

When You Don't Know Where to Turn... 211 Does

February 11th is 211 Day across North America (02/11), and here in Central Alberta we are saluting 211 for the entire month by dressing up two city buses. Look for them around Red Deer.

In case you haven't heard, 211 is the source Canadians trust when seeking information and services to deal with many of life's challenges. 211's award-winning telephone help line (2-1-1) and website www.ab.211.ca provide a gateway to community, social health and related government services.

United Way has led the 211 initiative from its start in Atlantis (USA) in 1997. With so many services and programs delivered by so many non-profits and various government agencies, how is a resident supposed to know where to turn? 211 is the super-centre answer to information services... one point where everyone can go to find what they need.

Since 1997, many United Ways have seen the value 211 brings to local communities and have joined the 211 movement. Here's a recap of developments in Central Alberta:

- **February 2014:** United Way Central Alberta officially launches 211 online at www.ab.211.ca. This online database is available to all 400,000+ Central Albertans, and anyone else who cares to visit the site.
- **February 2015:** United Way Central Alberta partners with The City of Red Deer to bring 211 phone service to all city residents. This is a free, multi-lingual service available 24/7.
- **February 2016:** The push is on to expand the phone service across the entire region. BREAKING NEWS – United Way has just received FCSS funding to expand the 211 phone line service to the County of Red Deer, the towns of Penhold and Bowden, and the villages of Elnora and Delburne. Stay tuned for updates as the months progress.

While the 211 online database is a powerful resource and can undoubtedly help many people, it has limits: visitors must understand English, have access to a computer and be (somewhat) Internet savvy. 211 phone service overcomes these limitations by using a technology that everyone knows, providing access to qualified Information and Referral Specialists, and access to translators in over 150 languages.

Here's an interesting example of how 211 phone service was recently used in Red Deer.

A female caller phoned in stating that she had hit an animal on the highway between Red Deer and Innisfail. The caller was very concerned and was not sure what she should do, or who she should call. The Information & Referral Specialist explored the physical health and well-being of the caller and asked if she required medical attention. The caller indicated that she was feeling shaken up but was not physically injured. The I & R Specialist further explored if the caller's vehicle had any damage from hitting the animal on the highway. The caller indicated that there was visible damage to her vehicle and she was not sure what the next step was. The I & R Specialist validated, empathized and provided emotional support to the caller, then provided the caller with the contact information for the Royal Canadian Mounted Police so they could further advise her on what her next steps would be.

This is a great example of the many, many ways that 211 can help you, your family, or your organization.

211 connects people to the right information and services, strengthens Canada's health and human services, and helps Canadians to become more engaged with their communities. So when you don't know where to turn, 211 does. Time to get on the bus and spread the word!