

EDITORIAL

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Calling 211 is great way to find help

Even in this so-called information age, it can be difficult for people to find out what programs and services are available to them.

That was just one reminder that came out of a forum Monday night on “Aging in Community in Newport County”: Despite myriad agencies providing services to older residents and their families, it is not always easy to get information about what’s available, one attendee said, to nods of agreement from others in the audience gathered for the discussion.

And that isn’t just the case with agencies serving the aging population. It’s true across the board. In a general discussion of nearly any topic, the same truism rises to the surface: We need to do a better job of connecting people with programs designed to help them.

That is particularly true today, given the unsettled economy and high jobless rate. And that’s where 211 comes in.

While most people are familiar with dialing 911 during an emergency or 411 for information, fewer may know about 211, a health and human services referral hot line run by United Way, in conjunction with Crossroads Rhode Island and the state Department of Health and Human Services.

In Rhode Island, 211 connects callers (or visitors to its Web site, 211ri.org) with more than 2,700 programs and services offered by 720 health and human services providers, government agencies and community-based organizations.

The hot line operates 24 hours a day, year-round, and can provide assistance in multiple languages. Calls are answered by information and referral specialists who have received intensive training on services available in Rhode Island.

The first 211 call center was established in Atlanta in 1997; Rhode Island opened its service about 10 years later. As of April, 211 had served more than 240 million people in 46 states and Washington, D.C., according to United Way.

The Rhode Island 211 call center received more than 100,000 calls last year and nearly 10,000 calls in the month of January alone. Callers come from varied backgrounds, with requests for financial assistance for rent and mortgage payments, help with utilities and finding housing topping the list recently.

In addition, Rapid Response Rhode Island, a cooperative service involving a number of agencies across the state, including 211, makes sure that individuals receive substance-abuse screening within 24 hours of a request and are referred to the appropriate program for treatment.

Whether looking for an after-school program for a child, in-home care for an aging parent or assistance with some other aspect of life, it is good to know that help is just a phone call — or a mouse click — away.