Coronavirus: A phone line for anxiety? Right now, the WarmLine is off the hook

The county-funded service is fielding so many calls it might go 24/7.
Leia, a Husky-Shepherd mix who is the pet of an OC WarmLine staff member, helps comfort the people in the office who speak with callers dealing with emotional issues related to mental and behavioral health. The WarmLine has seen an increase in calls the past few weeks from people stressed out over the novel coronavirus pandemic. (Courtesy of Stephanie Alvarez, OC WarmLine)

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By THERESA WALKER | thwalker@scng.com | Orange County Register
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The voice sounded like so many others who have placed calls of help to the Orange County WarmLine in recent weeks:
Anxious. Stressed out. Scared.

And the question the voice asked — the one every human is asking during the coronavirus pandemic — has no easy answer: “What if I come down with it?”

But WarmLine operators said this caller was unusual in at least one respect — he was a garbage collector.
“We never had sanitation workers call us before,” said Mariam Harris, who has been clinical director of the WarmLine since its inception 10 years ago.

“Sanitation workers are afraid,” Harris added. “They're not getting protective gear.”

The WarmLine is a confidential support service offered by the county to people who are suffering mental and behavioral health issues that aren't considered an “immediate crisis.”

And, right now, the WarmLine is having a moment.

In a single day early last month, WarmLine operators handled 259 calls, about half from people who had never previously phoned in. This month, as the coronavirus pandemic has grown, the line has seen a steady 15% jump. That surge, in turn, has led to an expansion of WarmLine hours and consideration, by Harris and others, to go round-the-clock.

Most callers, Harris said, are in “a state of panic.” She ticked off the common concerns: “Am I going to get it?” “I lost my job.” “How am I going to make rent?” “What if I can't feed my family?”

But such broad categories don't capture the humanity of each call.

There was the laid-off family man who cried into the phone. The young woman whose father had just been sent for testing. The mom whose child was frightened enough to vomit.

And, of course, there's the stream of callers who are suddenly stuck at home, fixated and terrified by what they can't stop watching on TV.

“They just watch the news all day,” said Stephanie Alvarez, the WarmLine operations manager.

“It stresses them out,” she added. “Because they are at home, with no activities, they are becoming more anxious.”
And that's just the newcomers.

In the pre-COVID world, the WarmLine helped people who struggle with chronic mental health issues and behavioral disorders. Some call in daily or weekly, as if by appointment.

For them, too, the virus is a trigger. What's more, their fears are growing at a time when stay-at-home rules are disrupting their regular counseling and sober living meetings. As a result, some regulars are calling the WarmLine as if on speed dial.

“Regular callers are already in a state of panic,” Harris said.

“Now, they are panicking more.”

There to listen

Whether a regular or first-time caller, the people contacting the WarmLine want comfort and hope, if not absolute clarity about a health crisis that offers little on that front.

That soothing voice — and the simple power of listening — has been the WarmLine's mission since 2010. That's the year the county-funded program, operated by the National Alliance on Mental Illness – Orange County (NAMI OC) under contract with Orange County Behavioral Health Services, got started.

The WarmLine, as described on its website, is for individuals or those who know someone “experiencing mental health concerns, substance abuse, loneliness, or are in need of community resources.”

The OC WarmLine, and similar non-emergency phone services in other counties, handles calls typically routed their way by other operators who staff suicide hotlines. Those hotline operators already have made an assessment to determine if the caller is or isn't experiencing a life-threatening moment of crisis. People also find the WarmLine number on the internet. And, recently, callers reaching the WarmLine have just contacted the Orange County Health Care Agency's COVID-19 hotline and been transferred for some emotional support.
‘End of the world’
The WarmLine peer mentor known to callers as “Miss Peaches,” a name that harkens back to childhood, has been through a lot. Now, an older woman, her youth included a rock cocaine habit, prostitution and a rap sheet that she says “would stretch to Brooklyn.”

She got a chance to remake herself through a program for non-violent offenders run by the specialized Collaborative Courts within Orange County Superior Court. She became a WarmLine volunteer the year it started, which grew into a 24-hour a week paid job.

Miss Peaches has been sober for a decade. As a self-described “full-blown, born again Christian,” she sees her work with WarmLine as a ministry of sorts, saying it has saved her life by letting her help others in need.

That’s never been more true, she added, than right now.

“The last couple of weeks, it’s been very, very traumatic,” she said. “I have been running across callers who are overwhelmed.”

She hears desperation on the other end of the line from her regulars. Some are bipolar, like her, or battle schizophrenia, and many tell her things like “this is the end of the world” and “we are not going to survive this.” Others, in recovery, have said things like, “I should just go back on drugs and alcohol.”

There are new callers who admit to being so depressed they can’t summon the energy for simple tasks. Miss Peaches says she went on speaker phone with one call to talk through the steps of doing the laundry.

In some moments of panic, she gets callers to take a deep breath or put cold cloths on their faces. Whatever time they need, Miss Peaches gives it.

People who live alone and can’t get out, she said, are having the toughest time.
“They’re lonely and they don’t know what to do. They’re anxious and scared because they can’t go outside. They don’t know if they are going to die. They don’t know what this virus is about.”

Listening to all that takes a toll. Miss Peaches recently needed a couple of days off to do some self-care.

“I started feeling a bit depressed because of what was going on,” she said. “Emotionally, I started feeling tired.”

She followed her own advice, taking some time to step back and breathe.

“I’m not a superwoman or anything like that. If I don’t take care of myself, then I won’t be there for my clients.”

Contacting OC WarmLine

The WarmLine has two phone numbers: 714-991-6412, for a phone call or text, and toll-free at 877-910-WARM (877-910-9276). There are options for non-English speakers: Spanish, Farsi, and Vietnamese. A special option, called Operation Compassion, was recently added for those who are the most isolated, such as senior citizens, and need more immediate attention, which can include a wellness check.

If lines are busy and the wait is more than five minutes, callers are asked to leave a call-back number. All calls are returned, administrators say, typically within an hour or two.

The WarmLine operates seven days a week, from 9 a.m. to 3 a.m., Monday-Friday; and 10 a.m. to 3 a.m, Saturday and Sunday. An online chat service is available through the WarmLine website at namioc.org/oc-warmline.