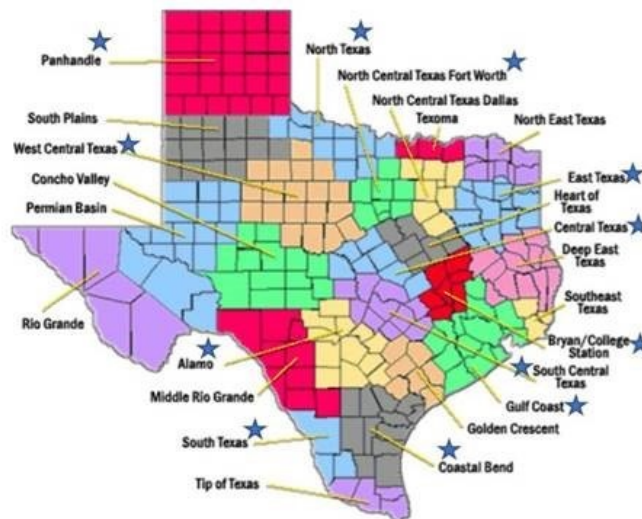


## Strengthen 211 Texas Information and Referral Network (TIRN) Area Information Centers (AICs) under Integrated Eligibility & Enrollment Testimony to the Senate Finance Committee on February 21, 2023

### 211 Texas

Millions of Texans dial 2-1-1 to reach the Texas Information & Referral Network (TIRN) for help with basic needs like food, housing, child care, or emergency services. 2-1-1 TIRN, a program of Texas Health and Human Services, hosts a free anonymous hotline that operates **options 1** (community programs and services provided by 211 call specialists), **4** (emergency assistance registry), **5** (disasters), **6** (public health emergencies) and **8** (mental health and substance abuse). **211 Texas is a connector for Texans in need of critical resources and is a service provided by 25 Area Information Centers (AICs) across the state**, many of which are operated by organizations such as Council of Governments, Area Agencies on Aging, and local United Ways. These call centers are required to meet national accreditation standards.

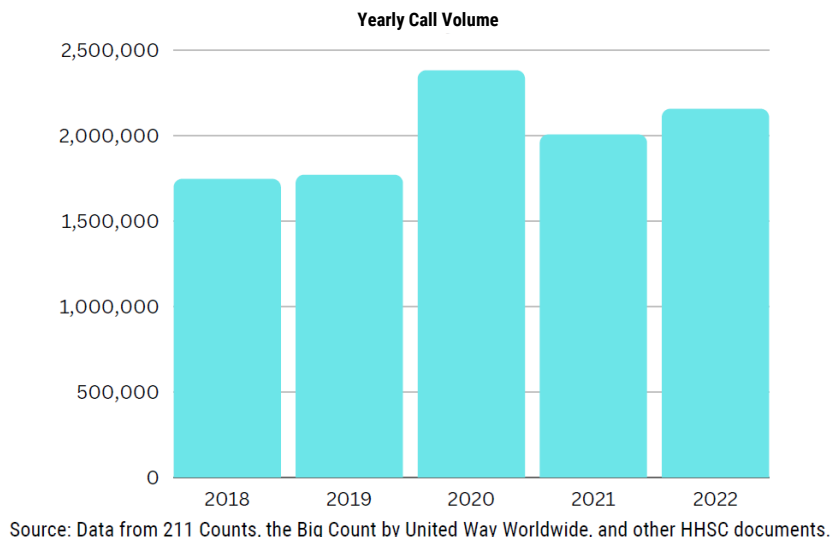
211 TIRN Area Information Centers (AICs)



★ Denotes UW-led 211 call center/AIC across Texas

### 211 Call Centers are operating beyond their current capacity and facing limited staffing support

Over the last few months and throughout the pandemic, 211 has experienced record call volume, often 30-40% above historical levels. HHSC continues to push AICs to do more, without any additional support and resources from the state. AICs are concerned about staff burnout and turnover as they struggle to meet the increased volume and demands.

