Ensuring good community engagement in the aftermath of Hurricane Dorian

CASE STUDY: Operating a feedback hotline in the Bahamas

August 2020

Introduction

Hurricane Dorian hit The Bahamas on the 1st of September, 2019. It was one of the strongest Atlantic hurricanes to make landfall in history, rivalled only by the 1934 "Labor Day" hurricane. While the Bahamas has over 700 islands, the hurricane significantly impacted the islands of Abaco and Grand Bahama and the surrounding Cays. According to the Caribbean Disaster Emergency Management Agency (CDEMA), Dorian left around 15,000 in need of food or shelter, with an estimate of 5,000 people evacuating to Nassau from the islands of Abaco and Grand Bahama.

From the onset of the disaster, the Bahamas Red Cross Society (BRCS) has been in the forefront of the response on the ground with the support of the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) through its Hurricane Dorian Emergency Appeal.

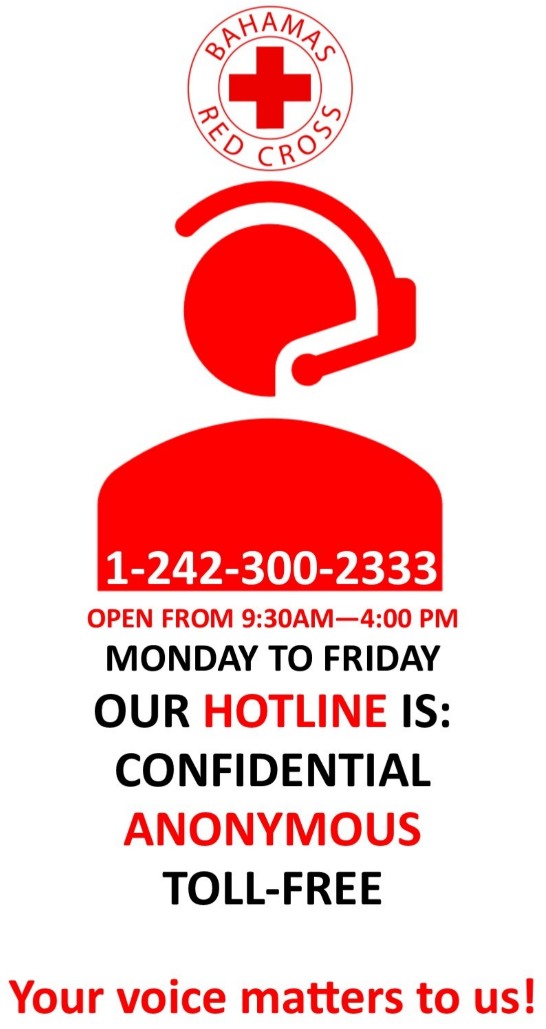
This case study presents the process of establishing and operating a feedback hotline that was undertaken by the BRCS and the IFRC to support operational community engagement and accountability (CEA) efforts in The Bahamas. The hotline has been in service since early October 2019. It has evolved into a vital information and communications channel of the operation´s integrated feedback mechanism.

The case study aims to provide other Red Cross and Red Crescent National Societies with best practices and lessons learned from the operational process. The hotline´s associated tools and material were designed and tailored based on the country-specific context, and, therefore, may not be the most appropriate and relevant solutions for other National Societies operating in different contexts. However, it has proven to be useful to explore options and possibilities when undertaking a process towards the same goal of operating a well-functioning hotline as part of a bigger feedback mechanism.

The Hotline

The BRCS Hotline is a **toll-free**, **anonymous** and **confidential** feedback hotline, operated at one location from 9:30 AM to 4:00 PM Monday through Friday. The hotline is bi-lingual, staffed by three trained hotline officers; two English -speaking and one Creole-speaking. Its primary purpose is to receive, respond to, and refer incoming feedback guided by defined standard operating procedures.

