Years ago, when Dawn, a St. Paul resident, was experiencing a crisis, someone recommended she call 211. Greater Twin Cities United Way’s 211 resource helpline is staffed 24/7 by kind, caring professionals who listen and offer guidance, providing information and referrals to 40,000+ statewide resources.

“I was living in a situation that became dangerous, and I wasn’t sure where to turn. Through 211, I got a list of temporary housing options and other resources like food shelves,” she said. “It was a heightened emotional time, and I remember feeling 211 was an avenue to pursue when I didn’t have one.”

At the time, Dawn’s daughter Anna was 13. More than a decade later, Anna joined United Way as a fundraising representative. Anna has made the connection between how caring 211 specialists helped her and her mom when she was young and how those specialists help hundreds of thousands of Minnesotans ever year.

“In stressful times, it makes all the difference to call one number and talk to someone who connects you with countless resources,” Anna said. “I want everyone to understand how easy 211 makes it — there are people who are willing to help and there are tons of resources out there.”

Dawn’s call to 211 gave her a sense of relief and a direction to move forward. As Dawn and Anna explained, 211 is a critical lifeline for our neighbors in need of housing assistance.
UNITED WAY 211 HELPS CALLERS NAVIGATE COVID-19 IMPACTS

Recently, a man called 211 a few days before his wife was expected to give birth to their first child. They were experiencing COVID-19 related unemployment and were behind on their rent. A 211 rent assistance specialist asked the caller a few questions to determine eligibility for the State’s COVID-19 Housing Assistance Program, and they were able to begin the application process over the phone.

The economic impact of COVID-19 has made the housing crisis in the Twin Cities region more severe. Nearly 60% of all calls to United Way’s 211 resource helpline, a statewide resource that provides information and referrals to services, are related to housing. Using 211 data and the experiences of our nonprofit partners, Greater Twin Cities United Way influenced public awareness and policy solutions around COVID-19 emergency housing needs.

In partnership with coalitions like Homes for All, Greater Twin Cities United Way helped advocate for and secure the $100 million in state funding from the federal CARES Act to support people needing emergency housing and rental assistance.

At the beginning of the call, the man was on the verge of tears but by the end of the call, he told the 211 specialist he was feeling hopeful again. The 211 specialist also identified other supports available to help with things like baby supplies, financial assistance, legal services, and job search and vocational services. He also shared that it happened to be his birthday, and the support he received through 211 was the best present he could imagine.
For more than a century, United Way nonprofit partner Neighborhood House has been helping St. Paul families in need.

Sa Eh is one of six Neighborhood House Family Coaches who help connect families in crisis to a wide range of community resources and help — from basic needs like food and home furnishing to more complex issues like health insurance and legal aid.

Born in Myanmar, Sa Eh speaks Karen and Burmese in addition to English and was brought on board specifically to help Karen families impacted by the challenges of COVID-19.

“In Karen families — especially those who are new to this country — they rely on their kids a lot for help navigating the culture and translating materials,” explained Sa Eh. “Once they get to know me and are comfortable with me, that takes a lot of pressure off the young people so they can focus on school and learning.”

With COVID-19 restrictions in place, Sa Eh had to get creative to build trust and provide help virtually through phone calls, emails, texting photos of documents, and even meeting with families outside their homes.

Her work is possible thanks to a Student and Family Empowerment grant awarded to Neighborhood House as part of Greater Twin Cities United Way’s COVID-19 Response & Recovery Fund.

Sa Eh forged deep ties with many of the families she served this year. “We provide resources and are here physically for families,” she noted. “But I am also here if they need someone to talk to, someone who can help relieve the stress of COVID. This is a safe place for them.”
Minnesota Teamsters Service Bureau, a United Way nonprofit partner, connects Teamsters and their families to vital human and employee services through the Employee Assistance Program.

Word-of-mouth and referrals from United Way’s 211 resource helpline account for many of the lives the bureau is able to impact. Since the start of the economic shutdown due to COVID-19, the bureau has heard from almost 1,000 workers who call for help.

“People are experiencing the trauma of job loss, social isolation, and civil unrest. We’re practicing trauma-informed care. Learners recognize their emotional responses to stress and develop coping skills. We use the power of courageous conversation to help people build resilience and adapt to change,” said Jennifer Munt, Teamsters Service Bureau Executive Director.

Teamsters Service Bureau is utilizing funding from Greater Twin Cities United Way’s COVID-19 fund to meet basic needs while continuing to practice compassionate care. Their Emergency Fund has been a lifesaver – literally. It meant a mother could feed her hungry children…. a father could pay his family’s rent…a public defender could work safely with a mask…a trucker’s life was saved from suicide…and a retiree could escape from an abusive home.

Deon Clark, founder and CEO of TCI Solutions, understands firsthand the importance of access to wealth-building career pathways. Born and raised on the southside of Chicago, Deon had limited access to educational opportunities and there was little talk of college.

When he was 17, Deon joined the United States Navy where, after surprising recruiters with his performance on the entrance exam, he trained to be a senior nuclear reactor operations instructor. After serving more than eight years in the military, he went on to be one of the few people in America that licenses individuals to operate commercial nuclear power plants.

Deon always had the abilities and talent to do great things. But in high school, there was no system around him to actually allow him to do those things. It wasn’t until he entered the military that he was able to connect the dots and learn the skills he needed to succeed.

“I am a product of a system of people and programs that worked together to allow me to be the best version of myself,” Deon Clark, founder and CEO of TCI Solutions.

Partnering with school districts across Minnesota, Career Academies provides specialized funding, technical assistance and coaching, and a platform for peer-to-peer support focused on building sustainable career pathways alongside local businesses. Together, we work to ensure students will have clear pathways to wealth-building careers with zero college debt.

Since 2015, Career Academies has engaged more than 10,000 students – 49 percent of which are Students of Color vs. 13 percent in other concurrent enrollment programs. Students collectively have earned more than 9,800 college and technical school credits and saved more than $3 million in tuition.