

Tallahassee Democrat

Our Opinion: Need help? Call 2-1-1

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The challenge of paying the overdue rent, delaying the shut-off of your electricity or even feeling the walls of uncertainty close in is stressful enough. If you don't know where to go for answers, it can be devastating.

But in this community, thousands of people reach out to 2-1-1 Big Bend for help during a crisis. On the other end of the phone line is a staff of trained professionals and volunteers ready to direct those in distress to help within the community.

It's one of the great resources at a time when more and more people find themselves in financial situations that bring on stress, uncertainty and depression. On average, 2,000 calls are placed to the hot line each month. The most common needs are depression, loneliness and help with utility payments, housing or food.

This week, 2-1-1 centers across the country are working to raise awareness of their services in celebration of National 2-1-1 Week. The resource is not as widely known as 9-1-1, but in many cases, a need to call 2-1-1 is just as urgent. The United Way agency serves as a one-call clearinghouse that provides a client with immediate information on local agencies that can provide services.

For instance, 2-1-1 Big Bend has hundreds of agencies and about 1,100 human-service programs available as part of its network. Organizers say more than 31,000 referrals were made last year.

"I think the biggest role is the connectivity to the resources in this county and the surrounding counties," said development director Sheila Horne. "We are the gateway, the one source to connect to human services in this area."

Big Bend 2-1-1 also can automatically connect a caller to one of five other hotlines:

- Florida HIV/AIDS.
- The Family Health Line.
- Parents Line.
- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline.
- Helpline 2-1-1.

The agency's staff also stays aware of current trends, which has led to it providing two specialized short-term hotlines, one designed to provide assistance to military families and a second to assist those struggling in the aftermath of the Gulf Coast oil spill. It also provides access to its online resource directory at <http://211BigBend.net>.

Sometimes having someone to talk through a situation can be a first step toward solving one of life's many challenges. This community benefits by having such committed people waiting for the next call.