

## COUNTY'S 211 LINE SEES BIG JUMP IN CALLS AMID CRISIS

Most seeking help with food, housing, health care needs

BY GARY WARTH

The nonprofit call center that connects San Diego County residents with area resources has been especially busy during the COVID-19 outbreak but is meeting the challenge, one of the organization's administrators said.

Meg Storer, vice president of government and community relations with 211 San Diego, said calls have been 200 percent higher on some days than in previous years.

The call center is tracking the increase in calls on its website, marking the number of calls that have come in since March 13. A graph shows more than 93,300 calls have come in as of April 26, with more than 4,000 coming in on some days in March. Counting ones that went just to the voicemail system, more than 154,000 calls have come into the system.

The service has been around since 2005 and is partnered with San Diego County Public Health Services, and also provides access to more than 6,000 services, resources and programs seven days a week, 24

hours a day. The service is free and available in 200 languages.

Storer said the flood of calls are COVID-19 related, but are not from people asking for help in dealing with the disease. Instead, they may be asking for help in getting food or finding housing, which Storer said were typical needs people called about in the past.

The difference is that many more people are calling for those needs.

"Nothing is new," she said. "There's just more. We're seeing a high increase of people calling for public assistance programs, health care needs, housing assistance, utility assistance. We're seeing a huge impact on our entire service system throughout San Diego. Our top need is folks looking for assistance, then housing and utilities."

Countywide, 42 percent of calls are coming from ZIP codes within the city of San Diego, while 9 percent are from Chula Vista, 9 percent from El Cajon and 5 percent from Escondido.

While most callers are seeking the same type of assistance as before the outbreak, about 15,600 calls specifically related to COVID-19 have come in since Jan. 31, the 211 website shows. About 3,800 people were directly assisted with COVID-19 issues through the calls while about 5,800 people were transferred to a nurse line.

Women represent 68 percent of the callers, and 42 percent are identified as

Hispanic/Latino, the largest race/ethnicity on the graph, with white/Caucasian the second largest at 28 percent.

Storer said 211 is staffed by about 100. Most of the community connectors, as staff members are called, are working remotely these days, and the ones who stayed behind are practicing social distancing at their stations.

"We've seen a lot of agencies come together to bridge gaps," she said. "We've been working with Jewish Family Service on a mobile food program for seniors and working with the city of Chula Vista to deliver food to isolated seniors."

Storer added, "It's been an amazing but scary experience."

She also gave thanks to the San Diego COVID-19 Community Response Fund maintained by the San Diego Foundation, which recently gave a grant to 211 San Diego.

The foundation's website states the money was to provide flexible resources to the call center, which is helping tens of thousands of San Diegans find services and support they need.

Grants are going to organizations focused on food security and other essential living expenses, emergent needs, rent and utility payment support. The fund also provides interest-free loans for nonprofit organizations to provide business and community service continuity.

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