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**United Way
of
Portage County**

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PUCO

April 13, 2000

Public Utilities Commission of Ohio
ATTN: Docketing Department and Dan Fullin, Attorney Examiner
180 East Broad Street
Columbus, Ohio 43215-3793

Re: Case No. 93-1799-TP-COI

Dear Mr. Fullin:

I am writing in support of the PUCO's preliminary findings supporting a two-year pilot using "211" as the three-digit access number for non-emergency community service referrals throughout Ohio.

Every day, a number of Portage County residents face homelessness, hunger, job dislocation, substance abuse, or other community service needs and often do not know where to turn. Navigating the maze of community services can be challenging. A simple, reliable universally recognizable access number could make all the difference for a person in need. Ohio Information & Referral organizations already respond to over half a million calls each year from Ohioans in crisis or struggling with ongoing problems and needing referrals to resources in their communities.

The information and referral service in Portage County, our United Way's FIRST CALL FOR HELP, provides valuable, up-to-date, comprehensive information on vital community services available to residents. United Way's FIRST CALL FOR HELP works collaboratively with agencies and organizations in our community and is actively involved in a wide variety of coalitions, collaboratives and task forces that address a number of community issues and needs.

In Portage County, our United Way's FIRST CALL FOR HELP responds to over 15,000 requests for assistance from residents each year. In addition to providing a local number, the program also offers a toll-free number, available to most telephone exchanges in Portage County, through United Way of America. However, many individuals and families in need still do not know how to access the vital community service information and referral available. I think this is the case in most counties in the state. Designating 211 as a state-wide access number for community service referrals would ensure that residents in our communities get the help they need as soon as possible.

I think that the designation of "211" as the three-digit access number for non-emergency community service referrals will greatly benefit both Portage County residents and residents throughout the State of Ohio.

Sincerely,



Bob Gragson
President & CEO

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