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JON L. HENDRICKS | THE TIMES Joyce Mitchell, 211 call center supervisor, works at her desk Tuesday at the Northwest Indiana Community Action Corp. in Hammond. Residents of Lake and Porter counties can dial 211 when seeking information for food, health care, shelter, counseling or support groups. The number also gives referrals for housing, clothing, employment and education.

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## Human service help is a call away

211 line activated for Lake, Porter counties

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HAMMOND | Need help? Now there's a number you can call.

Northwest Indiana Community Action is on line with a new 211 telephone number in Lake and Porter counties.

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Callers can dial 211 when seeking information for food, health care, shelter, counseling or support groups. The number also gives referrals for housing, clothing, employment and education, Executive Director Gary Olund said.

The service will allow people access to information and help much more efficiently, Olund said at a news conference Tuesday.

Getting the line up and running in the two-county area has taken years longer than expected, in part because the social service agency expected to run it was replaced in June.

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North Township and Highland officials said the 211 line would have made a big difference in their ability to respond after the September floods.

"We did a serious assessment to see if we could have announced it early, but we were not ready," Olund said as the line was activated Tuesday. "In the midst of a disaster, establishing linkages and relationships are not the time.

But now, Olund said, "Our commitment to the public is, 'We are ready.' "

The 211 system is expected to assist in crisis management and relieve strain on the 911 emergency call system.

NWICA's new center has trained staff, including Spanish-speaking personnel, who are on-site to answer calls from 8 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Monday through Friday.

After 5:30 p.m., before 8 a.m. and weekends, calls will be routed to an Indianapolis site so that a person handles every call.

Olund said the center's resource database has 1,800 listings of service providers, and NWICA has full-time staff to keep it current.

"We anticipate having 25,000 calls per year, clearly double what we are doing," he said.

The Federal Communications Commission assigned the 211 three-digit telephone number to provide the public quick and easy access to information on basic needs.

Indiana 211 Partnership, a nonprofit organization, has built the 211 system through linked IN211 centers for six counties in Indiana. In 2005, the organization endorsed services in Jasper, Newton, Pulaski and Starke counties.

IN211 is working to ensure the 211 calls remain free for landline phones. But most cellular phone plans charge customers based on usage,

The 211 number comes with no tax or surcharge and can be accessed from most landline phones. It has capabilities for telephone typewriter, TTY, and telephone device for the deaf, TDD.

The \$300,000 budget is funded by a Community Service Block Grant and Older Americans Act

grant, Olund said. The new plan also has a Web site address, www.in211.org., and is sponsored in part by United Way.

Olund said United Way initiated the program and will underwrite the development for about two years. But sources are not growing because of governmental cutbacks, he said.

"NWICA anticipates Porter and Lake County will be partners and able to support the program," Olund said. "Over time, this program will need to be supported locally."

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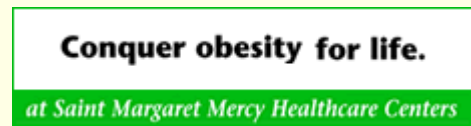
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