Since October 2019, the hotline has received and documented approximately 7.500 calls, which amounts to approx. 37 calls per day, and 5,7 calls per hour. The hotline number is displayed in strategic places, e.g. on Social Media, around the office premises, and also proactively in communities related to programme interventions where a hotline is determined to be an appropriate means of communication.



The yellow table below is a screenshot from a programme pamphlet on which the hotline number was disseminated to communities related to the BRCS´ Meals on Wheels initiation in response to COVID-19.

WE WANT TO HEAR FROM YOU

If you have questions about the work of the Bahamas Red Cross or would like to give feedback about our services, such as compliments or complaints, you can:

- **Speak to our officer during the next delivery**
- **Contact our toll-free hotline 1-242-300-2333**

Open from Monday to Friday between 09:30 AM – 4:30 PM

TOLL-FREE - ANONYMOUS - CONFIDENTIAL

1-242-300-2333

Your Voice Matters To Us!

1. **Ask** if you can receive support from the Red Cross.
2. **Give feedback** or raise issues regarding the way our support
3. **Report issues** regarding your safety or the safety of others in your community.

Vwa Ou Enpotan Pou Nou!

1. **Mande** sou ou la resevwa sipo nam men Make A Wouj
2. **Bay fidback** oswa ogmante problem konsenan wout la soti sipo yo bay la.
3. **Repote pwoblem** konsenan sekirite ou oswasekirite lot mon nan lavi ou

