

UNITED WAY'S 2-1-1 HELPLINE SERVES AS CRUCIAL COVID-19 SERVICE



Since the new coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak began in Michigan, Gov. Gretchen Whitmer and other state officials have been clear with their message of where to go for help: Call United Way 2-1-1.

During this crisis, 2-1-1 has served as a helpline to connect individuals with any resource they might need. Whether they feel ill, are worried about supporting their family or just want to help, they can call and get help.

Every hour of every day, [United Way's 2-1-1](#) helps families get out of crisis so that they can build a stable household. It's a free, confidential service available everywhere in the state of Michigan.

United Way for Southeastern Michigan's 2-1-1 call center is the largest in the state. It covers Wayne, Oakland, Macomb, Lapeer, Monroe and Washtenaw counties.

Our 2-1-1 community care advocates provide free, confidential, personalized help to callers. They have access to a [statewide database](#) of more than 30,000 resources that are continually updated. It includes everything from food pantries and emergency shelters to education resources and volunteer opportunities.

RISING TO MEET THE NEED

COVID-19 has changed United Way's 2-1-1 operations – from how our staff work to how we help people in need.

"Like many businesses, COVID-19 has affected everything we do," said Eric Davis, United Way's vice president of Basic Needs, Health and Outreach. "We've taken multiple steps to quickly equip our 2-1-1 team with the tools and support they need to continue providing this vital service."

Typically, our team handles around 500 requests for help per day. As of mid-March, the average daily requests are closer to 750. In March of 2019, our 2-1-1 team handled 9,162 calls, emails, chats and texts. In March 2020, contacts topped 19,000.

Our 2-1-1 team has gone fully remote, answering calls for assistance from the safety of their homes. The move was made possible **thanks to an investment from Roush Industries**, which allowed United Way to purchase laptops and other supplies for staff.

We've increased staff hours to handle the increase in call volume. Our utility assistance team is also taking calls from individuals who are struggling to afford their gas and electric bills. Next, we'll train staff and partner volunteers to take calls from people who specifically ask about COVID-19 resources.

FACING NEW CHALLENGES

Even before the COVID-19 outbreak began, Southeastern Michigan residents would reach out to 2-1-1 every day in dire situations – facing eviction, utility shutoff or food shortages.

This pandemic has presented us with new challenges, from keeping our resource database updated to supporting our staff.

"We deal with crisis every day," said Tamara Bolden, 2-1-1 call center director at United Way for Southeastern Michigan. "But the COVID-19 pandemic is like nothing we've ever experienced."

As many community organizations have had to shut their doors and decrease or change their service offerings, it's been a challenge to make sure that callers can be connected with a food pantry that is open or a shelter that has beds.

Our 2-1-1 team works to keep its database of resources updated in real time. It also keeps track of resources that can help families navigate the unique circumstances our community is facing. We're connecting parents with education resources. We're ensuring displaced workers know how to file for unemployment or where to find job openings. We're also helping callers take the correct steps to get tested if they're worried they may be sick.

'WE'RE ALL GOING THROUGH IT'

2-1-1 staff are personally facing the impacts of COVID-19, even as they try to help others. Several staff members have lost family due to complications of the virus. Others, like many working parents, struggle to balance working from home while caring for their children and home-schooling them.

"We're pretty accustomed to working in disaster and crisis," said 2-1-1 Resources Manager Emma Lentini. "But it all caught us a little off guard because we've never had so many people impacted before."

"Our staff is trying to be available and present for other people, but it's challenging because this crisis is also impacting us."

Call Center Manager Jozette Gaiters and Tamara work to keep the staff who answer calls motivated and positive. Part of that is sharing success stories from the callers they help.

Jozette shared that one caller needed help finding a food pantry in her area. When given the resource, she shared with the 2-1-1 operator that she had no transportation to get there. Through United Way's partnership with Lyft, we were able to secure her a ride.

"She called not knowing what we were going to be able to do," Jozette said. "We were able to say not only can we connect you with a food bank, but we can get you there, too."

Many people reaching out to 2-1-1 for help are distraught, angry or just plain scared.

To combat the stress of helping people in crisis, Jozette said the team stays in constant touch with each other.

"They're humans too, so they feel these things," Jozette said. "We're all going through it. They're not superhuman. We're trying to reach out to them and keep their spirits up."