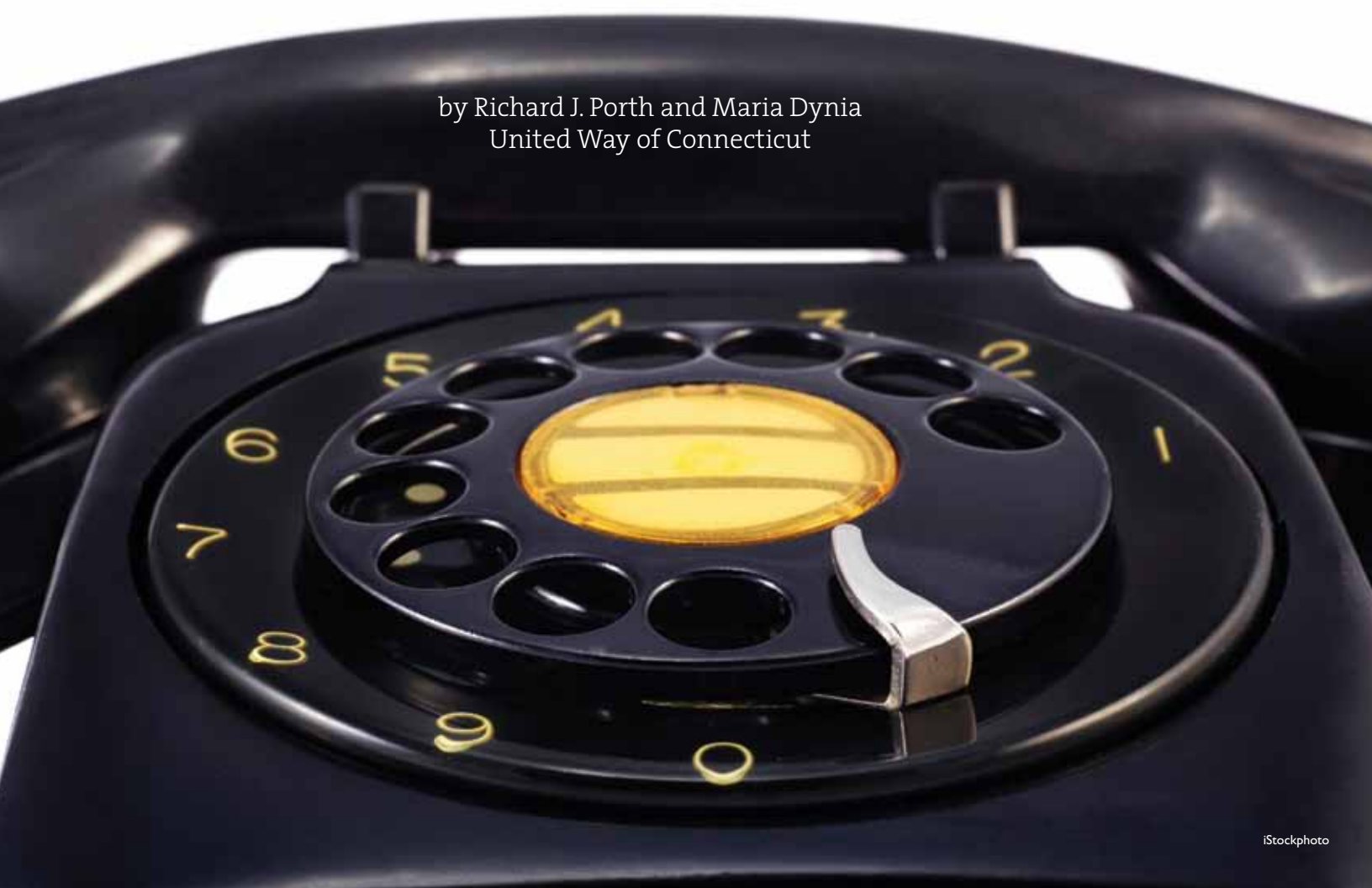


DIALING 211 IN CONNECTICUT

During these challenging times, it is important that people know where to turn for help. In Connecticut, residents have found help for more than 30 years by dialing 2-1-1. A centralized information and referral service, 2-1-1 is funded by the State of Connecticut and local United Way organizations and administered by United Way of Connecticut. (See “United Way of Connecticut: Background.”)

by Richard J. Porth and Maria Dynia
United Way of Connecticut



A call to 2-1-1 gets people connected to health and human services assistance quickly. Most states have some form of 2-1-1, including every New England state. Use of Connecticut's has been increasing.

The Economic Downturn

Use of 2-1-1 is a barometer of the times. In 2009, 2-1-1 handled more than 360,000 calls and offered nearly half a million requests for services, an increase of 8 percent and 6 percent respectively over 2008. The web site received more than 525,000 visits, an increase of 46 percent.

