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By Donna McArdle - Special to the TIMES

If you have ever wished for a one-stop phone number where you could call for help, about anything from finding a day-care center to getting financial assistance for those high utility bills or to finding a ride for your grandmother to the doctor, look no further. Instead of spending hours poring over the phone book and calling one agency after another to find the right information, help is at hand. Simply dial 2-1-1.

You will reach the Info Line of Central Jersey, where paid professionals have access to a wealth of current databases that can help you with almost any problem.

The 2-1-1 number might be one of New Jersey's best kept secrets, but administrators at United Way of Greater Mercer County are hoping that will change.

"It is easy to remember a three-digit number," said Craig E. Lafferty, president and CEO of the United Way of Greater Mercer County. "We can be the first call for help."

The idea of a general helpline has been around for years, to not only offer information about social services, but also to take the nonemergency load off of 9-1-1. Info Line of Central Jersey has been helping people since 1995. The 2-1-1 partnership in New Jersey was coalesced under the leadership of the state's United Way organizations, with infrastructure support from Verizon, in February 2005. The state Board of Public Utilities has designated United Way as 2-1-1's administrator. New Jersey's addition to the information network brings about 50 percent of the United States into the 2-1-1 system. Eventually all of the country will have access to this communication network.

Lafferty said the benefits are overwhelming, not only for state residents who on a day-by-day basis call for help and information on a wide range of issues, but also during a disaster. It was a lesson the organization learned during Hurricane Katrina.

"We saw what we could do during disaster relief," he said. "They didn't have a 2-1-1 call center in New Orleans. The hurricane hit over the weekend, and I think the levees broke on Monday. By Thursday we were up and ready to take calls. With just a couple of switches, our system can re-route calls."

Steven Nagel, executive director of the Info Line of Central Jersey, runs the Mercer and Middlesex operations center in Milltown (there is roughly one 2-1-1 call center per every two counties in the state). He remembers how busy they were after Katrina hit.

"We were one of the overflow centers set up as a donations line," Nagel said. "The victims ... began calling us for social services help. We were able to match them with resources in the area and we helped many of them when they relocated up here."

Nagel said more than 30,000 people used the agency's services last year. The phone calls are fielded by three full-time professionals, and the phone number is available for use 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The call centers rotate after-hours shifts.

"We find we are usually the busiest between 10 and 2 p.m.," added Nagel. "We see that the No. 1 need from our callers is for financial assistance. The largest need in June was financial assistance for rent and help with utility bills."

Nagel said those numbers for utility bill help has greatly increased in just one year. "Last year we had 385 calls; this year it is 521."

He said callers who needed financial assistance were helped most of the time, but he noted that New Jersey resident's needs far outweighed the amount of resources available.

"These are tough economic times and we have had an influx of people who are making minimum wage or less. It is very expensive to live in Central New Jersey. Our homeless population is not the guy in the trench coat sleeping on a park bench; it is day laborers, and 30 percent are under the age of 18. We are dealing with mothers with two or three little kids."

Nagel is exceptionally gratified by the work he and his information specialists do.

"I have spent 20 years working with nonprofits, and what matters here are that the person gets the help they need the first time they call. That help can make a difference. We can cut through all the red tape."

As a comprehensive referral service, not only can a caller receive help for their initial question, but the information specialist can often provide other numbers for secondary services. Many times calls can be transferred directly to the service the person needs to be connected with.

Lafferty said the technology and 2-1-1's ability to grow makes it the perfect vehicle for information dissemination. His group provides a \$50,000 annual grant to the Info Line of Central Jersey.

"These information specialists are carefully trained. They are experienced in confidentiality, and they are triage on the phone. Our specialists are an extension of the professional social services out there."

Getting the word out about 2-1-1 has been Lafferty's greatest challenge.

"We need to build this into the residents' consciousness," he said. "When we went from dialing 0 to 9-1-1 in an emergency, it took time to retrain people. 2-1-1 is like that. We are the nonemergency call for help. It would be great if a business would contribute refrigerator magnets or phone stickers with the number."

He added that the state has recognized the call center's value in an emergency situation and has included it in emergency planning.

"I take great pride in being able to accomplish this in our community," Lafferty said. "Human services touch everyone's lives. This is free. It is confidential. And it offers the most up-to-date services available. Even if it is something like trying to ship a loved ones remains from the West Coast here, we can help."

Nagel agrees and is proud to share testimonials and success stories about people who were given the information needed to get out of a tough situation. "It is the most gratifying experience, to help someone."

For more information, or to register as a service provider, call 2-1-1, visit its Web site ([www.nj211.org](http://www.nj211.org)) or go to the Info Line Web site ([www.info-line.org](http://www.info-line.org)).