United Way's Guide to 211 Helpline in Northwest Pennsylvania

Issued: February 11, 2021

SUMMARY

United Way of Erie County has evolved from its roots as a fundraising organization to a critical community impact organization mobilizing local partners - including businesses, community leaders and community residents - to break the cycle of poverty and expand opportunities for people to become self-sufficient. One of the ways we approach impact work is through **United Way's 211 Helpline**. Individuals in need can contact a trained resource navigator and receive referrals to agencies near them by simply dialing 211. 2020 was a year like no other, and many individuals experienced extreme needs for the first time. Many people didn't know where to go for assistance, but they knew they could start with 211.

You may have found yourself referring a friend or colleague to United Way's 211 Helpline, or found yourself wondering, "is anyone else in this situation?" As agencies, organizations, employers, and government officials spread the word about 211 this year, we found many people wondering what the needs in our community really look like. Through custom reports to United Way and publicly available data on requests to 211, we can share information on the needs of Erie County residents through this document. Using 211 Day as our anchor, United Way will be distributing trend reports to the Erie Community on a bi-annual basis. We hope that by shedding light on the needs individuals are facing, our community can work together to better meet those needs and address gaps.

DATA

In this paper, United Way will review calls and requests from the 211 Helpline over the course of July to December of 2020, the demographics of callers, the needs by category over time, the zip codes with the highest number of requests, and the comparative data at the state level.

CALL TO ACTION

By making a concerted effort to share this information out with the larger community on a biannual basis, we hope other organizations, agencies, and officials will use this data in their work moving forward. You can help by ensuring your agency's information is up to date, using and promoting 211 when you encounter an individual in need, supporting United Way of Erie County, and using this data in your strategic planning and advocacy efforts.

Table of Contents

WHAT IS 211?

Approved for national use in 2000, 211 is the most comprehensive source of locally curated social services information in the United States. Frequently referred to as the "social service equivalent of 911," people in need of information or referrals to service providers in their area can dial 211 to reach a trained, professional resource navigator 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year.

Individuals can also interact with a live resource navigator by using the online chat feature available on pa211nw.org or by texting their need and zip code to 898-211 to receive information by text.

211 is funded differently across the country, but the resource is provided free of charge to the general public. Local United Ways provide funding and/or operations for over 70% of the nation's 211 centers, including here in Erie County.

211 resource navigators listen to callers' concerns and provide information on appropriate organizations that can assist the caller with their needs. 211 takes the guesswork out of finding services through a quick and confidential call, text, or chat. Currently, 211 is available to over 94.6% of the nation's population.

In Pennsylvania, we have achieved 100% statewide coverage. To do this, 211 is supported and coordinated by a statewide network of partners called PA 211. PA 211 is a subsidiary of United Way of Pennsylvania, and is operated by the following regional call centers throughout the state:

- PA 211 Central
- PA 211 East
- PA 211 Northeast
- PA 211 Northwest
- PA 211 South Central
- PA 211 Southeast
- PA 211 Southwest

Each region has a lead agency that serves as a liaison between PA 211 and their region's county-specific partners. Lead agencies also coordinate quarterly Regional Advisory Committee meetings to discuss regional operations.

Each county in Pennsylvania has a local champion that serves on their Regional Advisory Committee. These organizations coordinate the funding and marketing of 211 in their local communities. In most cases they are from a local United Way, county government or social service agency.

UNITED WAY OF ERIE COUNTY AND 211 SUPPORT

United Way of Erie County has evolved from its roots as a fundraising organization to a critical social impact organization mobilizing local partners - including businesses, community leaders and community residents - to break the cycle of poverty and expand opportunities for people to become self-sufficient.

Today, United Way is on a mission to crush poverty in our community. We envision a collaborative community where all students succeed, and all families thrive. We know that education is the key to ending poverty. When kids are well-fed, well-rested, and getting the support they need, they are far more likely to succeed in school and therefore in life.

211 in Erie County is made possible through funding from our local United Way. As a result, we refer to 211 as *United Way's 211 Helpline*.