More and more, callers seek help with basic needs, such as paying for utilities or finding housing, financial assistance, food resources, and public assistance programs. In 2009, requests for such basic-needs services rose, sometimes dramatically, accounting for 41 percent of all requests. The largest increases were for housing, financial assistance, and public assistance. Requests for utility assistance topped the list but saw a smaller increase. (See "United Way 2-1-1 Top Five Requests for Service.")

Although 2-1-1 receives calls from people of all ages and income levels, 2009 saw a striking increase in callers who were homeless or unemployed. Calls from people experiencing homelessness increased 27

percent over the previous year (15,200 in 2009 versus 11,950 in 2008). Calls from those who were unemployed doubled to 20,000 in 2009. In addition, 26 percent of callers to 2-1-1 in 2009 were first-time callers, probably the result of not only increased 2-1-1 visibility but also greater need for services and more middle-income families.

Not surprisingly, the increase in calls coincides with other developments. Consider the following economic and social indicators in Connecticut:

- the unemployment rate, which continues to hover at around 8 percent;¹
- the percentage of individuals living below the poverty level, which increased from 7.9 percent in 2000 to 8.5 percent in 2008;² and
- the 18 percent increase in enrollment in key safety-net programs, as reported by the Connecticut Department of Social Services (now at nearly 924,000 residents).³

The DSS program seeing the largest increase in enrollment is the federally funded, state-administered Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)/ Food Stamp program. More than 295,600 Connecticut residents were receiving SNAP benefits in 2009, an increase of 32 percent over the prior year and 58 percent over the

previous five years. The increase in enrollment is partly due to a widening of SNAP eligibility criteria. Even so, food stamp use nationwide is at record highs.⁴

In 2009, 2-1-1 received about 20,000 requests for information for food resources, an amount similar to that in 2008. However, referrals for SNAP/Food Stamp benefits almost doubled. More than 14,000 referrals were made for SNAP/Food Stamp assistance, compared with 7,600 the previous year. More than 40 percent of 2-1-1 callers seeking SNAP/Food Stamp benefits were first-time callers. Nearly one-quarter of the callers for the benefit were unemployed.

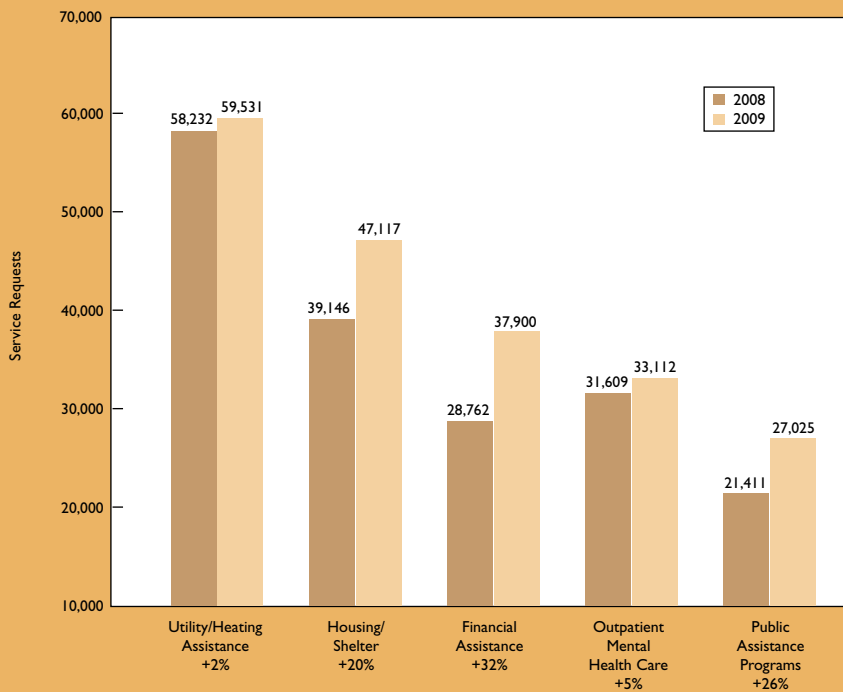
Reducing Homelessness

In January 2009, the annual point-in-time count of the homeless population by the Connecticut Coalition to End Homelessness (CCEH) found more than 4,100 homeless people, including 800-plus children. By November, the average shelter bed usage was over 107 percent. Additionally, CCEH found that the homeless were increasingly people who had jobs. In fact, 78 percent of the families surveyed reported having some source of income. To create viable alternatives to temporary shelter and to relieve an overcrowded shelter system, the federal American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (the "stimulus") awarded Connecticut \$17 million dollars for the Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Re-Housing Program (HPRP).

United Way 2-1-1 received a portion of the federal stimulus funding to assist with this effort since it is uniquely positioned to link those at risk of homelessness with HPRP. In 2009, 2-1-1 received more than 47,000 requests for services related to housing and shelter, an increase of over 20 percent from the previous year. The callers—among whom 15,000 were experiencing homelessness—were most often looking for emergency shelter, affordable housing, rent payment assistance, and food.

