



# Holding the line

PHOTO BY JOANNE ZUHL

## A day in the life of 211info's call center

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You can hear it, from many miles away, that vacillation between hope and defeat grinding within men and women as they try to hold it together for the duration of one phone call.

They don't always make it.

*"We're just beside ourselves. We've never been in this situation before and we don't know what to do."*

The woman is talking with a 211info call center specialist. She called the referral service line to find help with utility payments. It is the most frequent request the statewide service receives. Spend a day listening to the calls, as I did from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. one Monday, and the vast spider web of poverty begins to take shape. Each call center specialist handles up to 80 calls a day. Last year, they fielded more than 120,000 calls, with another 120,000 inquiries coming through 211's website.

In this case, the caller is a student and she has no income. Her husband has been holding on to the promise of work, but the project in question is behind schedule, and the company is not yet ready for his services. Their daughter is disabled and lives with them, along with their daughter's boyfriend who is also out of work. And there's a fifth person in the household, a friend whose circumstances required a place to stay.

In trying to stay up on rent, they've fallen hundreds of dollars behind on utilities. Unemployment benefits ran out in December. There will be no insurance until her husband is back to work.

Having outlined her situation, the caller, who is 53, begins to cry.

*"I can't tell you what that does to a person. It's the scariest thing there is. If we can just get through this little pinch, we know we'll be*

*OK." ... "I've never seen so many people hurting and suffering ..."*

The specialist refers her to some places that might be able to help, programs that get dozens of hits each day, each hour, during my visit. But the resources are limited well below the demand. Since January, more than 5,000 people have called 211info for energy assistance, just from Multnomah County. In addition to those calls, the organization's automated utility assistance message was listened to more than 2,500 times in that same period.

The callers include a woman, age 33, who has three children in the house living on her husband's minimum-wage income. They've already received the shut-off notice. As did another caller, who received assistance before, but needs it again. He can't keep up with the rent payments, he says, plus paying for his own insurance, which he has to have for his diabetes. He's 51.

*"I'm afraid tomorrow morning they're going to shut me off. And I have diabetes. And now I'm scared. I thought I could make the \$100 but I came up short. I just need a little bit of help."*

He is audibly crying.

*"I feel so bad. I hate to ask for any help."*

The specialist directs him to programs that can offer utility assistance, if there is any still available. The caller is also directed to services to find a more affordable living situation to help cut costs. Because next to utility assistance, people need help staying in their homes. More than 2,000 callers in Multnomah County called for rent assistance between January and March. People on the verge of being evicted, like one man whose monthly rent for his family, a wife and two kids. His income is less than \$1,000 in a good month, and rent takes more than half of that.

*"(The notice says) if it's not paid by the*

*13th, we're out. I have 10 days to 'fix it.' I see this paper every year. I'm working hard to find a job. But it's not easy to find a job. I'm about to lose this home."*

He has a toddler and an infant daughter. There is no family in the region to turn to, he says. He was earnest at the start of the call, but now his voice grows hushed. He sighs heavily.

*"It bothers me every day. I think, 'what can I do? What do I do now?'"*

And the conversation turns to the option of a family shelter — if they do get evicted. The caller coughs uncomfortably.

"Wow" he utters softly.

But there could be options before that stage, and the specialist finds a few apartment buildings offering rooms that could be more affordable to the family, if they're still available. She reads off the names, addresses and phone numbers. The caller's earnest voice returns, and he promises to call every one.

*We are having the worst year of our life. My son had a mental breakdown. It's just been hell."*

The caller, a man, is looking for help for his son. His wife just had an operation, and he is scheduled for one in the coming month. He can't remember the name of an agency that had helped him before, which he hopes will help him again. He needs help with rent and utilities. As he outlines his situation, he — like others — finds it emotionally overwhelming. He breaks down in tears while the specialist searches for the organization he needs.

*"I'm going in for back surgery and I'm scared to death. I sure would like to have a home to come home to."*

Far above this intimate exchange, in full view from across the call center, a digital information board displays the activity. There are now six calls in the queue waiting for an open specialist to answer.

The specialist finds the program the man is looking for, and lists several others that might help cover peripheral costs. Within a minute, as the conversation draws to a close, there are 10 people in the queue waiting for an open line.

Not everyone who calls is in dire straits. Some just don't know who to call or where to begin looking for an affordable apartment. Others just need a phone number. The 211info call center handles not only 211 calls, but also the SafeNet calls for maternal and child health care, and the regional affordable housing network, Housing Connections. Beyond matters of crisis, 211 fields calls for parenting resources, counseling, legal assistance, jobs training and many preventative programs.

One caller needs to find a treatment center for her teen-age son. It needs to be residential and for juveniles. She has no income. It's not an easy search, but there are programs that might help.

Another caller is looking for a women's shelter for her sister-in-law and her five kids, all under the age of 10.

*"She doesn't have anywhere to go. ... We just don't have the room to take five kids. We already have five in a three-bedroom house with one bathroom."*

The number in the queue dips to six then flickers back upward — eight, then 10, and then 12, within half a minute.

From their individual booths, the specialists are able to instant message each other, like when a caller speaks only Spanish, the message is sent out, and the