

# 211 in Ontario

## Vision and Road Map

2013-2015

When you don't know  
where to turn.<sup>TM</sup>



Quand tu ne sais pas  
vers qui te tourner.<sup>MC</sup>

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## BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE OF DOCUMENT

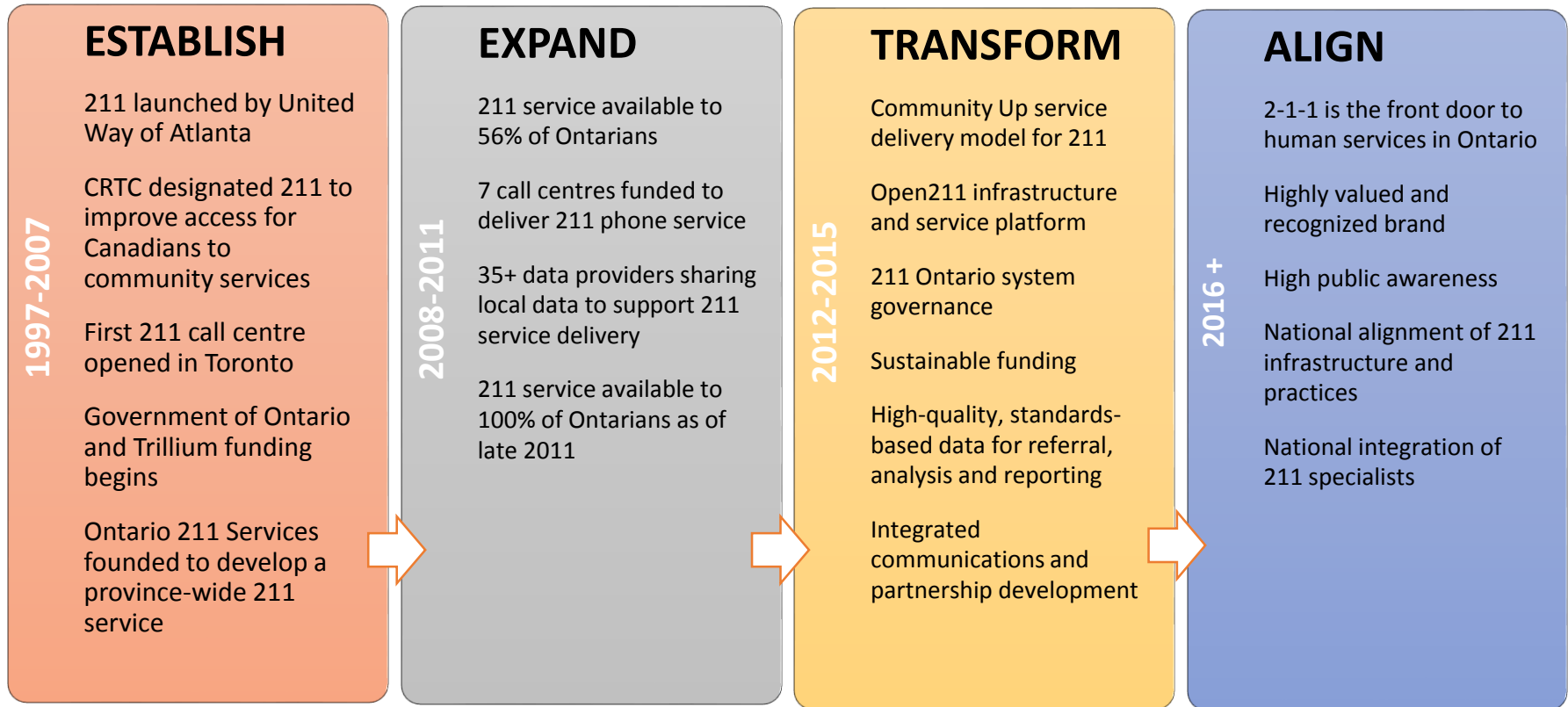
*The roots of information and referral in Ontario are very deep, and they are planted firmly in community. For decades, local agencies, public libraries, United Ways, and volunteer centres have made it their mission to help people navigate the complex system of human services and connect them to the best possible resources close to home.*

The 2-1-1 number was established in North America in the late 1990's as a way to make it easier for people to get the help they need through one phone call. In addition, 211 would benefit agencies by reducing the amount of time spent on misdirected calls and more time spent on their core mandate. For governments, 211 would provide a lens into the demand for services at a community level, and would help to identify where service gaps existed. In 2002, with the launch of service in the City of Toronto, 211 began to take its place as a partner in the delivery of social services in Ontario.

