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HEADLINE: As Cape May County loses social-service phone line, it gains benefits of 211

Source Website

First Call for Help, the information and referral phone line that has been synonymous with **United Way** of Cape May County for about 30 years, will be retired soon due to loss of a \$13,000 state grant that helped fund the phone line and other outreach efforts, county **United Way** Executive Director Suzanne Nardi said.

But since the county will fully join the 5-year-old statewide 211 system, the change will bring a benefit, some social-service advocates say. Cape May and Camden counties were the last to operate their own referral lines, rather than join the **NJ 211 Partnership**, run by a consortium of United Ways in the state.

Much like the 911 emergency line and 411 phone directory information line, anyone who dials 211 in New Jersey gets immediate access to free information about social-service programs in their county. The 211 line has been operational in Cape May County, but the **United Way** has not promoted it as heavily as the First Call for Help line.

"The state (TM)s 211 Partnership provides someone to answer the phones 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, " said Deacon Joe Orlando of St. Augustine (TM)s Parish in Ocean City. In contrast, the First Call for Help line was only staffed during regular business hours. He said 211, which he called "technology for the present and future, " also has access to translators who can handle questions in 50 languages, and its web site is multi-lingual.

Nardi said the two information lines weren (TM)t in competition, but are "just different. "

"We (TM)re 30 years into First Call for Help, " Nardi said of the Wildwood-based **United Way** chapter. "We (TM)re local. If people call 211, they will just direct (many of them) back to us. "

But Orlando said there are many other agencies and faith-based groups serving the county, and 211 can direct people to all of them.

Orlando heads up South Jersey Hope, an interfaith, nonprofit group studying the causes of social problems in the region and addressing them through policy changes and other actions. The group has been advocating for Cape May County to fully embrace the 211 system for months, after hearing from many needy people, especially in the northern part of the county, about their difficulty understanding what services are available, and how to access them.

The 211 Partnership assesses **United Way** agencies an annual fee, based upon the size of the agency. Cape May County (TM)s 211 fee would be \$9,000 per year, but it is being waived for the time being, said **NJ 211 Partnership** Executive Director Laura Zinc Marx.

United Way of Cape May County raised a total of \$231,332, and spent \$215, 280, according to its 2007 Federal 990 tax form. It paid a total of about \$87,000 in grants to agencies, and it allocated \$66,000 to program costs of running the First Call for Help program, including a directory of agencies, referral line and outreach activities.

Nardi is concerned that some of the outreach activities, such as a hot lunch provided to those in need every Thursday over the winter, may be affected by the loss of the state grant.

Nardi is the highest paid employee, making \$48,858, according to the 990 report. There is one other part-time employee, who makes about \$15,000, according to the 2007 report.

If you go

South Jersey Hope will kick off a 211 public awareness campaign Thursday, May 20, at 7 p.m., at a public meeting at Christ Gospel Church on Route 9 in Whitesboro. For more information on 211, visit www.nj211.org.

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