

**BEFORE THE TENNESSEE PUBLIC UTILITY COMMISSION
NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE**

October 12, 2022

IN RE:

**PETITION OF EAST TENNESSEE FOR 211
TRANSFER OF UPPER EAST TENNESSEE
DESIGNATION FOR CARTER, GREENE,
HANCOCK, HAWKINS, JOHNSON,
SULLIVAN, UNICOI, AND WASHINGTON
COUNTIES**

**DOCKET NO.
22-00047**

ORDER APPROVING TRANSFER OF 211 DESIGNATION

This matter came before Chairman Herbert H. Hilliard, Vice Chairman David F. Jones, Commissioner Robin L. Morrison, Commissioner Kenneth C. Hill, and Commissioner John Hie of the Tennessee Public Utility Commission (“TPUC” or “Commission”), the voting panel assigned to this docket, during a regularly scheduled Commission Conference held on August 8, 2022, for consideration of the *Petition for Transfer of 2-1-1 Designation for Upper East Tennessee* (“*Petition*”) filed by East Tennessee 211, LLC (“ETIR” or “Petitioner”) on June 8, 2022. In its *Petition*, the Petitioner requests that the 211 designation for the eight (8) county area served by Contact-Concern of Northeast Tennessee, Inc. (“Contact-Concern”) be transferred to ETIR.

I. BACKGROUND AND *PETITION*

On July 31, 2000, the Federal Communications Commission (“FCC”) granted a petition filed by information and referral service providers seeking nationwide assignment of an abbreviated dialing code. The FCC’s designation of 211 as an information referral service was an effort to transition non-life-threatening calls made by citizens to 211 rather than utilizing emergency 911 for such calls. Citizens can call 211 to receive information and/or telephone numbers for the appropriate city departments, hospitals, disaster assistance, housing, utilities, etc. In its order assigning the N11 Abbreviated Dialing Code 211 for access to community information and referral services, the FCC

found that the proposal submitted by the petitioners met the “public interest” standards for such assignment, stating:

Individuals facing serious threats to life, health, and mental well-being have urgent and critical human needs that are not addressed by dialing 911 for emergency assistance or 311 for non-emergency police assistance.... We believe that the Information and Referral Petitioners have shown a public need exists for an easy to use, easy to remember N11 code to efficiently bring community information and referral services to those who need them, providing a safety network for persons to get access readily to assistance. Therefore, we find that the public interest standard has been met.¹

The eight (8) counties that are the subject of this request to transfer designation were among the first counties to receive 211 designation in the state of Tennessee. Contact Ministries, located in Johnson City was awarded the 211 designation for Carter, Greene, Unicoi, and Washington Counties on May 13, 2002.² Contact-Concern, located in Kingsport, Tennessee, received its 211 designation for Sullivan, Johnson, and Hawkins Counties on March 26, 2002³ and its 211 designation for Hancock County on November 21, 2007.⁴

As stated in the *Petition*, the Board of Directors for Contact-Concern planned to close its offices on July 1, 2022. As a result, ETIR requests that the 211 designation for the eight (8) county region served by Contact-Concern be transferred to it for the purpose of providing information and referral services to such counties and to answer calls, on an interim basis, when Contact-Concern closes its doors on July 1, 2022 until the Commission’s approval of its transfer, permanently.⁵ Transfer of the

¹ *In the Matter of: The Use of N11 Codes and Other Abbreviated Dialing Arrangements*, CC Docket No. 92-105, *Third Report and Order and Order on Reconsideration* (July 31, 2000).

² *In Re: Contact Ministries, Inc.’s Petitions the TRA to Provide the 211 Information and Referral Services to Carter, Greene, Unicoi and Washington Counties*, Docket No. 02-00126, *Order Approving Allocation of N11 Number (211) to Contact Ministries, Inc.* (May 13, 2002).

³ *In Re: Petition to Designate 211 Service for Non-Profit Health and Human Services Information and Referral Line for the Counties of Sullivan, Johnson and Hawkins, Tennessee*, Docket No. 02-00127, *Order Approving Allocation of N11 Number (211) to Contact-Concern of Northeast Tennessee, Inc.* (June 10, 2002).

⁴ *In Re: Petition of Contact-Concern for 2-1-1 Designation in Hancock County, Tennessee*, Docket No. 06-00100, *Order Approving Allocation of N11 Number (211) to Contact Concern of Northeast Tennessee, Inc.* (November 21, 2007).