With a funding commitment from the Ministry of Community and Social Services in 2008, the focus of the next three years was on expanding 211 to communities across the province. Once that task was completed in late 2011, Ontario 211 Services turned its attention to creating a fully integrated provincial system to realize the full benefit of 211 for individuals, agencies, funders, planners and decision-makers. In examining what our future state would look like, we collaborated with service delivery partners and United Ways to confirm our shared vision and values that would guide our individual and collective actions over the next three to five years.

Our Strategic Plan for the 2013-2015 period details the specific actions we will take, the associated timelines, and how we will know when we've arrived. This document complements our Strategic Plan, describing the ways in which we will transform our service delivery model and information services to enable a richer experience for users and stakeholders alike. It highlights 211's beginnings, how far we have come, and how we will build a stronger system and service to meet future social needs and trends.

# 211 DEVELOPMENT IN ONTARIO



## **ESTABLISH: 1997-2007**

### **211'S ROOTS IN COMMUNITIES**

*211 service was first delivered in 1997 in Atlanta, Georgia, and grew out of a need to provide easier access to Information & Referral services to the people of Atlanta.*

With the leadership of local United Ways, communities began to advocate with stakeholders to bring the 211 service to their residents. Today, 211 is available in 90.6% of the United States (or 283 million Americans).

United Ways and local Information & Referral agencies in Canada soon followed suit. In 2002, Findhelp Information Services became the first to deliver 211 service in Canada. 211 soon became the easy-to-remember number to call to access information and receive referrals to health, government and social services in Toronto. Over the next 6 years, 7 other 211 call centres were established in Ontario, operated by Information & Referral agencies with decades of experience in their communities and a long history of network collaboration.

In the early days of 211 in Ontario, the majority of funding for the service came from several United Ways and municipalities across the province. Citizenship and Immigration Canada supported 211 services as they saw great value in providing information & referrals to New Canadians in their mother tongue to improve their settlement experience. The Ontario Trillium Foundation funded key 211 projects to enable those in the 211 and agency networks to share best practices and explore collaborative solutions to community issues. The Ministry of Community and Social Services provided funding to create Ontario 211 Services, and the Ministry of Children and Youth Services provided funding to develop and implement a human services taxonomy for local and provincial databases.

In 2008, the Ministry of Community and Social Services made a significant commitment through their Poverty Reduction Strategy of 13.8 million dollars over four years to develop and expand the 211 service. Ontario 211 Services was established as the governing body for a province-wide system, responsible for distributing MCSS funding to service providers, and for developing the infrastructure required to tie the system of service partners and stakeholders together.

## **EXPAND: 2008-2011**

### **TOWARDS A PROVINCIAL SERVICE**

*Over the next three years, Ontario 211 Services worked closely with Regional Service Partners and local United Ways to build support and systems to expand service to all Ontarians. Service was launched in phases over this time, with all residents having access by late 2011.*

As the first province in Canada to achieve 100% coverage, 211 Ontario established shared protocols, processes and policies for the delivery of 211 services according to the standards set out by the Alliance of Information and Referral Systems (AIRS). Data standards were established for service records that were part of the 211 provincial database to ensure a consistent user experience for callers and web visitors alike.



### **STRUCTURE OF THE 211 SYSTEM IN ONTARIO**

211 calls in Ontario are answered by 7 Regional Service Partners (RSPs), who each serve a set geographic area in addition to their local community. Overnight and weekend calls to 211 are answered by Findhelp Information Services in Toronto. RSPs as well as 36 local data providers collect, maintain and update service records for their geographic area in their local databases, and feed that information into a provincial database where it is consolidated for online searches through 211ontario.ca.

While there has been some progress in aligning processes and systems to better integrate information and resources, there remains today several different local and regional databases containing 211 service records and 211 caller needs data. In addition, while the functionality exists to transfer calls to other RSPs to accommodate temporary operational needs, there are 7 separate phone systems across the province with different functionality and capacity.

