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211 help service now live in Jefferson, Lewis and St. Lawrence counties

By ELI ANDERSON
TIMES STAFF WRITER
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WATERTOWN — Residents of Jefferson, Lewis and St. Lawrence counties have another number to call if they need help: 211.

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The national service and referral phone number is available to those living in the tri-county area starting today, Robert D. Gorman, CEO of the United Way of Northern New York, announced at a news conference Tuesday.

"211 has been around since 2000, nationally," he said. "The United Way has lobbied for state government funding and provided money — through its own fundraising efforts for 211 — to make it available here."

The number connects callers to a large database of local government and nonprofit human services, including: food pantries and shelters, day care, elderly care, and mental health services, to name a few.

"There is a big net of information that we have out there," Mr. Gorman said.

However, callers should not think of the service as a typical computer database, said Cheryl Giarrusso, director of crisis intervention services at Contact Community Services, Syracuse.

"For the most part, unless the lines are busy, it's a live person who is picking up the phone," she said. "We have found, in our experience working with the helpline database in Onondaga County, that people are so appreciative to have a breathing person actually be on the other end of the line."

Hundreds of nonprofits have added their contact information to the registry, to reach out to the community and gain volunteers at the same time.

Literacy of Northern New York, in Watertown, is excited to be a part of the new service.

"We always need volunteers here, and I think it's a great way to let the community know of all the agencies out in the community and the things that we do," executive director M. Cecilia Brock said.

The helpline also acts as a crisis and suicide hotline, a service that Ms. Giarusso said callers can confide in.

"We have an extremely vigorous training for that line," she said. "We have a very person-centered, active listening kind of motto, which goes a long way when someone is calling and in distress and needs a resource."

Mr. Gorman encourages everyone to give 211 a try when they are in need of local services.

"I think 211 is potentially going to be this great step that's going to help all of our nonprofits," he said. "Use it, because I think it is going to be good for everybody."

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Access to local services also is available online by visiting www.211cny.com.

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