

# Answer the call, for all our sakes

In this day of telephone scams and political pitches, no one wants to answer a call from an unknown number. But if you get a call from 803-529-1551, please answer it.

That simple act could be a matter of life or death for you or someone near you.

That is the phone number of the S.C. Department of Health and Environmental Control's contact-tracing line. A call from this number either means that you have been identified as having COVID-19 or that someone with the virus has recently been in close contact with you.

We understand if you are reluctant to answer and get involved. It could mean a serious short-term disruption to your life, because you likely will be asked to self-quarantine for up to two weeks if your case is mild or if you have had contact with an infected person. It could mean a request that you be tested for the disease. But the disease loves a nonresponse because that means it gets to spread even further throughout your community.

Given these choices, it is perhaps not surprising that only 37% of the more than 60,000 people called by contact tracers from late June to mid-August bothered to answer the phone. And even fewer agreed to be tested.

That means nearly 40,000 people were willing to take a risk that they would not get the disease or spread it, as some almost certainly did. According to a Post and Courier article on the problem by Thad Moore and Mary Katherine Wildeman, it is estimated that each person with COVID-19 infects on average four other people. If you do the math, it's clear how difficult it is to corral the dangerous coronavirus. And until we get the virus under control, our battered economy will continue to struggle.

The summer months were a terrible time for the spread of the virus in South Carolina, with the full death toll yet to be tallied. The number of sick or dead could have been lower, perhaps much lower, had more people answered a call from 803-529-1551. Beyond wearing our masks, washing our hands and maintaining our distance from others, the best weapons our state can deploy against COVID-19 are contact tracing and remedial action, at least until we have a vaccine, which we hope will happen by next year.

If you care about yourself, your family and your neighbors, please answer the call when it comes. The life you save could be theirs — or your own.