

**Proposal for \$250,000 Grant  
from The Collaboration Prize Project**  
July 18, 2008

*Written and submitted by Cindy Burdette*

Representing the collaborative partnership of four nonprofit organizations:

United Way of Central Maryland's First Call for Help™

Community Crisis Services, Inc.

Life Crisis Center, Inc.

Mental Health Association of Frederick County

## Part D. Letter of Nomination

### **Part One:**

Imagine being in a stressful personal situation, facing your refrigerator which is smothered in 500 magnets featuring telephone numbers and trying to decide which number to call for help – where do you start, how do you cut through the chaos to get what you need? Now stop -- imagine this scenario if you are considering suicide. Cutting through confusion to easily connect people to resources they need is the premise behind the 2-1-1 Maryland collaboration.

### **Origins**

The three-digit numbers 911 and 411 are a familiar part of American life. Building on this concept, in July 2000, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) nationally designated the three-digit 2-1-1 for the exclusive purpose of providing widespread access to community information and referral services and providing critical information to the public in preparing for and recovering from natural and man-made disasters. Further, the FCC called upon community service organizations to work collaboratively to develop a statewide, free 2-1-1 system.

In 2000, the United Way of Central Maryland (UWCM) convened an 80-member statewide 2-1-1 Maryland Task Force charged with laying the groundwork for designing a 2-1-1 system in Maryland. The group included representatives from the nonprofit, private, and state, county and local government sectors. In 2002, the Public Service Commission designated the Task Force as the official body to conduct a pilot of 2-1-1 in Maryland. In 2004, Maryland Chapter 390 law was signed creating a 17-member Health and Human Services Referral Board (HHSRB) to oversee the pilot and make recommendations to the Governor regarding a permanent 2-1-1 system for Maryland. The task force and referral board completed an intensive planning process and created a final business plan (Exhibit A) which culminated in the launch of an unfunded 6-12 month 2-1-1 Maryland pilot. The pilot was deemed necessary to prove to state legislators that the 2-1-1 service was important and would be utilized by our residents, a requirement on their part to be considered for future state funding.

The call for a pilot created the collaboration of four nonprofit organizations: United Way of Central Maryland's First Call for Help™, Community Crisis Services, Inc., Life Crisis Center, Inc. and the Mental Health Association of Frederick County to serve as the regional call centers to execute the pilot program. The collaboration partners, also serving on the task force since 2000, were selected based on their demonstrated commitment to a 2-1-1 system by volunteering to be pilot sites without funding.

### **Structure and Management**

What makes the pilot collaboration unique is that it was not mandated nor financially supported by the State of Maryland, it was a completely voluntary partnership, and had little, if any, guidelines as to specifically how to execute or succeed at this massive state-wide 2-1-1 endeavor. The four organizations joined forces around the common goal of 2-1-1 and its ability to simplify access to help and resources for Maryland's residents. The most amazing aspect of this union is the fact that over three years of execution there was minimal public funding for operations or resources provided for this initiative requiring the partners to participate with some private/public funds, but mainly utilizing their own resources. To clarify, there was consensus that "we think this is a great idea" from many of the stakeholders in the process, including the Governor's Office. However, when it came to the actual execution of 2-1-1 Maryland it was solely up to the four agencies to make it happen.

Oversight of the project through the planning phase was by joint leadership of the 2-1-1 Maryland Task Force and the State of Maryland Health and Human Services Referral Board. Each of the collaborative partners signed an “Agreement to Conduct Pilot Program” (Exhibit B) with the Task Force in October 2006. Once the 2-1-1 Pilot launched, the collaboration became self-managed with accountability primarily to each other and the common goal. Semi-annual reports are made to the HHSRB, which ultimately have final authority over the pilot. One of the partner sites, UWCM, is the fiscal sponsor and administrator for the pilot collaboration.

