

Viewpoint: 2-1-1 Day in SLO County

By: Rick London, CEO United Way of San Luis Obispo County, (805) 541-1234

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Since January 2010, help for San Luis Obispo County residents in need of assistance from area social-service agencies has been as close as the telephone by just dialing 2-1-1. 2-1-1 SLO County is a free program of United Way of San Luis Obispo County (UWSLOC) and is a one-stop way to get timely access to health and human services information and referrals 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Dialing 2-1-1 connects the community to a free, confidential, bilingual call center with access to nearly 600 local, low-cost and no-cost programs and support groups. UWSLOC is pleased to be celebrating National 2-1-1 Day on Friday, February 11, 2011.

When an individual or family is in need of assistance, often multiple types of help are required which can be confusing and overwhelming to navigate. Often times, people want to offer their help and find volunteer opportunities or donate gently used items. 2-1-1 is useful in these cases as well. By dialing 2-1-1, community members are provided referrals to as many different agencies or services as necessary to ensure their needs are met. When possible, callers are given three referrals for each need they have; these could include food, shelter, health care, transportation, or other services. Callers in crisis or with immediate mental health needs are transferred to appropriate support lines, where locally trained volunteers and staff are prepared to give more personal help. In this way, local individuals and families are connected with important health and human services, giving them the support they need to be productive and healthy community members.

As residents throughout SLO County continue to work through their own economic struggles, and as decreased funding from either the federal or state government appears to be imminent, 2-1-1- SLO County continues to gain rapid relevance. From 2007 to 2009, call volume to 2-1-1 SLO County increased 57%, with requests for basic services also increasing: food by 107%, financial assistance by 111%, housing by 57%, and health and medical referrals by 53%. Also during that time, 2-1-1 SLO County experienced a 40% increase in callers seeking substance abuse resources and a 200% increase in domestic violence calls. Over 15,000 calls have been placed to 2-1-1- SLO County in the past two years, with close to 5,000 of these coming from callers in the City of San Luis Obispo.

2-1-1 SLO County helps to support and strengthen the 'safety net' programs that provide residents with direct services, and helps prevent greater crises from occurring. Because 2-1-1 SLO County is available any time of day or night, calls to this non-emergency number reduce the number of inappropriate calls to 9-1-1 and other public safety offices. In the past six months (July through December, 2010), approximately one quarter of the calls received from known zip codes in SLO County were between the hours of 5:00 p.m. and 8:00 a.m., indicating the need for 24-hour assistance. Simultaneously, operations at nonprofit and public assistance organizations are streamlined when clients already know what services are offered and their eligibility. While employees at nonprofit organizations have the expertise to address issues that their agency is

designed to face, they often do not have the time or training to assist with needs that are related, but different. 2-1-1 SLO County call specialists have a full range of accurate resources, the training to use them and the time to listen. There is no other service in SLO County that provides this type of information for such a wide segment of the population; the 2-1-1 SLO County database is available over the phone (by speaking with call specialists) and online in a searchable format at www.unitedwayslo.org/211, a valuable resource for both the public and social service workers.

Local 2-1-1 calls are answered by trained call specialists at a center in Ventura County, operated by Interface Children Family Services. The Interface call center is able to maximize their efficiency by not only serving Ventura and San Luis Obispo counties, but also taking calls for Kern, Kings, Monterey, Santa Barbara and Santa Clara counties. By partnering with Interface, the cost of operating 2-1-1 is now less than when calls were answered locally. UWSLOC continues to be the local 'face' of 2-1-1, and maintains the database of local resources to which call specialists refer. Additionally, UWSLOC conducts all marketing and fundraising efforts for 2-1-1 SLO County. United Ways throughout the nation have a long-standing tradition of commitment to funding information and referral services in their respective communities, with 2-1-1 originally created in Atlanta in 1997 by United Way of America.

It was in July 2000 that the Federal Communications Commission designated the easy to remember, three-digit dialing code for health and human service information. But, like many government programs, the money to maintain the system was not included. Currently, 23 of 58 California counties have 2-1-1 systems up and running. Combined, they provide 2-1-1 access to approximately 90 percent of the state's residents. Collectively, United Ways across the United States are working together to establish nationwide 2-1-1 coverage, not only for information and referral purposes, but also as a disaster preparedness tool.

In the event of a disaster, the need for accurate information and resources will dramatically increase, as will the need to coordinate volunteers. UWSLOC is a member of Volunteer Organizations Active in Disaster (VOAD), a network of community, faith-based and government organizations that provide help during and after disasters. Across our country, 2-1-1 has been found to be indispensable during times of disaster, such as Hurricane Katrina in 2006, the Southern California Wildfires in 2007 and the BP Oil Spill in 2010; maintaining this service is of vital importance to SLO County. Currently, important work is being done at the state level to establish a system that will link all 2-1-1 call centers across the state, a system that will be particularly important if our state or county faces a disaster of major proportion with hundreds of thousands of residents in need of the service.

While the "Calling for 2-1-1" bill (H.R. 211 in the House, S. 211 in the Senate) enjoys significant bipartisan support, it has moved slowly through the process and therefore 2-1-1 call centers rely entirely on local funding. 211 SLO County owes its thanks on this year's 2-1-1 Day to several funding partners, namely, the County of San Luis Obispo, PG&E, Interface Children Family Services and First 5 SLO County. Without these partners, thousands of SLO County residents would struggle to find the basic help they need.

United Way of San Luis Obispo County's 2-1-1 service is available for anyone, regardless of age or level of income. It's for the teenagers that want to find help for drug or alcohol abuse, the families that need child care, the veterans that need medical resources. It's for the senior woman who wants to donate some furniture and clothes but doesn't know where to go, or the young man that wants to volunteer his time and doesn't know who to contact. Help support your local 2-1-1 service. For more information on 2-1-1- SLO County, visit www.unitedwayslo.org/211.

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