

## Serving with 211 Wisconsin during the COVID-19 Pandemic

**Ben Li** -- MCHS AmeriCorps Volunteer Wisconsin member serving at United Way of Dane County 2-1-1

Our United Way of Dane County 211 Call Center normally gets about 100 calls a day from folks looking for help finding food, shelter, rent & utilities assistance, aging & disability resources, and more. We primarily serve Dane County and the surrounding areas, but for AODA (Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse) calls, we are part of the statewide Wisconsin Addiction Recovery Helpline. As a result of the COVID-19 crisis, our call volume has spiked big time. We are now receiving around 360 calls a day. Much of this increase is due to folks being laid off or having reduced hours, and thus having difficulty affording their basic needs. A large chunk of these new calls is also due to us handling statewide COVID-19 calls. Especially during the early days of the crisis, people had a lot of basic questions, such as: how can I get tested? What are the symptoms? How is it spread? And is it true that seniors shouldn't go to the grocery store? As more information has gotten out there, and especially after Governor



Evers's Stay At Home order, those calls have changed more to: What businesses are considered essential? Can I go for a walk outside? How do I get my stimulus check? And how long is this going to last? We are not medical professionals, so we do have information about who to contact with more advanced medical questions for each county.

As a result of the spike in calls, we have an all hands on deck situation for our call center. I used to take calls two or three days a week, now I am taking calls every day. In the time that we are not taking calls, we are making calls out to local agencies, especially food pantries and homeless shelters, to get updated information to share with callers on how their services have changed in response to the pandemic. I am basically no longer serving our volunteers, as we sent our volunteers home for their safety and only staff are able to take calls remotely on the primary 211 line, so I am able to devote a majority of my time to these efforts.

A few observations from being on the phones all day. One, people are scared. The elderly especially are fearful of leaving their houses, and for good reason, and working folks don't know how they are going to keep up with their bills. Two, for assistance with rent, utilities and emergency shelter, I am still referring folks to the same resources I referred people to before the crisis. These resources were already stretched thin as it was, so I am worried about how they are going to be able to serve the huge influx of people needing help. Three, I have been impressed with our state's response to keeping people fed. Food pantries were very quick to switch to a curbside service to continue serving folks with as little contact as possible. That said, the elderly and homebound individuals are being left behind. Services are coming online to have volunteers deliver groceries to these folks, but they are limited and over stretched.

At United Way 211, we are working tirelessly to keep Wisconsinites informed and connect them with community resources to get them through this crisis. I am very thankful for this opportunity to be able to serve my state in this time of great need through AmeriCorps. I would also like to encourage folks to remember that the basic needs people are calling for help with right now, in particular finding food and stable housing, are the same needs that we were getting nearly 100 calls per day for before this crisis. For many Wisconsinites, these needs will not disappear when this pandemic is over. I hope that the issues exposed in our society by COVID-19 will continue to be a focus of communities moving forward and that together we can cut our call volume in half and someday bring it down to zero.

