

United Way Community Matters**By
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Imagine: Help as Easy as 2-1-1

It sometimes seems that the more easily we are connected to the vast array of information available to us the more difficult it is to find the help we need when we need it. It may even seem like a technological step backwards to aspire to be able to use the old fashioned telephone to dial three little numbers, 2-1-1, to reach a live operator to ask for help and receive the information we need, 24 hours a day, every day of the year, but this is exactly the highly personal telephone assistance that 75% of Americans and 84% of Californians have. We now want to see if we can bring 2-1-1 to Santa Cruz County.

2-1-1 is an easy-to-remember telephone number that connects people to essential community information and referral services. The goal of 2-1-1 is to connect callers with services, information, resources and volunteer opportunities in their communities 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. When a person calls 2-1-1, specially trained "real people" answer the call and determine what services, information or resources are needed to help the caller.

Examples of services people can access by calling 2-1-1 are food and housing resources such as food banks, clothing, housing, rental and mortgage assistance. 2-1-1 can link people to health services including access to health care for the uninsured or under-insured, prenatal care and medical information lines. 2-1-1 can link people to income support such as Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) assistance, job training and education programs. 2-1-1 is especially helpful for seniors and people with disabilities in securing adult day care, meals on wheels, respite care, home health care, and transportation. Families can find resources for children like child care, after school programs, family resource centers and tutoring.

2-1-1 has also become a critical tool during disasters. As early as 2001, during the September 11 attacks, 2-1-1 was a means for aggregating resources and enhancing post-disaster assistance. In Connecticut, where a statewide 2-1-1 system was in place, the governor used the 2-1-1 infrastructure to assist those "searching for loved ones employed at the World Trade Center- and later used the system to connect those suffering from the attack's aftermath to mental health services.

Following the Katrina and Rita disasters, FEMA issued a study, the *2005 Hurricane Season After-Action Report*, in which it both recognized the accomplishments of 2-1-1 and made a strong recommendation that states move forward on statewide 2-1-1 implementation.

In October 2007, Southern California communities experienced first-hand the role of 2-1-1 can play during a disaster. Twenty separate wildfires consumed large parts of six Southern California counties; in all, more than 500,000 people would be evacuated from homes in San Diego County alone. During these evacuations, major highways were closed as new fires began and existing fires spread. Information about evacuations, shelters, and road closures changed by the minute.

Over the period of October 21 through October 25, 2007, more than 130,000 calls to 2-1-1 were answered in the counties of Los Angeles, Riverside, Orange, San Bernardino, San Diego and Ventura, an increase of 764 percent over the same period the previous week. In a single day, October 24th, the six call centers answered more than 41,000 calls (with 2-1-1 San Diego answering 81 percent of them), comparable to the call volume of a mid-sized call center for an entire year. Unlike other types of disasters, wildfires pose the challenges of shifting evacuations, fires burning and expanding over days, continuously changing traffic closures and simultaneous situations of response and recovery. In these disaster situations, 2-1-1 provided an essential service while relieving the 911 call centers of the nonemergency calls.

2-1-1 also has the capacity to be the place one can call to give help, as in volunteering and also to pledge financial support as in the case of a disaster.

It is the goal of United Ways of California that all Californians will have access to 2-1-1 by the year 2010. Here in Santa Cruz County, we have just convened a countywide Steering Committee to study the feasibility of bringing 2-1-1 to our county's residents.

For more information on the progress of our Steering Committee visit our United Way of Santa Cruz County website: www.unitedwaysc.org. To become involved in the study, call Mary Lou Goeke at 831.465.2202.

For the past 16 years Mary Lou Goeke has been the Executive Director of the United Way of Santa Cruz County. She has 33 years of experience providing social services to elders, children and families. The mission of United Way is to improve the lives of the people of Santa Cruz County by convening the community to seek solutions to their needs and by efficiently raising funds for the human care programs the United Way supports.