BAHAMAS RED CROSS

OPEN 9:30 AM - 4:00 PM

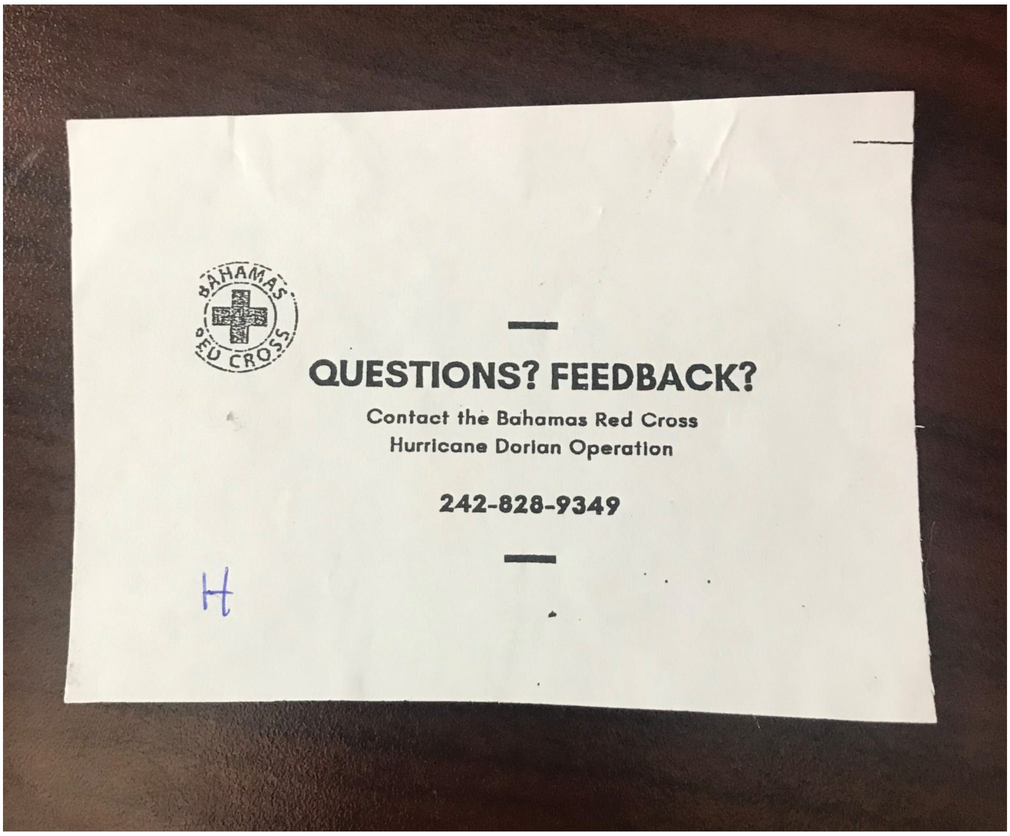
MONDAY TO FRIDAY

LOUVRI DE 9:30 AM - 4:00 PM

LENDI A VANDREDI

The hotline´s evolution

The hotline has not always been a toll-free service; it was initially operated on several mobile phone numbers by BRCS volunteers and IFRC delegates. We advertised the hotline numbers to Dorian-affected communities upon the receipt of emergency relief and financial assistance from the IFRC and the BRCS. The dissemination mainly targeted persons receiving financial assistance for troubleshooting issues related to the prepaid visa cards distributed in response to Hurricane Dorian. Due to the inevitable limitations of mobile numbers, i.e. only being able to operate one phone line per number as well as the incurring charges for the callers, the number of incoming calls exceeded the technological capacity of the mobile numbers to cope with high volumes; hence, an overabundance of persons was left unanswered when calling the hotline while busy. The statistics also came to show the relevance of a hotline in the operating context, i.e. being a preferred channel of communication in the aftermath of Dorian. Therefore, a strategic decision was made to upgrade the hotline´s hardware system to accommodate one toll-free hotline number with three trunk lines. The ultimate aim was to increase the capacity of the hotline to receive, on the one hand, a higher volume of calls, and, on the other hand, more than one phone call at once. The toll-free service would simultaneously provide more inclusive access to the Red Cross, with no charges to the persons placing the calls.



Responding to calls

One of the guiding principles of the hotline´s response protocols is consistency; regardless of who picks up the phone call, the person calling should receive the same information. Proper consistency is ensured by the hotline´s trained and experienced officers, its defined standard operating procedures (SOPs), and its regularly updated document on Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs). All hotline officers answering calls have completed basic two-day training on communications, and feedback and complaints handling skills facilitated by the IFRC.

The aim of the hotline is always to solve each case during the call. However, the hotline serves a massive operation comprising different sectors and programmes across locations and islands.

