

Hot line becomes lifeline

By [ERIKA CHAVEZ The Orange County Register](#)

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The calls come every day and at all hours, ebbing in the middle of the night and peaking Monday mornings.

An overwhelmed woman needs help paying the electric bill. A reluctant single man needs information on how to apply for food stamps and find a job. A frightened family is homeless and needs a motel voucher, or the name and number of the nearest shelter.

In a physical emergency, people dial 911. People in economic need – of shelter, food, health care or a job – can dial 211, a federally mandated service that’s available nationwide to provide callers access to social services.

But 211 is more than a legally mandated call center. For some observers, it’s a canary in our economic coal mine, a way to track and, in some cases, foresee distress on a wide scale. In late 2008, the volume of calls at the local 211 center began to spike. The reasons why are numerous and obvious – foreclosure, unemployment and recession are pushing many people, even in affluent Orange County, into a financial abyss.

But a few hours of eavesdropping on 211 conversations at the call center in Costa Mesa reveals another reality: For the people who handle those calls – the mostly young staff who talk day and night with the hard cases and the sad cases and the newly poor and overwhelmed – the calls are nothing short of soul churning.

“I remember having to get the police on the line because a woman was threatening suicide and her 5-year-old child was there,” says 211 operator Cynthia Gonzalez.

“I go home and wonder all the time: Did they get help? How did it work out for them?”

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Griselda Ramos is one of 10 operators at the local 211. While she used to get a breather between often emotional conversations, they’re coming in too fast now to get a break. In 2008, 211 took an estimated 102,000 calls, up 58 percent from 2007.

“Sometimes they’re in tears. And it’s hard, because you feel like there aren’t enough services to refer them to,” Ramos says of the callers she tries to help.

Like other nonprofit organizations that cater to people in need, 211 Orange County finds demand for services increasing even as funding and contributions are in decline.

While 211 is a federally mandated service with more than 200 call centers nationwide, each center is locally funded. Each year the agency cobbles together a \$1 million budget that pays for a staff of 12. In Orange County, 211 sponsors include Orange County United Way, CHOC/UCI, the cities of Anaheim and Santa Ana, and several private foundations.

The funding doesn’t just cover call-in operations. It also helps the agency maintain a database of more than 6,400 local agencies and that stand ready to help the homeless, the hungry and those down on their luck. One free phone call and a few keyboard strokes are all it takes for callers to be connected with county agencies, shelters, food banks, churches and clinics that offer help at little or no charge.

The service has been available in Orange County for 20 years, and the three-digit phone number has been in effect since 2005. Operators speak a multitude of languages and refer callers to agencies closest to them.

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In recent months, the operators say, the nature of the calls has been basic: people are seeking food, shelter and help with rent and utility payments.

In November, they even took calls from people who lost homes in the Freeway Complex fire, referring victims to shelters, hotels, food banks and other points where basic needs could be met.

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As the holidays approached, the tone of some 211 calls changed. The operators started hearing from people who couldn't afford a Christmas dinner or presents for their children.

Operator Justin Nguyen referred one caller to a Toys for Tots program, and fielded a call from a man seeking a gas card or a bus pass in order to commute to his job.

Elsewhere in the room, operators spoke to a mother seeking food and diapers for her baby, and another woman embroiled in a child custody battle in need of legal help.

Operator Cynthia Gonzalez has been on the job for 10 eye-opening months. As the calendar turned and the economic news went from worrisome to grim, she noticed that people on the line didn't fit into any stereotype.

"It's not just low-income people calling," says Gonzalez, a Cal State Fullerton graduate. "We hear from mortgage brokers, real estate agents and contractors who suddenly have no work and need help."

For those people and others who have taken a fast, unexpected economic tumble, Gonzalez says health care is a particularly thorny issue because they don't have insurance, but they are still listed on government rolls as making too much money to qualify for Medi-Cal.

Callers remain anonymous and the operators maintain a professional detachment throughout the conversation. But listening to the strain can take a toll.

"We're human beings, and a lot of the calls are very sad to hear," Gonzalez says. "I don't have kids, but it's hard to hear people crying on the phone because they don't have food to feed their children."

The calls also can change the operators' lives.

Gonzalez earned a degree in psychology from Cal State Fullerton and is working toward a master's degree in social work.

After working at the 211 center, she says she hopes to continue the work she's started and hopefully establish more personal relationships with the people she helps.

"At the end of the day, I feel satisfaction," she says.

"One time, a caller said I was an angel sent from heaven above, which touched me.

"I wish I could know for sure that they got help," she adds. "But, unfortunately, I can't."