⁵ *Petition*, p. 1 (June 8, 2022).

services will allow ETIR to provide information and referral services to the citizens in the Northeast region of the state, collectively serving all counties of Northeast Tennessee.⁶

In addition, ETIR asserts that it has been answering calls and inquiries since July 2015, receiving funding from United Way, government grants, and the Community Action Committee of Knox County. Local area United Way agencies, coordinated by the United Way of Greater Knoxville, have committed to funding 211 and maintaining sustainability. ETIR has two interns committed throughout the school year through a relationship with the University of Tennessee's School of Social Work. The database administrator and volunteer employees of Contact-Concern will be retained by ETIR.⁷

ETIR demonstrated its technical ability through compliance with standards established by the Alliance of Information and Referral Systems ("AIRS"). AIRS is the driving force behind the delivery of quality information and referral services and the sole source for standards, program accreditation and practitioner certification for the information and referral sector. ETIR requires AIRS-certified operators answering all 211 calls for information and referral services utilizing a modern Automated Call Distribution ("ACD") phone system with call recording and live monitoring to ensure quality assurance. ETIR recently received an award for its collaboration with partner agencies during the COVID-19 pandemic. ETIR provided a path for their callers to get access to rent, mortgage, and utility assistance through Knox County's Federal Treasury Grant.⁸

The Director of ETIR is Russ Jensen. Mr. Jensen currently serves as President of Tennessee AIRS. Further, he was a member of the board of directors for the original 211 for East Tennessee when it began operations in 2000-2001.⁹

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ *Id.* at 2.

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ *Id.* at 3.

II. PUBLIC COMMENT

On June 8, 2022, the Commission received written public comment from Joshua B. Pedersen, Interim Senior Director of 211 at United Way Worldwide. Mr. Pedersen expressed support for the *Petition*, stating that, “stable funding, a history of exceptional service, and strong leadership within the Knoxville operation provides us the confidence that 211 services in Tennessee will continue uninterrupted.”¹⁰

The Commission received additional written public comment from Matt Ryerson, President and CEO of United Way of Greater Knoxville on August 8, 2022. In support of the *Petition*, Mr. Ryerson states: “The United Way of Greater Knoxville will go beyond the endorsement of this transition and commits to funding support of this work, as well as, convening the nonprofit community to give the necessary information to make that work successful.”¹¹

III. FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

The Commission considered the entirety of the record and found that ETIR has been the provider of 211 information and referral services for sixteen (16) counties in the East Tennessee Region. Upon the transition of the 211 designation for Carter, Greene, Hancock, Hawkins, Johnson, Sullivan, Unicoi, and Washington Counties from Contact-Concern to ETIR, ETIR will provide information and referral services to all of Northeast Tennessee. The panel found that the information and referral services provided via 211 continue to be an excellent use of scarce abbreviated dialing codes and that the consolidation of services in Northeast Tennessee will improve the quality of 211 services in that area. As such, the voting panel found that the transfer of the eight (8) county 211 designations to ETIR is in the public interest. Therefore, the panel voted unanimously to approve the

¹⁰ Letter to Chairman Kenneth C. Hill Re: Support for 211 from Joshua B. Pederson, United Way Worldwide (June 8, 2022).

¹¹ Letter from Matt Ryerson, President & CEO of United Way Greater Knoxville Re: Support Transition of 211 Services of Upper East Tennessee (August 8, 2022).

transition of the 211 designation for Carter, Greene, Hancock, Hawkins, Johnson, Sullivan, Unicoi, and Washington Counties to ETIR.

IT IS THEREFORE ORDERED THAT:

1. The *Petition for Transfer of 2-1-1 Designation for Upper East Tennessee* filed by East Tennessee 211, LLC is approved.
2. Any person who is aggrieved by the Commission's decision in this matter may file a Petition for Reconsideration with the Commission within fifteen (15) days from the date of this Order.
3. Any person who is aggrieved by the Commission's decision in this matter has the right to judicial review by filing a Petition for Review in the Tennessee Court of Appeals, Middle Section, within sixty (60) days from the date of this Order.

FOR THE TENNESSEE PUBLIC UTILITY COMMISSION:

**Chairman Herbert H. Hilliard,
Vice Chairman David F. Jones,
Commissioner Robin L. Morrison,
Commissioner Kenneth C. Hill, and
Commissioner John Hie concurring.**

None dissenting.

ATTEST:



Earl R. Taylor, Executive Director