

211 Impact on Families | Dr. Gavi Begtrup – United Way of Greater Cincinnati

Chair White, Vice Chair Salvo, Ranking Member Lett, and members of the Children & Human Services Committee, thank you for your leadership and for allowing us to provide testimony today.

I am Dr. Gavi Begtrup, Director of 211 Innovation at United Way of Greater Cincinnati (UWGC). I am here today alongside my colleague Hailey Barr to speak in support of state funding for Ohio 211. While Ms. Barr will address the collective impact of the 14 independent 211 providers across Ohio, I want to highlight the essential role 211 plays in Southwest Ohio.

Brenda's Story

When Brenda, 56, had to stop working after being diagnosed with stage 4 breast cancer, she quickly fell behind on rent and utilities.

“The worst thing I could think of,” she said, “was going home from the hospital and having no home to go to.”

Navigating the social services system, she said, was “a nightmare.” Then someone suggested she call 211.

When Brenda dialed 211, she reached Patrick, a trained care coordinator at UWGC, who connected her with organizations that helped with rent and utilities. He also provided information about emotional support services.

Brenda later told us:

“It means so much when you're in a situation like mine—when all you hear is bad news, when so many people tell you ‘no’—to finally hear someone say, ‘I don't know if this will work, but let's try.’ That's so important.”

With 211's help, Brenda caught up on her bills and avoided homelessness. And when we followed up, she shared that her cancer treatments were going well—though we can't take credit for that.

Helping Over 50,000 Families a Year

Brenda's story is just one of over 50,000 stories made possible by UWGC 211 each year. Our trained, credentialed staff provide support 24/7, connecting families to vital resources such as rent and utility assistance, food pantries, transportation, and free tax preparation.

Why can UWGC 211 help when families don't know where to turn?

Because we maintain an accurate, up-to-date directory of 1,200 agencies and 6,000 services across our region. Our 211 database is the gold standard for reliable social service information, in contrast to the outdated, incomplete, and often inaccurate information families find online and elsewhere.

211 also plays a critical role in disaster response.

When a railcar chemical leak in Western Hamilton County forced evacuations last September, 211 became the official information source for residents, working with our county Emergency Management Agency to provide real-time updates on shelter locations and return-home timelines.

A Modern Hub for Social Services

UWGC 211 will celebrate 50 years of service next year.

Founded in 1976 as a community helpline, we began serving our community nearly 25 years before the national 211 designation. But our services today are vastly different from the past, thanks to a transformational philanthropic investment that modernized our operations.

We are no longer just a "Yellow Pages for social services."

UWGC 211 is now a hub for connecting families to services and programs.

Our programs include:

- **Free Tax Prep** – A collaboration with the IRS Volunteer Income Tax Assistance program, returning \$10 million annually to local families.
- **Access to Counsel** – A partnership with the city of Cincinnati, Legal Aid, the Help Center and the University of Cincinnati, providing rent assistance and legal aid to prevent evictions.
- **Project Lift** – A financial empowerment initiative offering short-term assistance, coaching, and workforce development.
- **Family Success Network** – A program in partnership with the Department of Children and Youth bundling financial empowerment, parenting support, and

immediate relief services, to prevent families from entering the child welfare system.

Streamlining Access to Services

Through direct electronic referrals, 211 can now connect families to services seamlessly—without the burden of calling multiple agencies.

We're also working to:

- Connect new and expectant parents to support services to reduce infant mortality.
- Partner with our regional Child Care Resource and Referral Association (CCR&R) to assist families connect to quality rated child care providers.
- Support Ohio's new Parent & Youth Ambassadors (PYAs) with our resource directory, enabling them to guide families to state and local services for children birth to 21.

These modern approaches ensure faster, more efficient connections so social service providers can focus on what they do best: helping families.

Ohio Needs Investment in 211

During the recent devastating Los Angeles fires, families from all backgrounds turned to 211LA for help. In response to the surge in calls they turned to UWGC 211 for support. Because of our **modern infrastructure**, we began fielding LA fire calls the next day.

But we can't provide the same disaster support in our own state.

30 counties in Ohio have no 211 service at all.

Ohio is nearly singular in the nation in lacking full 211 coverage. While Indiana, Michigan, Kentucky, and Pennsylvania all provide state funding for 211, Ohio provides none.

Had Brenda lived in Pike County, there wouldn't have been anyone to answer her call.

Our Request: State Support for Ohio 211

We are asking for state funding to support OH 211, the statewide association of 211 providers.

With state investment, we can:

- Expand 211 coverage to **all 88 counties**.
- Ensure **every Ohioan** has access to **trusted help** when they need it.

- Spread **best practices** and **modernize** 211s across the state.
- Enable 211 to serve as the backbone for statewide programs, ensuring consistent service delivery and data-driven insights across Ohio.

211 is Ohio families' first call for help.

With your support, we can work with DCY to achieve our shared mission: ensuring Ohio families have access to the services they need.

Thank you for your time and leadership. I am happy to answer any questions.

Sincerely,

Gavi Begtrup, Ph.D.

Director, 211 Innovation

United Way of Greater Cincinnati

About UWGC 211

United Way of Greater Cincinnati 211 (UWGC 211) is a 24/7 service connecting families to community resources in Greater Cincinnati. UWGC 211 is the designated 211 provider for Hamilton, Clermont, and Brown and provides contracted 211 service in Butler, Warren, and Clinton counties funded by UWBWCC 211 Collaborative. We also provide limited coverage in Adams County and service Boone, Kenton, Campbell, and Grant counties in Northern Kentucky.

In 2024, UWGC responded to over 51,000 requests for help, making over 160,000 referrals to local services.

For more information on UWGC 211, our impact report, and Brenda's story please visit www.uwgc.org