

Hunterdon County Democrat

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After two years of providing county callers with information and referrals to social services, the 211 hotline will be launched statewide tomorrow.

Hunterdon has fielded more than 127,000 calls since October 2002 when it became the first county to implement the phone service. The three-digit number has since been activated in all counties, with southern New Jersey counties the last to be activated on Jan. 31, said Howard Shapiro, project manager of the NJ 2-1-1 Partnership, an alliance between the United Way of New Jersey and the New Jersey Association of Information and Referral Services.

In 2000, the Federal Communications Commission designated the three-digit code as the national phone number for social services. Since then, 21 states have signed on.

The state Board of Public Utilities approved the code in 2002. Before the system was set up, callers had to dial an 11-digit toll-free number to reach a similar information line.

"What we're looking to do now is get the word out, so people that have the need can call it," said Frances Palm, co-chair of the partnership.

The helpline is confidential and provides free referrals to local organizations and government agencies that assist with child care, employment, health care finances, disabilities and needs of senior citizens.

The service is jointly funded by the United Way, local counties and a \$600,000 grant dispensed by the state Department of Human Services.