

S.D. Cingular users can now access 211 Line offers community information for free

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Cingular Wireless has implemented the 211 service in San Diego, allowing customers to reach a free, 24-hour community information line by dialing the three-digit code from their mobile phones.

The company is the second wireless carrier to make 211 available for its San Diego customers. T-Mobile did so in September.

The carriers charge customers for airtime at the usual rates, but they do not charge a premium for the call as they do for 411, the directory assistance calls.

The 211 information line provides confidential community information, mostly on health care and social service matters. Topics include utilities, child care, homeless shelters, volunteer opportunities, substance abuse treatment, evacuation routes and other non-emergency community information.

The line is staffed by trained specialists who can provide the information or direct callers to the clinics, agencies and organizations that can help.

The 211 phone number has been set aside by the Federal Communications Commission for this type of service. Atlanta was the first to roll it out, in 1997, and since then the service has become available to 137 million people in 32 states.

The local service is operated by a nonprofit organization, 211 San Diego, and funded primarily through grants from the United Way, Kaiser Permanente, First 5 California, San Diego Gas & Electric Co. and the San Diego county government.

Although 211 is available countywide over land lines for SBC, Cox Communications and Time Warner telephone customers, wireless carriers have been slower to implement the service.

The organization is in the process of getting other wireless carriers to offer the three-digit dialing, said 211 San Diego's executive director, Sara Matta. The difficulty is in getting the wireless carriers to incur the expense of setting up the system so that callers reach 211 San Diego's phone banks by dialing the three-digit code, she said.

"We thought once we had one signed up, the others would fall in line," Matta said. "It hasn't exactly happened that way."

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