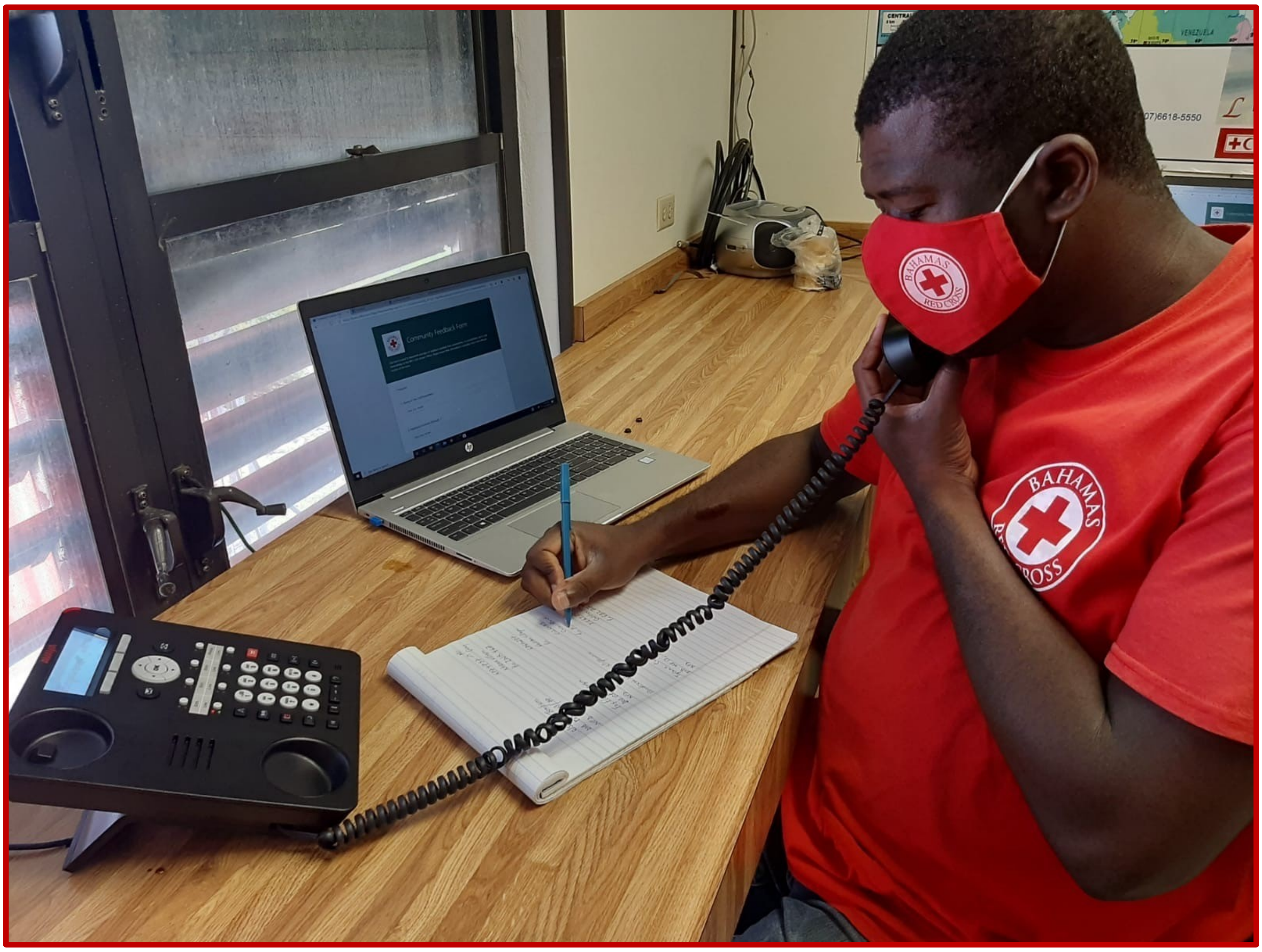
With the hotline being cross-cutting, albeit without the direct involvement of the hotline officers, specific measures have proved pivotal to increase the response rate of the hotline, such as providing hotline officers with briefings and presentations from programme staff, preparing Q&As in advance with regular updates based on daily/weekly monitoring of incoming calls.

The Dorian Operation has presented challenging and complex matters to the hotline requiring additional steps and actions taken beyond the hotline´s ability to solve cases on the spot. For this reason, we designed a referral pathway system to facilitate referrals throughout the feedback loop. For further information on the referral pathway, see the section *Closing the loop.*

Inside statistics: Feedback by Sex

Statistics show that 71% of calls are made by females and 29% of calls by males.

Documenting calls



Antoine Wilzor, BRCS Hotline Officer

We use incoming feedback systematically to inform and influence operational and programmatic decisions for improvements. To identify trends and patterns for improvements and necessary changes, we devoted significant efforts to define and determine the best way to document calls by the hotline; the hotline went through several different tools used to document calls such as an Excel Spreadsheet and the Kobo Toolbox, neither of which afforded the hotline to facilitate and manage the feedback data as needed across locations.

As the hotline works in parallel with other feedback channels across locations and islands, it was deemed necessary for the feedback mechanism to accommodate a unified database containing data from all feedback channels. This required us to use one feedback template across all channels of the mechanism.

The hotline now uses a **digital feedback form** hosted by Microsoft Forms to document all incoming calls, which allows us to document each call in a simple and user-friendly manner. The template has been designed around a defined disaggregation of feedback to ensure a consistent and coordinated approach for documenting feedback across channels.

The form accommodates all feedback channels of the operation; we use the same form to document feedback through the other feedback channels of the operation´s integrated feedback mechanism. This documentation facilitates the analysis of feedback received through all feedback channels within the operation to identify trends and patterns to influence and inform programmatic and strategic decisions.