United Way 2-1-1, working with CCEH and the Connecticut Department of Social Services, has established a Homeless/Housing unit where trained specialists screen callers for eligibility, refer those who are not eligible to other services, and connect eligible callers directly to the HPRP program. HPRP then conducts further screening and may provide rental assistance and more permanent housing options. Although the program is slated to be funded for three years, recent demand may exhaust the

United Way 2-1-1 Top Five Requests for Service Connecticut, 2008 and 2009



Source: United Way 2-1-1, <http://www.211ct.org>.

funding sooner. As of this writing, more than 2,000 people have been referred to HPRP.

Benefits Assistance Made Easy

One of the more ingenious tools for helping residents find the benefits that can move them toward self-sufficiency is the 2-1-1 Navigator. Understanding who qualifies for various state and federal programs can be challenging for both human services providers and their clients. So United Way developed the 2-1-1 Navigator, an online tool that screens instantly for eligibility in various state and federal benefit programs. Located at <http://navigator.211ct.org>, the 2-1-1 Navigator includes a survey with a few basic questions about income and household makeup. A list of the programs for which a resident or a client may qualify is then immediately generated. Twenty-four different state and federal programs are listed, including the Earned Income Tax Credit, the Child Dependent Care Tax Credit, Medicare, SNAP/Food Stamps, utility assistance, and child-care subsidies.

Since its inception in 2007, an estimated 26,000 individuals and human services providers have used the 2-1-1 Navigator. In 2009, it averaged approximately 1,000 inquiries per month, with about 15 percent originating from State of Connecticut web sites and about 25 percent more coming from providers working with clients.

Although a plethora of state, municipal, and community programs exist to help people in need, those programs cannot work effectively unless the people who need them can find them. United Way 2-1-1 provides that assistance and makes sorting through the maze of programs and services easier. In 2009, as the economy continued to decline, United Way of Connecticut worked to meet the increase in demand for information. In 2010, it is continuing to look for ways to increase its visibility to ensure that state residents get connected to the services they need.

Richard J. Porth is president and chief executive officer of United Way of Connecticut, where **Maria Dynia** is manager of research and evaluation. They are based in Rocky Hill.

United Way of Connecticut: Background

United Way of Connecticut helps meet the needs of Connecticut residents by providing information, education, and connection to services. Funded by the State of Connecticut and individual Connecticut United Way organizations, it provides toll-free, call-center access to health and human services information through 2-1-1, as well as specialized services in child care, child development and disabilities, and Connecticut's child health insurance program (called HUSKY).

- **United Way 2-1-1** is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Callers reach degreed, multilingual call specialists who help them sort through their challenges and provide the best assistance and referral for their situation. 2-1-1 utilizes a constantly updated computerized database of approximately 4,800 health and human service providers offering 48,000 services. It is available to everyone, regardless of income or age, whether they need help or want to give help through donating or volunteering. The resource database is also online at www.211ct.org.
- **2-1-1 Child Care** provides referrals to licensed child care, assistance with finding quality care, information to help unlicensed providers to become licensed, and child-care training for parents and providers. 2-1-1 Child Care received 30,000-plus calls and more than 74,000 visits to its web site in fiscal year 2009.
- **Child Development Infoline (CDI)** helps families concerned about a child's development get information, support, and referrals. It serves as the access point for state programs related to early childhood development. In fiscal year 2009, CDI helped more than 20,000 parents, doctors, and child-care providers with child development assistance and support.
- **HUSKY Infoline (HIL)** provides information about the state's health insurance program for children and families. HIL handled more than 60,000 incoming and 44,000 outgoing calls, helping 51,000-plus families understand the HUSKY application process, eligibility requirements, and the benefit package—and advocating on their behalf.
- **Care 4 Kids** administers the state's child-care subsidy program for low-income families and provides customer service for the program. It interfaces with providers and families from application and determination through to completion. Care 4 Kids handled more than 280,000 customer service calls from parents and child-care providers in 2009.

Endnotes

- ¹ Connecticut Department of Labor, *Labor Market Information*, January 2010, <http://www1.ctdol.state.ct.us/lmi/LAUS/lmi121.asp>.
- ² U.S. Census 2000 and American Community Survey 2006-2008.
- ³ Connecticut Department of Social Services, *More Residents Turning to State for Help, Pushing Up DSS Caseloads by 18%*, January 2010, <http://www.ct.gov/dss/cwp/view.asp?Q=453332&A=2345>.

- ⁴ Jason DeParle and Robert Gebeloff, "Food Stamp Use Soars, and Stigma Fades," *New York Times*, November 28, 2009.

► This Communities & Banking article is copyrighted by the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston. The views expressed are not necessarily those of the Bank or the Federal Reserve System. Copies of articles may be downloaded without cost at www.bos.frb.org/commdev/c&b/index.htm.