



Inland News

211 is the phone number to call for Inland services



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By **LAURIE LUCAS**
The Press-Enterprise

The best-kept secret is out.

And Tracie Bell, 26, is privy to it.

She's among a steadily increasing number of people who are dialing the 211 toll-free phone number to hook up with public and private services in Riverside and San Bernardino counties.

The biggest demands are from casualties of the collapsed housing market and callers in need of food, shelter and money to pay for rent and utilities, say the heads of the two Inland referral centers.

Bell said that since she and her husband, Joshua Valentine, 23, moved into a rental house last November with their three children, they've received food, clothing and utilities assistance from Riverside County organizations, simply by dialing 211.

"We've called five times and they've come through every time, real quick," Bell said. At the moment they've got a roof over their heads, but Tuesday, their car broke down.

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Amanda Lucidon / The Press-Enterprise

Calling 211 has helped Tracie Bell, of Riverside, center, and her family secure food, clothing and utilities assistance from Riverside County organizations. With Bell are her children, Lenae, 8, left; Tabious, 3; and Josias, 3 months.

What 911 is to emergencies and 411 is to information, 211 is to social services -- including animal care, disaster resources, help for elderly veterans, shelters, food, clothing, disability programs, low-cost child care and medical care, job training and government programs.

"More and more calls are from families with children looking for shelter because they've lost or are about to lose their home," said Gary Madden, director of San Bernardino's 211 service that operates through the Inland Empire United Way in Rancho Cucamonga. "About 60 percent of callers are in serious financial difficulties."

A staff report in June indicated that about 40 percent of their calls were from the 10 zip codes with the highest foreclosure rates in San Bernardino County -- led by San Bernardino, Victorville, Fontana and Ontario, respectively, he said.

"I'm sure the housing market has had an impact," said Mary Salvador-Sheets, who as CEO of the Volunteer Center of Riverside County runs the 211 service there.

Debora Mickelson, in charge of outreach and training, agreed: "There's a high volume of callers for rent and utilities assistance, food and counseling."

How It Works

Story continues below



Amanda Lucidon / The Press-Enterprise

Tracie Bell has called 211 to hook up with public and private services in Riverside and San Bernardino counties. With Tracie are her children, Lenae, left, Tabious and Josias.

Callers to the San Bernardino office are connected to one of Madden's 16 staff members. Workers attempt to establish a rapport with callers and try to "de-escalate" emotional crises, if they exist. Callers are asked about their needs, zip code and whether friends or family can offer financial support, if needed. Then the phone number of the appropriate service agency is provided.

"We're the Google clearinghouse," Madden said. "In a single, free phone call, we're able to access comprehensive data from 667 agencies offering 1,629 programs."

In Riverside County, Salvador-Sheets' 10-member staff links callers to the most suitable of the 2,300 programs from 800 agencies logged into the database. The numbers are culled from small directories, regional meetings and networking groups, she said.

Eight years ago, the Federal Communications Commission reserved 211 as a shortcut to cut through the fractured, bewildering maze of community services.

The FCC's goal is complete national coverage by 2010 with permanent funding from Congress. Currently, 211 clearinghouses cover all or part of 39 states and one-third of the counties in California, with money provided by cities, county agencies and nonprofit organizations.

A Spike in Calls

Within the past six months, Hospitality House, the Salvation Army-run shelter in San Bernardino, has seen a 45 percent upswing in referrals from the 211 number, people "down on their luck who've lost their homes," said shelter director Roosevelt Carroll. "It's heartbreaking. They've never been in this situation before."

The 211 services played a critical role during the October wildfires. Madden said they responded to 130,000 calls in five days.

Salvador-Sheets said daily calls jumped from 300 to 1,000 during the fires.

Business is booming. Salvador-Sheets' Riverside agency, which came on board in July 2005, handled 40,000 calls last fiscal year. Already, calls have topped 55,000 during the first six months of this fiscal year, she said.

Since its debut in September 2006, Madden said, San Bernardino's 211 center has handled more than 100,000 referrals and is logging 1,300 calls per week now.

"We're seeing the strain of more and more families looking for ways not to be thrown out of their homes," he said. Several human resource staffers from big companies have called seeking help for employees living in their cars.

The goal is help the caller within three to six minutes, Madden said. Because most callers are anonymous, he and Salvador-Sheets say they follow up with a willing 5 percent. "We always want them to let us know if they didn't receive a call back from a referral agency so we can investigate," Salvador-Sheets said.

"About 50 percent say they've been helped," Madden said. "Those who aren't are looking for serious financial help. Federal money for utility assistance is extremely limited."

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Inland 211 People are connected with community services and resources.

Riverside County has a database of 800 agencies with 2,300 programs.

San Bernardino County has a database of 667 agencies with 1,629 programs.

Basic needs: Food, clothing banks, shelters, assistance with rent and utilities.

Physical and mental

health: Health insurance programs, Medicaid and Medicare, maternal health resources, health insurance programs for children, medical information lines, crisis intervention services, support groups, counseling, and drug and alcohol intervention and rehabilitation.

Work support: Financial assistance, job training, transportation assistance and education programs.

Support for older

Americans and persons

with disabilities: Adult day care, community meals, respite care, home health care, transportation and homemaker services.

Family Support: Child care, after-school programs, educational programs for low-income families, family resource centers, summer camps and recreation programs, mentoring, tutoring and protective services.

Suicide prevention: Suicide prevention help organizations.

Source: Riverside County, San Bernardino County 211 services