We designed the digital feedback form to accommodate all sectors of the operation, all BRCS´ programmes, as well as other potential additions to the BRCS´ portfolio without having to rearrange the feedback database in the future.

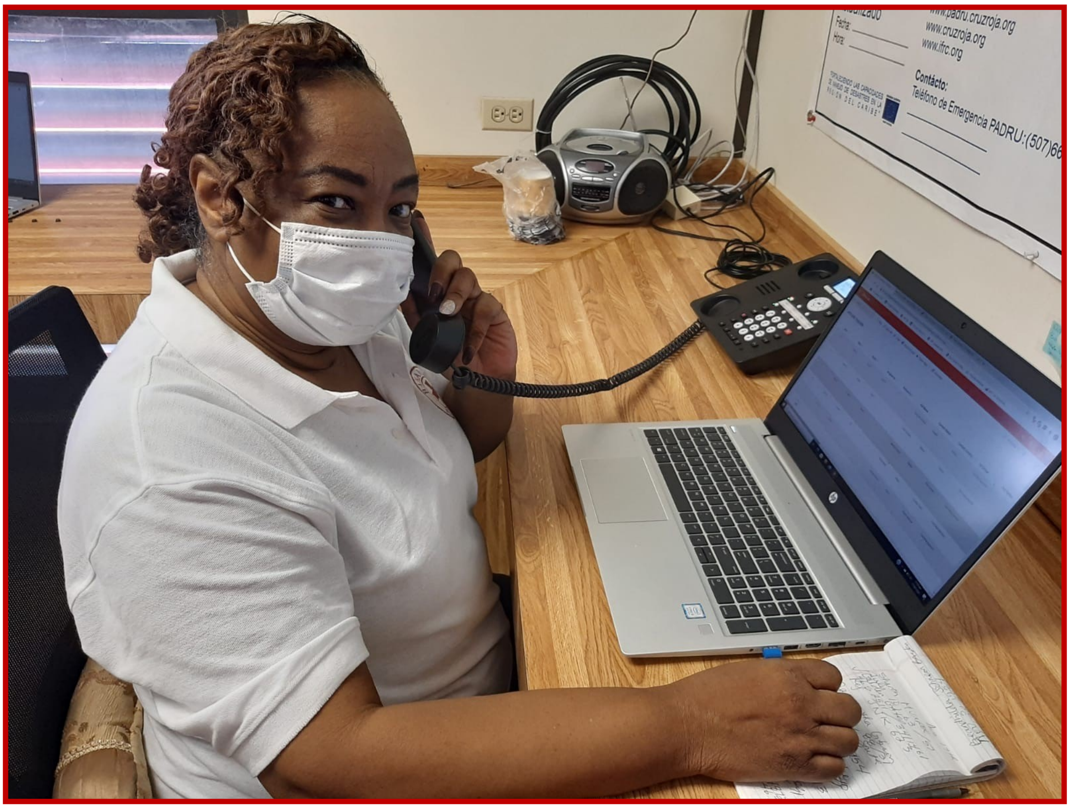
➔ Anonymity and confidentiality

We present and display the hotline proactively to communities as an anonymous and confidential service. The hotline´s anonymity and confidentiality have reportedly proved encouraging for people to reach out to the hotline when the need arises.

We do not ask persons calling the hotline to reveal their identity unless a follow-up action is required to solve the call. In such cases, the hotline officers invariably and carefully ask for permission to document contact information.

➔ Handling of sensitive feedback and complaints

Feedback cases categorized as sensitive require different response protocols managed by designated PSEA/PGI focal points. Therefore, we established a separated database for feedback data defined as sensitive for data protection purposes. Once feedback is labelled as sensitive and submitted as such, the feedback cases follow a separated pathway managed by the PSEA/PGI focal points. The information associated with the feedback is automatically stored and separated accordingly to protect the caller and to ensure that the call follows the appropriate protocols.



