

PA 211 continues to answer the call with help from United Way of York County

The health and human services helpline is available 24/7 and completely free for any caller.

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Dawn Squire, a resource specialist with PA 211, helps callers find health and human services information and resources. (Photo by Paul Chaplin for Our York Media)

Dawn Squire can recall the frustration in the man's voice. At 82, he recently lost his wife. He was a Marine Corp veteran with two sons — both doctors — and he felt like he should have been able to help himself more.

"At that moment, I thanked him for his service," Dawn says.

There was a deep sigh on the other end of the phone. "How proud you must be of your sons," she continued.

And that was all it took for him to feel heard.

As an operator with CONTACT Helpline, which operates the PA 211 helpline in the southcentral PA region, Dawn was able to help the man find information on COVID-19 vaccinations. He struggled with most of the online registration systems for getting a vaccine and didn't know where to turn for help.

His call is just one of many examples where people can receive free, 24/7 assistance with finding health and human services information and resources. The program is supported by the United Way of York County Impact Fund.

"Sometimes we're the only encouraging voice someone may have in their life," Dawn says, recalling the many callers she has helped in the past two years. "We don't ever know what happens when we leave that call, but we know we're doing our best to listen while we have them."

A helpful voice

Cheryl Preperato has been with 211 for 22 years — long before it was even known by that name in this area and instead used the acronym FIRST, Free Information and Referral Service Teleline.

Some of Cheryl's most recent calls include a man who lost his bus passes and needed to get new ones so he could go to work, and a woman who found herself abandoned by a significant other and alone in a rural area.

Because she may answer calls from people within a variety of locations, she has to be able to research and find resources based on ZIP codes. For folks who don't know where they may be, she asks them to identify things around them so she can better find them help.

And then she scours her database, finding support groups, food, shelter, clothing, and more, and connecting people with those resources. In the past year, 211 has received nearly 8,000 requests for help in York County.

Her biggest wish is that more people knew the service existed.

A partnership last fall between United Way of York County, Print-O-Stat, Inc., and rabbittransit featured posters on rabbittransit busses to help spread the word that help is a just a call or text away.

"I know we touch a lot of people every year — even more now because of the pandemic," she says. "I can't help but think how many more people we could help if they just knew we were on the other end of the call."

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