United Way launched 211 services for our community in May of 2017. Since launching, over 39,000 requests to 211 have been made in the Northwest Region. Our local United Way serves as the lead agency for the Northwest Region, and we contract with the Southwest Region to operate the call center servicing our community.

OVERVIEW OF 211 DATABASE
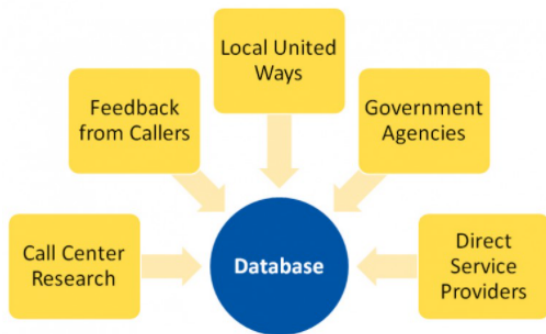
211 is able to efficiently connect callers to resources in their community because of a frequently updated database of organizations, agencies, and programs that provide supports and services. Once added to the database, service providers can update their program offerings at any time but are asked to update their public listings, at minimum, once a year. In addition, updates are made by 211 staff year-round based on feedback provided by callers, local United Way partners, and ongoing information-seeking by 211 staff. Agencies or programs in the Erie community who would like to create or update an agency profile in the database can contact **Paul Wotus**, the PA 211 NW Database Coordinator at paul.wotus@unitedwayswpa.org.

The quality of referrals to an organization is only as good as the information in the database, meaning updates from providers are vital to the quality of 211 services. With a new database migration that occurred in 2020, 211 now sends automatic update emails to agencies so they can review their data. Annual requests of resource data from local agencies ensure the database is constantly providing accurate and valid information to the community. Currently, the update percentage for the database in Erie County is at 100% -- meaning *all* of the agency and program information has been reviewed / updated **at least** once in the past year. This ensures the information provided to the community is as up-to-date and accurate as possible. Currently, the 211 database holds a listing of 295 agencies and 1,161 programs for Erie County.

ACCESSING THE DATA

It is evident that 211 is a vital resource for citizens in need — but what about the data that is collected from the use of the helpline? 211 data provides a unique snapshot of needs and service gaps in our community that can be used by a number of stakeholders. Currently, United Way of Erie County has access to 211 data through two different sources.

The first source is a free, easily accessible online database called PA 211 Counts (https://pa.211counts.org/), where anyone can search for the top referrals and requests that have been made throughout the state. United Way also receives monthly reports from the PA 211 call center which provide aggregated data on calls made in Erie County and the Northwest Region. In utilizing the data tools like that of PA 211 Counts, United Way – and other local nonprofit organizations and service agencies – can analyze the greatest resource requests and unmet needs of residents in our community.

PA 211 COUNTS

PA 211 Counts Home Page
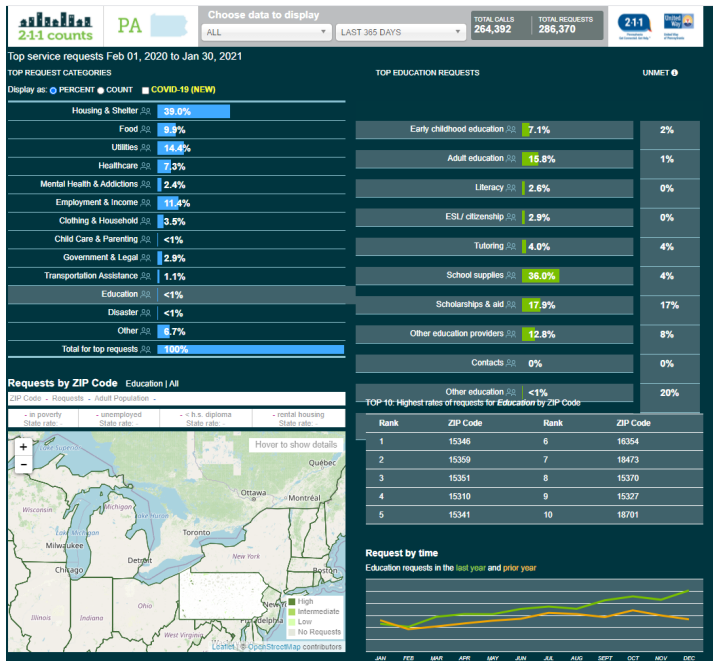
PA 211 Counts is a *publicly available data dashboard* that provides customizable, real-time, visual presentations of requests from Pennsylvania's 211 call centers and can be accessed at pa.211counts.org. 211 Counts offers data on the types of referrals that callers are requesting based on their location and timeframe for contact.

