

Volunteer of the Year – Southwest Wisconsin

Cathy Schmale

United Way of Dane County – 211

Governor's
Service Awards



When the COVID-19 pandemic dramatically increased the number of people looking for information and assistance, Cathy Schmale stepped up and began volunteering with United Way of Dane County's 211 program.

Prior to the pandemic, their 211 program consistently utilized 8-10 volunteers who assisted others from their office, answering calls every hour of every day and connecting callers with community resources such as food, housing, utilities, healthcare, legal assistance, transportation, and other resources. When their office closed and people would need to answer calls remotely, their volunteers left due to not feeling comfortable continuing from their homes without direct staff support. To make things more difficult, until Cathy started serving, whenever 211 tried to recruit virtual volunteers, those that expressed interest had all decided to look for easier volunteer opportunities after shadowing live calls and realizing the scope of the volunteer project.

Recognizing the need and being willing to help, Cathy quickly underwent training as an Information and Referral Specialist and began answering calls. Her service was critical to answering the increased level of need in the community, as 211 saw particular increases in food and housing needs from those seeking assistance, as well as the impact of the pandemic on the callers' mental health and increased substance use. Throughout the height of the pandemic, Cathy answered over 1,000 calls, frequently serving multiple four-hour shifts per week and committing to a regular four-hour shift on Mondays, which is their busiest day.

Cathy not only answered these calls, but those seeking assistance consistently gave her high rankings for satisfaction with the assistance they received when providing feedback on their after-call survey line. Callers expressed how Cathy was not only "delightful" and "personable" when speaking with them, but that "she kept me calm" and "made me very comfortable." Her ability to demonstrate both a caring and professional approach came through with her assistance being described as "very helpful and understanding" and that Cathy "took the time to look up everything she could think of to help."

Cathy's service continues into the present, as she answered over 800 calls in 2022 alone, which was nearly 5% of the total calls 211 answered last year. Looking at other areas where assistance is needed, she also continued her training to prepare for staffing 211's Addiction Recovery Helpline in 2023.

In addition to this service with United Way of Dane County's 211 program, Cathy also makes a difference for others by delivering lunch for seniors and people with disabilities as a volunteer with Meals on Wheels and by providing mental health services for people affected by disasters as a Red Cross volunteer.

Reflecting on what Cathy's service meant for their program, Agi Redei from United Way of Dane County explained that "not only did Cathy leave an impact on our service, but 211's volunteer program as well. She proved that virtual volunteerism exists and can be very effective. She was the first volunteer fully trained remotely, which meant working in our database with thousands of resources without 211's usual hands-on support. Cathy handled over 1000 calls through a cloud-based phone system from her home during the COVID-19 pandemic. Her responses impacted people's financial, physical, and mental well-being. This was done with patience and a personal touch showing that she cared, wanted to listen, and sought to guide and to empower those who needed her help most urgently."

