



**211 After Action Report:  
2016 Wood Buffalo Wildfires**



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# Background

## 211 Services Every Day

211 is a free, confidential, multilingual, 24-hour information and referral system staffed by certified Information and Referral Specialists. 211 provides information on government and community based health and social services.

By calling 211:

- You will be connected to referrals to local non-profit, government and health programs to fit your need.
- Staff can provide advocacy and system navigation support to help get you what you need in an effective and efficient way.
- In addition to helping people find the information they need, 211 analyzes data from calls to identify emerging needs, gaps in services and areas of high demand. 211 will share this data with various stakeholders, including local municipalities.

211 was launched in Edmonton in 2004 and Calgary in 2005. The United Way has been instrumental in bringing 211 to cities in Alberta and is now playing a leading role, along with many community partners, to initiate and implement a province-wide service so more people can benefit from the 24-hour support. In 2014, 211 Alberta launched services in the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo. 211 Alberta, through their two contact centres operated by Canadian Mental Health Association – Edmonton Region and Distress Centre, currently provides phone and online services to people living in Edmonton & Area, Calgary & Area, the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo, Red Deer, the Town of Banff and Bow Valley Region and Yellowhead County. For more information on communities served, visit [ab.211.ca](http://ab.211.ca).

211 Alberta is accredited by the Alliance of Information and Referral Systems.

## Help Starts Here

**Dial 2-1-1** for free, confidential services, 24/7, in over 170 languages.

Chat with us online at [ab.211.ca](http://ab.211.ca) from 12pm – 8 pm 7 days a week.

## 211 Services During Disasters

No one can predict when a disaster may occur, nor the devastation that it may leave in its wake. The best measure for minimizing the impact of any disaster is being prepared ahead of time to adequately deal with the aftermath. Information and referral services such as 211 remove the strain on emergency services, government departments and support service agencies during disaster situations by handling non-emergency calls.

211 is prepared to support the community when disaster strikes:

- Standards related to disaster planning are a part of the accreditation process required for all 211 services.
- 211 Information and Referral Specialists are highly skilled in crisis intervention.
- 211 acts as a communication hub. One phone call (or chat) is all that is needed to get people to the right place, ensuring there are limited instances of misinformation and misdirection for those requiring services or support. 211 prevents a large number of confusing help lines from being developed.
- 211 hosts a comprehensive database of resources and services. The need for this level of information becomes amplified in times of disaster when available resources may change on a daily, or even hourly basis. New resources surface while others may become unavailable. This data can provide opportunities to identify unmet needs and monitor the allocation of available services.
- 211 can be used as a resource for agencies and first responders to complement their roles in the disaster. By utilizing 211, they can focus their time on the work in their specific area of practice.
- 211 can expand the capacity of first responders by diverting calls from emergency responders during times of crisis.
- One of the largest gaps in navigating resources during times of disaster is coordinating the influx of donation and volunteer offers that arise. In many cases, when these offers of support come in, agencies just do not have the capacity to respond and helpers can feel discouraged when their offers are not taken up. 211 is in a position to coordinate these offers of help and support, preventing non-useful items from being dropped off in the community.
- 211's infrastructure and network allows for the system to have extended capacity and reach in times of disaster. Since the comprehensive database is online it can be updated in one region where information is coming in, and provided in another region where

information is going out. This was of vital importance when the contact centre in Calgary had to shut down for 24 hours during the 2013 floods as it ensured there was no disruption in service when it was needed the most.

As first responders start to withdraw following the initial response period, there are often weeks, perhaps months of recovery for local residents and communities. 211 Information and Referral Specialists can provide continued emotional support and reassurance to callers' post-disaster, work on an on-going basis to connect them with services and to meet new needs that may have surfaced because of the disaster.

211 is a critical piece of the community fabric assisting citizens during this period of hopelessness that remains well into recovery and rebuilding.

## **The Event: 2016 Wood Buffalo Wildfires**

On Sunday, May 1<sup>st</sup> 2016, a wildfire began in the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo. Due to high temperatures and strong winds, the fire grew quickly. On Tuesday, May 3<sup>rd</sup> 2016, the fire entered Fort McMurray triggering the evacuation of more than 88,000 residents. Some residents evacuated north to oil sands work camps as well as the indigenous community of Fort MacKay First Nation. Most residents evacuated south to communities along highway 63 to get to safety.

On Wednesday, May 4<sup>th</sup>, Premier Rachel Notley declared a Provincial State of Emergency. Mandatory evacuation orders were in place for Fort McMurray, Anzac, Gregoire Lake Estates and Fort McMurray First Nation. Reception Centres were set up across the province including in Athabasca, Bonnyville, St. Paul, Edmonton, Calgary, Lac La Biche and many more communities. As the fire moved through the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo, it resulted in more than 2400 homes and businesses being destroyed.

