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## Who ya gonna call if you need help with rent, children, food?

### Fresno County residents can dial 2-1-1 for referrals.

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We all know to call 9-1-1 when grandpa's bleeding, when a robber steals the rent money, when the baby can't breathe, when the bedroom's on fire.

But what do you dial when the family budget's hemorrhaging red ink, when your stomach hurts because there's no food for breakfast, when you need emergency child care, when you've been fired and need a new job?

People who live in Fresno County can memorize a three-digit number -- 2-1-1 -- to get help.

There are more agencies, programs, departments and organizations available to help Fresno County people than any one person could ever keep track of.

The 211 call center sorts through all that. The program, operated by United Way of Fresno County, connects residents to hundreds of public and private services that can make life easier if you're struggling. For example:

- Food banks.
- Affordable housing.
- Rent assistance.
- Child care.
- Elder care.
- Financial education.
- Volunteering.

-- Job training.

-- Immigration assistance.

The 211 number works on landlines 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The call center can accommodate 150 languages. To use a cell phone, call (866) 559-4211. It is not a long-distance call.

It's tax season right now, for example, so let's say you've heard Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's wife, Maria Shriver, encouraging people to sign up for the Earned Income Tax Credit. That is a federal program for low-income families that can mean extra money in your pocket very soon. The call center will help you find out if you qualify, help you get the forms and even connect you with Volunteer Income Tax Assistance, a program that helps people get their taxes done for free.

The phone service has been working without the three-digit designation in a limited way for about a year.

Anthony Richardson, the call center manager, says the team has been fielding about 15 calls a day, but the operation is expected to grow to serve 5% to 8% of the population and field 48,000 calls a year.

Already, the center is seeing success stories. One family, for example, called about the tax credit program, and was also referred to the financial stability program. The advisers helped them to figure out a way to cover the family's expenses and still enable the mother to stay home with the three young children.

Negotiating bureaucracy, even bureaucracy that's designed to assist overwhelmed people, can be intimidating. The 211 program is a smart and promising idea that is sorely needed in a county with some of the nation's highest levels of poverty.

Let's put it to good use.

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