**Elisha Adelman** -- MCHS AmeriCorps Volunteer Wisconsin member serving at Sunshine House Inc. in Sturgeon Bay

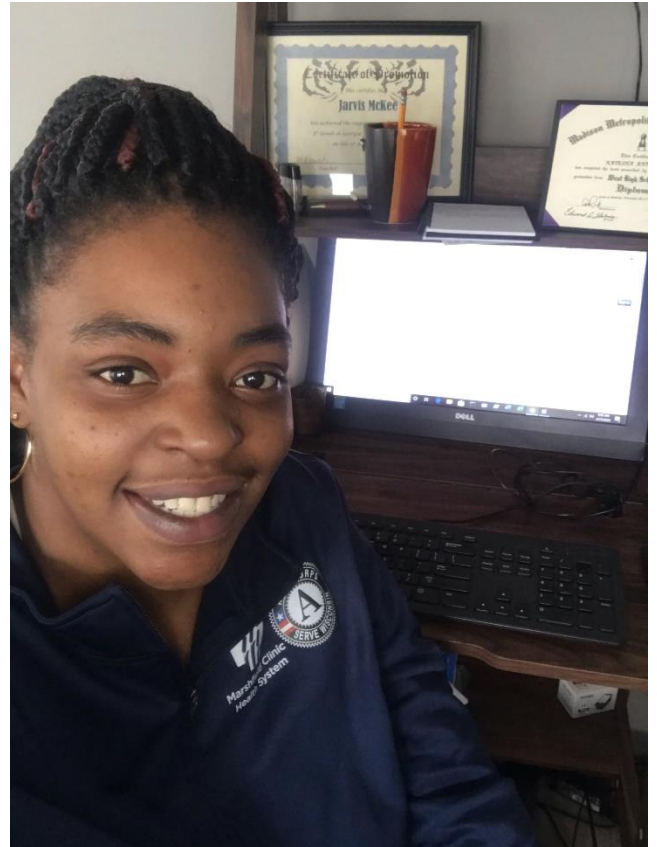
The opportunity to help field 2-1-1 calls for the Wisconsin system has been informative and a personal way to give back to those who are in need, which these days, is a lot of people. The experience of answering calls can be tough when people are afraid and lacking in basic resources, but many callers seem to feel a bit of relief knowing there are organizations and programs out there designed to help. Furthermore, these calls provide an opportunity for people to feel like they are not alone, both in their experiences and in the world. With our inability to make daily contact with others, just getting to connect with another person for a few brief moments is so important, for people on both sides of these calls. It's clear our resources are stretched thin, but I hold out hope that through systems like 211 we have the feedback loop to help fill in the gaps for those in need. I am grateful to be part of this service and thank those who keep this program going.



**Natesha Davis** -- MCHS AmeriCorps Volunteer Wisconsin member serving at MCHS Center for Community Health Advancement remotely from Madison

I am an AmeriCorps Member who is serving to help United Way 211 answer the influx of calls they have been receiving since the start of this global health crisis. My first day serving was a few weeks ago when there was not as much information about the virus, so on that day I had a lot of anxiety and was concerned about being unprepared to answer calls and give good valuable information. United Way has made it easy to access pertinent information and so that has made it much easier to give out the right information, but weeks later it seems there is still a lot we do not know and people are aware of this and afraid.

From week to week it seems like the calls I am taking are pretty consistent. It is an elderly woman who has a doctor appointment but is concerned about her well-being if she leaves her home based on CDC information that people 65 and older are higher risk for complications. Or the healthcare administrators who are looking for answers on how to help their employees who are increasingly testing positive for the virus as they continue to try to do their jobs and take care of those who need it the most. And another very common call has been patrons calling to complain about businesses who are not essential but haven't shut down and some who are not practicing social distancing within their facilities, putting their employees at risk. No matter where or who the call comes from, the commonality among all these different calls is that they are all afraid and like most of us do not know where to turn for answers or if they should trust the information they have been given.



**Alli Sukow** -- MCHS AmeriCorps Volunteer Wisconsin member serving at the United Way of Greater Milwaukee & Waukesha County:



I am continuing to serve by taking calls for 211 and providing childcare for a full-time nurse/part-time EMT.

With 2-1-1 phone answering, I feel like I am a huge help for the other volunteers and the people calling. I am a COVID-19 phone person, which means I only get the calls that involve COVID-19. With me answering those calls, the other volunteers can answer all other important and emergent calls, giving them more time to help those people, because they do not have to worry about the COVID-19 calls. The 12 hours a week taking these calls have opened my eyes to how many people have general questions, but no one that they can ask.

I also spend a majority of my week providing childcare. I watch two children while their mom is hard at work helping other people as a nurse and EMT. Everything I am doing is making me grateful that I have this time to help other people that need it.

**Cindy Katocs** -- MCHS AmeriCorps Volunteer Wisconsin member serving at Volunteer Services, Walworth County

It is a privilege to have the time to assist with the 211 calls because I live alone. Taking calls and assisting people helps me get out of my head, and after my shift I am left with a satisfied feeling knowing I did my best directing the caller to obtain the right information.