Linda Duncombe, BRCS Hotline Officer

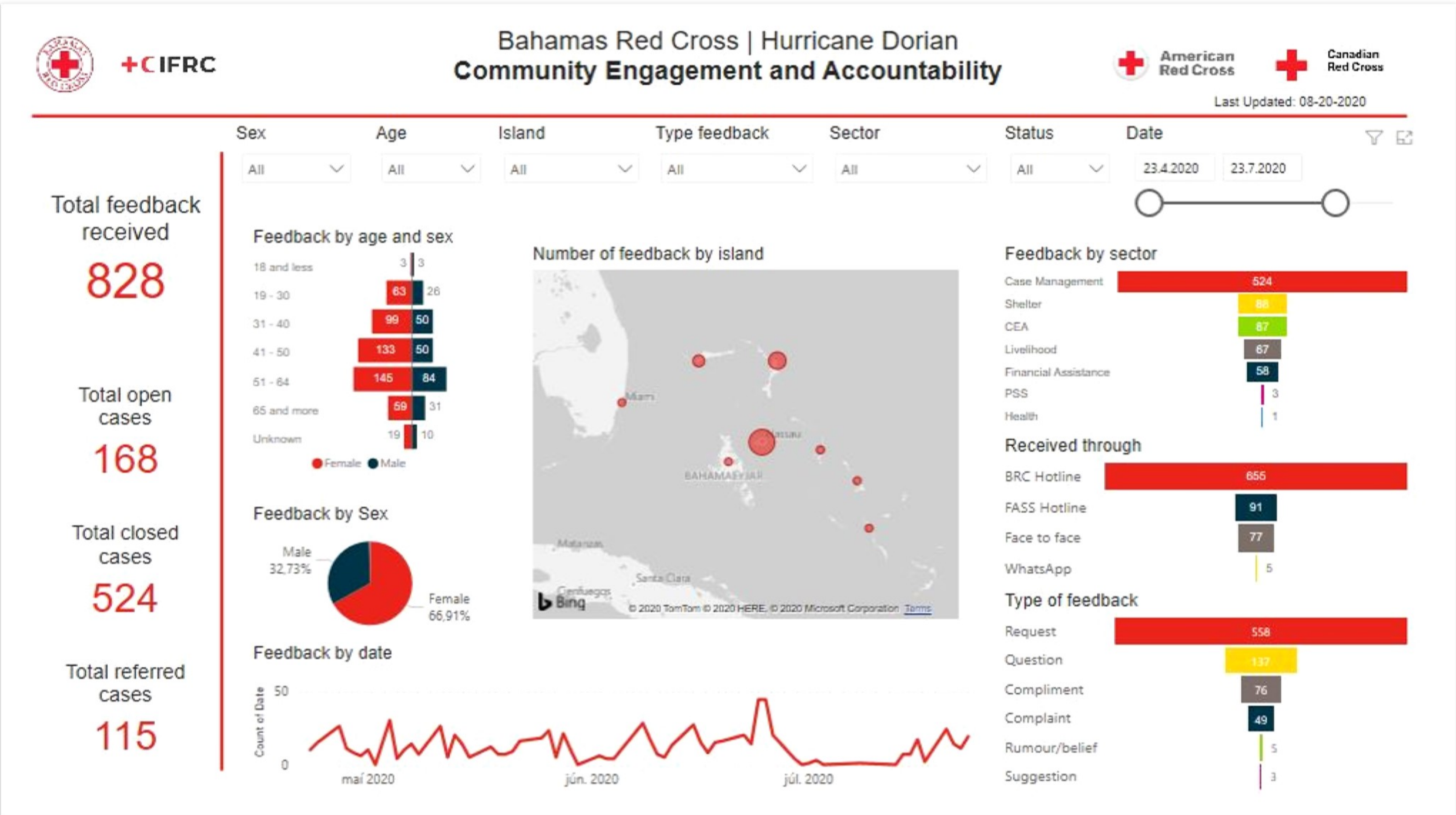
Analyzing the calls

We analyze the hotline data in parallel with feedback from other channels. Once feedback cases are documented and submitted, the feedback goes into a unified database where all feedback cases are consolidated. We then present the unified database using an **interactive CEA dashboard** hosted by Microsoft Power BI. The dashboard visualizes the data for analysis purposes as shown on the below table, and is updated twice a week. This analysis and presentation afford the relevant audiences to filter and monitor communities´ perceptions as needed. The dashboard is available to the public, making the feedback mechanism more transparent and accessible to communities.