United Ways and Local and Regional Governments in Ontario play a key role in the network, as they act as ambassadors for 211 in their communities. In many cases, local United Ways develop the relationships with social service agencies and municipalities and advocate for their support – and use – of 211’s services. And many municipalities have been strong champions for 211, helping with awareness and outreach efforts to their residents.

A significant amount of time and effort has been given by Regional Service Partners, Data Partners, staff at Ontario 211 Services, United Ways, municipalities and agency partners in pursuit of a fully-integrated, high-performing and efficient provincial service. While 211 is still a very new service, the expertise and history of the agencies involved have allowed the system to deliver award-winning service to callers, support the work of Emergency Responders, and to provide community data back to planners to assist with decisions around programs and investments. And in the process, call volumes have grown to over 530,000 calls in 2012, and over 2 million web visitors. These are significant achievements in a very complex social services sector.

## **TRANSFORM: 2012-2015**

### **WHERE TO FROM HERE?**

In 2013, Ontario 211 Services undertook a strategic planning initiative to establish the priorities for the next 3-5 years. Part of this process included an honest assessment of where our organization is at today in the context of the external environment and system constraints. This analysis allows us to focus our resources on promoting our strengths, building our capacity and infrastructure where needed, building plans to capitalize on opportunities, and mitigating against potential risks.

The chart below reflects a point in time assessment of 211 in Ontario:



This assessment, combined with the external context and considerations, have framed our strategic priorities for the coming years. We believe that our strengths and opportunities position us well to build a stronger system and service for Ontarians.



## EXTERNAL CONTEXT

Governments at every level are being challenged to reduce spending and to balance budgets. For the non-profit sector, this has meant less dollars for social programs and more competition for government funds. At a provincial and municipal level, governments are looking for efficiencies in program delivery and oversight, as well as encouraging collaboration among social service agencies more than ever before.

As a result of budget pressures, agencies and governments are improving their capacity to strategically partner with others to achieve their goals. Examples of shared services, shared infrastructure, and shared resources among agencies are becoming more and more common.

From an end-user perspective, it is increasingly difficult to increase awareness of any one service or product due to the sheer volume of messages that people are exposed to each day. Public awareness campaigns in Canada and elsewhere have invested millions of dollars to move the needle on public awareness – with modest results. In the world of social and health services, the majority of people asked are motivated to connect with an agency or program based on advice or information provided by a trusted intermediary (word of mouth).

The same technology that has increased the volume of messages that reach us each day, provides opportunities for working differently and amplifying the capacity of the physical work resources to achieve similar, and many times improved results. Companies or agencies who wish to stay current and competitive are investing in technology and infrastructure to meet their clients' needs and to deliver services in the way people wish to receive them.

***211 will be the first and best source of information for individuals and planners regarding human services.***

# 211 ONTARIO

## IMPROVING OUR SERVICE, IMPROVING THE SYSTEM

*In creating a strategic plan to support our transformation, we engaged our Regional Service Partners and worked closely with United Ways in Ontario to ensure a collective understanding of our vision for the future.*

## 211 ONTARIO VISION

The vision for 211 Ontario is consistent with the vision for 211 in Canada – to be the **primary** source of information and gateway to human services for individuals and planners.

What this means for individuals – or their family members, neighbours, friends & colleagues — looking for help is that 211 is a number they know and trust to provide the right resources, the first time. 211 will help people connect to their communities and maintain a good quality of life.

For agencies, 211 will be a trusted resource to help them find services for their clients, and to receive qualitative caller needs data that provide additional insight about the needs in the community.

For Emergency responders and Emergency Managers, 211 will provide a channel for authoritative information to the public regarding non-urgent needs and services, allowing them to focus their resources on their core mandate.

Finally, for government planners and other decision-makers, 211 will provide rich data about caller/user needs that will help inform their investment and policy decisions regarding social, health and government services. Through the adoption of Open Data principles, 211 will also provide the authoritative source of human services data that can be accessed and leveraged to support community development initiatives at all levels.

