

The Star-Ledger

THE VOICE OF NEW JERSEY

Jersey sets up 24-hour hotline to take burden off 911 emergency system

By Susan K. Livio

Star-Ledger Staff

People searching for help from a social service agency now have an alternative to thumbing through the telephone book.

By dialing 2-1-1 callers will reach a live operator at a nonemergency hotline any time of day who can link them to private and government agencies located in their community, state officials announced yesterday.

"For a person who is hungry or someone without permanent shelter, help is just three numbers away," Human Services Commissioner James Davy said during a news conference in Trenton. "211 can give you the where-to-go and how-to-apply for a variety of human service programs."

Patterned after the 911 emergency and 411 information lines, versions of the 211 information line serve 107 million people from 31 cities and states, but many of those information services do not operate around the clock.

New Jersey is one of nine states to establish a 24-hour service, said Thomas Toronto, who as president of Bergen County's United Way coordinated the project.

A bill (S211) is pending in the Congress, sponsored by U.S. Sens. Hillary Clinton (D-NY) and Elizabeth Dole (R-N.C.), to create an information line in all 50 states.

The hotline will help narrow the search for callers who need help finding an agency that provides mental health, domestic violence and public assistance for children, families, senior citizens and veterans in their area, officials said.

"Too many people use 911, the emergency number we are all familiar with for nonurgent questions. 211 will help take that burden away and offer local and precise answers to these questions," Davy said.

The network has been operating in select counties since 2002, and before yesterday's launch was already fielding roughly 10,000 calls a month from people in 15 counties, Toronto said. Calls are routed to 10 regional call centers

operated by United Way-supported agencies. Cell phone users also can reach the hotline, although service may be spotty while some glitches are being worked out this month, he added.

The statewide network cost \$2.2 million to launch, with the United Way providing \$1 million, state lawmakers spending \$600,000, and grants from counties and corporations such as Verizon covering the rest, Toronto said.

Assemblyman Louis Greenwald (D-Camden), chairman of the Assembly Budget Committee, said he considered the hotline a sound investment that will ultimately save the state money.

"In the long run, this will keep the senior home longer, which will save the state money on nursing homes at four times the costs," Greenwald said during the news conference. "This will keep the senior citizen fed and out of the emergency room. This will keep the child healthy and off of drugs and in a program, maybe like a boys and girls club or some other program where they won't find themselves at greater expense to the state."