Further in-depth qualitative analysis is processed weekly by the CEA team and shared separately with relevant stakeholders through regular community feedback update reports and coordination meetings.

We analyze the consolidated data according to the defined disaggregation of feedback,. The status of the calls is presented to reflect the response rate, to keep the number of open cases as low as possible, and the number of closed cases as high as possible.

The collected data can only go so far as to identify the problems and make recommendations about how to change courses. The crucial part is to adjust the programme or operation based on the information received and analyzed.



Closing the loop

The hotline tools used to document the calls are designed with the intention to facilitate a smooth process for the feedback cases to flow throughout the loop, from the point of submitting the documented feedback into the database until the case is solved with the person placing the call within three working days.

The loop for each call may be closed in two ways; either by the hotline officer during the call, or with a follow up action undertaken by the relevant focal point responsible for the related sector. If the call is solved by the hotline officer, the call is logged as *closed* when documented with the digital feedback form. If the call requires a follow up action, the case is documented as *open*, and the system used to document the calls automatically generates an email notification after which the feedback case is picked up by the relevant focal point responsible for closing the case. This has proved highly efficient.

The referral pathway system starts with mapping the focal points for each sector. Protocols were then developed for the referral focal points, which guides the way from the point of receiving an email notification on the pending feedback case to the point of solving the matter and updating the files accordingly. This process is for closing the loop on a case-by-case basis. The aim is always to solve each case during the call; however, the referral pathway was deemed necessary as this is not always possible.

Closing the loop is not only meant to be done on a case-by-case basis, but also more strategically based on trends and patterns identified through the analysis. Sharing and acting on feedback means that the feedback analysis is used to inform programmes about identified problems and make recommendations for improvements so that necessary adjustments are made according to feedback received in a systematic manner.

➔ Community Feedback Update Reports

The BRCS CEA Senior Officer is responsible for producing and sharing community feedback update reports bi-weekly with relevant stakeholders including all sectors, the operation manager as well as programme staff and volunteers. Feedback leading to significant changes should be shared with the relevant wider communities for accountability purposes.

Reports and feedback sharing only contains general quantitative information about trends and patterns to protect anonymity and confidentiality of persons giving feedback.

➔ Finding solutions for programmatic improvements

With the support of the BRCS CEA Senior Officer, the relevant sector is responsible for ensuring consultation with the respective community in finding solutions and necessary improvements based on identified trends and patterns from the feedback mechanism through focus group discussions and community meetings.

Resourcing the hotline

Human resources

One hotline officer was initially recruited and trained to manage incoming calls. The volume of calls has steadily increased throughout the operation, which required increased capacity. At the moment, three BRCS staff members are responsible for answering and documenting incoming calls during business hours. The number of calls fluctuates up and down. However, the hotline needs to be ready for the next wave whenever it strikes. For instance, this has proved pivotal in the context of COVID-19, affording the hotline the necessary capacity to cope with a high volume of calls without losing focus on the ongoing operation.

The BRCS CEA Senior Officer is responsible for the overall management of the hotline. The same person is also responsible for analyzing the calls, producing regular reports and ensuring that calls are closed within three business days after receiving the calls.

