

Mary Lou Goeke: If you need a lifeline, call 211

Good health is influenced by far more than just health care. Feeling connected to family and community, functioning well mentally, physically and socially, and having a sense of well-being are all markers of good health. By the same token, poor health can be the result of numerous forces beyond your control, especially during tough economic times. The good news is that you're not alone. Just knowing where to go for help can make all the difference.

Starting in July, Santa Cruz County residents can access a free, confidential telephone service that they can call for help: 211. 211's skilled call specialists are available 24 hours a day, seven days a week to assist individuals and families, who may, for the very first time, find themselves in need of health, social services or other support. Referrals for basic needs like food and shelter, or urgent needs like health care or counseling, can be accessed just by calling 211.

Here's a sample of some of the programs you can connect to.

Food

211 can help keep food on the table by linking you to "SNAP," the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program formerly known as food stamps. There are also food pantries throughout Santa Cruz County, as well as drop-in meal programs for seniors.

Utility bills

Sometimes, being able to pay your small bills can make a big difference. Pacific Gas & Electric Company's CARE California Alternate Rate for Energy program provides a 20 percent discount on utility bills for eligible seniors, and there are other utility assistance programs in Santa Cruz County that may be able to help with back payments.

Health insurance

If you or your children are uninsured, you may be eligible for a public coverage program or our own locally funded Healthy Kids program.

Health care

If you are uninsured or lack the funds to pay for care, there are community clinics that can help you regardless of your ability to pay. These "safety net clinics" offer high quality, affordable medical, dental and other services to local residents, serving thousands of patients each year.

Medicine

United Way of Santa Cruz County offers FamilyWize, a prescription drug discount program, which boasts an average savings of 22 percent for its cardholders. Free membership cards are available at most area pharmacies and at safety net clinics. All Santa Cruz County residents are eligible to participate, whether you are uninsured, underinsured, a Medicare recipient or have private insurance.

Volunteering

Feeling engaged and connected to your neighbors and community is one of the keys to good health. If you're feeling isolated, volunteering can help you kindle human connections while also reaping the reward of helping others. 211 can link you to volunteer opportunities.

Counseling

If you are having difficulty coping, don't be afraid to seek professional help. 211 can help you find a qualified mental health professional.

Whatever your needs, think of 211 as a lifeline to an array of local resources that can ensure your good health and more. Your community stands ready to assist you; just dial 211.

Mary Lou Goeke is executive director of the United Way of Santa Cruz County. She regularly collaborates with the Health Improvement Partnership to improve the health of Santa Cruz County residents, including launching 211.