Public comment on the Sunset Commission's recommendations for the Texas Health & Human Services Commission

Texas Alliance for Information & Referral Systems

Matt Yell, President, Judy Fullylove, Vice-President

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HHSC Information and Referral

The Health and Human Services Commission operates a variety of hotlines, websites, and call centers. The professional field for these operations is "Information and Referral."

Information in the report discusses public confusion with contacting HHSC and in discovering information important to them. It is important to understand that there are proven processes, tested over time, that can aid in information and referral (I&R).

TAIRS

The Texas Alliance of Information and Referral Systems, Inc. (TAIRS) is a statewide association of agencies and individuals committed to the provision of quality information, referral and helpline services.

TAIRS members include or may include United Ways, crisis hotlines, community councils, libraries, military services centers, state health and human service agencies, elder help lines, 2-1-1s, child care resource and referral providers, children/youth services, Aging Disability Resource Centers (ADRC), community non-profits, and others who provide hotline or Information and Referral (I&R) Services.

Information and Referral (I&R) is about bringing people and services together. TAIRS connects its members with professional development, education, training, and certification. This essential communication link supports people connecting others to the services they need. It is a facilitator, broker and advocate.

TAIRS also offers an annual training conference for its members and other interested service providers.

Sunset Advisory Commission Staff Report (SACSR) Findings

According to the Sunset Advisory Commission Staff Report 'Health and Human Services Commission and System Issues', Issue 12: "Numerous uncoordinated websites and hotlines create barriers to navigating the complex health and human services system" (P161). The report goes on to discuss the various websites, hotlines, and call centers that fall under the purview of HHSC. The report states that data is not collected regarding callers' success and that "has not created policies or standards for hotlines and call centers." [1]

SACSR Recommendation 12.2 (P164): "HHSC must assess this inventory with an eye toward merging related hotlines and call centers where appropriate, and maximizing use of the 2-1-1 call system."

Discussion

Data: Some data does exist in the 2-1-1 systems because of the use of industry standards, standard software and databases. Information is collected on 2-1-1 Information and Referral (I&R) inquiries and reports may be created at the local, regional or state level that include, but is not limited to, unmet needs – callers who were not able to be assisted or did not receive the assistance they sought. Each year, a report known as the "Big Count" is submitted to the Alliance of Information and Referral Systems (AIRS) that contains aggregate data from the collective statewide 2-1-1 systems.

Texas is consistently the leader in the Information and Referral (I&R) Community when it comes to the provision of I&R Services, enforcement of industry standards, and impact in the I&R community. Texas was the first state in the nation to provide 100% statewide coverage of I&R Services via its connected 2-1-1 Systems.

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[1] https://www.sunset.texas.gov/reviews-and-reports/agencies/health-and-human-services-commission-hhsc

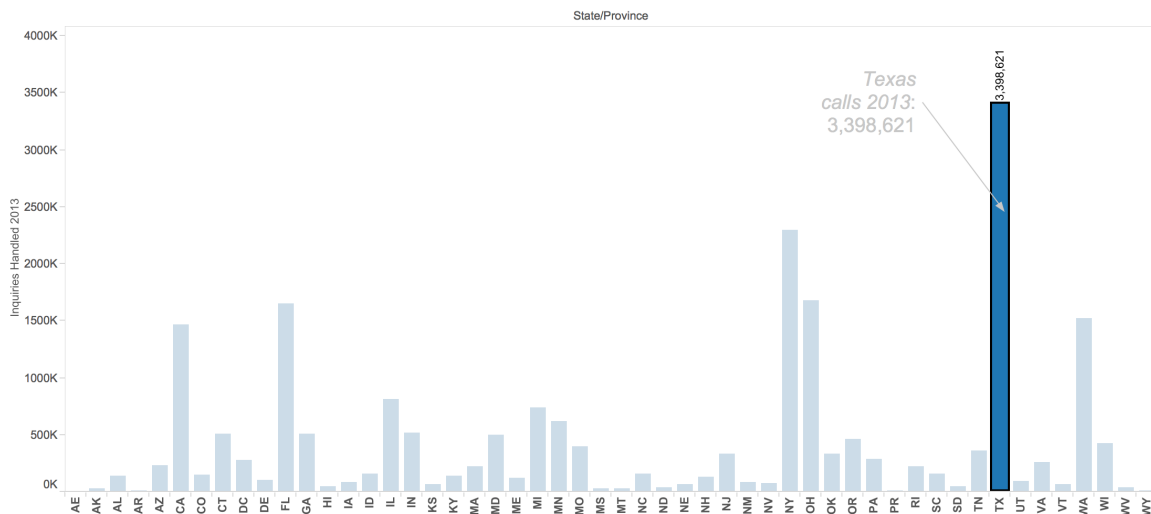The graph below demonstrates the I&R inquiries handled by State/Province during CY2013.[2]

State/Province

Figure 1: Texas far exceeds the call volume of other states

Standards: As a state affiliate of the Alliance of Information and Referral Systems (AIRS), TAIRS Members adhere to industry standards for call centers and for information and referral (I&R) operations known as AIRS 'Standards and Quality Indicators for Professional Information and Referral'.[3] AIRS also provide standardized testing and certification of personnel and accreditation of Information and Referral (I&R) call centers using proven, best practices in a thorough process.

