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THE TRIBUNE
Newspaper of the Central Coast

Posted on Sat, Feb. 03, 2007

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Social services hot line gathers support

By Nick Wilson

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Local efforts to develop a new telephone service for people to call for social service referrals and crisis support could get a boost from federal dollars.

A House bill — introduced last month by Rep. Anna G. Eshoo, D-Palo Alto, — would authorize \$700 million through fiscal year 2013 in federal matching grants to enable nationwide implementation of 211 services.

211 could become the universal number to dial when callers need information, referrals or counseling. The service with 24-hour availability would help reduce non-emergency calls to 911, supporters say.

On Friday, Rep. Kevin McCarthy, R-Bakersfield, announced his support of the bill, which has been co-sponsored by many Republicans and Democrats.

"This bipartisan bill puts people before politics," said McCarthy, who added in a written statement the he will "work with Democrat co-sponsors, like Rep. Lois Capps, D-Santa Barbara, and other Californians to help move the bill along in Congress."

Jerry Lenthall, chairman of the county Board of Supervisors, also announced his support for the bill on Friday.

The 211 service already is available to more than 65 percent of Americans in 41 states, according to the executive director of Hotline — the county's nonprofit organization that hopes to begin operating 211 services this summer.

Eight California counties, including Santa Barbara and Ventura, already have 211 and Santa Clara County will soon be the ninth, according to Hotline.

The 211 service would provide people with such information as evacuation routes and shelter locations during fires, earthquakes, and other disasters. People also could call for referrals on a variety of topics, including health care, senior-citizen support, childcare and housing.

In San Luis Obispo County, Hotline would need an additional \$100,000 to get started. Pacific Gas & Electric Co. has offered a \$25,000 matching grant, as has Lenthall.

An ongoing 211 operation in the county would depend on about \$175,000 annually from the county and local cities in addition to Hotline's current budget of about \$200,000 per

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year, said Evan Mendelson, executive director of Hotline of San Luis Obispo County.

Lenthall has been on the local steering committee, which includes local nonprofit and business leaders, to implement the service in the county.

Mendelson said that Texas used its statewide 211 service as invaluable resource after Hurricane Katrina. More than 400,000 evacuees from Louisiana and Mississippi entered Texas and 211 was crucial in that relief effort.

"If we had one more major disaster, this would happen much more quickly," Mendelson said. "But I certainly hope that's not the case. If the bill passed this year, that would be great."

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