

# Lake County touts new 211 assistance line

BY FRANK S. ABDERHOLDEN

Lake County took a leap into the information age this week as United Way of Lake County and its partners went live with a new telecommunications service that allows anyone in the county needing health or human services to simply dial 211.

The county became the largest in Illinois to implement the program, joining a roster that also includes McHenry County. Less than 30% of Illinois has access to the service, even though 94% of the U.S. population had access to the program as of 2018.

Kristi Long, president and CEO of United Way of Lake County, said that back in 2005, a community-wide assessment of needs was conducted and found that people who needed help generally didn't know where to go.

"That was always in the back of our mind, and we knew 211 fit that," she said.

Now, if someone needs help with just about anything, United Way officials say a referral is just a 211 telephone call, text or computer click away.

The service — available 24 hours a day, seven days a week — utilizes a Find Help Lake County website that was put together by the United Way. It has information on services involving disasters, domestic abuse, food, utilities, affordable housing, transportation, immigration, financial support, individual and family support, addiction and mental health. Operators have access to a translation line that covers 140 different languages.

Long went to her first 211 meeting back in 2003, but at the time, the requirements included setting up a call center, "and that was very expensive," she said. United Way of Lake County will be using a Ventura County, California, contact center



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Kelly Brown, director of Interface Children & Family Services, answers questions about the 211 call service her company will operate from California.

called Interface Children & Family Services.

She added that the United Way has two focus areas: "One is education, and the other is safe and stable families. We really saw 211 supporting those areas."

"Today, we went public, and we hope people start getting the word out," Long said. "We just went through and just trained all the staff at the Lake County sheriff's department. We still have a specific list of organizations that we want to touch so they know how to use, and how it benefits their organization."

According to Long, the need was evident when several different nonprofit organizations came to the United Way and said they need a better referral sys-

***"Let's make sure every county resident knows, no matter their age, their language, their immigration status or their socioeconomic group, that if they need social services they can call 211."***

— Sandy Hart, Lake County Board chair

tem. She recounted how since her name and office number is on their website, she would even get calls from people in need.

"I do get what it's like to be a township trustee who is getting calls from people asking for help. (You) want to help this person," she said, adding that 211 provides an easy way that is always up to date.

Call specialists on 211 will do more by asking callers for more information about what other issues are affecting them and their family, according to Long, and they find out what they need to get back on their feet.

"Specialists will ask if they want a call back to see how things went. It's confidential unless a person

gives information," she said.

Lake County State's Attorney Michael Nerheim said 211 is a great program for many reasons, because most people think a victim reaches out for help by calling 911, and most do. But, with crimes like domestic violence and sexual assault, which might not be reported immediately, people don't know how to access care.

"We recently had a young woman who was sexually assaulted, and she reached out for help via the Lake County Text A Tip text line," Nerheim said, adding he also felt that with the ease of 211, some people could avoid the legal system.

"What if they can get help before they have con-

tact with the criminal justice system? (The) 211 (line) allows us to do that," he said.

Lake County Board Chair Sandy Hart recalled how Steve Carlson, a board member, championed this cause for many years, recalling how he would say, "You know this would work better when we have 211."

"There is no doubt in my mind that this program really will improve the quality of life for Lake County residents and you can truly save lives in many cases," Hart said.

She recalled doing homeless counts in January where participants would look for people warming up in stores, and an employee or manager would say they see homeless residents all the time, "but we don't know who to call or what to do."

"With 211, now we can make a difference for those people," Hart said. "Now we really need to make sure to get out there, let people know this program is here. Include it in your newsletters, share on social media, talk about it with friends.

"Let's make sure every county resident knows, no matter their age, their language, their immigration status or their socioeconomic group, that if they need social services they can call 211."

Carlson said he began working on the project about 10 years ago.

"It's been an exercise in diplomacy, perseverance, with a whole lot of dedicated people who busted their butts. This is a great group," said Carlson, who is also on the United Way board.

Carlson added he's been involved in many things the past 17 years, and the new service, "is far and away the greatest single effort I've ever been involved with."

"You can tell I'm excited about this," he said. "This is cool."