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If 9-1-1 is the number to call for emergencies and 4-1-1 is for directory assistance, what is 2-1-1 for?

The 2-1-1 helpline was reserved by the Federal Communications Commission in July 2000 for assistance in finding social and human services information. The movement was spearheaded by the United Way, along with other nonprofits, and the organization currently runs or provides funding for more than 70 percent of 2-1-1 call centers, including PA 2-1-1 Northwest, which serves Crawford County and seven others.

To honor this growing service, Feb. 2 (2/11) was designated National 2-1-1 Day. By the end of 2019, the state and its United Way partners plan to secure 2-1-1 access to 100 percent of Pennsylvania. The helpline provides callers with information on government and private programs and organizations in their local area to address health, social and other human services such as food banks, shelters, crisis intervention, counselors, job training, child care, support for those with disabilities, and natural disaster prep. Callers are free to remain anonymous.

For instance, when Erie was hit with a severe snowstorm in December 2017, PA 2-1-1 NW responded to 1,264 requests for help and were able to screen callers for eligibility for Team Rubicon snow-shoveling services. "PA 2-1-1 can be a life link for many people," said Terri Ann Wig, chief professional officer at the United Way of the Titusville region, the lead 2-1-1 agency for Crawford County. "It provides quick and easy access to human service needs in any situation. It's much like 9-1-1 in that aspect. If you have a human services crisis, you can call 2-1-1, and they can get you right where you need to be."

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Wig described herself as “passionate” about 2-1-1, having worked to secure this service in the region since 2001. The United Way in Titusville and Crawford County Human Services have pledged three years of funding for the whole county to have access. She said the helpline served between 50 and 60 households in Crawford County last year, and they are working to increase the number of calls. “Most frequently, it is helping with utilities,” Wig said. “That’s probably the biggest, whether that’s electric, propane, National Fuel, city water. They’re the ones we see most commonly along with housing and transportation.”

She also included a few stories of 2-1-1 local success with names changed to protect anonymity. For example, “Janet” briefly became homeless after her husband died, and she contacted PA 2-1-1 NW to help her with case management and budgeting for her rent and healthcare. The United Way’s Center for Financial Independence helped Janet revise her budget, and the Salvation Army assisted with housing. “With 2-1-1’s help, I didn’t have to give up my home healthcare in order to pay my rent,” Janet said.

Another concerned “Alice,” 71, a widow who was raising three grandchildren on a fixed income. When she attempted to move to more affordable housing, her water heater ran out of propane, her car broke down, and she received a notice of her electric being shut off. Calling PA 2-1-1 NW for help, the resource navigator referred Alice to a local agency that agreed to help with her energy bills and car repairs. Once she moved, she called 2-1-1 again about agencies in her new town. “PA 2-1-1 Northwest helped when I had too many financial setbacks at once and couldn’t cope,” Alice said. “Services are different in every county, and 2-1-1 is the fastest, best way to find them.”

PA 2-1-1 NW also has a text-messaging service and a chatline on its website, [pa211nw.org](http://pa211nw.org), in addition to the telephone service. If there is a domestic violence or suicide risk, 2-1-1 resource navigators can do a handover to those specific hotlines, and if emergency intervention is necessary, they can also connect with 9-1-1. For those looking out for relatives living far away, 2-1-1 can also connect to resource navigators across the country to assist with services in specific regions. “I’d like to see (PA 2-1-1 NW) grow,” Wig said. “Right now, we’re conducting a community needs assessment for our United Way, and we can get a lot of data at a 2-1-1 that shows what the greatest needs are and where sources need to be targeted and where there is unmet needs. For me, it’s very rewarding to see how it’s been helping individuals and families.” — *Meadville Tribune*

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Verizon Communications Inc. had a deal that many consumers couldn’t pass up: a free voice-activated Amazon Echo smart speaker and a one-year Amazon Prime membership subscription with a \$79-a-month two-year contract for gigabit internet, television, and phone.

Pennsylvania Attorney General Josh Shapiro is now saying that consumers couldn’t get the Echo and Prime, and then faced a potential \$350 termination fee for breaking the two-year contract, in a lawsuit filed on Monday in Philadelphia Common Pleas Court. Shapiro claims that Verizon violated consumer protection laws. Though the suit was filed in Philadelphia, the marketing campaign and potential violations

took place statewide, the Attorney General's Office said. The office did not specify the number of complaints.