## 211 ONTARIO VALUES

The vision for 211 is ambitious – but the network of Regional Service Partners, Data Partners, United Ways of Ontario and Ontario 211 staff and Board of Directors are committed to achieving it. 211 in Ontario is not about any single organization, but rather a network of professionals with various skills and capacities, that when properly structured and supported, can achieve very lofty goals. In the world of human services, how we operate is sometimes even more important than what we deliver. The following is a list of our core values that guide our interactions:

- ⑤ People are at the core of our work. We strive to ensure that program or policy decisions are based on what is best for those we serve.
- ⑤ Inclusion and diversity are part of our culture. We serve all residents of Ontario and strive to deliver services in the way that people wish to access them. We provide service in both official languages, as well as in more than 150 other languages and TTY.
- ⑤ 211 is built from the Community Up. This means that we value and leverage the knowledge and expertise that exists in communities to provide a better service to our stakeholders.
- ⑤ Community data belongs to the community. Resource data and caller needs data is shared openly with governments, planners, agencies and other funders to inform their decisions about human services.
- ⑤ We are a standards-based service. Our Information & Referral Specialists and Resource Specialists are certified by AIRS, and our Regional Service Partner organizations are accredited by AIRS. This means that we adhere to consistent standards that guide the information and referral sector across North America.
- ⑤ 211 is Powered by Partnerships. 211 is committed to working in partnership with governments and community organizations to achieve the best outcomes for residents of Ontario.
- ⑤ We are accountable to our stakeholders. 211 relies on public dollars to deliver services to all of Ontario. We are committed to investing those dollars wisely to deliver results at an individual, an organizational, and a community level.

## **WHAT DO WE MEAN BY COMMUNITY UP?**

*Professional and effective information & referral relies heavily on the quality of the resource data collected and knowledge of the local landscape.*

For decades, local organizations have collected information about health, social and government services that are available to support their residents, and have shared that information through phone services, printed directories and online channels. They have built relationships with municipal governments and service providers, and understand the unique strengths and challenges within those communities.

Community Up is an approach to Information Management that sees data collected locally, managed regionally, governed provincially and aligned to a national 211 framework.

Community Up is also a model that sees local service delivery agencies, United Ways, government decision-makers and municipal partners participate in the 211 system by contributing their information and resources, and equally important, benefitting from user needs data that is collected to inform their program and investment decisions.

Community Up leverages the capacity and relationships of organizations, and the experience and expertise of their people to build a stronger system, and improve the user experience.

Ontario 211 Services plays a coordination role investing in policies, processes and infrastructure to create an integrated system and ensure maximum value for stakeholders.

# OPEN 211

## ENABLING AN INTEGRATED SERVICE DELIVERY SYSTEM

*The 211 system relies on the capacity and infrastructure of our service delivery partners to respond to callers and web visitors' needs.*

We have created collaborative processes and platforms to share consolidated information across the province from more than 35 separate datasets, and to flow calls across regions and across seven separate phone systems. To ensure that we maximize the resources in the system, and to ensure a consistent user experience no matter where a user is located, investments into technology solutions are required. These investments allow for more integration within the 211 network in Ontario, such as load balancing of calls and intelligent routing of calls based on language or specific expertise.

We also believe that there is a huge opportunity to reduce the amount of duplication of data collection efforts in the system by building a platform for partners to contribute to an open data repository for planning, programming and decision-making.



## THE ELEMENTS OF OPEN 211

### Maximizing I&R resources

- Virtually integrated phone system for load balancing and intelligent routing (every day and during Emergencies)
- Standardized processes for data collection and call handling
- Single database for caller needs tracking

### Consistent user experience

- Portal of integrated regional and local 211 websites with common look and feel — and customized content relevant to local users
- Common set of tools and practices
- Standardized user needs reporting (community intelligence)

### Reduce duplication across system

- Create an open repository of resource data that is available for the sector to access for a variety of public good initiatives

# STRATEGIC PRIORITIES: 2013-2015

*The next three years will be a critical period for 211 in Ontario – focused on formalizing and strengthening relationships, creating efficiencies through the use of technology, and improving our ability to report back to communities on user needs.*

With a continued focus on partnerships, the priorities identified will allow us to demonstrate the full value of 211 for all stakeholders, and will build the foundation for 211 to be leveraged fully by others in the sector. Building greater general awareness of 211 at an individual, community, and system level will be critical to our success and we will fully engage our partners towards this goal.

Ontario 211 Services has set out the following key priorities and objectives, and has consulted with Regional Service Partners and United Ways to ensure that there is a shared understanding of the body of work required to set the stage for the future.

