

HEATHER MCGAFFIN

Building Safer, More Connected Communities with the Statewide Implementation of 311

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My name is Heather McGaffin, a former Southern Maryland resident who spent four decades in the state. I began my career as a call taker and dispatcher before advancing to supervisor and ultimately Deputy Director at the Calvert County Emergency Communications Center—the county’s Public Safety Answering Point (PSAP). Later, I worked throughout the country to enhance 911 operations and had the opportunity to support the Maryland Next Generation 911 Commission. Currently, I reside in Washington, DC, where I serve as Director of the Office of Unified Communications, overseeing the District’s 911 and 311 centers. Every year, the agency’s 911 Specialists handle 1.4 million emergency calls, while our dedicated Customer Service Representatives answer nearly one million 311 inquiries.

Over my 22-year career in diverse PSAPs, I’ve seen the advantages of separating non-emergencies from emergency calls. Without round-the-clock centers for non-emergencies, after-hours calls default to the 911 center. In 2023, Maryland’s 911 Specialists managed over 10 million calls, with an estimated 15-20% being non-emergencies such as illegal parking, lost items, or questions about services—nearly two million calls of this type.

A robust 311 system is vital for allowing 911 Specialists to focus on their life-saving roles. All Maryland 911 Specialists are certified to provide critical instructions in emergencies like cardiac arrest, active assailant incidents, and childbirth. They guide callers through CPR, coordinate resources, and manage scenes until help arrives. However, these responders are also fielding non-emergency requests, like library hours or water main breaks, diverting valuable time and attention from emergencies.

Having first responders juggle both types of calls create delays that could cost lives. 911 Specialists must be available for genuine emergencies, not tied up with non-urgent issues.

Currently, only about 58% of Marylanders can access 311 services, offered in Baltimore City and five counties: Anne Arundel, Baltimore, Montgomery, Prince George’s, and St. Mary’s. Service quality varies; for instance, St. Mary’s relies mainly on an online portal, while Montgomery County has limited evening and weekend coverage. During severe weather events, when residents need to report road hazards or downed utilities, they often turn to 911, the same line needed for life-threatening emergencies. Calls are handled in

order, which means non-emergencies can delay urgent responses. Expanding 311 significantly improves public safety by ensuring emergencies get immediate attention.

Adopting Artificial Intelligence (AI) in 311 centers has shown positive results across many states and cities. AI systems efficiently route calls, answer frequent questions, and connect people quickly to local government information. They analyze trends to forecast service demand, optimize resource allocation, and even automate follow-up actions. This leads to quicker, more accurate responses for callers and frees 911 staff to concentrate on emergencies. Places using AI report higher customer satisfaction, greater efficiency, and improved public safety.

Statewide 311 access would streamline non-emergency responses, conserve emergency resources, and guarantee prompt help when it matters most. By embracing modern technology and proven strategies, Maryland can upgrade its communication systems, reduce pressure on 911 Specialists, and enhance overall service quality. These improvements will help build safer, more resilient communities.

In looking ahead, a statewide 311 system—supported by innovative AI solutions and robust oversight—will not only streamline public interactions but also strengthen the foundation of emergency response in Maryland. By removing barriers to access and standardizing service levels across counties, we can ensure that every resident has a reliable way to report non-emergencies without jeopardizing critical 911 operations. This investment in technology and infrastructure is more than a matter of convenience; it is an essential step toward safeguarding lives, empowering communities, and building public trust in our emergency communications network. Therefore, I urge the Maryland House to pass House Bill 0009 to create the Maryland 3-1-1 Oversight Board and expand 3-1-1 services statewide for all 6.26 million residents.