

Pangea Foundation Created Emergency Solution for 211 San Diego during Wildfires, Relied on Rackspace® for Infrastructure



About Pangea Foundation

Pangea Foundation is a San Diego-based nonprofit that started in 1996 with the mission to bring the very best information technology solutions to other nonprofits worldwide. Through intuitive, secure, and easy-to-use web-based and software-as-a-service applications, Pangea Foundation helps these nonprofits visualize and communicate the impact of their programs by fusing real-time statistical program results with advanced data visualization technologies.

Situation

On Tuesday, Oct. 23, Pangea Foundation received a phone call from a representative of 211 San Diego, San Diego County's comprehensive provider of community information. 211 San Diego was gravely concerned about the stability of its website. Just on the first day of the fast-moving California wildfires, the 211 website was overwhelmed with more than a million hits and an increasing number of phone calls as more than a million people evacuated their homes and sought information.

As a result, the 211 database could not handle the high volume of inquiries and eventually crashed. An even larger challenge existed as the site did not address the needs of the disaster at hand. Because of Pangea Foundation's experience developing enterprise web applications for nonprofits, 211 San Diego reached out to the foundation for assistance in immediately addressing three specific areas of concern: bandwidth, server capacity and updating critical data on the website.

Early on in the wildfires, 211 San Diego had several critical needs. Everything from getting the existing website back online, on new servers with enough bandwidth that could handle the capacity, to getting content such as road closures, evacuation routes, emergency shelter openings and hospital information uploaded to-the-minute. Instead of simply bolstering the capacity of the existing 211 San Diego application, Pangea Foundation's objective was to develop a brand new information system from the ground up, tailoring it to meet the needs of the current disaster, and do so in an extremely short period of time.

"We needed to do what we could to quickly alleviate the situation, and we came up with some initial concepts of ways to help," recalls Kristin Kuipers, founder and director of programs, Pangea Foundation. "To do this, we needed new servers brought online. All of our existing customers are on dedicated Rackspace servers, so we contacted Rackspace to see how fast we could move to meet the needs of 211 San Diego."

Solution

"I contacted Rackspace around noon on Tuesday to request assistance, and a few minutes later I was told there was a plan in the works with their engineering team at the data center," says Kraig Kuipers, chief executive officer and president, Pangea Foundation. "Rackspace was all over this from the start. They understood the seriousness and timeliness of the situation, and after a series of calls, an agreement was reached. Less than six hours later, we had a brand new server and database up and running."

With the new web server and a new database server ready to go at Rackspace, Pangea Foundation offered to commit both the people and the resources to design and develop a custom web application—on a pro bono basis—that would help the 100-150 staff and volunteers at 211 San Diego more efficiently and effectively communicate disaster relief and recovery information to people whose lives were affected by the wildfires.

The number one priority Pangea Foundation and 211 San Diego agreed on was getting a system in place that could handle the rapidly changing content. Originally, information was updated every two hours and operators were just

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"After reviewing a half dozen other hosting providers, we moved our main customer servers to Rackspace in February of 2007," he says. "Prior to moving to Rackspace, we hosted our servers in a colocation facility in San Diego, which we still use as backup. Our IT team was perfectly capable of handling our server needs, but Rackspace gave us an opportunity to offload those responsibilities so that we could focus on our core mission.

Kraig Kuipers – Pangea Foundation

handed a new binder containing the updates. Pangea Foundation basically designed a solution that took all the content from different areas to include road closures, evacuation routes, emergency shelters, repopulation zones, hospital information, and other vital community resources, and made this information available the very second there was an update. The software also tracked and reported the nature of the 211 calls to give local leaders insight into the community's most vital information needs.

Using software donated by Microsoft, Pangea Foundation created a Content Management application that enabled research specialists and 211 San Diego staff the ability to quickly enter updated disaster relief and recovery information directly into the database-driven web application. Call operators were then able to login to the system and see the updates as they happened, rather than being two hours behind.

"Rackspace had the servers online in a matter of hours. This is the very reason we were able to accomplish what we did for 211 San Diego, because we had neither the hardware capacity nor the manpower to do it ourselves," says Kristin Kuipers. "Through managed hosting solutions, we were able to act so much more quickly because we could rely on a partner like Rackspace that took care of servers, hosting, bandwidth, and network infrastructure around the clock so we could focus our efforts on creating and delivering an application to 211 San Diego."

Benefits

One of the great things about the application created, is how it resources 211 San Diego for the future. By tracking the types of 211 calls that occurred, local leaders will be able to better plan for the next disaster by identifying high areas of concern. They will also have a better understanding of how to handle certain situations more effectively next time. According to Kraig Kuipers, a large part of Pangea Foundation's overall success is a direct result of being able to offload the server and infrastructure management to Rackspace.

"There would have been absolutely no way we would have been in a position to buy the equipment, install it, then develop and build the software application in time to relieve 211 San Diego," he goes on to admit.

Pangea Foundation has 12 employees who basically worked for two straight days on the application, while still assisting other customers when needed. Having Rackspace there to offload the hardware management increased their ability to step up and serve the needs of San Diego County quickly and effectively.

"We have found that from the very beginning, Rackspace is willing to jump through hoops for us," says Kristin Kuipers. "They definitely did a better job than we could have done ourselves. We used to have a whole team working on our network infrastructure. Because of Rackspace, they are now free to focus on our core mission of application development."

More than 1,000 community organizations nationwide, like 211 San Diego, rely on Pangea Foundation's software to improve service delivery, measure and report program outcomes, evaluate program impact, and ultimately increase funder and community confidence. "You can't put a price on being in a position to act so quickly during disasters like this. People's lives were at stake. Rackspace's Fanatical Support not only gives us confidence to do our job, but gives our customers piece-of-mind that we have the ability to rapidly deploy in times of emergency," says Kraig Kuipers.

He adds, "When it comes to the broader issue of business continuity, many community organizations today are at risk. With Rackspace as our partner, our customers know that if the unexpected occurred, they will be able to continue with business as usual. So rather than worrying about losing mission critical data in a disaster, nonprofits can instead focus on serving people."

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