Due to the level of destruction, residents were not immediately able to return home. Assessments and monitoring of air and water quality began. Coordination of essential services also began, to ensure a safe space to return home to for residents.

The evacuation order stood until Wednesday, June 1<sup>st</sup> when those whose neighbourhoods were safe and houses habitable were able to return. Controlled access was given to those residents of other neighbourhoods where houses were destroyed or uninhabitable.

On Friday, July 1<sup>st</sup> 2016, the Province of Alberta lifted the State of Emergency. Wildland firefighters from across Canada worked to tirelessly bring the fire under control and on July 4<sup>th</sup>, 2016 the fire was declared under control. In the following weeks and months, the community worked to clean up and start the rebuilding and healing process.

## Role of 211 Alberta

Through the response and recovery phases of the Wood Buffalo wildfires, 211 Alberta responded to 1314 calls and chats from those affected by the disaster. During the response phase, May 4 – 31, 1078 contacts were received with the top contact issues relating to donations, housing, and emergency stipends. During the recovery phase, June 1 – August 31, 236 contacts were received with the top contact issues relating to re-entry protocol, general information, and emergency stipends.

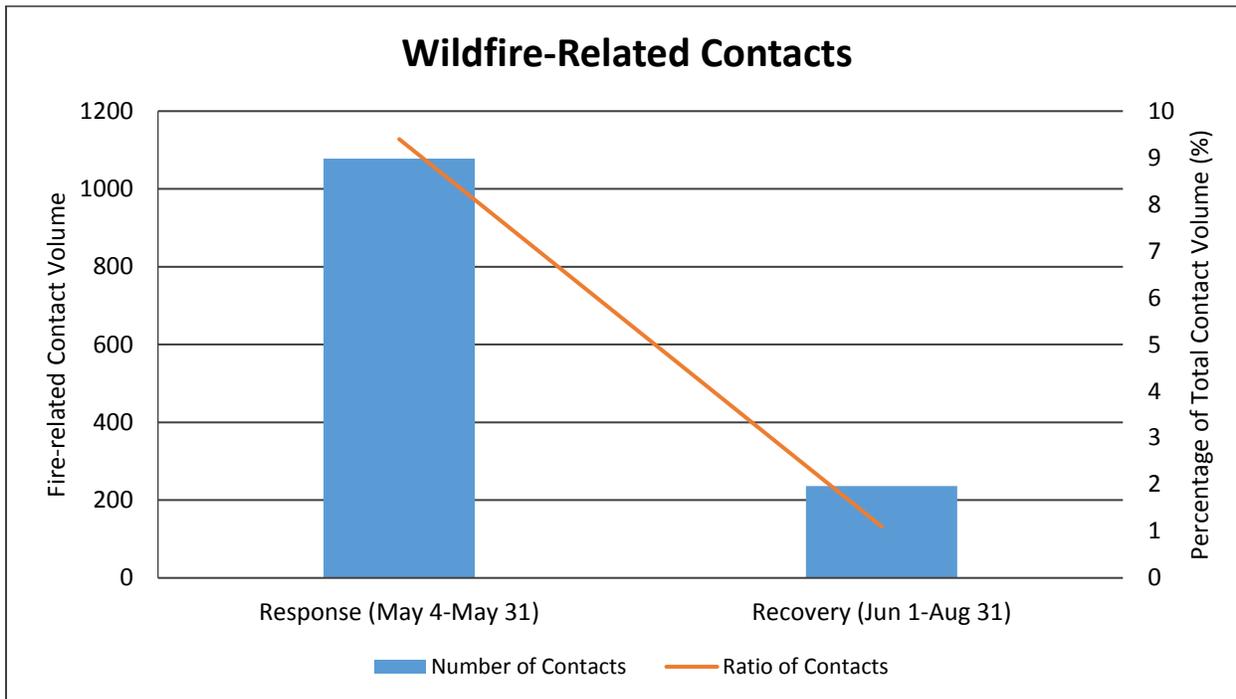
On, Tuesday, May 3<sup>rd</sup>, the 211 data team began tracking and reporting rapidly changing information through a resource document by monitoring social media, investigating calls to the 211 line, and contacting agencies to verify and update resource information. Using GoogleDocs, this resource document was a live updated reference for the public, stakeholders, and information and referral agencies across Canada made accessible on the ab.211.ca website. During the response phase, the data team prioritized resources around evacuation, including food, shelter (for humans and animals), clothing, emergency funds.