2-1-1 Maryland adopted a “hybrid model” system based on regional call centers with some shared centralized service. This model was supported by a 2004 study, commissioned by United Way of America and conducted by the University of Texas Ray Marshall Center for the Study of Human Resources. The study concluded that the “hybrid model” – combining regional hubs with centralized functions – is the most cost efficient model for 2-1-1. The model respects and builds on the diversity of the state and ensures system wide redundancy and interoperability. Furthermore, the hybrid model leveraged the regionally-based existing call centers resulting in a project implementation that was faster, logistically efficient, and with significantly reduced operating costs. A centralized model would have put the agencies who became 2-1-1 partners in direct competition; in fact UWCM’s First Call for Help was already promoted as a state-wide referral resource and would have competed head-on with the other three partner sites across the state.

During the planning process it was recommended that following the pilot, 2-1-1 Maryland would become a separate public-private partnership organized as an independent 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization. That organization would be governed by a board of directors that would include representation from state government, counties, municipalities, major nonprofit organizations, private philanthropy, and the community. The hybrid model would continue to be used partnering with the current pilot call centers and adding a call center for Montgomery County. However, the new structure would provide an Executive Director solely focused on 2-1-1 with a support center providing critical system-wide functions to the call center partners. The collaboration team has served as the pioneers to execute this future vision for 2-1-1 in Maryland.

### **Community Response and Impact**

The response to 2-1-1 Maryland over the past two years has been incredible. Since 2006, the cumulative call volume has increased by 31% for a total of over 300,000 calls answered in FY2008. Most telling is the fact that call volume increased 15% from 2006 to 2007, directly related to the 2-1-1 Maryland pilot launch; and then again increased 11.6% from 2007 to 2008. This is a significant impact as there was minimal advertising for 2-1-1. These statistics tell us that the 2-1-1 number sticks with and makes sense to our residents and most importantly that they are using it. Basing forecasted call volume as a percentage of the total population being served, 2-1-1 systems typically target a 6%-8% growth range. 2-1-1 Maryland projected an 8.1% increase, forecasting 448,200 calls by year three and 2.1 million calls handled over the first five years. Using the efficient hybrid model would not have been an option for Maryland’s residents had it not been for the collaboration called 2-1-1 Maryland. Certainly it is not typical to find non-profit organizations willing to work together for three years without funding on a huge project with an uncertain future.

Regrettably, there is impact we know will come one day, the cost of a man-made or natural disaster in our densely populated state. The Washington Metropolitan Region (MD, Northern VA, DC) is a key

target for terrorist activity, with Washington DC, Port of Baltimore, Fort Detrick, and Camp David in our back yard we are just one serious attack away from discovering how unprepared Maryland really is. A two-for-one deal, 2-1-1 Maryland serves as the main source for citizen communication in a crisis leaving emergency responders, 911 centers, and military personnel available to handle mission critical duties. Using the 2007 San Diego Firestorms as an example, 2-1-1 call volume skyrocketed from 2,989 to 109,971 calls in just the first week, exceeding its call volume for the entire previous year. The second disaster week ran at 200% over typical calls, with a surprising side effect. Once people knew about 2-1-1 from their emergency usage, the 2-1-1 call volume in San Diego demand consistently remained 65% higher than before the disaster. The collaboration knew it was imperative that this social utility be in place before it was actually needed and the hybrid model utilized provides the structure needed so that the four partners can share calls in the event a massive disaster hits our region.

The 2-1-1 Maryland resource database of over 4,183 records is now accurate, records are updated at least annually, and available on-line at [www.211metrodc.org](http://www.211metrodc.org) for citizens, non-profits, social service agencies, emergency personnel, anyone in need. Prior to the collaboration, each agency maintained legacy resource databases that were not shared or well-maintained. The partnership made the decision to consolidate efforts into one common resource database. Since UWCM's First Call for Help had built a statewide database over the past 42 years, the partners agreed it was the best choice. Sharing the burden of updating critical information, all four agencies have worked together to update 95% of the records annually while also developing hundreds of new resources.