You are able to search by zip code, county, congressional district, State House district, State Senate district, school district, and/or region. Features of the site include the ability to overlay Census poverty data with the geographic location you have selected, which helps to better contextualize the needs of residents in that area. Once you have identified a geographic population, you can also adjust the timeframe of your search. The range of a search can be anywhere from calls made in January of 2018, all the way up to referrals made the day before you are conducting your search. This is because 211 Counts is connected directly to our regional databases.

211 Counts data focuses on the requests of callers, but typically 211 resource navigators will not let a caller hang up without more than one referral, as they have been trained to recognize that a need is often multi-faceted. On the 211 Counts site, you can see the broad categories that resource navigators break requests into.

The broad request categories 211 Counts data is organized into are: Housing & Shelter, Food, Utilities, Healthcare, Mental Health & Addictions, Employment & Income, Clothing & Household, Childcare & Parenting, Government & Legal, Transportation Assistance, Education, Disaster, and a wide-ranging "Other" category.

These categories can be broken down even further; for instance, referrals for Housing & Shelter address needs around shelters and low-cost housing, but they also include house

repairs/maintenance, rent assistance, mortgage assistance, landlord/tenant issues, contacts, and more. By hovering over any of those subcategories, you can see the scope of the category itself. The subcategories are also where you'll find the column that shows the percentage of the unmet need for that category. This is the percent of requests for which a referral could not be made because the individual did not qualify for the service or there was not resource available for the caller's request.

Once you conduct a search, the categories will be broken out by percentage, but you are able to easily toggle back and forth between the percentage of referrals and the actual number of referrals.

While the interactive 211 Counts dashboard is a great resource for visualizing and interacting with data in different ways, the tool also allows you to pull a detailed report for your search criteria. On the left-hand side of the screen, you will see a PDF icon. By clicking on that icon, a report is pulled that will include all of the data available for your search criteria, breaking down categories and subcategories either by count or percentage, based on your selection. You can also pull a brief report for a high-level breakdown of referrals.
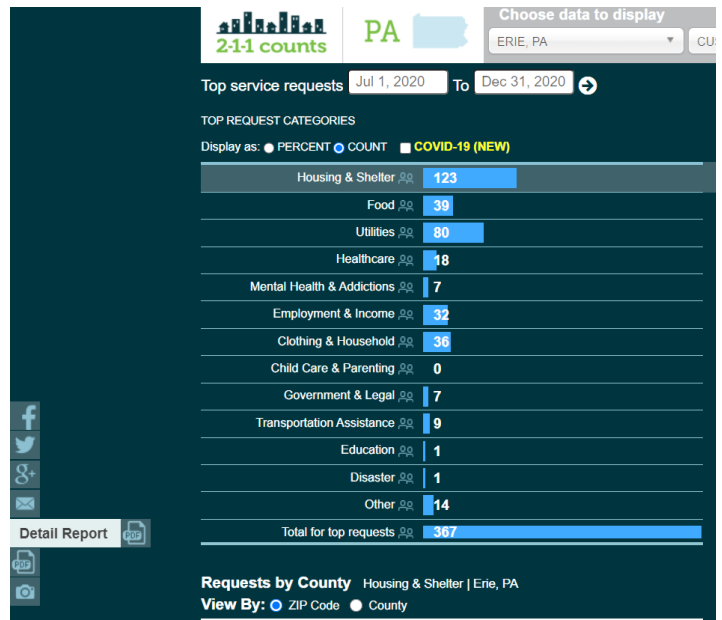
211 Counts has a playlist of tutorial videos that explain how to use the site on their YouTube channel: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xNEPWr1ziMU&list=PL-NFLFlNQsjo_20BfDMJtkIhcnlDmXRGW.

