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The San Diego Union-Tribune.

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LOGAN JENKINS

211 organizer says system answered the call

December 24, 2007



Ain't it good to know you've got a friend?

— James Taylor

High up on Starvation Mountain, Sara Matta lost her home to the October fires.

Last week, standing by the blackened ruins, the Scotland native scanned Palomar Mountain to the north and the San Pasqual Valley far below.

"This reminds me of Northwest Scotland," Matta said.

Earlier, I had asked Matta to reflect on the aftermath of a Category 5 firestorm.

"Those first two weeks – I think it's part of the coping mechanism – I remember very little," she said.

As she and husband, David, hopped from one temporary dwelling to another, Matta eventually realized she needed precise information about how to clear their property, the first step in the long march toward rebuilding their lives.

Her research hit a dead end, so she did what some 120,000 San Diego County residents did during the first 10 days of the fire disaster.

She dialed 211 to speak to a person trained to patiently answer any practical question.

"I remember being very proud," Matta said. "The volunteer didn't have that specific information. It was too early. And yet she worked with me. We went to some Web sites together. It made me feel that this person is working for me, on my side, and that's the whole point of 211."

If anyone in the county ought to comprehend the consolations of a human voice during a calamity, it's Matta.

Twenty-one years ago, she took charge of a local United Way program called INFO LINE that 19 years later would evolve into 211 San Diego. The basic mission of the phone referral service hasn't changed: Guide people to where they need to go.

"It's been a crusade of mine to get this system in some kind of rational order," Matta said.

On Oct. 19, the Friday night before the fires, the 211 San Diego staff threw Matta, their boss, a going-away party.

Some 48 hours later, she would flee as the Guejito and Witch Creek fires converged on Starvation Mountain.

And 211, Matta's baby, would crash, but, in the end, not burn.



211, a nationally recognized dialing code, was launched in San Diego in 2005. Despite the

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slick number, it's hardly a household icon like 911.

Before the October fires, Matta figures maybe 15 percent of the county's residents even knew that a human voice, trained to assist in life's non-911 emergencies, was just three digits away.

On a normal Sunday in "peacetime," as Matta puts it, two 211 employees man the telephones.

When the October wildfires kicked up, eight available staffers were rushed in, but "the sheer volume was astronomical," Matta told me. In the first 10 days, 211 received roughly the same number of calls it gets in a year.

As the fires spread terror, a system designed to handle up to 60 simultaneous calls was overrun. Many callers got busy signals or long waits. They hung up upset and angry.

By Oct. 24, Matta said, the 211 telephone/Web system had been retooled, thanks to companies like Qualcomm, AT&T, Google and IBM, and was up and running.

Despite the initial meltdown, "they did an admirable job of ramping up," Matta said. "There was bad news going out. Of course, the good news doesn't follow immediately."

The straight news?

If it's to be the official countywide alternative to 911 in a disaster, the nonprofit agency that relies on public and private funds is going to have to be capable of shooting up with steroids at a moment's notice.

To function in "wartime," 211 needs technical pumping up – a linked daisy chain of emergency call centers, for example – as well as the ability to recruit and train an army of volunteers to roll out as quickly as firefighters and police.

■ ■ ■

Without a strong commitment, 211 is destined to fail precisely when it's needed most. It's a cultural throwback, a human voice on the other end of a desperate lifeline.

The modern answer is a recorded voice directing callers to the searchable 211 Web site. Only as a last resort would a person come on the line.

Money is part of the robotic equation. Human contacts cost at least three times more than virtual contacts, Matta said.

Just as newspaper companies must imagine a virtual future for newspapers, can Matta conceive of a day when 211 phones are silent in favor of fully automated assistance?

"I really can't," she said. "The human connection is still what we hear back about from our callers. It was so great to have somebody to talk to, they say. That human connection is so important. I really know that now, personally. To have someone who sees it from your perspective and can work it through with you. You're not alone."

Now that the fires are two months into memory, the frequency of calls to 211 calls is running more than 60 percent higher than before them, Matta said.

Out of the ashes of a communication meltdown, the human voice rises, stronger than before. *All you have to do is call.*

Before leaving Starvation Mountain, I asked Matta if she had noticed any fresh signs of natural life on her 7 acres.

She led me to bright-green shoots of mint pushing through the seared earth.

"I'm going to give them as Christmas presents," she said.

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