Government to launch 3-1-1 phone line for more than 100 services

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Gov. Luis Fortuño's administration will launch early next year a toll-free 3-1-1 telephone service that will provide government information and services directly to citizens, Government Chief Information Officer Juan Eugenio Rodríguez told CARIBBEAN BUSINESS in an exclusive interview.

The goal is to eventually provide all services that are available over the pr.gov website, which has more than 100 services, and runs the gamut from getting a copy of your birth certificate or good-conduct certificate to paying traffic tickets and utility bills.

Rodríguez said the new service would be up and running by next March, but the government will start with a few key agencies and expand.

"The rollout process will be very regimented because we want to make sure the quality is there. The last thing we want to do is put up 3-1-1 and have people say it is worse than calling the agencies. We want people to never call the agencies again. We want them to call 3-1-1 and say, 'wow! They solved my problem in a minute.'"

Rodríguez said the system was being developed using the infrastructure and personnel of the 9-1-1 emergency-telephone service, and the government planned to start with agencies that deal significantly with the public.

The 3-1-1 call system will be the latest push by the Fortuño administration to cut costs and improve services through increased automation of government services. Rodríguez said this would be a way to reach residents who lack access to computers or the skills to take advantage of the pr.gov website, which accounts for about half the population.

Officials visited New York City, Miami and Panama to study existing systems and "learn from the mistakes of others."

While New York City spent some $50 million to launch its service in 2003, smart planning and tumbling technology prices will enable Puerto Rico to launch its first phase for no more than $1.5 million, Rodríguez said.

The government computer whiz said the idea is to have the 3-1-1 telecommunicators handle as much of the citizen requests as they can directly, and they will be provided tools to resolve issues on the spot, such as accepting payments for traffic fines or reporting a downed power line.

Citizens will also be able to request documents such as the good-conduct certificates or evidence that child-support payments are up-to-date. In these cases, the documents would be faxed or emailed, Rodríguez said.

The service will probably be operational about 12 hours a day, Monday through Friday, with a staff of less than 100.

The overall goal is for the government to provide services any way citizens want to receive them: in person, over the Internet or, starting next year, via the 3-1-1 line.

The 3-1-1 system is also aimed at cutting the number of non-emergency calls made to the 9-1-1 emergency-telephone system, which account for 87%. ■