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By DON ELLZEY, AN17.com

HAMMOND -- For those needing services during an emergency, almost any type of health or support service, the answer is as easy as dialing 211.

Food, ice, shelter, prescription assistance -- even locating loved ones -- are among the many services offered through the 211 agency, and the service is free, Richard LaPratt, 211 programs and services director, told the Hammond Kiwanis Club during its weekly meeting.

LaPratt said 211 is a nationally dedicated line for a wide range of health and human services.

It has been available since 2000, but gained momentum, especially in Louisiana, following Hurricane Katrina. The agency puts all emergency services information under one umbrella organization.

The 211 data base now has over 3,000 emergency service agencies that can be called upon to provide services to the public. It also has a language bank to assist those who do not speak English.

All non-profit agencies in Tangipahoa Parish are in the 211 data base.

During Hurricane Isaac, 211 took 5,000 to 10,000 calls per day, LaPratt said. People were seeking food, ice, water, shelter, disaster food stamps, relocation assistance and in some cases, rescue assistance.

Normally, 211 receives about 750-1,000 calls per day.

During Hurricane Katrina's aftermath, 211 provided information to relatives of storm victims along with shelter information, LaPratt said.

He said 211 staff and volunteers are well trained. The agency has nine paid staff members. Volunteers must receive 80-100 hours of training in order to be certified.

LaPratt said the severity of Hurricane Isaac was unexpected and many people were caught short of food, medicines and other needs.

The agency operates 24 hours per day, seven days per week, he said.