

Dial 211 When You Need Help

By Jonnie Taté Finn

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There's a new number in town, but you don't need to write it down to remember it.

It's as easy as 911 for emergencies and 411 for directory assistance.

It's 211, and dialing it will put you in touch with organizations and government agencies that provide a variety of services, information and everyday needs.

The Nebraska Public Service Commission recently approved Lancaster County to use 211. Residents in the area now can use this free and easy-to-remember phone number to connect 24 hours a day, seven days a week, to human service information and referral beginning today.

The service is for anyone and everyone, said Jamie Moore, with the United Way of the Midlands.

"People have always had a need for information," she said. "When people go to the phone book, it's like they have to work their way through a maze. People aren't always thinking clearly, and so it's difficult for them to get through the maze. And they give up, never finding the information they needed."

The new line is like a map, helping people find information on practically everything - from childcare and health care, to paying bills and finding a job.

Staffers also are standing by for the many languages, such as Spanish, that are spoken in Nebraska.

"It's a clearinghouse for people to get connected to services already available to them in their community," Moore said.

The new number also will free up the 911 emergency line, taking non-emergency calls the police frequently receive.

The 211 operators are certified referral specialists, trained in assessing each caller's needs and connecting callers with appropriate services. All calls are confidential.

The system isn't perfect, however. While everybody can use 211, not every phone can dial it for free. Alltel is the only phone company in Lancaster County allowing users to

call 211 at no cost from cell phones and pay phones. Such companies as Verizon Wireless and Cellular One will charge callers a small fee per call.

Providing the service isn't cheap. Gail Stoklasa, the communications manager for the United Way in Lincoln, said the cost of the entire project was \$84,195. The most expensive aspect of 211 was given to them in-kind for one year from the Lincoln-Lancaster County Health Department.

The database was developed by the Health Department and contains information for more than 1,300 services, which operators will search through to aid callers, said Steve Beal, the department's assistant health director.

"In today's world, data is very precious and priceless, and you can't just get it for free," said Sandra Rupp, the chief professional officer of Lincoln's United Way. "There's no such thing as a free lunch, but it's very generous of the Health Department to voluntarily give us access to their database for free."

The service will be available for one year at no cost to callers. Once the year is over, it's up to Lincoln's United Way to come up with the funds to keep 211 operating.

"I think once the value becomes apparent to businesses and phone companies, they'll want to keep it up and running at no cost to callers," Rupp said.

Despite the drawbacks, 211 still offers callers a great service, Rupp said.

"The key to 211 is that you're talking to a real person," Stoklasa said. "It's an actual body - it really humanizes the whole thing."

In addition to day-to-day calls, Rupp said 211 could easily function as a disaster information line. Had the number been accessible earlier, people confused during the recent tornadoes in Southeast Nebraska could have called 211 and received information that electricity was down and where to go if they needed help.

With today's launch of 211, 60 percent of the state can use its service in 11 counties.

Seven are connecting today: Lancaster, Hall, Saunders, Washington, Hamilton, Howard and Merrick. Douglas, Sarpy, Dodge and Cass counties have been using 211 for more than a year.

The United Way of the Midlands recently proposed that the Nebraska Public Service Commission provide seven other counties with 211.

There will be a hearing in Kearney on Aug. 18 to decide whether Buffalo, Dawson, Franklin, Gosper, Harlan, Kearney and Phelps counties will be able to access 211 in the future.

The Federal Communications Commission decided in 2000 to reserve 211 for human services information. That led to the United Way campaign for a national three-digit number.

United Way of Metropolitan Atlanta launched the first 211 service in 1997. There are 128 active 211 systems in 26 states, giving 211 access to 32 percent of the U.S. population.

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