

## New 211 service to fill the information void

By Emily Sachs, Staff Writer

Emergencies have 911. And information has 411. By next summer, San Bernardino County will have 211, for everything from food stamps to utility assistance.

The county will be among the last in Southern California to implement the 24-hour-a-day system, which guides callers through the tangled web of public social services.

The 211 system is expected to be operational by July 2006, assuming funding and state approval come through as planned.

A sort of hybrid of the information and emergency lines, the idea is to reduce the confusion that people may face when they have personal emergencies such as homelessness or hunger or child-care needs. It refers callers to programs, but does not sign them up or offer personal advice.

"That is the best way to help people get back on their own two feet," said Gary Madden, who directed Riverside County's program implementation and is overseeing San Bernardino County's through the Inland Empire United Way in Rancho Cucamonga.

In other areas, the system has reduced the volume of inappropriate calls to 911 by as much as 65 percent.

Dispatch supervisors in Redlands and San Bernardino said Friday that social service calls aren't a noticeable problem and, in Redlands' case, callers are asked to come to the department in person for help.

In its first three months of operation, Riverside County's 211 system has fielded an average of 3,000 calls a month, which is double what the county's previous weekday information system received, said Mary Salvador, chief executive officer for the Volunteer Center of Riverside County, which operates the system.

About a quarter of the callers are from the city of Riverside. The overall number of calls is expected to rise and represent the entire county as marketing expands.

"We kind of wanted to roll it out slowly. We wanted to make sure we could deliver what we promised," Salvador said. "That way we're able to handle the calls that are coming in right now."

A new contract with T-Mobile will allow those users to be the first to dial in on their cell phones. Other companies are expected to join in, she said.

Implementation of San Bernardino County's system is stymied because it is starting further behind than Riverside and other counties, including Los Angeles, Orange and San Diego, which had prior referral systems.

Geography is also complicating the effort, requiring staff members to travel around the county to secure program information.

"People think 211, just open the box and turn on the switch. It doesn't work that way," Madden said.

In a sense, though, they are mostly ready to go. With

initial funding, the United Way purchased a \$50,000 state-of-the-art phone system. During business hours on weekdays, at least two specialists are available to direct a growing number of callers to the Help On Call line to social service programs, including housing services, counseling, Social Security and job assistance.

The system's application to the state Public Utilities Commission is expected to be turned in next week. Approval typically takes six months, Madden said, adding that he will use that time to secure an estimated \$500,000 being sought from the county Board of Supervisors and the First 5 Commission for the county.

After five years, the system will need \$1.4 million annually to operate.

By then, the system is expected to generate 140,000 calls a year - about one from every 14 people in the county. Amada Garcia, one of the call specialists, recently assisted the 211 service in Monroe, La., and fielded hundreds of calls from hurricane evacuees, some frantic for housing, food, diapers and medication.

"The same kind of thing happens with personal drama and crises every day in San Bernardino County. People who don't know where to go can go to one place to get connected to services and needs," Madden said.

The weekday service, which will expand to round-the-clock service early next year in anticipation of 211 approval, is helping some of the 1,000 hurricane victims now calling the county home.

On Thursday, Karina Salinas, who joked that everyone keeps mistaking her name for Katrina, helped connect a woman wanting to give away furniture with Catholic Charities, which at that moment had a hurricane family moving into an empty home.

Shortly after, Salinas assisted a woman who was helping a pregnant teen get assistance. Flipping through a notebook, Salinas quickly found her an Ontario pregnancy service that could help the young woman procure food stamps, Medi-Cal and counseling.

"You're welcome," Salinas told the caller. "And go ahead and call us back if you need some more."