

Ohio 211 and Return on Investment | Ryan Bunch, United Way of Greater Toledo

Chair Dolan, Vice Chair Cirino, Ranking Member Sykes, and members of the Senate Finance Committee thank you once more for allowing us all to submit testimony on House Bill 33.

I am Ryan Bunch, Senior Director of Outreach and Advocacy at United Way of Greater Toledo. Our organization has firsthand experience with the significance of maintaining this essential public service and its local connections. We operate 211 with local staff and understand the return on investment that results from fostering strong relationships and effective programming.

Our 211 helpline serves Lucas, Ottawa, and Wood Counties, and like the other 211 helplines, our call volume and call times are on the rise. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, our call record was 68,000 contacts in a year. In 2021, we received more than 100,000 calls for the first time in its 20-year history. In 2022, call volume remained elevated, with 85,000 contacts from people who needed help.

211 is how people access the Free Tax Prep initiative. This service assists low- to moderate-income individuals, persons with disabilities, older adults, and limited English speakers with filing their taxes.

In 2022, more than 2,200 Northwest Ohio households utilized Free Tax Prep services, which resulted in more than \$3 million in tax refunds. This program consistently generates significant economic impact by injecting millions of dollars into our local economy while providing access to accurate and timely tax filing for those who lack the means or resources.

When people contact 211, they are answered by caring experts trained to probe further and address other needs that households seeking tax preparation assistance may have. They ensure access to food, secure adequate shelter, and meet families' additional financial stability requirements. Our Community Resource Advisors referred 885 people to additional resources in 2022.

Collaborating with Financial Opportunity Centers, 211 supports credit building, employment opportunities, homebuyer education, and financial coaching. It provides veterans, retirees, and elderly residents with up-to-date information tailored to their needs.

Two of our tax clients, a married couple, began seeing us in 2019. They save \$200 each year on tax preparation fees, and they say they get the same level of service as their former CPAs. They have referred several family and friends. One individual who was unemployed was referred to the Neighborworks Community Development Corporation FOC in East Toledo. Because of that connection and experience, that individual is now employed at Neighborworks.

211 doesn't just provide a direct return on investment for residents; it is a critical resource for agency partners. In 2021-2022, as capacity challenges and need volume surged, 211 and its staff assisted Lucas County Job and Family Services in intake verification and distribution of

over \$1.3 million in federal COVID-19 relief funds through the federal Prevention, Retention, and Contingency (PRC) program. This collaboration ensured Ohioans received support before the federal deadline and allowed our county partner could serve as many qualified individuals as possible.

In conclusion, I want to express our gratitude for your time and leave you with a few critical points:

1. 211 benefits urban and rural communities across Ohio. The service is especially crucial for vulnerable Ohioans, including families with children, older adults, and veterans.
2. 211 helps bridge the digital divide by operating our helpline 24/7 and assisting Ohioans with limited internet access who need to complete online forms.
3. Virtually every state surrounding Ohio, along with most other states, directly fund 211.
4. We request modest annual funding of \$2 million, which is a 1:1 match of the philanthropic dollars Ohio United Ways invest in 211 and represents about 20% of Ohio 211's annual budget. It would establish a true public-private partnership with the state, sustain revenue, and secure the 211 infrastructure.

Thank you for your attention today, and we are available to answer your questions.