CUSTOM REPORTS

Additional information on 211 users can be gleaned from the monthly reports United Way of Erie County receives from the 211 operations team. Each month, we receive a report that breaks down the number and types of contacts; the needs of callers - met and unmet; the demographics of the callers, and the top referrals to agencies made by navigators.

Contacts are broken out by calls, texts, or chats with a resource navigator. The top ten needs are listed, as well as the top unmet needs that month. The 211 unmet needs data does not indicate if the individual actually received services or followed through with the referral. A need can be considered unmet for many reasons, including but not limited to scenarios where the database does not have a resource available to address the request, the individual does not have the proper documentation needed to receive the service, the individual has already attempted to access the available resource with no success, or the service is only available on a seasonal basis. As part of 211's quality control process, resource navigators attempt to follow up with clients after the initial call to determine if they were successful in securing help, though data for only a small percentage of 211 users is able to be collected.

The demographics of callers are broken out by the gender and age of all callers, as well as the top zip codes of callers. The top referrals are broken out by the name of the agency and the program that will provide the resource within that agency. This also includes the number of referrals given for each agency/program.
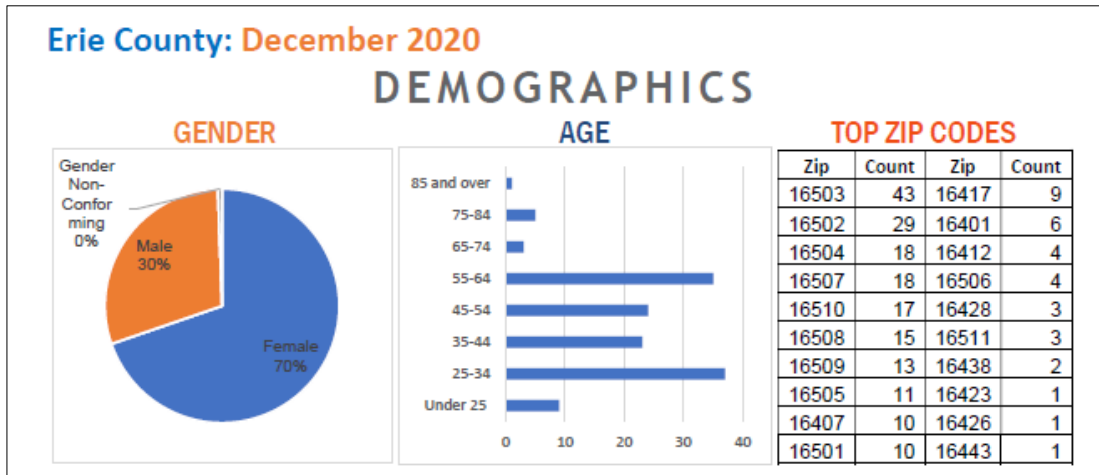

December 2020 Monthly Report to United Way

As the lead agency for the Northwest Region, we receive these reports for the Erie County population, and for the region as a whole. If you are looking for additional information on 211 calls, United Way is also able to pull custom reports through our 211 operations team to provide additional context to the needs of Erie County residents.

DATA & TRENDS

This section provides and overview of 211 data and trends for the period July 1, 2020 to December 31, 2020, as well as comparative statewide data for reference.