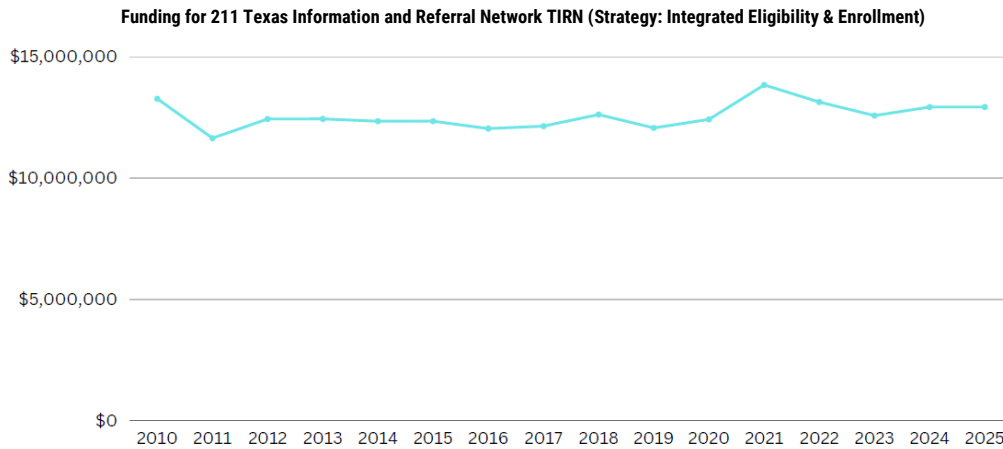


Source: Data from 211 Counts, the Big Count by United Way Worldwide, and other HHSC documents.

### Call specialists are burdened by state benefits and eligibility (Option 2) operational issues

Additionally, they are carrying the burden of Option 2 (benefits and eligibility), without additional financial support. According to the Gulf Coast Region Call Center managed by United Way of Greater Houston, **nearly 300,000 calls to their call center in 2022 were from Texans across the state looking to connect with eligibility and benefits services (Option 2)**. Since 211, Option 1 is operational 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, Texans know that, regardless of the service they are seeking, they will be able to speak to a live person by pressing this option.

**Funding for 211 Texas has been stagnant and does not match the real business costs of operating a call center** Increasingly, AICs are putting up their own resources to maintain call center operations with some United Ways, such as United Way of Greater Houston and United Way of San Antonio and Bexar County **absorbing nearly half of the cost of operations for their call centers.** Appropriate funding levels that reflect increased call volume and needed operational capacity should be a priority.



Source: Data from HHSC Operating Budgets and Legislative Appropriations Requests.

**211 is more than just the three-digit number and Texas is lagging behind**

Unfortunately, 211 Texas is behind other states in network efficiency, innovation, and system integration. Other states and communities across the country are utilizing 211 across state programs and systems for its: **community resource and referral database**, which quickly connects individuals with community services; **communication capabilities**, that helps callers connect more quickly with information and services through texting and web-based communications; **data**, that enables policymakers better understand community needs and resource gaps; and **technology and collaboration infrastructure**, which allows for innovative partnerships and projects, such as providing closed-loop referrals, care coordination and navigation services, and serving as a front door and coordinated entry for vulnerable populations.

**Recommendations**

**Lawmakers should increase funding for 211 Texas—under Strategy: Integrated Eligibility and Enrollment—by \$4.6 million for the biennium** in addition to investing in benefits and eligibility services. Additional state investment in the 211 local information and referral network is needed to fully maximize and leverage 211’s capabilities and ability to serve as a front door, connector, navigator, and data resource to communities.

- **Increase base funding for 211 TIRN by at least \$2.8 million to support staffing and other operational costs** at the 25 AICs needed to respond to elevated call volume, overstretched call center operations, and network optimization. Call volumes rose almost 40% statewide during the first 18 months of the pandemic and remain elevated. AICs need additional funding to maintain quality operations and to attract and retain trained, quality staff necessary to support call center functions and effective information and referral services. Also, the LAR includes a decrease in funding for FTEs at HHSC to support TIRN operations and would impact AICs.
- **Invest \$1.8 million to implement technology and communication enhancements**, including texting, enhanced taxonomy and search functions for 211 Texas resource database, and two-way Application Programming Interface (API) for multidirectional communications and other measures required by national accreditation standards and designed to better connect specialized populations with available state and local services and address non-medical drivers of health.

To read the full policy report scan the QR code or visit <https://bit.ly/3E5giS8>

