

HERMAN: Life by the numbers

By AGNES HERMAN For the North County Times | Posted: Wednesday, June 8, 2011 12:00 am

All of us understand we must dial "911" for a quick response to an emergency. I shall focus on that below. There are other varieties of assistance available by punching in "211" or "511" and of course, "411" for telephone information.

"211" connects people to a smorgasbord of non-emergency community help: social services, health issues, disaster, financial and government information and assistance. It functions 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Certified, informed specialists will discuss needs, offer specific referrals to achieve the best guidance and service available. Two specific pluses make "211" work: First, it is a people-to-people conversation; no long wait, no ladder of responsibility to climb, and second it is an easy number to remember.

When should we call? The range is enormous.

For example, are you wondering about drivers to get your aging parent around when you cannot? Has your family recently arrived from elsewhere, and there is a need for a language program for your father? You are aware abuse is taking place next door, what can you do about it? Are you wishing to volunteer time, service or goods? A homeless person, literally out in the cold, is looking for a place to rest her head? Call "211." A trained, caring person will have the answer or find it.

"511" is another specialized service. It is an arm of North County Transit District. It connects us with public transportation, also with a person-to-person contact. When I became aware that I might require bus transportation, I called that number and received specific directions, including times for leaving and returning. Someone will help plan a trip; if you are nervous, a buddy system is available to accompany you for a trial run or two. Someone will also discuss certification for the "LIFT," which provides curb-to-curb service in certain situations. "511" heads us in the right direction with a helpful answer to the question, "How can I get my aging mom to that medical appointment alone if I cannot?"

"911" is the number we teach small children. The list of possible emergencies that require the call is long. Heart attack or stroke symptoms, accidents, sudden unexplained blindness, severe vomiting, bleeding, dizziness are but a few examples. If in doubt, try to reach the family physician; but if you cannot, call "911."

Years ago, when I fainted from pain, I came around to find my husband calling "911." I made him stop and insisted he call the doctor. Our doctor, a wonderful, caring person, barked over the phone at 7 a.m., "Call 911!"

A reader called with a question. Coincidentally, her name is Agnes. She and her husband are in their 80s, they are well and enjoying life. But they have recently begun to voice a nagging question, "What should we do if one of us suddenly dies?" Their shared concern is not about loneliness or life insurance ---- it is about action. "Who do we call, what are we supposed to do?"

The question is a good one. Many other couples have the same concern. Every family and faith feels differently about death. In some families it is censored out of the conversation. In others the paperwork is done, but the talk is postponed.

My suggestions come from experience and research. Generally, you call "911" immediately. Let them decide whether indeed your loved one has died; a professional has to make the pronouncement. If a hospice is involved, those first unknown and painful steps are eased. The hospice representative knows exactly what to do and if she/he is not in the home, their number must be called. The night our son died, we had been visiting many miles from here and were ensconced in a hotel five miles from Jeff's home. The hospice nurse arrived that night before we did and handled everything.

After the first call, call friends and family, close, trusted people of your choice to be with you. These are the folks you will enlist to be by your side to support you, to weep with you, to make more calls and help in every way imaginable. Believe me, you will not want to make all the calls yourself. Someone should call the mortuary, funeral director of your choice. If there is no choice or pre-arrangement, accept the suggestion of someone among your close friends or family.

Funeral events should be honored according to your combined wishes. "Wishes" can be written in longhand by each person, signed and dated so they will be respected. Hopefully, we all have health directives on file. If there is a family clergy person, she/he must be informed.

The journey is difficult. It need not be lonely. Remember the numbers.