

2-1-1 Telephone System Programming

2-1-1 is a vital service that connects millions of people to help every year, including thousands in New York. This program is a partnership between the United Way and other organizations that provides 2-1-1 dialing capability to allow fast and convenient access to critical social services from any land or cellular phone lines within New York State. By simply dialing 2-1-1 from a land or cellular line, callers are connected to trained professionals that have access to a vast knowledge base to provide informed assistance to a variety of caller needs. This 2-1-1 service is free to callers. In order to provide access to 2-1-1 service, businesses, educational institutions and agencies (for-profit and not-for-profit) that utilize on-site telephone “systems” have an additional step to be performed.

On-site telephone “systems” commonly known as Private Branch Exchanges (PBX) or Key Systems connect staff phones to the outside world and provide advanced features that individual lines typically don’t have. Common manufacturers include Alcatel, Avaya, Cisco, Iwatsu, Mitel, NEC, Nortel, Panasonic, ShoreTel, Siemens and Toshiba. The connections to the outside world can be via “POTS” (Plain Old Telephone Service) lines, ISDN Primary Rate Interfaces (PRIs), T-1s or fractional T-1s. Newer Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) telephone systems may connect to the outside world via the Internet and use Session Initiated Protocol (SIP) instead of POTS, PRIs, T-1s, etc. While the carriers providing these connections to the outside world have already enabled their networks to route the digits “2-1-1” to the appropriate 2-1-1 call center, the on-site telephone systems need to allow the digits “2-1-1” to be passed to the carriers. Without this necessary programming being done, callers that dial “2-1-1” will receive error messages like, “The number you’re dialing is not active.” or reorder tones (fast busy signals).

We would like to stress that there is no cost to users for 2-1-1 calls. The 2-1-1 New York network has borne all the cost to set up the service and has made provisions for 2-1-1 calls to be free to the public.

Phone system technician checklist:

1. The digits 2-1-1 should be passed from the phone system to the PSTN just like 9-1-1
2. Carriers translate 2-1-1 to a toll-free number.
3. When the carriers “see” 2-1-1 on their trunk lines from the phone system they translate 2-1-1 to a toll-free number.
4. The toll-free number will route to the appropriate call center.
5. No special provisions need to be made to inter-digit timing.
6. If possible, 2-1-1 should be allowed to pass to the PSTN whether an outgoing local prefacing digit is used or not. For example, Many telephone systems require a “9” or an “8” to be dialed first in order to tell the system that a caller wants to make an outside call. More sophisticated systems allow “9-1-1” to be passed regardless if the prefacing “outside line digit” is dialed. For example, callers to emergency services can dial “9-9-1-1” or just “9-1-1” and the call will still be routed to the carrier who in turn routes it to the emergency responder call center. Although not absolutely necessary, it would be nice if “2-1-1” calls could be routed in a similar manner – with or without the prefacing digit for an outside line.
7. When programming is completed, please test by dialing 2-1-1. When the outside call completes, indicate to the call center that this is a 2-1-1 test call from your company/agency.

For more information or assistance, please contact:

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