Hotlines vs. 2-1-1 Systems: As part of this evaluative process, it is important to understand the difference between a hotline and the 2-1-1 systems. 'Hotlines' typically involve toll-free telephone service in constant operational readiness so as to facilitate immediate communication for a specific purpose. 2-1-1 systems, however, usually play multiple roles, sometimes simultaneously. 2-1-1 roles, according to the Alliance of Information and Referral Systems (AIRS), may include but are not limited

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[2] Chart data from the 2014 "Big Count", a product of the 211US Steering Committee

[3] *AIRS STANDARDS AND QUALITY INDICATORS FOR PROFESSIONAL INFORMATION AND REFERRAL*. Vol. 7. N.p.: Alliance of Information and Referral Systems, 2013. Print.

to: Assessment, Information Giving, Referral Giving, Advocacy, Crisis Intervention, Follow-Up, Resource Database, Data Collection, Analysis and Reporting, Cooperative Program Development, Community Outreach, and Emergency Preparedness and Disaster Response.

The Future: The Information and Referral (I&R) Industry is ever-evolving and the 2-1-1 System in Texas is ever-changing to ensure quality I&R Service provision, in accordance with established standards, while integrating multiple methods of access preferred by its users.

As new technologies and ways of communication come to the forefront, new investments in people and technology will be required to maintain Texas' leadership position in the I&R Industry, continue to provide quality services to the people in the State of Texas, and sustain its collaborative contributions to the communities of TAIRS Members.

In a recent article by Peter Manzo "Information Wants to Find People" the author points to a shift in consumer expectations and information-seeking behavior.[4]

"Nonprofits that seek to improve lives by coordinating services that meet multiple needs—through wrap-around services supporting schoolchildren or people at risk of homelessness, "no wrong door" benefits initiatives, and other means—likewise face a future that is both exciting and daunting. For broad swaths of the social sector, the challenge will be not only how to coordinate services for people who seek them, but how to identify and push services to those who may benefit from them—similar to the way Google and Amazon push ads, or the way retailers identify and target information to customers going through life changes such as pregnancy. The question of what business you are really in is particularly urgent, however, for information and referral programs seeking to connect people to health and human services—such as area agencies on the aging; independent living councils; warm lines for housing, mental health, and substance abuse; even crisis centers, and 2-1-1s."

SACSR Recommendation 14.2 (Pp176-177): "2-1-1 Electronic Access to Child Care and Education Services Summary Referrals": Eliminate four unnecessary reporting requirements, but continue others that serve a purpose. …2-1-1 Electronic Access to Child Care and Education Services Summary Referrals

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[4] Manzo, Peter. "Information Wants to Find People (SSIR)." *Information Wants to Find People*. Stanford Social Innovation Review, 9 June 2014. Web. 03 Nov. 2014.

Discussion

Users cannot wait: Users of the 2-1-1 System have a particular set of needs that can be camouflaged or dissuaded by an overbearing process that delays assistance. Lengthy interactive voice messages, mandatory screening for a plethora of services and benefits, and intrusive collection of personal information place a burden on the caller that renders the 2-1-1 system unavailable to the people that need it most. It seems that a better option is to simplify interactive voice messages using laymen's terms, which are more readily known to the general public, and to train operators of other call centers to professional standards, and ensure that 2-1-1 has accurate and up-to-date information to provide its users.

Information not well used: TAIRS agrees that this information is not well used. The amount of time that it takes to collect this information or create the "off-ramps" from the 2-1-1 systems should be eliminated if it is not of use.

Summary: TAIRS is the professional organization that supports I&R organizations and staffs in Texas. The Sunset Review of the HHSC offers opportunities to provide higher quality services to callers in Texas. TAIRS can offer professional training and certification of 2-1-1, helpline, and hotline staffs in a variety of I&R situations across the state. TAIRS recommends the call and data collection processes be streamlined to make it easier for callers to connect to the services they need.

Contact Information

For more information, contact Matt Yell, TAIRS President, at myell@ntauw.org.