

## 211 helpline needs state financial help

**BY ELISE YOUNG**  
STATEHOUSE BUREAU

New Jerseyans increasingly are using a free phone line and website to find financial and housing assistance, health-care referrals and other help, a United Way official told lawmakers yesterday.

The toll-free 211 telephone line and its companion website, nj211.org, have received 340,000 information requests in the past year, said Laura Marx, executive director of the New Jersey 211 Partnership. Internet requests alone have increased 600 percent, she said.

Users may simply dial the three digits from a land line or cell phone, or visit the site for confidential help.

"It's compassionate, it's free and it's anonymous," Marx told members of the Assembly Telecommunications and Utilities Committee.

Committee members took no action at the hearing, at which United Way officials said state funding could help the program help more people.

The state and United Way have operated the service since 2002 to guide callers to child care, support groups, food-bank and shelter locations, job training and other social services. Other states operate their own 211 lines, accessible to about 78 percent of the U.S. population, United Way officials said.

The goal is to make the system nationwide, they said.

The New Jersey program costs about \$2.2 million to operate each year — funding that United Way officials said is well-spent, because it allows government employees to focus on their duties, rather than on phone calls.

"The more calls we receive, the more useful we are to state government, the more cost goes down and the more effectiveness goes up for consumers," said Tom Toronto, president of Bergen County United Way.

The service also is useful to social service workers, who can enter restricted areas of the Web site to check, say, available beds at psychiatric centers.

*Elise Young may be reached at [younge@northjersey.com](mailto:younge@northjersey.com).*

