

## TIMES EDITORIAL

### Getting help on phone

Contra Costa Times

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IT'S OFFICIAL. Getting a wide range of help in seven counties of the Bay Area is now just a three-digit phone call away.

Everything from police emergency to directory assistance and, now, help with housing, employment and health care are available with a three-digit call.

Just as local residents have long been able to dial 911 to summon police, fire and medical help, now they can dial 211 to get help with food, housing, employment, health care and more.

San Francisco County has had the service for nearly two years, but since then Alameda, Contra Costa, Marin, Napa, Santa Clara and Solano counties have been in various stages of operation.

But as of Monday the service is officially up and running throughout those counties.

Frankly, it is a service that has been long overdue. There are many good county programs available for those in need but finding out about them isn't easy for people not savvy about navigating the labyrinth of county governments.

Officials said that the most frequent calls are for emergency shelter and housing, but they also get many calls about food, health care, employment assistance, mental health services, utility assistance, public benefits, substance-abuse treatment and

landlord-tenant mediation. Now, operators are equipped to provide information on everything from child care to senior services.

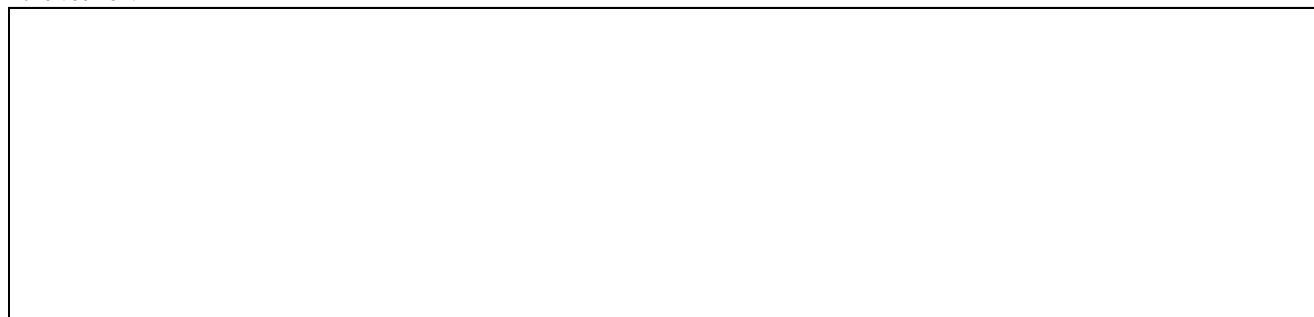
The service has been on the drawing board for about four years and is not yet fully funded. It will cost about \$800,000 a year to provide the service, but we think it is well worth it.

One of the most important aspects of the 211 hotlines is that it relieves pressure on 911 dispatch centers by drawing away nonemergency inquiries. We think that is a vital and worthwhile feature. The 911 operators need to be free to handle emergency calls, which should be their one and only focus.

They also play a vital role in disasters as they can be used to spread basic information and squelch rumors. A case in point was last year's wildfires in Southern California. Officials said San Diego's 211 centers took up to 30,000 calls a day, dispensing information on evacuation sites, road closures, emergency shelters and more.

By making this a regional service in the Bay Area, 211 centers can coordinate marketing, disaster response and referrals, and that can be a major help in times of need.

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