CONTACTS & REQUESTS

From July to December of 2020, **1,145 individuals** contacted 211, which resulted in **1,994** requests for referrals to services, programs, or organizations in Erie County. A request is noted when an individual indicates they are in need of something, whether by their own account or after some probing questions from trained resource navigators. The goal is to provide the caller with a referral for each request.
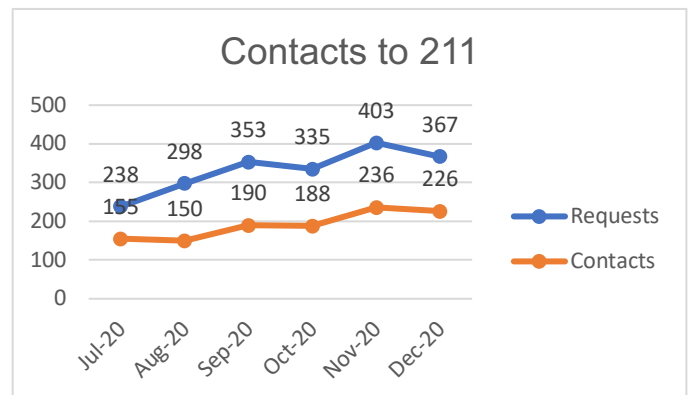
Overall, contacts began to decline in July of 2020, which is not typical for 211 contacts in the summer months. We likely attribute this to the lack of events and gatherings where United Way and other organizations would traditionally distribute information to the public on 211. Numbers continued to stay relatively low (all under 200 contacts a month) into October. In November and December, however, contacts to 211 increased with 235 contacts in November and 226 in December. November saw many seasonal requests for Christmas/Thanksgiving meals and Holiday

Gifts/Toys. Because organizations updated their 211 profile with special holiday events, resource navigators were able to refer those individuals to local seasonal drives.

Through the custom monthly reports provided to United Way by the 211 database, we can share the demographics of individuals in Erie County who contacted 211 in the last six months of 2020 based on their gender and age. Please note that not all 211 callers may choose to disclose this information. From July to December, 68% of callers identified themselves as female, 31% identified as male and 1% identified as gender non-conforming. Additionally, in those six months, 211 saw the most contacts from individuals age 25-34, followed by contacts from individuals age 55-64, and then individuals age 35-44. At this time, the 211 resource navigators do not ask callers to disclose their race; however, this information may be beneficial for future use with organizations, agencies, and government entities to have on hand to better understand the needs of specific communities as well as any inequities in the current supports. For the time being, you are able to overlay Census data for various zip codes and counties.

REQUEST CATEGORIES

The PA 211 Helpline breaks down requests into thirteen categories, which can be viewed on pa.211counts.org. For the last six months of 2020, the top requests in Erie County were overwhelmingly for housing resources. This was followed by steady requests for help with utilities, food, and clothing/household needs. In December, there was a spike in requests for assistance with Employment & Income, but the Housing, Utilities, Food, and Clothing/Household needs remained the top categories each month.

Erie County Requests to 211
July - December 2020
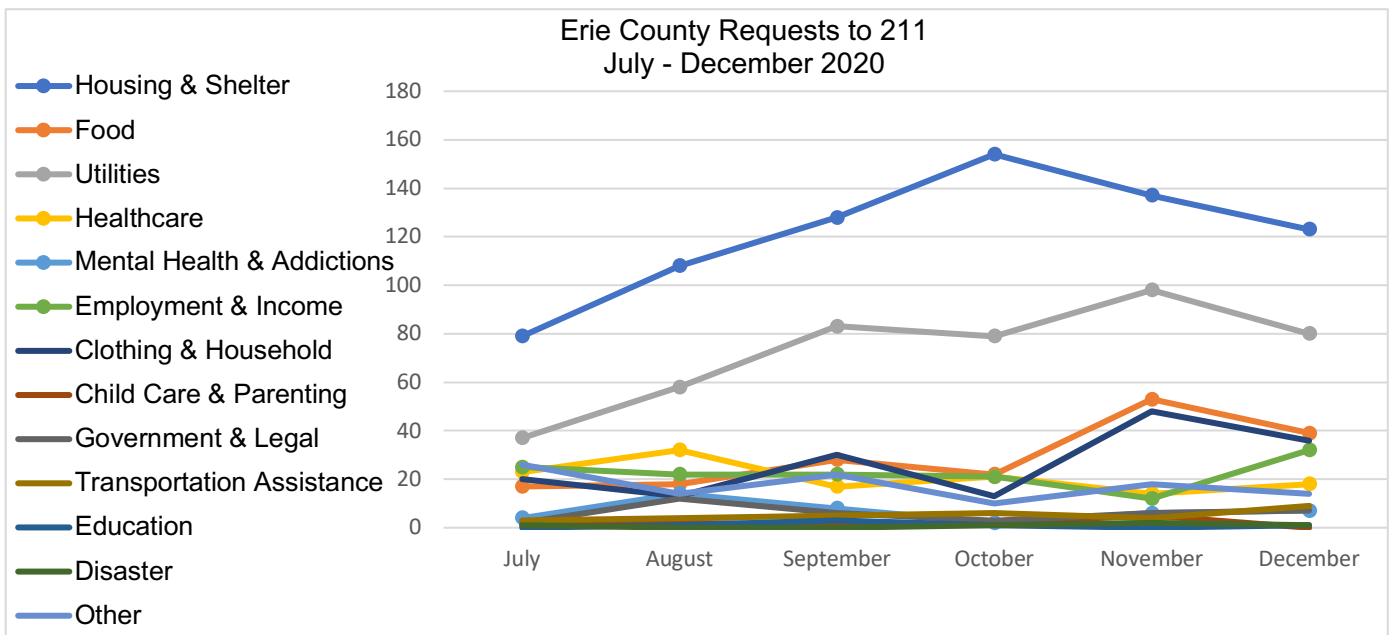
TOP CATEGORY REQUESTS:

