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211 information line to debut this week in Sonoma County

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Starting Wednesday, callers in Sonoma County can dial "211" to get information on a variety of non-emergency local health and human services.

"It's basically the non-emergency version of 911: 'I need help but I'm not dying right now,'" said Sonoma County's 211 program director Bill Myatt.

Callers to the anonymous, 24-hour 211 line can find out where to get food, shelter, clothing, counseling, mental health aid, alcohol treatment, transportation, elder care, job information or road closure news.

"Without 211 the average person needing help gets the help they need on the ninth phone call — the truly tenacious ones," Myatt said. "211 makes it two phone calls."

The 211 program, started about 10 years ago by United Way in Georgia, already is available in much of the Bay Area and the United States.

It hasn't occurred before in Sonoma County mainly because of cost, said Jim Leddy, county community and governmental affairs manager.

The \$220,000 budget for the program will be split by a four-way partnership of the county and the local United Way, Volunteer Center and Community Foundation. The bulk of the cost included upgraded software and equipment.

The program comes at a good time, said officials.

"Unfortunately, given where the economy is, people have more needs now," said Leddy.

Daytime operators staffing the phones will be volunteers armed with a database of service information. After hours, calls will go to a 211 call center in San Bernardino County where operators will have Sonoma County's information list.

A paid supervisor and social worker also will be part of the daytime call team, Myatt said.

In addition to aiding those in need, the program eventually is expected to help local police and fire agencies by curtailing inappropriate calls to emergency 911 dispatchers.

Calls to 911 about power outages, possible earthquakes, road closures or a myriad of other non-emergency issues are common, several dispatchers said.

The 211 line will be a quick referral for 911 dispatchers answering those calls, said Steve Bell, communications supervisor for the Sonoma County Sheriff's Department.

"It's a good resource for us, a very good resource for Sonoma County in general," Bell said.

Sonoma County has had a more limited version of the program for more than 20 years, available only on weekdays by calling 565-2108.

Starting Wednesday, dialing a simpler 211 from a landline or cell phone will take callers to the county information center.

