THE #FKLM FAMILY BLUEPRINT

Finding Local Food, Housing, and Utility Help

Caregiver Wellness & Support · Household Stability

A national search tool that lists free and reduced-cost local programs by ZIP code.

IN THIS GUIDE

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- How to make the call productive
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A free guide from My Fairy GodParents — for youth impacted by parental incarceration, justice-impacted youth, and the caregivers and families who support them.
myfairygodparents.org/resources/family-blueprint

Print, write on it, and share it with the people helping your family.

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THE DIFFERENCE THIS MAKES

Almost every community has more help available than the families in it know about. Utility assistance, rental help, food pantries, childcare subsidies, free legal clinics, counseling on a sliding scale, kinship caregiver programs — these exist quietly, funded and staffed, waiting for someone to call.

The barrier is almost never eligibility. It is that no one hands you a list, the programs have unmemorable names, and a caregiver in survival mode does not have three hours to research county websites.

This lesson is about the one number that shortcuts all of that — 211 — and how to use it so you get names and phone numbers rather than a vague referral.

WHAT 211 ACTUALLY IS

211 is a free, confidential referral service that operates across most of the United States. You dial 2-1-1, or use 211.org, and reach a trained specialist who searches a database of local programs by your ZIP code.

They do not provide money or services themselves. They connect you to the organizations that do — food, housing and utility assistance, childcare, healthcare, mental health support, transportation, and caregiver programs.

It is available in many languages, generally around the clock, and you do not have to explain your family's whole situation to use it. "I need help with my electric bill" is a complete request.

HOW TO MAKE THE CALL PRODUCTIVE

Have three things ready: your ZIP code, the number of people in your household including children, and the specific problem. Specific gets better results than general. "My utilities are shutting off Friday" routes differently than "I need help."

Ask for more than one referral per need. Programs run out of funds, close intake, or have waitlists, so a single name is fragile. Ask: "Can you give me two or three, in case the first one is full?"

Say the words "kinship caregiver" or "relative caregiver" if that describes you. It unlocks a category of programs — support groups, navigator services, sometimes financial assistance — that a general request

will not surface.

+ THE OTHER DOORS WORTH KNOWING

The school counselor or social worker often knows which local programs actually answer their phones, and can sometimes make the referral for you, which moves faster than cold calling.

Public libraries maintain community resource lists, host programs, and have staff who help with online applications. There is no eligibility test to walk in.

Faith communities, community action agencies, and local nonprofits serving families affected by incarceration frequently provide direct help — a utility payment, a grocery card, a ride — with far less paperwork than a government program.

+ KEEPING TRACK OF WHAT YOU FIND

Write down every organization name, phone number, the person you spoke with, and the date. You will be asked to repeat this information, and having it saves an entire second round of calls.

Note the outcome plainly: applied, waitlisted, denied, call back in 30 days. A denial from one program is not a denial from the category — eligibility rules differ program to program.

Keep the list where the household can see it. If you are ever unavailable, whoever steps in should not have to rebuild it from scratch.

+ A SHUTOFF NOTICE AND FOUR PHONE CALLS

A caregiver raising her nephew received an electric shutoff notice dated eleven days out. She had assumed there was nothing to do but pay it, which she could not.

She called 211 with her ZIP code and said the bill amount and the shutoff date. The specialist gave her three names: the local community action agency that administers energy assistance, a faith-based emergency fund, and the utility's own hardship program, which she did not know existed.

The community action agency had a two-week intake wait. The utility's hardship program let her set a payment arrangement that stopped the shutoff the same day. She used the third name a month later for a different bill. The point was not the first referral; it was having three.

+ WORDS YOU CAN USE

Opening the 211 call

Say this first and the rest of the call goes faster.

“Hi — my ZIP code is [ZIP]. I'm a relative caregiver with [number] children in the household. I need help with [specific need], and it's urgent by [date]. Could you give me two or three options in case the first has a waitlist?”

Asking a utility about a hardship program

Call the number on the bill, not the shutoff notice.

“Hello — I received a shutoff notice for account [number]. I'm not able to pay the full balance right now. Can you tell me what payment arrangements, hardship programs, or medical or child protections you offer, and what I'd need to submit to qualify?”

Asking the school social worker for a warm referral

Email; warm referrals move faster than cold calls.

“Hello — I'm [child's name]'s caregiver. We're working through some household challenges with [need]. You likely know which local programs are actually responsive. Could you point me to one or two, and let me know if you're able to refer us directly? Thank you.”

+ WORKING THE LOCAL HELP SEARCH

- [ ] Write your ZIP code, household size, and one specific need before calling.
- [ ] Call 211 or search 211.org.
- [ ] Say "kinship caregiver" or "relative caregiver" if it applies.
- [ ] Ask for two or three referrals per need, not one.
- [ ] Ask each program: what documents do I need and how long is intake?
- [ ] Call your utility directly about hardship and payment plans.
- [ ] Ask the school counselor or social worker for a warm referral.
- [ ] Check the public library's community resource list.
- [ ] Record every name, number, date, and outcome in one place.
- [ ] Set a reminder for any "call back in 30 days" answer.

+ REFLECT AND WRITE

What is the single most urgent household need I could call about today?

Which programs have I assumed we would not qualify for without asking?

Who at my child's school could make a referral on our behalf?

Where will I keep the running list of organizations and contacts?

YOUR NEXT STEP

Search your ZIP code for one category you need this month and note two programs.

WHERE THIS COMES FROM

Source: 211 (United Way Worldwide) — verified August 2026. Curated and summarized by MFGP.
https://www.211.org/
This is general information and practice guidance — not legal advice, mental-health treatment, or a statement of any court, agency, or facility's rules. Policies differ by state, county, facility, school, and program, so always confirm details with the office involved.
For decisions with legal, medical, financial, or clinical consequences, work with a licensed professional or the organizations listed with each resource.

You do not have to do this alone.

More free guides, scripts, and checklists:
myfairygodparents.org/resources/family-blueprint