good communication skills. Some individuals receive employment preparatory training and computer orientation training. All new hires are required to train initially for 30-40 hours on subject matter content (housing, public assistance, indigent health options, etc.) and the 211 systems at the call center. During this paid training period, new hires also listen to actual calls for assistance and periodically receive updated training.

Each teleworker has a flexible schedule by day and by shift. A typical schedule is four to six hours per day with some shifts extending to 8 hours and others being only two hours. All work is performed between the hours of 5 pm and 8 am. Teleworker schedules are set a month in advance by their supervisor but some swapping of hours and days are permissible as long as the total number of hours is covered.

### **211 Employer Perspectives**

While satisfied generally with current partnership, given the available funding, the 211 system will be required to pass a call center accreditation process in order to continue providing services. Because of this, it is anticipated that a variety of improvements and changes will be needed within the next two years to meet the new standards. Both technology and human resource components will be affected.

In addition to technology issues, the nature of the skills needed by the teleworkers is changing. Simple referrals to organizations still occur but are less frequent. Instead of answering a phone and locating the nearest service, teleworkers are now being confronted with more complicated situations. These require the teleworker to have more knowledge of social services, better search skills to identify potential services, and more advanced problem-solving and crisis management skill

## **Lessons Learned**

The 211 experiences suggest that the telecommunications infrastructure is a critical component for remote teleworkers. There are still problems with some call center data software and if at all possible, employers should make sure their software allows for goals to be easily measured and to yield data for accurate tracking and measurements. This is an essential element of a remote service delivery process, especially in the absence of a listening in/call monitoring feature.

## **The Future**

Because of the importance of an adequate infrastructure for telework, federal and local workforce programs should consider allocating more resources for start-up technology costs. This would also enable more remote teleworkers with disabilities to be engaged in 211-type teleworker positions.

Possible changes include:

- Upgrading teleworker skills through more and customized online training or adding other teleworkers with more advanced skills; and
- Expanding the current regional 211 system to new geographical areas throughout Minnesota.

*NOTE: This case study was a product of a federal Department of Labor telework research study.*