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### San Diego County's '211' line traffic on the rise

By: GIG CONAUGHTON - Staff Writer

SAN DIEGO ---- Operators of an ambitious 24-hour telephone hotline that helps people find everything from financial counseling to shelter to rehabilitation services and parenting classes said Thursday they have seen a 40 percent increase in calls.

Officials from "211 San Diego" also said they hope to increase the 125,000 calls they fielded in 2005-06 to 175,000 in the coming year ---- and eventually to 300,000 a year ---- at an open house Wednesday.

But they said they are still looking for more cash to boost their roughly \$2 million budget to manage that expansion, by petitioning local cities for money and increasing their own revenues by hiring out their services to agencies.

Executive Director Sara Matta prodded visitors at the information line's San Diego offices Wednesday to lobby federal lawmakers to pass the "Calling 211 Act" that would authorize \$150 million for the information lines nationwide.

Matta and the 32-member staff of San Diego's 211 hotline held the birthday-fundraising-promotional open house at their San Diego offices Wednesday, where they celebrated the one-year anniversary of the hotline with



*An Information and Referral Specialist at San Diego County's 211 information call center, takes a call on Wednesday from an Oceanside single mother, with three children, who needs help with money for food and utilities.*

**JAMIE SCOTT LYTTLE** Staff Photographer

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county Supervisor Greg Cox and the leaders of many of the social services they interact with.

"This whole program is about people," Cox said. "It's about helping people ... and getting them the information they need to solve whatever their problem is."

Cox, a longtime supporter of the 211 hotline program, said that the information line had seen a jump from 89,000 calls a year when it was the formerly 10-digit INFO LINE to 125,000 in the last year. He said the hotline interacted with 2,000 social service agencies in the county, representing 5,000 different programs.

Visitors got to watch the information line's operators at work Wednesday in brief tours.

One operator, Carmen, tried to help a 63-year-old woman who called to say she was disabled and being evicted from the shelter where she was staying because she couldn't help with chores at the facility. Hotline callers are afforded confidentiality. So too, are the operators. Administrators asked that Carmen's last name, and those of the other operators, not be disclosed to protect them from the potential of disappointed callers venting their anger on those trying to help them.

Operators, administrators said, often work with people who are in dire circumstances, ranging from people with drug and alcohol dependencies, to domestic violence victims, and suicide calls.

Carmen, sitting inside her cubicle, surrounded by more than a dozen pictures of her family, and a statuette of a pink unicorn, said she typically handled 60 to 80 calls a day, and found her work rewarding.

"A good day for me is if I got somebody to let this lady stay at (a shelter)," she said. "A bad day is if I have to go home and this lady is out on the street."

Carmen said the operator's job often goes beyond just putting callers in touch with agencies that can help them.

She said she also worked Wednesday to help find hotel vouchers for another woman, a domestic violence victim, who was being denied access to a shelter because the facility couldn't also take her 17-year-old son.

"Sometimes you have to advocate for them," she said.



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The hotline's operators go through extensive training, and callers can obtain help in 140 different languages.

Penny Abell, chairwoman of the 211 San Diego Coalition, said the current average wait time for the hotline was 72 seconds.

Matta, meanwhile, said the hotline had a couple of goals for the coming year. The biggest, she said, was to make sure the hotline is prepared to be the single conduit for information for county residents in emergencies.

When the information line kicked off in 2005, one of its goals was to take some pressure off overburdened 911 emergency lines ---- especially during emergencies. Sheriff's Department officials said they have seen no evidence that the new line had eased 911 traffic yet.

But Matta said she expects that easing to kick in "whenever" the next disaster occurs, when local governments direct information-thirsty residents to the hotline.

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