



***DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY
SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY DIRECTORATE***

Text-Enabled Gatekeeper Intervention Help Line Referral System

Draft Policies and Procedures

Georgia State University

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Purpose

This report documents our efforts to support the creation of policies, procedures, and protocols for 211 LA to expand their offerings to individuals calling for help diverting or disengaging someone from violent extremism. Virtually none of the 24/7 hotlines throughout the United States have protocols in place to referring callers to relevant service providers in the context of violent extremism. Research has shown that people tend to be reluctant to contact law enforcement agencies when they see signs of radicalization or mobilization to violence for fear of getting their loved ones, or themselves, into trouble (e.g., Williams et al., 2016, 2019, & 2020). Given this, a safe-referral call center would empower local communities with a convenient, readily accessible, and confidential means to intervene.

Background

Helplines designed to prevent violent extremism (PVE) remain nascent. Even fewer exist with *protocols* designed specifically for PVE (Sivenbring, 2019), let alone with published evaluations of, or research into, program policies and procedures. Indeed, Hutchinson notes (2017) that most helplines are developed and implemented without any kind of assessment or evaluation at all. The few PVE helplines that do exist were developed either recently in response to the challenges associated with returning foreign fighters from Iraq and Syria or previously in response to right-wing extremism (Gielen, 2015; Rabasa et al., 2010; Ranstorp et al., 2016).

In the United States, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) launched the national "If You See Something, Say Something®" campaign in July 2010. The campaign emphasized the importance of reporting suspicious activity to law enforcement authorities. The campaign was first implemented by New York City's Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA), who licensed the use of the slogan to DHS for anti-terrorism efforts. Consistent with these efforts, what helplines do exist—sometimes referred to as “hotlines”—are thus far focused more on providing citizens the means to report ‘tips’ regarding suspicious activity as opposed to say, helping potential perpetrators disengage from, or avoid engaging in, violent extremism (Bossio, 2005; Briskman, 2015; Coaffee & Rodgers, 2008; Grossman, 2018; Jarvis & Lister, 2010; Mirchandani, 2017).

True *helplines*—that is, lines of communication to connect to helpful resources like counseling services, not just a criminal tip line—have been developed since then, most prominently across Europe and the Middle East, with some notable outliers, such as in Australia. These helplines embraced the principles of prevention, from primary to tertiary. Several helplines were designed not only for people deemed at risk of engagement in violence, but for their family and friends who might help them turn away from violent extremism. Some are built on the assumption shared by researchers that family and friends can play an important part in an individual's de-radicalization, disengagement, and reintegration into society, and even protection against initial radicalization and engagement in violent extremism in the first place (Malik & Russell, 2016). 211 LA aspires to be one such helplines by connecting help-seekers to relevant community providers and resources.

Below is a discussion of 211 LA's local context in which it is developing these protocols and policies—particularly, some of the barriers that LA-ROC might face, and how they might expand community awareness and scale up LA-ROC to other 211s.

Context

Local Context

211 LA promotes themselves as serving the Los Angeles County (“LA county” for short). However, 211 LA report receiving inquiries from other counties, states, and even from outside the U.S. on occasion. The *local* context matters regarding how the program is perceived. Firstly, however, the way the program is portrayed might affect whether people feel comfortable reaching out to 211 LA if someone they know is being radicalized.

So far, the 211 LA team reports that the implementation of LA-ROC has been well received by the agencies that 211 LA approached, in part because no one else is offering a helpline for preventing violent extremism and reporting hate crimes. Some of the agencies were not aware of what 211 LA offers and have been interested in learning more.

Barriers

211 LA reported that one of the hardest parts of developing the LA-ROC program, was finding out what organizations might provide relevant services to deter someone from violent extremism or providing support to a concerned individual. To paraphrase how one staff member put it, “the helpline is useless if we cannot connect them with service providers.” The 211 LA team disclosed that it has been difficult to find agencies to collaborate and build partnerships with. While two were identified on a national level (Parents for Peace and Life After Hate), no direct fit was identified on a local one. This does not necessarily mean that there are no service providers that can help with adjacent areas (e.g. mental health services), but there might be a lack of community organizations experienced with helping someone leave violent extremism or stop someone from radicalizing.

The second barrier concerns community acceptance. The 211 LA team explained that LA vs. Hate was developed by the Humans Relation Commission in LA county. To make sure the program was independent and had a 24-hour helpline, they partnered with 211 LA. 211 LA have received positive feedback regarding the LA vs. Hate program from community organizations. Of a similarly sensitive nature, there were concerns that the community would not welcome LA-ROC and would receive it as *hotline* or “tip”-line as opposed to a *helpline*, but thankfully, so far 211 LA has experienced no backlash from the community regarding the program. Given that previously funds had to be returned because of public backlash from LA city, this is good news. The 211 LA team observed that in past years some organizations might have assumed that 211 LA was trying to “fix” a person by getting them out of extremism. Therefore, 211 LA was careful to frame the LA-ROC program as offering support and connecting people with other agencies to help people help themselves.

Community Awareness

It is foreseeable that it would take more than a few months to inform LA residents about LA-ROC's services. 211 LA staff mentioned also that they ought to plan an expansive marketing campaign. Once word gets out, calls to LA-ROC should pick up, but 211 LA does not expect inquiries to reach the levels of the LA vs Hate program, which already experiences lower inquiries than their other prevention programs (e.g., to prevent homelessness). The following recommendations were gathered during the focus groups, email exchanges and conversations with the 211 LA team.

Awareness and Marketing Recommendations

- Use the existing platform that partner organizations have and let Parents for Peace and Life After Hate spread the word on social media and during media appearances
- Inform local law enforcement agencies and schools about the helpline
- Advertise on billboards and at the back of buses
- Advertise on social media and on search engines

Scaling up

In the case of other 211s adopting the LA vs Hate and/or LA-ROC program, the implementation should be straightforward. Other 211s use similar processes, the same database, and operate call centers and care centers in a comparable manner to 211 LA. 211 LA will be able to offer technical assistance and guidance.

If agencies in other counties were to adopt the program, they might have to change some processes, as their system will differ, and they would not have access to the 211 databases for example. In addition, implementation at other organizations might affect a hate crime report program more than an extremism prevention program, as a large variety of local resources must be analyzed and gathered for a hate crime report program, but only a handful of national resources are available for an extremism prevention program and have already been identified by 211 LA.

211 LA is expecting ROC to upscale well on a state and national level as well. The biggest challenge they can foresee is a lack of local resources for preventing violent extremism and service providers offering direct help with intervention. Some recommendations that were expressed by the 211 LA team to the GSU researchers are to humanize people who are radicalizing or involved in extremism, encouraging more education on the topic of extremism (e.g., one staff member said the documentary *Healing from Hate* was more useful than anything else she had read) and letting service providers know that they are already equipped to address trauma and any underlying issues.

In addition, it was pointed out that no agency wants to add to their respective workload without access to additional funding. Furthermore, the development of even more organizations like Parents for Peace and Life After Hate, who utilize a bottom-up approach, might be needed to reach people. If one agency could also focus heavily on training and reach more service providers, that would help.