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New Telephone Number Guides People To Services, Resources

Service Provides Free Community, Health, Disaster Information

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SAN DIEGO -- A new non-emergency public assistance telephone line -- reached by dialing 211 -- will be available in San Diego County and throughout the Southland starting Friday.



The service offers the public handy access to health, social, community and disaster preparedness information and other services in the San Diego, Orange, Riverside, Los Angeles and Santa Barbara areas.

Ventura County launched the program in February, on "National 211 Day."

The free, 24-hour service utilizes a new dialing code approved by the Federal Communications Commission to connect people with assistance agencies.

Like 911 for emergency calls, 211 can connect people to non-urgent medical support for seniors and the disabled, child care, employment assistance, food and shelter, protective services and legal aid.

"The day we've been waiting for is here," said Maribel Marin, president of the California Alliance of Information and Referral Services, which provides information and referral services to the public.

In order to promote the orderly provision of 211, the state Public Utilities Commission has designated a provider in each county, each with decades of experience in central information roles.

Other counties around the state will be implementing 211 later this year, in 2006 and beyond.

By substituting 211 for many other public service numbers, Southern California residents will be able to quickly and easily get access to crucial assistance, Marin said.

"With (the service) in place, our Southern California 211 agencies expect to handle more than 750,000 calls per year," Marin said.

For the past six years, the California Alliance of Information and Referral Services has worked to guide the initiation of 211 planning.

The agency sought foundation funding for the planning process, petitioned the PUC to establish procedures for selection of providers and developed the program's collaborative infrastructure in the state.

The 211 system is already available to 107 million people in 30 states and the District of Columbia.

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