

211, 311, 911 – What’s the Difference and When do I Call which Number?

In an effort to make access to city services more efficient and customer oriented, District of Columbia officials have introduced a new twist on a very familiar number. Recently Mayor Adrian Fenty announced that the city’s 311 number would replace (202) 727-1000 as the number to reach the Mayor’s Citywide Call Center. Now District residents and visitors will have the ease of calling 311, to connect with government agencies and services.

The District has decided to follow the model set forth by the cities of Chicago, Los Angeles, New York, and San Francisco in implementing this new calling system. The goal of this switch is to help streamline the number of calls going to 911 operators. Under the new calling plan, callers would use 911 for all services that require police or fire department personnel regardless if the situation is an emergency or not. Determination whether the call is an emergency will be the responsibility of the 911 operator, not the consumer as it was with the previous system. According to the Office of Unified Communications, the switch to the 311/911 system would, “[e]liminate duplicate calls to the “non-emergency” and “emergency” lines from residents unsure of which number to use.”¹

311 and 911 aren’t the only three digit phone numbers available to visitors and residents of the District of Columbia. A few years ago the District of Columbia approved access to 211, the Federal Communications Commission’s designated number for access to social services information and referrals through the Departments of Human Services Answers, Please!² “211 Answers Please” connects residents with government and community services providers throughout the Washington Metropolitan area. The service specializes in referrals that meet essential human needs for food, shelter, financial assistance, and healthcare.

To eliminate confusion with the three digit numbers available to D.C. residents, the Office of the People’s Counsel has provided the following guide:

¹ Office of Unified Communications. (2008). Fenty Launches 311 Phone Number to Request City Services. News Release. Retrieved January 24, 2008, from <http://newsroom.dc.gov/show.aspx/agency/ouc/section/2/release/12499>.

² Department of Human Services. Retrieved January 24, 2008, from <http://answersplease.dc.gov/answersplease/site/default.asp>.

Which Number Do I Dial?³

Call 911 <i>(for police, fire, or emergency personnel to respond to a particular location)</i>	Call 311 <i>(for government services and agencies or police calls that do not require an office to respond to a location)</i>	Call 211 <i>(for information on local and national social services)</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fire/Medical Emergencies • Crimes in progress/Intruders (or just occurred), especially if the suspect is still on the scene • Serious violent crimes such as homicide, robbery, domestic violence and assault • Gunshots or a person with a gun or other dangerous weapon • Vehicle crashes with personal injury, major property damage or traffic tie-ups • Illegally parked cars that are blocking traffic • If you see a criminal wanted by the police 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • City agency phone numbers, location or hours of operation • Property crimes no longer in progress, such as vandalism, thefts, graffiti, stolen autos and garage burglaries • Abandoned autos or vehicles illegally parked blocking driveway • Minor vehicle crashes with no injuries, property damage, or traffic tie-ups • All other city services, such as Public Works, Motor Vehicles, Mayor’s Office, and Police Districts’ phone numbers and locations. • Trash pick up problems • Potholes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Crisis Intervention Hotline • To report suspected cases of Child Neglect or Abuse • To locate Homeless Shelters • HIV/AIDS referral services • Juvenile Employment Assistance • Locations of Senior Recreation Programs • Substance Abuse Rehabilitation Programs/Clinics • Domestic Violence Assistance • Legal Issues relating to Landlord Tenant, Power of Attorney, Marriage Licenses

³ “Which Number Do I Dial?” table adapted from the Metropolitan Police Department’s “Make the Right Call” table. http://mpdc.dc.gov/mpdc/cwp/view.a.1237.q.547634.mpdcnav_gid.1554.asp.