

# Referral line coming to Coast

BC211



File photo

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The 211 information and referral line will be launched on the Sunshine Coast in February, a bc211 spokesman confirmed last week.

The service — which provides free referrals to community, social and government agencies — has been available in the Metro Vancouver, Fraser Valley and Squamish-Lillooet regional districts since 2010.

“The Sunshine Coast is our first expansion,” said Brian Oentoro, bc211 marketing communication coordinator.

Oentoro said bc211 has been building a database of non-profit organizations and other service providers on the Coast for about the past two months to prepare for the February launch.

First introduced to Canada in 2002, the 211 line operates 24/7 year-round and is intended to reduce confusion, frustration and delay for users, while freeing up 911 operators to handle real emergencies.

“Furthermore, 211 helps communities better use their resources by providing information that can be used to identify service gaps, duplication and emerging trends,” the bc211 website says. “This will help policy makers to direct resources and services to where they are most needed.”

The 211 line in B.C. currently receives an average of about 1,000 phone calls per week, with call volumes rising steadily since 2010 as more people have become aware of the service, Oentoro said.

The line is billed as confidential and multilingual.

In advance of the 211 launch, Progress Plan consultant Betty Baxter appeared before Sunshine Coast Regional District (SCRD) directors on Dec. 19, requesting support for a pilot project that would look to fill local information gaps.

The 211 service, Baxter noted, will be "as rich and thorough as we feed it."

The pilot project would work with community schools in Pender Harbour and Halfmoon Bay to create "info hubs" where rural residents could access information that would not necessarily be available on the 211 line.

As the Progress Plan has identified "belonging" as a major area of concern for women on the Coast, the aim of the pilot project would be "to increase the region-wide effectiveness of information sharing and referral to services, employment and support," Baxter said in her letter of request to board chair Garry Nohr.

Tying the need to economic development, Baxter said the benefits of the project could take the form of "researching new services, answering questions from residents, working with bc211, the Community Resource Centre or others to help ensure the community's needs are met."

Both Nohr and Area A director Frank Mauro expressed support for the request, which came with a preliminary price tag of \$3,680, and the SCRD's planning and development committee voted to refer the pilot project to budget discussions later this month.

"With 211 rolling out, it's important to have a rural person working on the ground," Mauro said. "This is something that can really knit the community together."

Gibsons alternate director Lee Ann Johnson said the need is vital at the south end of the Coast.

"We are so information deficient in the Gibsons area. I can't think of any place to go to look for community organizations," Johnson said.

Regarding concerns about residents' sense of belonging, Roberts Creek director Donna Shugar said she was "not aware that there's a huge disconnection in Area D."

Baxter said the Progress Plan surveys "didn't track areas but belonging came out number one across the board."

A non-profit agency, bc211 is funded by the United Way, the City of Vancouver, BC Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General, BC Emergency Health Services Commission, BC Ministry of Housing and Social Development and the Yukon Ministry of Health.