

You've got questions...

211Info has the answers — for an increasing number of people needing information and assistance

BY JOANNE ZUHL
STAFF WRITER

On the 8th floor of 621 SW Alder Street, beats the pulse of Portland's economic and social wellbeing. It is the headquarters for 211Info, the nonprofit referral center for community services. More than 100,000 people called 211 last year to get information on not only what services could help them in times of crisis, but also how to navigate the often unwieldy bureaucracy of government assistance.

Not surprisingly, calls to 211Info are on the rise — up 25 percent over the same period last year. Web searches on the 211web site are up 45 percent. Foreclosure related calls leapt from 267 in 2008 to more than 1,300 in 2009. Those calls spiked the day The Oregonian published new information about \$88 million available to Oregonians in foreclosure. But the predominant needs remain with basic survival services, finding emergency food and shelter, and their coming from more and more people who have never called for services before. 211Info acts as the region's frontline processing center for disseminating needs and assistance, and as such, is a bit of a canary in our economic coal mine.

It's a tough canary, however, and soon to go statewide.

Liesl Wendt is the CEO of 211Info, which currently serves seven counties in Oregon, including the Portland metro area, and four counties in Southwest Washington. This year, 211Info received an \$85,000 grant from Meyer Memorial Trust to support its goal to serve all of Oregon by 2013. It's an ambitious undertaking that will nearly double the nonprofit's \$1.2 million budget, but it will leverage local information, service needs and the call center's capacity to serve all Oregonians.

Joanne Zuhl: *Can you speak to what your call takers are hearing from people and what that's telling you?*

Liesl Wendt: I think most significantly, the last two months we've been doing an experiment and asking additional questions when people call in, and one of them is if you've been newly unemployed or lost your hours in the past 12 months. And the other is are you a new caller to 211, and both of

those are around 55 percent. So what that tells us is not only are we getting more phone calls, we're getting more calls from people who have never used us before. That was our sense on the calls from anecdotes from people, but I think it's an exclamation mark that people have either done their internet research and maybe they're new to social services and maybe they still have access to the Internet as a way to look for information. Maybe they've made a few phone calls and run into deadends and so they call us and really need help navigating the system.

J.Z.: *So you think they have gone through several steps before calling you.*

L.W.: For the most part. We know people are finding our number through word of mouth, Department of Human Services, employment department, Internet. So they've gone through some channels to get to us. *



PHOTO BY JOANNE ZUHL

They want to know the five things they need to do to get their needs met. Well, there's a lot more than five things you need to do, and it's not a linear path. If there's any trend we've seen it is that the social services are not an organized system unto themselves. So for people who are new to that system, it's not as simple as here's a phone number and here's an agency for you to contact. There's much more they can expect. You might have to leave messages, you might have to wait, you might have to show up with your children while you wait in line. So it's kind of that reality check of how are you going to go through this process and locate services for you and your family.

That's a unique piece of what we do that we probably haven't talked about enough. We're a phone number and people answer the phone, but they're really trained to listen

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www.211info.org

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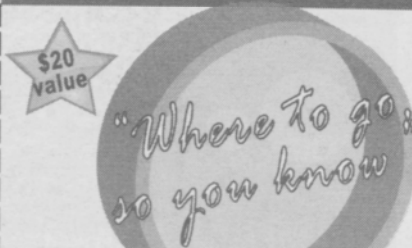
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