

LOCAL NEWS

Home > Today's Paper > Local News

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Out of food, can't pay the rent: Who do I call?

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Phones are ringing off the hook at the county agency that connects people in need with agencies that can help.

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Calls to the 2-1-1 hotline more than doubled over the previous year to 42,034 during 2007-08, according to Romala Ramkissoon, a director with 211 Kern's parent agency, the Community Action Partnership of Kern.

"A lot of times people don't know where to call to get assistance," she said. "We can tell them which agency to call that has resources so they can get help."

Assistance with food, utilities and rent are key reasons for calls to 211, said manager Deborah Steagall. The Salvation Army, Kern County Department of Human Services, local food banks and the Home Energy Assistance Program of the Community Action Partnership of Kern also receive a high volume of referrals from 211 Ramkissoon said.

Often, callers just need common-sense advice, Steagall said. For example:

- If you are behind on your rent or mortgage payment, the first thing to do is to approach your landlord or lender to try and work out a payment arrangement.
- If you're late on your utilities, it can be more effective to appeal to your provider in person.

HOLIDAY AVALANCHE

Funding for 211 Kern comes from the United Way of Kern County, First 5 Kern, the County of Kern and the County Department of Public Health Services, she said.

Besides Rivera, Steagall has two other information and referral staffers, along with a resource specialist, who contacts social service agencies and updates the 211 Kern referral database.

They normally answer an average of 100 to 150 calls a day, Ramkissoon said, with after-hours calls routed to Ventura County's call center.

In the three days before Thanksgiving, Steagall, Rivera and another staffer fielded 840 calls, many of them from people asking for food, especially turkeys. Besides those, there were 850 "lost calls," or people who hung up, Steagall said.

211 Kern needs volunteers, especially on weekday mornings when call volume is highest, Ramkissoon said. Steagall said the third and fourth weeks of every month are particularly busy because that's when people's funds run out.

Rivera called the satisfaction of helping people in the community "great."

A RECENT CALL TO 211

"Dos-Uno-Uno. Buenos Dias," said 26-year-old Alex Rivera, a bilingual information and referral specialist as he answered a Spanish-language call Thursday morning. Romala Ramkissoon, a director with 211 Kern's parent agency, said at least one in 10 calls received in the last year have been in Spanish.

Rivera began a screening — with the help of state-of-the-art database and phone system software — to determine what agency could best help the caller.

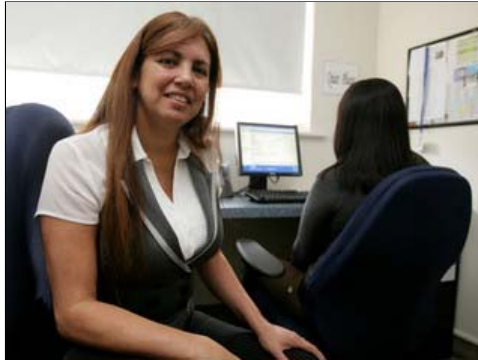


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HOW TO HELP

To volunteer as a telephone information and referral specialist with 211 Kern, call 321-4260 or 336-5236, extension 177.

PHOTOS:



Deborah Steagall, left, manager of 211 Kern. At right, information and referral specialist Elizabeth Garcia takes a call.

"Is this the first time you're calling us? What is your ZIP code? How old are you? How many people in your household? How many children? How many children under 5? Are there any pregnant women in the home? Are there any disabled people in the home? How many years of schooling do you have? What's your main source of income? Do you have health insurance?"

Questions about pregnant women, children and the disabled are important because of their special needs and the programs available for them, manager Deborah Steagall said. For example, in the case of children, "there's insurance pretty much to meet every child's needs," sometimes up to age 19, she said. Also, "young mommies seem to always need pampers," she said.

The woman Rivera was helping was a farmworker seeking rental assistance. He referred her to Proteus, Inc., a Central Valley community-based nonprofit that helps migrant workers and other low-wage earners.

The entire call took about two minutes. One to three minutes per call is the average, Ramkissoon said.



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Site map

News

- [Today's Paper](#)
- [Local News](#)
- [Latest News](#)
- [Sports](#)
- [Staff Blogs](#)
 - [Bakosphere](#)
 - [Ask the Californian](#)
 - [Breaking News](#)
 - [City Beat](#)
 - [School House Zach](#)
- [Business](#)
- [Eye Street](#)
- [Weather](#)
- [Obituaries](#)
- [Funeral Notices](#)

Other

- [Multimedia](#)
- [Photo Galleries](#)
- [Interactive Maps](#)
- [Special Reports](#)
- [RSS Feeds](#)
- [E-mail Newsletters](#)
- [SMS Alerts](#)
- [Contact Newsroom](#)

Entertainment

- [Movies](#)

- Dining
- Calendar
- Go & Do
- Contests
- Blog: Cocktail Culture

Community

- You Report
- Submit Your Article
- Blogs
 - Create Your Blog
 - Staff Blogs
 - All Blogs
- Applause
- Snap!

Inside Guide

- Dining
- Home & Garden
- Personal Care
- Find Businesses
- List Your Business

Opinion

- Editorials
- Opinion Headlines
- Columnists
- Letters to the Editor
- Blog: Sound Off

Marketplace

- Classifieds
 - Items under \$100
 - Merchandise
 - Pets & Animals
 - Public Notices
- Autos
- Homes
 - Featured Agents
 - Real Estate Rentals
- Jobs
 - Jobs at The Californian
- Special Sections
- Place Your Ad
 - Print and Online
 - Online Only

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- Media Kit
- Rate Cards
- Contact Advertising

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- E-edition
- Press Pass
- Frequently Asked Questions
- Contact Circulation

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- Contact Us
- Privacy Policy
- Terms of Use

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- Kern Life
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- Northwest Voice
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