

# U N I T E D W A Y R E P O R T

*Your United Way of Broome County investment at work*

*April, 2001*

## **First Call for Help: information and assistance you can use**

The phone rings. "Good morning, United Way's First Call for Help. How may we help you?" There's a pause on the other end of the line. Slowly the caller begins her story. She's working at a job paying at little above minimum wage but has just discovered that she's pregnant. Her world seems to be closing in on her. How will she manage?

It was a pretty normal call among all the others of the day: We need food in our house. Our gas and electricity are being shut-off. We must move for the safety of our children and need help with a security deposit. The list goes on.

### **Help with food, housing, money issues, and more**

When this call came in the woman who answered the phone could hardly understand what the caller was saying. It took a few minutes to find out that the young woman's husband had just walked out on her. That was bad enough in itself, but she also had a 2-year-old at home and now learned that she was pregnant. She began to cry.

The First Call for Help referral agent calmed the caller and then started helping her to look at the whole picture. Step one, even though she had a decent job, with the sudden loss of her soon to be ex-husband's income, things were going to be very tight. Second, she did a referral to CHOW (the Community Hunger Outreach Warehouse) to assist her in stretching her food budget. Prenatal care was her next issue of concern, so First Call for Help made sure that assistance in this area also was available.

Then talk turned to the next steps the caller needed to take. The caller knew that her marriage would not be salvageable, so legal questions needed to be addressed. Another referral to Legal Aid. It would be able to answer questions and to provide assistance in locating an attorney to proceed with a divorce. Budget counseling also was needed. Another referral, this time to Consumer Credit Counseling Services. A support group was suggested to help her emotionally through the transition. By the end of the conversation, she had become calm.

As the months passed, she continued to call

First Call for Help. It would be something as simple as some reassurance, a parenting question, or to fill First Call for Help in on the progress of her pregnancy. The First Call for Help staffers listened to the caller's concerns, offering reassurance along the way. Problems were not solved every day. Often it was just a comfort that someone listened. This young mother called back many times to update the staff on her progress, the results of the ultrasound, and the name she had chosen for her baby. The staff looked forward to that phone call in the fall telling of the arrival of a new little one to join her and her other child in their family. The staff was delighted to see the baby on the hospital's web page the day after the birth.

This mom found adequate childcare, has returned to work, and is enjoying her children. She appreciates First Call for Help for being there and for its emotional support during the tough times. All is now going well for this young lady and her young family. It was nice to know that First Call for Help could listen and help her through this transition.

### **Calls are as varied as the people who make them are**

The First Call for Help office is never a dull place to be. The calls are as varied as the people who make them are. You never know what question you will be asked when you pick up the phone. It could be something as simple as a phone number or address or, like the example above, quite complicated. Some questions are unusual. "Is my ferret a boy or a girl?" "Did the woodchuck see its shadow today?" There are calls about drug and alcohol abuse, shelter information, mental health issues including support groups, child abuse issues, suicide, and many other issues. First Call for Help keeps its database up-dated. Agencies keep it informed of changes and the staff scour newspapers for any information that will help keep our community well informed.

The person who calls First Call for Help often has already done the hardest part by asking for help. Often a caller has an immediate pressing need. First Call for Help answers about

1,200 calls each month with about 75 percent involving basic needs, i.e., shelter, food, utilities shut-off, heat, etc. Each call is an opportunity for the staff to inquire about underlying issues, such as unemployment, disability, lost records, and resources already tried.

### **Looking at immediate needs and also deeper problems**

The first step is to define the problem. What does this person need—now and in the future? What kind of help is the person looking for? Material needs? Legal advice? Medical care? Counseling? A woman who calls because she needs diapers may mention that her boyfriend is abusive when he drinks. Diapers will keep the baby dry for a couple of days, but she and the baby may be living in a dangerous environment thinking they have no other option.

A father, working at a job that offers no health insurance, who calls to get help to have a prescription filled, may appreciate hearing about Child Health Plus, a low-cost children's health insurance that may help them next time.

First Call for Help extends its helping hand—to count up options and to point the way to working things out. Because it is a service of United Way, many callers ask for cash assistance. However, First Call for Help does not provide financial assistance directly to its callers. Instead of duplicating other services offered in the community, First Call for Help assists callers in identifying those resources in the community, if any, that might meet their needs and explore options they may have overlooked.

First Call for Help is a telephone service covering three counties—Broome, Chenango, and Tioga. It is available Monday through Friday from 8:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. with recorded information available after those hours.

United Way of Broome County supports First Call for Help, but only with your assistance. Since United Way keeps its costs low, more than 85 cents of every dollar goes directly to programs that serve Broome County residents. For more information about First Call for Help, call 729-9100, or visit its website at [www.tier.net/firstcall](http://www.tier.net/firstcall)



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