### **Challenges and Lessons Learned (Sector Model)**

Watching from the sidelines, I can liken this collaboration to a marriage where blended families come together, have to learn about each other, establish ties and learn to make it work. It was a very complex and difficult process which required incredible dedication and patience from all four partners. It will probably come as no surprise that the biggest roadblocks faced were largely "soft" issues such as personalities, cultural differences among the partner organizations, lack of trust, and communication breakdowns and/or misunderstandings. In addition, main obstacles included lack of technical expertise or resources; the periodic absence of a dedicated project manager to keep the group on track and resolve communication issues; lack of financial resources; and the basic dilemma that each group member had a large core operation to run outside of their 2-1-1 Maryland duties.

Constantly evolving, the collaboration began this project with weekly conference calls which then slowed to twice a month; finally falling apart in 2007 when they had whittled down to almost no group communication outside of e-mail. Acknowledging that group dynamics had become very difficult, one of the team members suggested outside mediation to help resolve issues. The group grudgingly agreed. The mediation had mixed results, but it did help the group overcome enough hurdles to avoid divorce. Triangulation of communication among members has been a chronic issue. To combat this, it has been very important to have team members willing to speak up and pinpoint key issues in an objective and non-emotional fashion. Luckily this "semi-peacemaker" role has been shared by different members at various times in the project and has been critical to progress. As recently as last month the collaboration decided that if they were to stay on track it was absolutely necessary to meet both face-to-face and conduct a conference call once a month; finding that a lack of ongoing communication made all the known obstacles far worse over time. The partnership employs agendas for all meetings, makes most decisions by consensus, and in general has a powerful dedication to the project's end goal – a future where Marylanders can find whatever they need with one call and will know how to stay safe in times of disaster. Sometimes this common goal serves as the guiding force when the group

cannot resolve conflict using traditional methods.

## **Part Two:**

The hybrid structure of 2-1-1 Maryland and the expertise of the collaboration partners resulted in the utilization of existing state-wide call center capacity; limiting costs by building on existing infrastructure; better serving Marylanders by strategically placing centers in their specific region; decreased long distance costs; and capitalizing on the strengths of each participating center. Each partner, with over 30 years experience per site, brought their assets to the program, making the collaboration stronger. Partners have been able to lean on each other in solving problems, identifying expertise, and to identify overall best practices for the collaboration.

Operating efficiencies that have been attained by the collaboration include developing a centralized resource database open to the general public; creating a consolidated training program across all four call centers; converting to a shared call management and tracking system; providing backup to one another in times of disaster (some as simple as power outages); and developing reports that reflect needs across Maryland (previous to 2-1-1 Maryland no such report existed).

The estimated cost, as outlined in the 2005 business plan, for years one and two of 2-1-1 Maryland was \$9 million. Over the first five years of its operation as a fully integrated statewide system the total expense to operate the system was forecasted at \$24.6 million. Obviously this estimate was based on state funding which did not materialize.

Due to the limited nature of funding in a pilot, the collaboration's pilot effort was not a fully integrated state-wide system as was recommended in the business plan. However, the collaboration did provide 2-1-1 coverage from landlines across the state of Maryland and in 2008 added service from Verizon cell phones as well. The collaboration partners projected a \$4,879,549 budget to deliver the two-year pilot of 2-1-1 Maryland with all expenses covered by grants, contracts, and private contributions the partners were able to secure for operations. Execution of a \$4.8 million pilot project without state financial backing simply to ensure the future of 2-1-1 Maryland was an enormous financial risk on the part of the collaboration partners. The 2-1-1 Maryland initiative has persevered through three gubernatorial administrations, ultimately securing \$449,000 to begin to bridge 2-1-1 Maryland from a pilot to full implementation in the FY09 budget of Governor Martin O'Malley.

Scheduled for completion in fall of 2008, three of four partners have converted their call management and tracking system to i-Carol software to ensure consistent reporting and information sharing now and for the future. With limited technical expertise and assistance, this team has made smart decisions regarding critical shared systems that many private companies under one leader cannot always effectively execute.

The collaboration has tracked results since October of 2006 utilizing consolidated call volume reports, capturing information for each call which is summarized into cumulative community needs reports, creating combined annual budgets, and monthly joint database status reports generated by United Way of Central Maryland.