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## **CALL 211 FOR HELP OF A DIFFERENT SORT**

BY HURST LAVIANA

Kansans who have needs that don't quite rise to the level of a 911 call now have access to a new 211 telephone system that should be able to help them resolve their problems. United Way of the Plains president Patrick Hanrahan said the 211 system that went online Thursday was designed to plug people into more than 2,000 agencies and programs that can help them.

During emergencies, Hanrahan said, the 211 system will be used as a 911 backup that can disseminate information about the incident and take names of people who want to volunteer to help.

The line is being staffed from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. weekdays, but Hanrahan said he hopes to see the service expanded to 24-hour operations by this summer.

The service, which is now available in most parts of Kansas, is free and confidential.

Hanrahan said that during normal operations, those who call 211 will be able to talk to a United Way specialist who will assess their needs and refer them to an appropriate agency or program. He said those services range from marriage counseling to food for the elderly.

During a crisis, Hanrahan said, the 211 system will serve as a clearing house where victims and volunteers can leave information.

Sedgwick County Emergency Management Director Randy Duncan said he thought the service would prove invaluable during emergencies that result in 911 dispatchers being swamped with calls.

"This will now help take the strain off our system," he said. "If you have emergency need, please still call 911, but if you need disaster information or want to volunteer assistance, call 211."

Hanrahan said United Way has budgeted \$425,000 to launch the program and operate it for 12 to 18 months. He said he hopes Congress will eventually take the lead and help provide funding for states that operate 211 systems.

He said similar operations are already in place in 39 other states.

Sponsors that helped pay the initial costs of the 211 service are the Kansas Health Foundation, Capital Federal Savings, Cessna Aircraft and Preferred Health Systems.