

Carolyn Byrd

Link to full story: [2-1-1 answers a mother's call for help - United Way for Southeastern Michigan \(unitedwaysem.org\)](https://www.unitedwaysem.org/2-1-1-answers-a-mother-s-call-for-help)

Concerned about COVID-19 due to her age, race and preexisting conditions, Carolyn made the difficult decision to work reduced hours at her nursing home job. Soon, she fell behind on her utility payments. With her past due balance growing and another bill for \$340 laying on the dining room table awaiting payment, she reached out to the 2-1-1 helpline for assistance.

During her initial intake call, Carolyn was instructed to apply for State Emergency Relief (SER). Once approved, she was enrolled in DTE's [Low-income Self-Sufficiency Program](#) (LSP), which allows qualified families to make low monthly payments based on income.

Her monthly bill was reduced to \$130 – an amount she could comfortably afford. The remaining portion of her energy bill and arrears would then be paid with [Michigan Energy Assistance Program \(MEAP\)](#) funds.

“I was so relieved,” Carolyn said, feeling like she may finally be able to get ahead.

Carolyn built an instant rapport with her care coordinator. The conversation was easy as they discussed additional programs she may be eligible for. Each 2-1-1 care coordinator has access to a statewide database of more than 30,000 resources that are continually updated.

When someone calls us for help, we always look at the bigger picture to gain an understanding of the household and the challenges they face. Our teams work hand-in-hand with our partners for things like employment assistance or housing assistance. We ask a lot of questions and use that information to make strategic referrals.

Tasha Ball

“So many people are struggling,” said Tasha Ball, 2-1-1 data and performance manager at United Way for Southeastern Michigan. “That was true even before the pandemic and it’s truer now.”

Tasha knows what is like to be on both ends of a 2-1-1 call. Long before she began working for 2-1-1, she made a call for help herself.

“I was out of work for the first time in my whole life,” Tasha said, reflecting on what she calls an exceedingly difficult period. “I didn’t know where to turn for help but 2-1-1 answered the phone and talked me through exactly where to go. It was awesome.”

Encouraged by the initial conversation, Tasha wanted to do for others what had been done for her.

“I remember not feeling judged,” she said. “The person who answered my call had empathy and compassion. That’s exactly what our team does today.”

Anita Willis, United Way for Southeastern Michigan Community Care Advocate

Anita Willis has answered thousands of 2-1-1 calls over the past eight years. Over that time, many things have changed including her role, her location, and the technology. But one thing has remained consistent – her enthusiasm for helping people.

“I truly, truly love what I do every day,” she said. “Not many people can say that they love going to work. It’s true for me.”

The customer care advocate answers each call with the same level of excitement and determination she had on her first day at the job.

Anita said her passion for helping people was sparked by her own family’s struggles.

“I’m one of 12 kids and my parents are immigrants from Guadalajara, I know what it’s like to need help,” she said.

And though she can personally relate to calls from young mothers who need everything from diapers and milk to housing, it’s the calls from seniors that are her favorite.

“They’ll call and they feel so lost because they need to apply for some kind of assistance, but everything is online, and often they don’t have access to technology or the skills to navigate it,” she said. “They’re so relieved when I tell them there are resources that can help. It opens up a whole new world for them.”

When asked what she wants people to know most about 2-1-1, she responds with her signature enthusiasm.

“We’re here 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. All anyone has to do is call – we’re going to pick up, we’re going to listen, and we’re going to empower them to get the resources they need.”

LaJessica Joiner, 40, called 2-1-1 for utility assistance in July 2020

“I was having a rough time, for sure,” LaJessica said, thinking back to what her life was like in July 2020.

At the time, she was unemployed, behind on utility payments and fearful about the COVID-19 pandemic that was disproportionately impacting her community.

“I heard 2-1-1 could help with the DTE bill, so I called them,” she said. That single call would do much more than lower her utility payments. It would change the entire trajectory of her life.

After a conversation with a customer care advocate, LaJessica was referred to Matrix Human Services and enrolled in DTE’s Low-Income Self-Sufficiency Plan (LSP).

“It was great to have my payments at a level where I could afford them,” she said. “More than that, Matrix has been amazing. They helped me set and meet my goals one by one. I went back to school. I found a job. Before that, I would set goals and never complete them. Now, I’ve been working almost a year, I’m starting my third semester of school. I’ve started a business. They’ve been a beacon of light. I never would have come to Martix if it wasn’t for 2-1-1.”