

HELP IS JUST A PHONE CALL AWAY: 2-1-1 AND REVERSE 911

by Linda Parks, Ventura County Supervisor, July 2008

We all know that in an emergency when you need help quick, you dial 911. Yet not many people know about two other telephone services in Ventura County that are now offered to help residents. One service, Reverse 911, calls you in an emergency to provide you with valuable information. The other service, 2-1-1, is a number you can call to get help with issues ranging from senior services, affordable housing, and child care, to help with troubled teens, crisis intervention and reports of abuse.

Just last week our Ventura County Sheriff's Department announced the installation of a Reverse 911 system that can quickly call homes and businesses to alert them to emergencies and safety measures they should take. The system which is now up and running allows our Sheriff's Office of Emergency Services to pinpoint a specific geographic area and deliver an emergency message to residents and businesses in the affected area. If a phone line is busy, the system will redial the number, if an answering machine picks up it will leave a message, and if someone hangs up on the message or does not answer, it can note where the message was not delivered.

Currently the Reverse 911 system database includes both listed and unlisted landline telephone numbers of AT&T and Verizon customers. Last week's press conference announced that people can add their cell phone numbers to the database. The system also has the ability to send text and email messages. You can register your cell phone number, your email address, your Voice Over Internet Protocol (VoIP), or if your landline isn't in the AT&T or Verizon system, you can enter your landline number. The website address to register your cell phone number is www.countyofventura.org. Click on "Disaster Information" and then click on the Reverse 911 icon. You can also register by mail or by calling (805) 648-9283.

Examples of how the system will be used include evacuation notices, hazardous material releases and boil water alerts. During the fires in San Diego County that caused massive evacuations, emergency personnel were able to effectively reach people with evacuation information through their Reverse 911 system. The system has proven to be very effective, and while you shouldn't let this be your only source of communication during an emergency, such systems can make the difference between life and death.

While dialing 911 is strictly for emergencies and that is the only time the Reverse 911 system will be used, you can call the 2-1-1 number 24 hours a day to get connected with social services that can help you when life gives you some hard knocks and you need assistance. Whether the help you need is food, shelter, mental health services, or other calls for help, operators can direct you to the right resource so you can get the help you need.

Ventura County 2-1-1 is provided free to the public and over twenty-thousand calls are logged each month from people of all ages and income brackets. While 2-1-1 is not a government service and receives funding from contributions, its use by public safety

officials as a call center during the San Diego fires proved instrumental in answering the public's questions and communicating with people who wanted to donate their time and assistance to the fire victims and evacuees. 130,000 calls came into the 2-1-1 call center during that time. Having 2-1-1 available reduced the number of non-emergency calls to 911 and freed up the time of emergency dispatchers to handle the critical calls that are appropriate for 911.

The 2-1-1 system has been up and running in Ventura County for two years. It is funded by United Way, Interface Children Family Services, and First Five Ventura County, as well as corporate and organizational sponsors. Funding has been less than needed and private donations to the non-profits that run it are encouraged to keep this service going. The Board of Supervisors provided a \$35,000 donation during our budget deliberations in June and challenged the ten cities in the county to also contribute since most of the calls are from city residents. With continued funding, this valuable service will answer the call whenever someone is in need.

Having the Reverse 911 system in place and the easy to access help line offered by 2-1-1 provides a higher level of safety and better service to county residents. It took a strong commitment of individuals in the Sheriff's Department to get funding, work with the phone companies and technical services to get the Reverse 911 implemented. It also took a major effort and commitment in the non-profit agencies that spearheaded 2-1-1 in Ventura County which was the first such system in the State. We are fortunate that both services are there to help us, and they're only a call away.