



Press Release

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United Way of the Bay Area Launches 2-1-1 San Francisco Telephone Service

- Free service helps callers quickly find help from San Francisco's community services –
- Call center will alleviate misuse of 9-1-1 for non-emergencies, especially after disasters -

SAN FRANCISCO, March 29, 2006 – United Way of the Bay Area (UWBA) today announced the launch of 2-1-1 San Francisco, an easy-to-remember phone number that connects people in need with health and human services in San Francisco. This free, confidential, 24-hour multilingual service also serves as a vital link for individuals seeking to volunteer, provide resources and assist during times of crisis.

As the 100th anniversary of the Great Earthquake and Fire of 1906 approaches, 2-1-1 San Francisco takes its place beside other important three-digit information lines, 9-1-1, 5-1-1 and 4-1-1. UWBA anticipates its 2-1-1 San Francisco call center will significantly alleviate non-emergency calls to 9-1-1 and act as an essential public communications channel in the aftermath of a disaster.

The launch of 2-1-1 San Francisco marks the introduction of this important telephone number in all of northern California; it is the first step in United Way's plans to promote and establish 2-1-1 service throughout the Bay Area. Initially, 2-1-1 San Francisco service will not be accessible from cell phones.

United Way anticipates serving as much as 10 percent of the city's population through 2-1-1 San Francisco during its first year -- some 70,000 people -- based on the experiences of other first-year 2-1-1 call centers around the country.

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“2-1-1 San Francisco will make finding help, and giving it, a lot easier,” said Anne Wilson, chief executive officer of United Way of the Bay Area. “This easy-to-remember, round-the-clock service will help San Francisco residents quickly navigate the maze of government and non-profit agencies that provide health and human services at more than 1,600 locations.” She noted that without 2-1-1, people often call several agencies before getting through to the correct service, while many give up before finding the help they need.

Alex Tourk, deputy chief of staff for San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom attended the 2-1-1 San Francisco launch celebration at UWBA headquarters this morning and said, “As Mayor Newsom’s office and the city gear up for the launch of 3-1-1 this fall, we will be working closely with United Way to educate San Francisco residents about which number is best to call to reach the assistance they need. As part of Mayor Newsom’s commitment to make city government more accessible and responsive, San Francisco’s 3-1-1 phone service will provide residents with reliable, up-to-date information and access to all non-emergency city services. ”

2-1-1 San Francisco will be operated during normal business hours by HELPLINK – the United Way Community Information Center, which has provided the region with health and human service Information and Referral (I&R) for more than thirty years through their call center, print directories, and online searchable database of services. During evenings, weekends, and holidays, calls will be answered by United Way partner San Francisco Suicide Prevention (SFSP).

“Securing the 2-1-1 designation for San Francisco County from the California Public Utilities Commission meant that United Way had to demonstrate comprehensive, up-to-date knowledge of public, non-profit and community services and our ability to offer professional, expert and effective assistance to people in need, regardless of language, disability, or financial circumstances,” said Ed Schoenberger, executive director of United Way HELPLINK.

“HELPLINK’s 30 years of providing I&R service to the people and agencies of San Francisco was an essential ingredient in receiving the endorsement of so many of the city’s public and non-profit service providers.”

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Beyond San Francisco, United Way is working with Bay Area government, civic and non-profit leaders to expand 2-1-1 throughout the region: “We are developing plans to expand HELPLINK’s current infrastructure to offer 2-1-1 services in Marin, Napa, San Mateo, and Solano Counties,” said Janine Kubert, vice president of United Way HELPLINK. Until 2-1-1 service expands into those counties, United Way HELPLINK will continue to serve them through its toll-free number, 800-273-6222, which receives about 40,000 calls annually from across the region.

“We are also exploring ways to coordinate 2-1-1 services with the PUC-designated 2-1-1 I&R providers in Alameda [Eden I&R] and Contra Costa [Crisis Center] counties to ensure seamless delivery of 2-1-1 service across the Bay Area,” Kubert added.

More than 55 percent of the US population, including six counties in Southern California, can now access 2-1-1, thanks to United Way of America’s and its non-profit partners’ decade-long campaign to promote the service. Started in Atlanta in 1997, 2-1-1 currently reaches approximately 163 million people through 187 active 2-1-1 systems covering all or part of 38 states.

Residents from around the Bay Area can visit www.211sf.org to search United Way HELPLINK’s region-wide database of services and learn more about UWBA’s plans to expand 2-1-1 throughout the Bay Area. Information about 2-1-1 nationally can be found at www.211.org.

About United Way of the Bay Area

United Way of the Bay Area is one of the largest private funders of health and human services in Northern California. Our mission is to be the catalyst that enables people to strengthen their communities by investing in one another. Through the Bay Area Community Fund, United Way is helping prevent poverty through targeted investments in early childhood development, affordable health care, youth violence prevention and increasing opportunities for the working poor. For more information, please visit www.uwba.org.

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