Housing was the top need identified by 211 Helpline callers from July to December of 2020. Of the **729** requests for Housing assistance from Erie County residents, the majority, **305**, of these requests were for rent assistance. Secondary to requests for rent assistance were requests for shelters at 156.

Housing Requests to 211
July - December 2020

Because Erie County Department of Human Services and its administering agency, Erie County Care Management (ECCM), launched the Coordinated Entry system for homeless and housing services in January 2018, 211 callers identifying a housing need are directed to access the Coordinated Entry system by calling 814-SHELTER during business hours. The system acts as a single point of entry for those services in Erie County.

It's important to note that the 211 resource navigators ask a range of questions when someone reached out to 211 for assistance to best determine what may be either a caller's primary, secondary or tertiary needs. Utilizing the answers from these questions, navigators can then provide ancillary resource/program referrals to the individual in need, providing a comprehensive service outside of the individual's initial ask. So, in addition to Coordinated Entry referrals, callers are receiving a range of other non-housing related referrals based on their individual situations.

ZIP CODES WITH THE HIGHEST REQUESTS

Using PA 211 Counts, we're able to identify where the majority of Erie County 211 requests came from in the last six months of the year. While requests came in from all over the county, the zip codes with the top requests were 16502 with 305 requests, and 16503 with 327 requests. The third highest zip code was 16504, where we saw 168 requests during this time. Of the total 1,994 requests in Erie County from July to December, 632 requests came from zip codes 16502 and 16503, showing the highest concentrated population in need are those living in the City of Erie.
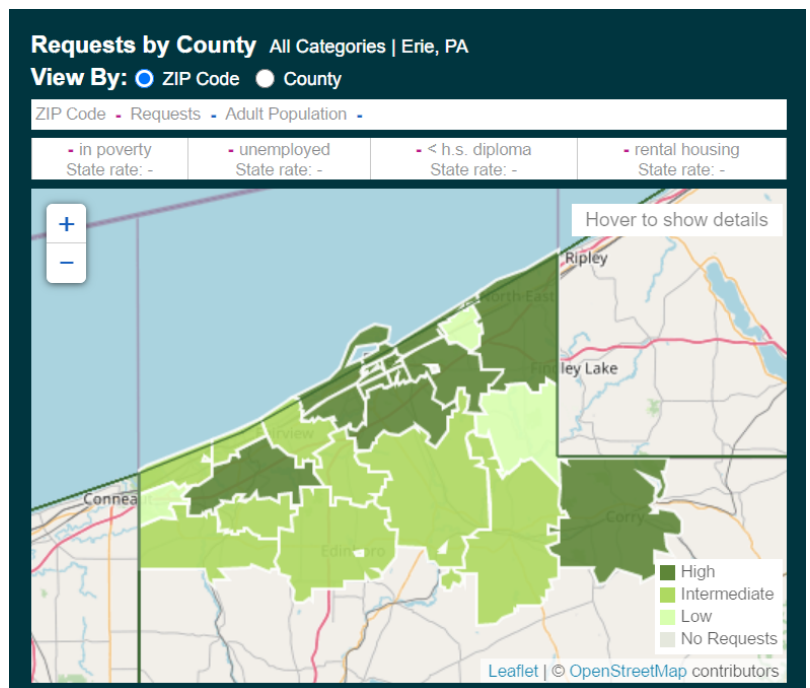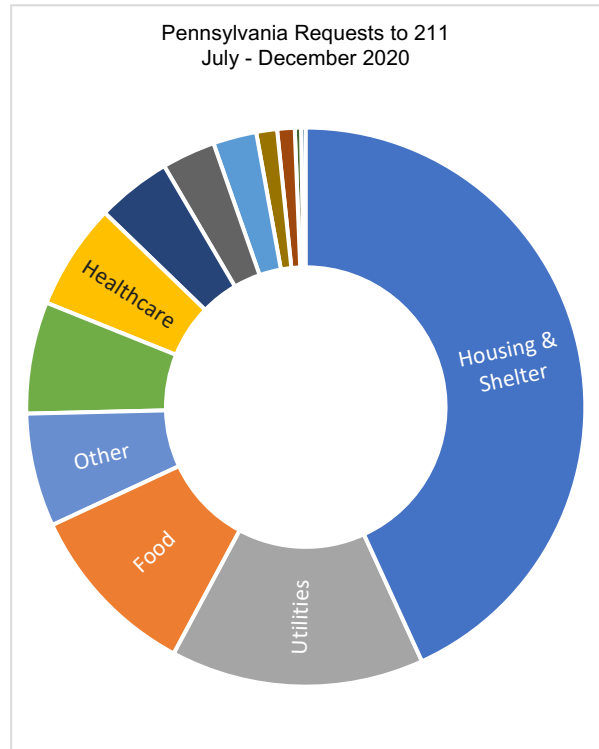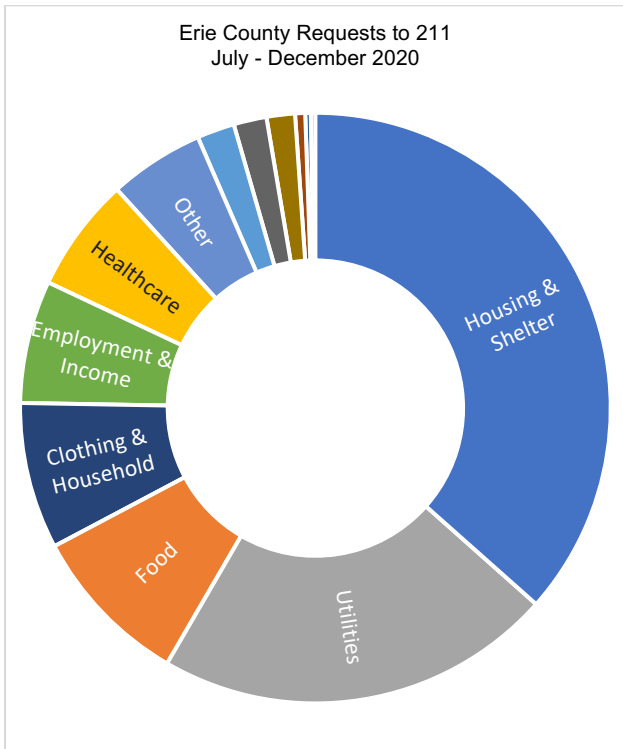
The zip code with the most requests, 16503, spans from State Street and East 26th Street, up to Holland and East 6th Street and as far east as Roger Young Park, on Downing Avenue. (For interactive maps detailing the boundaries of city zip codes, neighborhood organizations, school district lines and more, visit The City of Erie's My Neighborhood page.) The 16503-zip code is home to students in six of The City's elementary schools (Jefferson Elementary, McKinley Elementary, Joanna Connell Elementary, Diehl Elementary, Edison Elementary, and Pfeiffer-Burleigh Elementary). According to Census data, 44.6% of the population of 16503 live in poverty, compared to the state rate of 13.2%. It's also important to note that according to the Census, 62.8% of individuals living in this zip code are renting homes. Similar to all Erie County data, the highest requests in this neighborhood were around Housing, and more specifically, Rental Assistance in the last six months of 2020.

