

20,000 local calls for assistance to 211 in '07

By David M. Smith

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Time flies in many ways. But, it's hard to believe it has been three years since Ventura County's 211 program was launched through a partnership of United Way, Interface Children Family Services and First 5 Ventura County. The date was Feb. 11, 2005, and Ventura County made history of some note, becoming the first county in the state to provide this important, easy-to-remember telephone service to local residents.

In recognition of the third anniversary of 211 Ventura County, United Way will host an anniversary reception from 5:30 to 7:30 p.m. Monday at the Topa Tower Club in Oxnard. The \$50 cost to attend the event will help defray operational costs of 211, and the event will be an opportunity for you to learn about the success of 211 during its first three years of operation.

Today, the 211 call center in Camarillo is fielding about 1,500 calls per month from local residents seeking critical health and human service information. Here are just a few examples of the types of support 211 provides through this 24/7 service:

— A woman with three children had been staying in a hotel using money provided by friends. The money had run out and she was about to be homeless. She was afraid to be on the street with her children. Fortunately, a call to 211 provided the woman with referrals to several local shelters.

— An Oxnard resident called for assistance for his 1-month old triplets who needed diapers and clothing. Through the support of 211, the caller was referred to First 5 Ventura County, Tender Life and Catholic Charities.

— A caller was having problems with a home he had purchased a year earlier. Several structural issues had not been disclosed at the time of purchase. In addition, the caller had been given a second mortgage for \$100,000 that he had just learned would have to be paid in full within 10 years. With support from the county's "Don't Borrow Trouble" mortgage assistance program, the caller was referred to Consumer Mortgage Brokers, a local attorney and Consumer Credit Counseling.

— A woman called in search of shelter. She had been evicted from her home because she had to use her rent money to retrieve her car from impound, the result of a family member having received a ticket when he borrowed the woman's car. The woman was referred to the Light House, Turning Point and the Salvation Army.

The beauty of 211 is twofold. For everyday health and human service concerns, 211 is the answer. And, during time of disaster, 211 is definitely the answer, as was proved last fall when more than 130,000 calls related to the Southern California wildfires were answered at six 211 call centers in Southern California, including Ventura County. The relief 211 provided 911 emergency-service call centers was impressive and served notice of the importance of establishing a statewide 211 network.

Since the Ventura County launch of 211, access to service has grown rapidly in our state. Today, 13 counties are offering 211 service, representing nearly 70 percent of the state's population. And, interestingly, within those counties — some of which were only up and running for part of the year — nearly 1 million 211 calls were answered in 2007, including nearly 20,000 in Ventura County.

With several additional counties scheduled to go live with 211 early this year, the call-center volume for 2008 is certain to exceed last year's numbers. And the value of 211 becomes even more significant when one considers that in 2006 more than 7 million calls were placed to 211 call centers providing service to about 74 percent of our nation's

population.

In our county, basic needs such as food and shelter are the leading reason for calls at 32 percent, with mental-health care and counseling calls following at 17 percent, followed by healthcare calls at 13 percent and individual and family life support calls at 10 percent.

As has been the case from the outset of 211, Oxnard residents seek the most support from 211 — about 23 percent of all calls — followed by Ventura at 15 percent, Simi Valley at 8.2 percent, Camarillo at 7.8 percent and Thousand Oaks at 5.8 percent.

Tracking local needs supported by 211 is important as our partnership plans for the future enhancement of Ventura County's 211 program. So, too, is developing a firmer funding base important if the program is to survive in our county long-term. That said, United Way of Ventura County — which is contributing \$210,000 to 211 this year — will be looking to the corporate and governmental sector for increased support that will be critical in the future.

I hope you will consider joining us at the 211 reception to learn more about this valuable community impact program.

— *David M. Smith of Camarillo is president and chief executive officer of United Way of Ventura County.*



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