Just 3 phone digits open lots of doors in New Jersey

By DEREK HARPER, Staff Writer | Posted: Saturday, May 24, 2014 6:02 pm

Surveys show practically everyone in America now knows to call 9-1-1 for police and emergency services.

But 2-1-1? It’s like a semi-secret code practically every phone can access.

For more than a decade, callers have had the option of dialing the special three-digit code to access other public services. Those agencies are pushing for broader awareness of the numbers.

In New Jersey, payphones once used that number for repairs and refunds. The state Board of Public Utilities assigned it to the New Jersey 2-1-1 Partnership in 2002, BPU spokesman Greg Reinert said, which uses it for community-based information and referral services.

Callers can get help navigating government social programs, including post-disaster management, home-energy assistance and Hurricane Sandy recovery.

Laura Marx, the partnership’s executive director, conceded “outreach is a challenge.” She said the hotline, overseen by the United Ways of New Jersey, gets about 340,000 calls a year. Calls shot up in the months following the 2012 derecho storm and Hurricane Sandy, as the hotline connected storm refugees with essential services.

The three-digit codes, technically called N11 numbers by the Federal Communications Commission, are an outgrowth of plans made in the years following World War II to standardize telephone numbers.

The basic arrangement is called the North American Numbering Plan. It underlies agreements between the United States, Canada and most Caribbean counties that established our familiar 10-digit telephone numbers.

The FCC assigned the first three-digit codes in the 1990s, following the success of 9-1-1 in replacing the profusion of local emergency numbers.

During the next dozen years, the FCC issued a series of reports and orders that standardized and set aside practically all of the three-digit codes for local government services.

Only 0-1-1 and 1-1-1 go unused, because phone systems use 0s and 1s for switching calls. And regulators still are dealing with some modern phones that eschew traditional copper lines for the Internet and cannot access all of these numbers automatically.

Usage is growing, while other numbers have hung on to their older uses.

Callers to 4-1-1 have long reached directory assistance, paid for by callers. while 6-1-1 has
connected callers with telephone repair services. The 9-1-1 emergency line, first designated in the 1960s, is paid for in New Jersey by a $0.90 charge to all wire and wireless lines.

However, in Newark and Hoboken now, callers can dial 3-1-1 for nonemergency, quality-of-life issues that address everything from missed trash collection to noise complaints to abandoned cars. More than 50 other cities, including New York and Philadelphia, have similar programs.

Towns have the option to set up their own line, state Office of Information Technology spokeswoman Shelley Bates said. OIT was given responsibility for 3-1-1 in 2007, while others have suggested a broader, statewide program.

A 2007 study by the National Center for Public Performance at Rutgers University estimated it would cost $12 million to set up a statewide program and $26 million annually to operate.

In 2007, the state Department of Transportation started giving callers traffic updates at 5-1-1, a number the FCC nationally designated for traffic reports.

The number saw more than 1.4 million calls last year, said state DOT spokesman Steven Schapiro. The website 511nj.org had 2.4 million visits, he said.

The agency has promoted the number and site with announcements and signs, and Schapiro said it now tells callers to go there for the most up-to-date traffic and construction information. In North Jersey, the agency has used 5-1-1 to update motorists about reconstruction work on the Pulaski Skyway.

The FCC also designated 7-1-1 for telephone relay services. These allow callers to communicate with people with hearing issues who use special text-based or video-based phones. These are typically free for callers, and paid for by state or federal funds.

The last code the FCC assigned was 8-1-1, which the commission designated in 2005 as a one-call number for people doing construction work near utility lines, consolidating an array of 800 numbers. Callers to 8-1-1 are routed to utility companies, which pay $1.22 per-call to the operator, One Call Concepts, of Hanover, Maryland, which sends crews to mark the lines.

The goal of the Call Before You Dig program was to get more people calling before they start digging around utility lines, potentially damaging infrastructure, risking injury, fines and repair costs, according to the Common Ground Alliance of utilities, regulators, construction firms and others.

The alliance said just one-third of homeowners check with utility providers before doing underground work. The American Public Communications Council estimated in 2007 that more than 15 million calls nationally are made to the nations 71 one-call centers.

Contact Derek Harper:

609-272-7046