## 1. ALIGN SERVICE PROVIDERS AND KEY STAKEHOLDERS WITHIN AN INTEGRATED 211 PROVINCIAL SYSTEM THAT VALUES COMMUNITY EXPERTISE AND PROMOTES PARTNERSHIPS

The Community Up service delivery model requires a coordinated effort and strong partnerships to make it work. Our work in this area will focus on formalizing roles and responsibilities of stakeholders, establishing and ensuring compliance with standardized processes, implementing fair and consistent resource allocation and evaluation processes. In addition, we will continue to create formal and informal channels for stakeholders to participate in the management and development of the 211 system.

## 2. BUILD A STRONG 211 BRAND THAT IS CREDIBLE AND TRUSTED BY ONTARIANS.

Increasing general public awareness of 211 will be a key focus in the next few years. Creating materials and campaigns that make an emotional connection with Ontarians by addressing key issues that are important or relevant to them, and demonstrating the value of the service through story telling and reporting on our successes. We will also develop a toolkit of messages, collaterals and best practices to enable Ambassadors in the community to tell the 211 story and will further expand our reach and visibility at a local level.

### 3. INVEST IN TECHNOLOGIES THAT ENABLE SYSTEM INTEGRATION AND CREATE NEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR PARTNERSHIPS AND EFFICIENCIES.

Creating a shared database of human services to facilitate delivery of 211 services across the province, and an integrated phone system that allows for load balancing and intelligent routing of calls through 211 will be prioritized as a way to achieve efficiencies within our 211 system. Building an open, collaborative repository to house data on human services as well as other statistical and research information will reduce duplication of data collection and maintenance efforts across the sector, and will create efficiencies for governments and other funders in Ontario.

### 4. BUILD A FULLY SUSTAINABLE FUNDING MODEL THAT SUPPORTS SERVICE DELIVERY AND EXPANSION.

Fully describing 211's value proposition to municipalities and provincial ministries, and implementing the collective funding model with United Ways in Ontario will be key activities in the next 12-18 months to secure adequate core funding for the future. In addition, we will leverage our core strengths to compete for new funding opportunities locally, regionally and provincially, including the pursuit of private sector funding for capital investments. We will also work with United Ways to engage the private sector for in-kind support and expertise.



## **ALIGN: 2016+**

### **TOWARDS A 211 NATIONAL SYSTEM**

*The benefits of 211 to people in the community, to social service agencies, to funders and decision-makers, and to Emergency Management professionals are numerous.*

Our experience at the provincial level is that when we work collectively to offer services to people, we multiply our capacity to create innovative solutions and outcomes. At the same time, we benefit from the collective knowledge and best practices built from decades of experience in the Information & Referral sector. At a National level, we know the same will hold true.

We are committed to working in alignment with our provincial partners, and with United Way Canada, to create an integrated network that delivers a consistent user experience for those who need information about social services in Canada. From research projects, to community development initiatives, to identifying needs and trends in demands for social services, 211 data and expertise can play a vital role.

Continuing to build partnerships that leverage 211's phone capacity and Information & Referral expertise will not only ensure that public dollars invested in this sector are maximized, but will provide people in our communities with an easy way to access all kinds of human services. Providing an open data repository will ensure that information on social services is collected and maintained consistently, and is complemented by other statistical data to create community intelligence.

This information is key to funders, planners and decision-makers to be able to make the right services available to the right people at the right time and in the right place.

Our long-term vision for 211 Ontario can be summarized by describing the future state as follows:

- ⑤ 2-1-1 is the front door to government-funded and community-based human services in Ontario
- ⑤ Individuals, social service workers, planners, funders and decision-makers use 211 data to inform their decisions on human services
- ⑤ 211 is a highly valued and recognized brand
- ⑤ There is strong public awareness of 211 and it's utility
- ⑤ There is national alignment of 211 infrastructure and practices
- ⑤ Our service providers and 211 specialists pursue and model best practices to ensure a consistent and high quality experience for our callers and stakeholders

*There is much work to be done, and we believe that our investments over the next three years will position us well to achieve our long-term goals. We are confident that with the help of our partners, we will build a stronger 211 system and ultimately, build the capacity of our sector to address community needs.*