Shapiro asks in the suit that Verizon stop the marketing campaign and pay unspecified restitution and penalties. Verizon spokesperson Richard Young said Monday that "we are frankly surprised by today's lawsuit. We've been engaged in a productive dialogue with the Attorney General's Office. We had a few technical issues with this promotion, but we have worked hard to address all the issues we know about. Lawsuit or no lawsuit, we will do right by our customers." According to the suit, the "on us" marketing campaign began Nov. 18, 2018 But because of delays in receiving the Echo or Prime membership, consumers who sought to cancel the FIOS package faced termination fees.

The problem appeared to be that a hyperlink that was supposed to give Verizon customers access to the free Echo or Prime membership did not work. "Consumers who called Verizon to inquire about their inability to claim their items were placed on hold, were transferred to multiple Verizon representatives, were told someone from Verizon would call them back, did not receive a call back, and were forced to call Verizon again and go through the same cycle," the suit says. A marketing flier for the campaign filed with the suit pitched the \$79-a-month price "+Amazon Prime & Echo." Verizon has been battling for market share for fast internet services. – *Philadelphia Inquirer*

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A much-hyped network upgrade called "5G" means different things to different people. To industry proponents, it's the next huge innovation in wireless internet. To the U.S. government, it's the backbone technology of a future that America will wrestle with China to control. To many average people, it's simply a mystery. The technology is one of the issues expected to take center stage at the MWC mobile conference in Barcelona, Spain, this month. The interest goes well beyond engineers: In Washington, there are fears that China could take the lead in developing the technology and sell equipment that could be used to spy on Americans.

What, exactly, is 5G wireless — and will you even notice when it comes online?

What is 5G? – 5G is a new technical standard for wireless networks — the fifth, naturally — that promises faster speeds; less lag, or "latency," when connecting to the network; and the ability to connect many devices to the internet without bogging it down. 5G networks will ideally be better able to handle more users, lots of sensors and heavy traffic. Before we can all use it, wireless companies and phone makers have to upgrade. Phones need new chips and radio antennas. The phone you have today won't work with a 5G network. Wireless companies have been getting ready. They've been revamping their network equipment, buying up chunks of radio spectrum for carrying 5G signals, and installing new 5G antennas on cellphone towers, utility poles and streetlights. Wireless providers will invest \$275 billion in 5G-related networks in the U.S., according to CTIA, an industry trade group.

When will it be available? – A true U.S. mobile rollout will start in 2019. It will take a few years to go national, and even then more rural areas of the country will not be covered in the "millimeter wave" frequencies

that promise the highest data speeds and capacities, said Michael Thelander, CEO of wireless consultancy Signals Research Group. Thelander predicts that China may lag the U.S. by a year in its initial rollout, but will ultimately have the biggest deployment, while European countries will build out more slowly. Beware of confusion, though. Wireless carriers have a history of rushing to slap the latest-and-greatest label on their networks, and this time is no different. AT&T has already applied the name 5G on a service that's not really 5G. (Sprint, upset, then sued its larger rival.) Once the network is ready, you'll need a 5G-enabled phone to connect to it. The first ones should be available in the first half of 2019, but a 5G iPhone isn't expected until 2020. 5G phones will most likely be more expensive than current 4G phones. Don't worry, even when 5G turns on, you can keep using 4G phones, just not at 5G speeds.

What can 5G do? – There's a considerable amount of hype over the promise of 5G. Industry groups say it will promote smart cities by connecting sensor networks that could manage traffic and quickly identify streetlight outages. 5G could connect self-driving cars and fuel new applications in virtual and augmented reality. Its high-speed connections could enable better remote surgery and other telemedicine, help companies automate their factories and offer businesses dedicated high-speed internet lanes. "5G speeds, and ever-faster home broadband, will mean that existing applications will get richer, and also that new applications will emerge — new Flickrs, YouTubes or Snapchats. We don't know what yet," Benedict Evans, a partner at Silicon Valley venture capital firm Andreessen Horowitz, wrote in a January blog post. The most immediate impact on consumers will be faster download speeds for movies and other video. Thelander says your phone's internet will work better in crowded locations such as stadiums.

What are the security concerns? – The 5G network is one front in rising tensions between the U.S. and China. The U.S. government has warned U.S. companies not to use Chinese telecom technology in communications networks due to security concerns, and is pressing other countries to ban Huawei, a Chinese telecom company, from 5G network buildouts. U.S. officials have suspected for years that the Chinese government could use Huawei network equipment to help it spy. Huawei has rejected such accusations. – **Associated Press**