The zip code with the second highest number of requests, 16502, covers two main sections: the first being the blocks between West 26th Street and Pittsburgh Avenue over to West 26th and State Street and then from 12th Street and Greengarden Boulevard, up to Frontier Park and over to West 6th and Myrtle Street. The 16502-zip code is home to students in five of The City's elementary schools (Grover Cleveland Elementary, Perry Elementary, Jefferson Elementary, Pfeiffer-Burleigh Elementary, and Harding Elementary). According to Census data, 39.3% of the population of 16502 live in poverty, compared to the state rate of 13.2%. The 16502 zip code is another area with a high amount of individuals renting, as 63.1% of the population are renters.

STATE-LEVEL DATA

Because we have a state-wide network of 211 call centers, we are able to compare our local data to other communities, as well as to the entire state. We know that Housing was a top request in Erie County, but that is reflective of the needs seen across the state. We can also see that where there is a need for Housing, there is also typically a need for help with Utilities. Below are charts detailing requests to 211 in Erie vs. the entire state for the period of July to December 2020.

PERCENT OF REQUESTS BY CATEGORY		
Category	**Erie**	**PA**
Housing & Shelter	36.6%	43.7%
Food	8.9%	10.4%
Utilities	21.8%	14.9%
Healthcare	6.3%	6.1%
Mental health and Additions	2.1%	2.5%
Employment and Income	6.7%	6.5%
Clothing and Household	8%	4.4%
Child Care and Parenting	<1%	1%
Government and Legal	1.8%	3.1%
Transportation Assistance	1.6%	1.2%
Education	<1%	<1%
Disaster	<1%	<1%
Other	5.2%	5.6%

Erie County Requests to 211
July - December 2020

Housing & Shelter · Utilities · Food · Clothing & Household · Employment & Income · Healthcare · Other

Pennsylvania Requests to 211
July - December 2020

Housing & Shelter · Utilities · Food · Other · Healthcare

CALL TO ACTION

This section provides an overview of the ways our local community can support and use United Way's 211 Helpline.

SUPPORT UNITED WAY

While United Way of Erie County provides 211 as a free resource to our community, coordinating such a complex resource takes financial resources. When you give to United Way, your donation stays local to support a mission to remove barriers to learning and to ensure families have the stability to achieve financial growth.
unitedwayerie.org/give-now/

USE THE DATA

United Way Erie County will be releasing 211 data and trend reports for Erie County bi-annually moving forward. The January to June report will be released each following August and the July to December report will be released each following February. These reports will be distributed to local funders and elected officials, as well as made publicly accessible on United Way's website.

Each report will include an overview of the number of contacts made to 211, the number of referrals made by 211, and the highest categories of need for Erie County callers. The reports will also provide information regarding trends over time and comparative statewide data.

United Way encourages local government, funders, and social service agencies to use this information to assist with their strategic planning, resource development and advocacy efforts.

Because local 211 data is publicly accessible and provides a real-time snapshot of needs, trends and potential gaps in service, the data can be used in a variety of ways to support our local community. For example, because organizations can use the data to track trends over time for specific need categories and sub-categories, 211 data could be used in grant applications or as part of a policy brief to demonstrate need.

ENSURE THE ACCURACY OF THE PA 211 DATABASE

While United Way works diligently to ensure the accuracy of the 211 database, updates from providers are vital to the quality of 211 services. To review and update your agency's information, please contact Paul Wotus, PA 211 NW's Database Coordinator at paul.wotus@unitedwayswpa.org with any updates for your organization or agency.

USE AND PROMOTE 211

Anyone can use 211 when they are in need. However, not everyone is aware of this valuable resource in our community. United Way encourages you to leverage the range of promotional materials found on our website - unitedwayerie.org/211

In addition, we have distributed thousands of 211 wallet cards materials to social service agencies, businesses, school districts, law enforcement and emergency management personnel. If your organization could benefit from a quality of these cards, please contact Sara Naughton, United Way's Community Impact Coordinator at sara@unitedwayerie.org.