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by Mike Gallagher for the CMF NewsWire

Spearheaded nationally by United Ways – including the Michigan Association of United Ways (MAUW) – the far-reaching 2-1-1 telephone initiative for information and referrals on human service programs, volunteer opportunities and other public service needs is being funded primarily by the philanthropic and corporate sectors.

Efforts to obtain public funding through pending legislation are receiving bipartisan support both in Lansing and in Washington D.C.

“We are seeing the 2-1-1 system as one of those levers we can easily pull to improve the lives and living conditions of all people in Michigan and throughout the nation,” says Nancy Lindman, public policy director for the Michigan Association of United Ways.

“It is an easy to remember, one-stop place where anyone can receive information on a vast array of services to help themselves, their families or others for such things as job training, substance abuse, food, housing, utilities, mental health counseling and so much more,” adds Lindman. “And the generosity of our foundations is helping make it all possible.”

Today, through private and some limited public funding, approximately 70% of Michigan’s population is covered under the 2-1-1 system while that figure is about 65% nationally. There are still gaps in the telephone system’s coverage area in Michigan, primarily in the northern Lower Peninsula. In February, the 2-1-1 system will be up and running in all or parts of 41 states – including Washington D.C. and Puerto Rico – and serving 196 million Americans.

One example of how Michigan foundations are getting behind this public service effort comes from the [McGregor Fund](#) which in 2005 awarded a \$600,000 grant over three years to support its growth in Wayne, Oakland and Macomb counties.

“We are seeing very dramatic results where people call in not just for help but also to volunteer their time and services,” says **C. David Campbell**, president of the McGregor Fund. “One of the great things about this project is that it is being housed at United Way and they can take this information and really look at what are the needs that people are calling in about.

“Now we can tell what the problems are by regions, such as layoffs and utility shut-offs, and track those trends so our service agencies can be more proactive in the help they give,” adds Campbell. “It gives us real-time information. Ultimately there needs to be a public role in financing these 2-1-1 services. The state is putting some money in now and that is an important indication of support.”

Other Michigan foundations that have endorsed the 2-1-1 project include include the

Gratiot County Community Foundation, the [Hillsdale County Community Foundation](#), The Gail R. Schoenbach F.R.E.E.D. Foundation and the Legacy Associates Foundation.

Cheryl Elliott, president and CEO of the [Ann Arbor Area Community Foundation](#), is also a vocal supporter of the 2-1-1 initiative and notes the important role foundations have played – and can continue to play – in getting behind its continued growth.

That message and belief is shared by **Margaret Ann “Ranny” Riecker**, president of [The Herbert H. and Grace A. Dow Foundation](#) and chair of **The Harry A. and Margaret D. Towsley Foundation**.

Riecker says helping garner support from Michigan policymakers and the state’s congressional leaders for passage of legislation supporting public funding of 2-1-1 is an important role foundations can play. Currently, proposed legislation to facilitate nationwide availability of 2-1-1 telephone service is pending in the U.S. Senate (Senate Bill 211) along with its sister legislation in the House (H.R. 896). Those bills are now in committees.

“Both bills have bipartisan support and I think it is a great idea,” says Riecker. “Long-term it should work out just as well as our 911 system. It doesn’t hurt to start laying the groundwork with Congress now...and foundation leaders can help promote this (legislation) with our Michigan delegation.”

In Michigan, the United Way is working with state policymakers to help promote 2-1-1 and the effort is receiving bipartisan support as well, according to Lindman.

Similar legislation seeking state funding for 2-1-1 also has been introduced in the Michigan Legislature and has received bipartisan support as well, according to Lindman.

“We (United Way) are keeping a close eye on this and really pushing for state and federal support,” she says. “A big selling point is that community collaboratives are finding this service helpful along with county commissions and private groups. The data being gathered also is being used by state district offices such as Health and Human Services and the Department of Health.

“We also are finding that 2-1-1 is a very nice bridge to expanding public, nonprofit and faith-based initiatives as well,” says Lindman. “This is a win-win program for everyone!”

For more information about the 2-1-1 project visit www.211.org.