Financial resources

Financial resources required to establish and operate the hotline include:

- Staff salaries for hotline´s operation and management
- Avaya IP Office Telephone System
- Laptops
- Training of human resources

Hardware

The Bahamas Red Cross Society contracted the Bahamas Telecommunication Company (BTC) to provide the service needed to operate the toll-free hotline. The service includes:

- ➔ 6 Trunk Lines (Expandable)
- ➔ 3 Digital Telephone Sets
- ➔ Uninterruptible Power Supply (UPS)
- ➔ A toll-free landline

Additional hardware resources include three laptops used by the hotline officers to document and troubleshoot incoming calls.

Software

Software resources refer to the necessary preparation and tools required to operate the hotline. The software resources include:

- Training of hotline officers: Red Cross and Red Crescent Induction Training. Communication, feedback and complaints handling skills
- Training of referral focal points on how to manage and close feedback through the database.

Tools

- Digital Feedback Form (Microsoft Forms)
- Feedback Database (SharePoint)
- Customized Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs)
- Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)
- Referral pathway structure (Microsoft Flows)
- CEA Feedback Dashboard

Additional resources are further required for advertisements, graphic design and marketing of the hotline on Social Media, posters and flyers.

Lessons learned

The following are key lessons learned from operating the hotline throughout the operation. The hotline must be adaptable and flexible to necessary changes to suit an ever-evolving context and needs continuously discovered and revealed with a growing number, diversity and complexity of calls.

➔ **Lesson 1: Health and well-being of staff**

The hotline´s quality depends on the staff picking up the phone. If we do not take care of the team responsible for answering the hotline, the team will not be able to take care of the hotline. Ensure a pleasant working environment, proper working conditions, and make sure they have access to someone trained in PSS to talk confidentially about how they experience the calls. Be proactive; it´s easy to shut the stable door after the steed is stolen.

➔ **Lesson 2: Consistency; documenting and answering feedback**

We have learned that consistency is the key to accurate and reliable feedback data. In simple words, it should not matter which officer picks up the call, the person calling should receive the same information, and the call should be documented the same. We recommend not to neglect the importance of:

- Carefully designing the form and how it´s disaggregated.
- Ensuring that all human resources go through the same training process so that the level of understanding is compatible across persons answering and documenting the calls.

➔ **Lesson 3: Mapping of external referrals**

We are not alone, and we do not have the capacity nor the mandate to serve all. However, we do not want to leave people with more questions than answers when they reach out. Therefore, it is essential to have a clear map of who is doing what, where and when, and how we can possibly refer persons forward to relevant available services.

➔ **Lesson 4: Same feedback form for different channels**

As people have different needs and preferences, a hotline should not be the only available channel for communities to communicate with the Red Cross. Ensure that we systematically listen to communities where we interact and that the channels are connected through a compatible form for documenting feedback and complaints.

➔ **Lesson 5: Do not only rely on your database**

Our frontline workers are a vital source of information, and sometimes the database does not reflect the full picture. Make sure to speak with your frontline workers regularly to hear their views and concerns. In our case, we organized weekly meetings with our hotline officers during which more in-depth perceptions often are discovered for the person analyzing the calls. This can be used to complement, confirm or question the trends and patterns identified by the analysis.

➔ **Lesson 6: Proper training and preparation**

It is our responsibility to make sure that our hotline officers have the necessary knowledge and understanding of the services being provided by the Red Cross. Before the hotline number is displayed for programming interventions, a good practice is to undertake a standardized preparation process to make sure that our hotline officers are ready to receive calls related to targeted communities. For instance, when a livelihood programme was launched in the Bahamas, the following steps were undertaken before the registration process was introduced and advertised:

- Q&A document prepared by the livelihood sector and the CEA team. Questions were carefully predicted after which answers were tested and rephrased by the hotline team so that they feel confident and comfortable communicating the answers.
- A presentation on the programme was provided by the livelihood team to deepen the hotline´s understanding and knowledge about the programme.
- Calls were closely monitored to ensure that the Q&A document was up-to-date, accurate and relevant.
- Calls were deeply analyzed after the first round of applications, and, based on the analysis, necessary changes were made in preparation of the second round.

Health and well-being of staff

Consistency; documenting and answering feedback

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Proper training and preparation