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New support keeps 211 Hotline running

By Julie Lynem

The county's 211 phone line for health and social services and other crisis situations will continue operating — at least for the first six months of 2010.

The United Way of San Luis Obispo County is contracting with Interface Children Family Services of Ventura County to provide 211 support after the county's 211 Hotline organization announced it would close at the end of the year because of reduced funding.

The nonprofit is taking over the authority for the phone service with the Public Utilities Commission, which issued the permit for the 211 Hotline about two years ago.

The United Way has enough money to keep the phone line open for another six months. The board approved \$20,000 in emergency reserve funding, which was matched by \$20,000 from Pacific Gas and Electric Co.

Rick London, chief executive officer of the local United Way, said the organization is hopeful that it will be able to continue the service through 2010.

“But we need more community support,” he said.

While the 211 Hotline organization is shutting its doors, Tim Williams, a Hotline board member, said he's thrilled it will be restructured.

“We are really excited that we were able to transition the service, especially in these times,” he said.

The hotline has handled thousands of calls since its inception 40 years ago, and 45,000 callers have phoned for help since the 211 number was activated two years ago.

In the past year, the service received many calls for financial assistance, Williams said. The callers were often the newly poor who had little or no experience navigating the social service system. As well, suicide calls have increased, he said.

Under the restructured plan, people who dial 211 will speak with trained professionals to provide information and referral services.

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Mental health and crisis calls will be transferred to employees and volunteers with Transitions-Mental Health Association, a local nonprofit that is establishing a new mental health and suicide prevention phone line.

Transitions has agreed to hire two former SLO County Hotline staff members to set up the 24-hour mental health line. That number — 1-800-549-4499 — will be active by Jan. 1.

Jill Bolster-White, executive director of Transitions, said the group believed the closure of 211 Hotline would be a huge loss to the community.

The board decided that the hotline's purpose was too close to its own mission to let it fade away, Bolster-White said.

While funding to keep the service going is a concern, Bolster-White said she's confident the community will step in.

Transitions plans to host a bowl-athon this spring to generate income.

It also has been given a mental health services grant to start a social marketing campaign about mental health and is working with a local marketing firm to try to erase the stigma of mental illness.

“We are crossing our fingers and hoping for the best,” she said. “We’re hoping the fact that the service almost went away will help people participate. Sometimes, we take these services and resources for granted. That’s easy to do.”

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