

A Single Number Answers Calls for Community Needs

by Brian Gallagher

(NAPSA)—For many people, dialing 911 in an emergency has become almost instinctive.

But who do Americans call when they need help but don't require an ambulance, squad cars or a fire truck? For millions of Americans, help is just three digits away. They dial 2-1-1.

First launched by United Way of metropolitan Atlanta in 1997, 2-1-1 is a number that is easy to remember and quickly dialed when non-life-threatening emergencies spring up.

In addition, some say 2-1-1 will ultimately save Americans millions of dollars in taxpayer money by creating greater efficiencies. A recent cost-benefit analysis, commissioned by United Way of America and completed by the University of Texas-Austin, finds that national usage of 2-1-1 would provide \$1.1 billion in net value to society over the next 10 years.

The 2-1-1 number can also act as a conduit for people wanting to help others, get involved or give back to the community. Volunteer referrals and placements make it easier to match volunteers with their interests.

I believe 2-1-1 offers citizens a number of benefits, including a simple and centralized way to access social service information and volunteer opportunities in their communities.

On February 11, 2005, New Jersey, Vermont and Utah joined other states in launching a 2-1-1 service for their residents. Efforts



So far, citizens of 30 states can dial 2-1-1 for help with problems that don't require an emergency response.

are now under way in Congress to facilitate the expansion of 2-1-1.

The Calling for 2-1-1 Act (S. 211) has been introduced in the Senate by Senators Elizabeth Dole (R-NC) and Hillary Clinton (D-NY) in a bipartisan effort to secure federal funding for 2-1-1 and support its nationwide adoption. Supporters of 2-1-1 can call their own members of Congress to encourage them to cosponsor S. 211 or the similar House legislation by dialing the Congressional switchboard at 202.224.3121.

We know from the experience of 9-1-1 and 4-1-1 that clear, concise, three-digit dialing works. Clearly, a service as important as 2-1-1 should be available to everyone. Will 2-1-1 come to benefit all Americans sooner rather than later? You make the call.

Brian Gallagher is the President and CEO of United Way of America, the national organization dedicated to leading the United Way movement in making a measurable impact in every community in America.