As information changes slowed during the recovery phase, the GoogleDoc was discontinued with all relevant information updated in the InformAlberta database including special notations for records affected by or responding to the wildfire disaster. During the recovery phase, the data team prioritized resources related to resettlement, including emergency funds and long-term shelter.

While 211 service was available in the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo, 211 service is not yet available across Alberta. In the response phase, evacuated residents of Fort McMurray were being displaced throughout the entire province of Alberta and beyond. Recognizing this barrier, on Wednesday, May 4<sup>th</sup>, the 211 Alberta Steering Committee worked together to ensure any one affected by the wildfires and subsequent evacuation could access support and get connected with services, regardless of where in Alberta they were.

With the investment of these organizations, 211 Alberta:

- Implemented two 1-800 numbers that would directly connect callers to the contact centres in Edmonton and Calgary
- Implemented an online chat service



Top Contact Issues for Response Period (May 4 – May 31, 2016)		
Issues	Volume	Ratio of wildfire related contacts
Donations	103	9.6%
Housing	91	8.4%
Emergency Stipends	69	6.4%
Supplies	68	6.3%
Resources for Evacuees	58	5.4%
General Information	51	4.7%
Evacuee Reception/ Registration	43	4.0%
Volunteering	42	3.9%
Transportation	19	1.8%
General Info	10	0.9%

Top Contact Issues for Initial Recovery Period (June – August 31, 2016)		
Issues	Volume	Ratio of wildfire related contacts
Re-entry Protocol	42	17.8%
General Info	39	16.5%
Emergency Stipends	30	12.7%
Housing	24	10.2%
Transportation	23	9.7%
Supplies	20	8.5%
Household Goods	19	8.1%
Ongoing Financial Assistance	16	6.8%
Psychological Services	11	4.7%
General Information	10	4.2%

# Stories from the Front Lines

## Coordinating Donations

During the initial days of evacuations, a worker from the reception centre at SAIT phoned in looking for assistance in locating items for evacuees. The worker stated they had a large number of young children at the reception centre and were in need of strollers, car seats, play pens, and cribs. The Information and Referral Specialist gathered the workers information and offered to make calls on their behalf to try and locate the items. The Information and Referral Specialist provided advocacy by contacting several community agencies to try and locate the needed items on behalf of the reception centre. Within a few hours of the initial call coming in to 211, the Information and Referral Specialist had located the needed items as well as additional donations, to support the families of the young children and arranged to have them dropped off at the reception centre.

## Supporting First Responders

A volunteer with the Red Cross accessed the 211-chat service looking to obtain a list of available community resources for fire evacuees. The Information and Referral Specialist directed the volunteer to the [ab.211.ca](http://ab.211.ca) website where a list of available resources and services throughout the province of Alberta was being updated hourly. The volunteer and the evacuees she was working with were invited to call 211 at any time, to speak to an Information and Referral Specialist for support with navigating the available resources to meet their needs.

## Providing Mental Health Supports

A family phoned in looking for advice on bringing their children back to Fort McMurray to pick up belongings from their family home. The caller stated that the children were really missing their home since the evacuation and wanted to go back to pick up some belongings, but the family was unsure if it would be helpful or not. The Information and Referral Specialist explored the situation and provided emotional support of empathy and validation for the difficult situation the family had been going through. Through exploration, the caller shared more about the family concerns for supporting the children through coping with the fire and their feelings surrounding the loss. The Information and Referral Specialist connected the caller to counselling services that the family could access while coping in this difficult time. The caller felt that being able to talk to someone about the situation helped and thanked 211 for the service they had been providing.

## Helping with Resettlement

An adult female contacted 211 requesting help with obtaining furniture for her new apartment. The caller shared that she was an evacuee from Fort McMurray who was not able to return home and has decided to remain in Calgary. The caller shared that she had received help from the Red Cross for a number of things she required, but was still in need of furniture. The Information and Referral Specialist provided the caller with referrals to obtain furniture and invited a call back if further support was needed as she settled into her new home in Calgary.

## Looking Towards the Future

From disasters across North America like Hurricane Sandy, the 2013 Southern Alberta Floods and most recently the 2016 Wildfire, 211 has proven its value in a disaster.

211's ability to connect networks of information and respond to callers in crisis is the cornerstone of their daily work, positioning them to play an integral role in a community's disaster management framework.

- 211's data has the potential to play a key role in identifying trends of previous disaster response to help in shaping the response of future disasters.
- 211 can help build up sector capacity and build connections by linking community organizations together prior to disaster striking.
- There is potential for future integration of 211 with the Alberta Emergency Management Agency.

The 211 Alberta Steering Committee is working to **bring the 211 service to all Albertans**. If you are interested in supporting our work, please contact us at [info@ab.211.ca](mailto:info@ab.211.ca).