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CENTRAL OHIO RESIDENTS WITH WIRELESS SERVICE CAN NOW ACCESS 2-1-1

*Thousands of Franklin County Cellular Users Can Now Link to Critical Community Resources
At the Touch of Three Buttons: 2-1-1*

COLUMBUS, Ohio – Is your child struggling in school? Do you need help caring for an elderly parent or are you struggling just to make ends meet? By calling 2-1-1, Franklin County residents can reach thousands of social service, government or community resources to answer these questions or address other problems they might be facing. This effort between FIRSTLINK and the United Way of Central Ohio has been operational since 2003, but officials announced today that recent partnerships with wireless companies have expanded the service to thousands more Franklin County residents – *both cellular and land lines*.

Because wireless phone service will soon surpass landlines, FIRSTLINK has taken a leading role in Ohio to create universal access to 2-1-1 for cellular users. Carriers that have implemented 2-1-1 access for their customers include: Alltel, Cellular One, Cingular (AT&T Wireless), Nextel, Sprint, T-Mobile and Verizon. Additionally, FIRSTLINK is working with Time Warner to provide their digital telephone customers with access to 2-1-1 and expects to have this free service implemented by late spring.

"211 is a single, simple phone number that all Franklin County residents can use to get information on any number of social services, governmental and community resources," said Marilee Chinnici-Zuercher, president and CEO of FIRSTLINK. "With so many residents using a cellular phone as their primary line, it quickly became apparent we needed to expand the access to 2-1-1 to *all* phone users. Also, we've seen in recent disaster situations, like Hurricane Katrina, that often cellular phone service is the only practical means to reach help."

Free and confidential, 2-1-1 is available throughout Franklin County 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Information also is available via TTY/TTD services and in various languages, including Spanish and Somali. Last year, more than 165,000 residents in Franklin County called FIRSTLINK's information and referral service. ***With the recent access created for cellular phones, that number is projected to increase by as much as 30 percent, totaling more than 200,000 calls.***

– more –

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FIRSTLINK maintains a comprehensive and up-to-date database of resources, including federal, state and local government agencies, community-based and private, nonprofit organizations. FIRSTLINK's database contains more than 5,000 programs and services and 2,100 on-going volunteer opportunities at more than 900 nonprofit, government and healthcare organizations.

Certified operators who have access to this database can assist callers with a number of situations, including people looking for information about housing, parents looking for help for their child who is struggling in school, or those seeking drug and alcohol counseling or job training. According to FIRSTLINK statistics, eighty-eight percent of callers are seeking basic needs assistance, although inquiries on health care, prescriptions and mental health are also on the rise. Services available to those who may need information include:

- *Basic Human Needs Resource:* Food pantries, clothing closets, shelters, rent assistance, utility assistance.
- *Physical and Mental Health Resources:* Health programs, Medicaid and Medicare, maternal health, Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP), medical information lines, crisis intervention services, support groups, counseling, drug and alcohol intervention and rehabilitation.
- *Employment Supports:* Financial assistance, job training, transportation assistance, education programs.
- *Support for Older Americans and Persons with Disabilities:* Adult day care, congregate meals, Meals on Wheels, respite care, home health care, transportation, and homemaker services.
- *Support for Children, Youth and Families:* Childcare, after school programs, Head Start, family resource centers, summer camps and recreation programs, mentoring, tutoring, protective services.
- *Volunteer Opportunities and Donations*

The expansion of 2-1-1 is expected to ease the burden on 9-1-1 emergency lines, which are routinely clogged with callers looking for general information, rather than emergency help. Additionally, 2-1-1 providers have played vital roles in recent natural disasters. Even though hundreds of miles from the disaster area, FIRSTLINK was actively involved in assisting with the local Hurricane Katrina refugee resettlement and relief efforts, including linkage to mental health and other support services. Preliminary numbers indicate FIRSTLINK's staff handled more than 1,200 Katrina-related contacts locally.

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Although access has been granted to cellular callers in Franklin County, there is still some work left. 2-1-1 dialing may not yet be available from workplaces that have central switchboards.

“Many companies block 4-1-1 so they do not get charged for the call. When blocking 4-1-1, they typically block all N-1-1 numbers except 9-1-1,” said Bridget Wolf, chief operating officer at FIRSTLINK. “It is a very simple programming issue for companies to address, which would allow their employees access to 2-1-1, and ultimately, to the help they need.”

Companies with questions about reprogramming an office phone system to accept 2-1-1 calls should call (614) 221-6766 x 115 for more information.

In an effort to raise the public awareness of the recent expansion to cellular phones of 2-1-1, Clear Channel Communications, in conjunction with FIRSTLINK, will launch a year-long promotional campaign informing central Ohio residents about the 2-1-1 service. Through a series of public service announcements, outdoor advertising, and collateral campaigns, Clear Channel Communications will lead the most comprehensive communications campaign to date informing residents to call 2-1-1, to get help and give help.

“We are so grateful to have Clear Channel Communications spearheading our efforts to promote this newly expanded service to central Ohio residents,” said Chinnici-Zuercher. “As a not-for-profit we depend upon the valuable contributions of community leaders like Clear Channel Communications, to reach those most in need of our services.”

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FIRSTLINK's mission is to strengthen and enhance the quality of life in our community by mobilizing volunteers and connecting people to critical community resources. Last year, more than 165,000 callers called FIRSTLINK's 24-hour Information and Referral line for answers. Other programs include the FoodLINK pantry referral system, training programs for nonprofits, volunteer services, Kinship Care Navigator, Dental OPTIONS, Retired and Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP), Columbus Beyond the Freeway tours and the Youth Volunteer Corps initiative. FIRSTLINK is a United Way member agency.