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NJ 211 Call Centers Tell a Different Holiday Story **Need for Shelter Among Callers' Top Concerns**

Paramus, NJ December 20, 2007 – With all of the hustle and bustle that surrounds us at this time of year; with the clamor to buy the perfect gift and the pervasive images of happy Americans who are, if not opulent, at least content, warm and cozy – it is difficult to turn our thoughts for more than a few minutes to the reality that is communicated in the voices of callers to NJ 211, the statewide information and referral service that puts people-in-need, in touch with those who can offer assistance. Now, as has been the case throughout the year, a need for housing and financial assistance is the leading reason people contact the service.

Fran Palm, director of the northern New Jersey call center, says phone operators in that facility handle calls 24 hours a day, seven days a week. “This time of year is so difficult for people who are facing an issue with housing,” she explains. “I was speaking with a gentleman yesterday who had recently diverted some of his income to take care of a health issue that his son faced. He was calling our center, because the money that he used for that emergency typically goes to pay his rent. But, of course, he helped his son and now he was being threatened with eviction.”

It doesn't take more than an unexpected expense to throw one's world out of kilter. When asked, call center operators can rattle off an array of scenarios that make it easy to understand how individuals living paycheck-to-paycheck could find themselves facing homelessness. “A single mother, who is balancing two jobs to make ends meet, loses one of those jobs and, with it, the necessary income to pay the rent.” “A father of four who counts on overtime pay to meet his expenses, is told that the company is cutting back, leaving him with a serious shortfall of funds.” “An elderly relative can no longer be left alone during the day and her daughter finds it impossible to maintain the full-time position she had while caring for her aging parent. The result is that her family is put in peril.”

“Hard working people are struggling to make ends meet every day. When they call NJ 211, we try to put them in touch with local resources that will provide solutions. We try to give them hope and help,” states Barbara Gallagher, director of NJ 211 client services. The reality is that available shelter is hard to find in December. Agencies and organizations that might have been able to assist earlier in the year, have often run out of funds, leaving remaining housing resources in heavy demand. “NJ 211 strives to go beyond information and referral services,” continues Barbara. “When someone calls about a housing need, we take the opportunity to discuss other cost-saving programs with them. If they are within a certain income, we talk with them about food stamps and utility assistance programs. If the caller is a mother of young children, we discuss the WIC (Women, Infant and Children) program. Our tie with local communities throughout the state provides us with an awareness of local resources and in many cases we are able to direct people to a community food pantry where they may be able to obtain non-perishable essentials, leaving them to put the saved money towards rent.”

2-1-1 was launched statewide in the beginning of 2005. A companion Web site – www.nj211.org – was created in 2006. “With a functional and comprehensive database and call centers that are staffed with well-trained individuals, we have what it takes to provide the link between a person’s needs and the resources that will do the job,” states Ms. Gallagher. From the beginning, 2-1-1 was designed to answer questions and address situations that were anything other than life threatening. “If you have a life threatening emergency, you should call 9-1-1,” explains the director. “For everything else, you should contact 2-1-1 either by picking up the phone (land line or mobile) and dialing 2-1-1 or by going to www.nj211.org.”

Citizens are urged to use 2-1-1 when they need answers. While call centers are equipped to address the needs of families in crisis, they are equally adept at responding to inquiries of a more everyday nature like the availability of such things as local preschool programs or adult care centers. Additionally, the system provides critical information during times of natural disasters, like when the floods and wildfires traumatized so many of the state’s residents earlier this year. Volunteer requests successfully funnel through the system as well, when callers who wish to donate their time, efforts or resources are connected to local agencies that will benefit from their generosity.

About NJ 211

NJ 211 is a statewide information and referral network designed to connect people in need with government, social services and community resources that provide assistance. This free, confidential service is supported by United Way in partnership with the State of New Jersey – Department of Human Services and the Office of Homeland Security and Preparedness.