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VALENTINE: In need of housing or other help? Dial 2-1-1

By Eunice Valentine

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Cheryl, a single mom, was close to the breaking point. After making six calls to various agencies in Sonoma County, she still had not managed to track down the information she needed to find transitional housing for her and her 8-year-old daughter, Maggie.

Everyone she had spoken to had shown concern for her, but instead of getting the answers she needed, she was simply referred on. The situation had become urgent. Now it was Friday evening, and offices were closing for the weekend.

The help Cheryl needed that night was available. In fact, several organizations had the answers she desired. Sonoma County is home to literally hundreds of health and human services agencies, and that's one of the reasons I love calling Sonoma County my home. Our community has a big heart, with lots of places for people in need to turn to when things get tough.

Though as Cheryl found out, finding help can sometimes be difficult. That's why for the past 25 years the county of Sonoma, in conjunction with the Volunteer Center of Sonoma County, has run a human services information and referral service to make it easier for people to find the help they need.

In 2008 alone, we referred nearly 9,000 people who needed food, shelter, counseling, transportation, health care, child care or legal advice.

Starting Feb. 11, it will be easier to take advantage of this service with the creation of 211, a free telephone number that connects Sonoma County residents with the help they need. Not only is 211 an easy-to-remember number, the service has been expanded from weekdays, from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. only, to 24 hours a day, seven days a week, including holidays. This non-emergency number also is the one to call if a disaster occurs and people wish to volunteer.

We anticipate that our call volume will double with the launch of 2-1-1-partly because these trying economic times have given rise to more hardship than we've witnessed in decades. We and our partners in 211 (Community Foundation Sonoma County, the county of Sonoma and United Way of the Wine Country) are thrilled that we'll be able to help more people. We also know that this will increase the need for volunteers to handle the phone calls.



Eunice Valentine

People who are interested in helping should call Toni Fitzpatrick at 565-2335. Bilingual (Spanish and English) volunteers especially are needed.

Our volunteers who do this work say that it is incredibly rewarding. So if you have the time to give, I urge you to make the call.

Eunice Valentine is executive director of the Volunteer Center of Sonoma County.
