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Testimony of
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United Way of Southwestern Pennsylvania,
serving Allegheny, Westmoreland, Fayette, and southern Armstrong
Counties

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Good morning Chairman Barrar, Chairman Sainato and members of the Committee. I am Angela Reynolds, Director of 2-1-1 and Helping Families Thrive for the United Way of Southwestern Pennsylvania, serving Allegheny, Westmoreland, Fayette and southern Armstrong counties. I would like to thank you for the invitation to testify before this committee today and for your interest in the PA 2-1-1 system and its ability to help veterans and the family members of active military personnel.

I would like to first give a brief overview of the PA 2-1-1 system and then further explain the progress the Southwest region is making to ensure veterans have the information and opportunities available to them for any health and human service needs.

PA 2-1-1

The 2-1-1 dialing code was designated by the Federal Communications Commission for nationwide use as a health and human services information and referral phone line in 2000. 2-1-1 began to spread state-by-state and now is available in all 50 states. The system is designed to serve three major objectives, including: connect people in need to health and human service assistance available through government programs, private and non-profit organizations in their communities; provide assistance to communities in time of disaster, allowing 9-1-1 to work primarily for first responders, and connect volunteers and donors with organizations who can leverage resources to meet the needs of the community. Through 2-1-1, people connect to a wide range of services from utility assistance to housing needs, senior citizen programs, emergency food, job counseling, youth programs and many more. The information provided to callers comes from the 2-1-1 statewide resource database and the software also records information about consumer calls and needs.

PA's 2-1-1 system is the single-most comprehensive source of assistance covering all sectors of service both private and public. Currently, there are six regional 2-1-1 independent centers operating through contracts with the nonprofit organization PA 2-1-1. These six centers cover about 85% of the state's population. The Northwest is the only region in the state that is not covered by the 2-1-1 system, but PA 2-1-1 is working

hand-in-hand with United Way of Pennsylvania to get coverage to that region within the next year.

Project SERVE

Now that you have a general overview of PA 2-1-1, I would like to discuss how the Southwest region is specifically working with veterans to meet their needs in the community. Project SERVE is an initiative to give back to those who have given so much for our country. Unfortunately, there are many veterans who fall into the gaps of traditional health and human services, and do not get the support they need. Our Project SERVE initiative seeks to help those veterans and ensure their needs are being met. This initiative includes both community impact programs we fund to help veterans, special United Way sponsored initiatives and information and referral through 2-1-1 to other services available to veterans.

In our region, we have found that returning veterans face challenges gaining employment, need help with mental health or disability issues, and some face the prospect of homelessness. In the past year, 3,834 calls or texts came into our 2-1-1 regional call center, serving an 11- county region, from veterans or their family members looking for various services. Some of the services veterans seek include housing or food, getting help with utilities or connecting to transportation to get to work or doctor appointments. Transportation is actually a highly sought after service by veterans and we currently have two active projects that specifically help connect veterans to transportation. In 2015, 2-1-1 helped connect 601 struggling veterans to transportation through bus passes for three months to help them achieve financial stability. This also provided handicap accessible transportation to those veterans living with a disability.

Another key veteran service is help with tax preparation. With the complexity of taxes for military personnel there is an additional certification needed by the IRS to prepare those returns. For this reason, it can be costly and difficult to find people to prepare a tax return; however, UWSPA sponsors free tax preparation sites specifically for veterans. 2-1-1 helped connect nearly 600 veterans and their families last year.

Furthermore, we partnered with veteran-serving agencies, city and county partners as well as other human service agencies on an initiative to end veteran homelessness by 2015. This initiative assists veterans and their families with housing. Finding housing for the entire family is especially important because there is a link between stable housing and quality of life indicators, such as health and educational outcomes for children. 2-1-1 has been able to connect veterans who have children with supports that help them avoid homelessness, quickly find housing after an eviction or foreclosure, and to assist families with avoiding a disrupting schooling change due to homelessness.

Reaching a growing population of female veterans, many with families, Project Journey assists women veterans with avoiding homelessness, securing stable housing for themselves and their children, and developing a plan to address future financial crisis by providing short-term emergency housing and providing connections to appropriate quality services. An important aspect of the projects described above is that they involve partnerships between veteran-serving agencies and other community organizations. The 2-1-1 system is able to connect veterans to these and other collaborative efforts that are not widely known.

To ensure that we are meeting the needs of veterans with sensitivity, PA 211 Southwest hired an in-house resource navigator that specializes in working with veterans and their family members. It is important the person in this role has prior military experience and/or served in the military. We have found veterans contacting the 2-1-1 call center prefer communicating with another veteran. All 2-1-1 Resource Navigators are trained on available resources for veterans and ways of providing better and continued support to veterans in our community. Our goal is to not just have one expert resource navigator, but for the Veterans Resource Navigator to share their expertise with the 2-1-1 contact center and database teams.

A study by Robert Morris University objectively quantified what many of you know. Veterans find it difficult to reach out for help, and when they do reach out for help they prefer if the person with whom they are communicating also understands the experience of being a service member. This is for many reasons, including a shared understanding of both the experience and the language unique to military personnel. We made it a priority to have our specialist understand the military and the needs of veterans. It is important to have these traits for navigating available benefits with the veterans and connecting them with agencies specifically structured to help them.

Supporting veterans in our community is something we hope all communities do across this state and country. We have a population of veterans and their families that don't know where to turn when they experience a setback in their transition to civilian life. Although my remarks today focus on a local initiative of United Way of Southwestern PA, the PA 2-1-1 system across the state has enormous potential to make it much easier to connect our state's veterans and their families with the help they are seeking. I think we can all agree it should be a priority to make their transitions and efforts to assure long-term sustainability for themselves and their families as easy as possible.

I would like to thank each of you again for the opportunity to appear before you today and inform you how United Way and 2-1-1 are working to help our veterans. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.