

Before the

A Step-By-Step Guide to Educating the Public

BY BRYAN E. WOLFE

IN AN EMERGENCY CALL **9-1-1**

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Before an Emergency

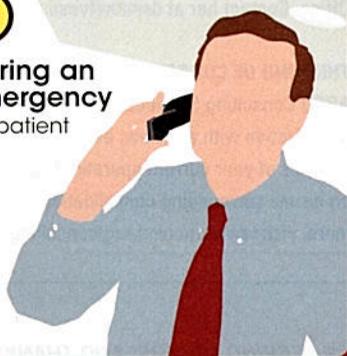
Know your emergency and non-emergency telephone numbers.



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Call, don't text



Call

A quick search engine query suggests that the average citizen calls 9-1-1 once or twice during their lifetime. Unfortunately, most emergencies do not make advance appointments or delay their untimely occurrence based on human convenience. Therefore, it is advantageous for all citizens to pre-plan and become familiar with best practices regarding the utilization of 9-1-1 emergency services.

What does this have to do with those who work in the call center? In the last several years, public safety communications professionals have begun to value the importance of educating the public we serve. Programs that speak to varying segments of society serve to provide a better understanding of how 9-1-1 and emergency services in general work.

In this article, I suggest some critical points that those involved in these education efforts should relay to their audiences. Readers can use this article as a template for public education engagement to ensure a uniform and consistent message, providing a comprehensive, yet easily understandable, overview of the system. *Note:* For this reason, the article speaks directly to the citizen, not the communications professional.

The public safety communications community is hungry for new and better materials to support their programs. This article can help provide just that.

1 BEFORE AN EMERGENCY

Make sure your address numbers are clearly displayed on the front of your home and mailbox. The numbers should be made from a reflective material and visible from the street—not just on a sunny day, but during inclement weather and at night. If responders cannot quickly and clearly see your address, help will likely be delayed.

Determine your dispatch center's non-emergency telephone number and

post it on your refrigerator or in another prominent location near your phone.

Do not program the number 9-1-1 into a speed-dial button on your cellular or home phone. Thousands of inadvertent 9-1-1 calls are placed when phones with 9-1-1 programmed into a speed-dial button are jostled around in pockets or purses. When the pre-programmed button is inadvertently depressed and a call is placed, emergency dispatchers have an obligation to listen to private conversations, karaoke, lawn mowing or other activities occurring in the background of the unintentional 9-1-1 call in an effort to investigate whether an emergency is occurring. This is a substantial problem for 9-1-1 dispatchers.

Know how to utilize 9-1-1 and when to utilize the non-emergency seven-digit number to your dispatch center:

- If you're reporting a crime in progress, a crime that just occurred or if you need a fire or emergency medical service response, you should call 9-1-1.
- If you're reporting a non-emergency incident, such as an incident where the suspects have already departed a scene and there's nothing life-threatening occurring, call the non-emergency number for your dispatch center.

Example: If you arrive home and observe a man you don't recognize running out your front door with your television set, you need to dial 9-1-1 immediately. However, if you want to report that your cousin stole your flat screen television last week and won't return it, use the seven-digit non-emergency number.

2 DURING AN EMERGENCY

When you dial 9-1-1, stay on the line and do not hang up. You might notice a longer-than-normal silence before the phone starts ringing because 9-1-1 calls are routed differently than any other call you make. Do not hang up; the call will ring through. Remain on the

line until you are told by the 9-1-1 dispatcher that it is OK to hang up.

Emergencies don't occur to most people every day, so your adrenalin will be pumping. Take a deep breath and listen very carefully. If you focus intently on listening, you will be less likely to become excited and shout. Because many dispatchers wear headsets, shouting is unpleasant for them. Do the best you can to speak at a normal speed and volume.

The dispatcher is going to ask you questions that they need answers for and will input that information in a particular order into a Computer Aided Dispatch (CAD) system. Answer only the question asked, then stop talking and be quiet. Do not speak unless you are spoken to; this is critical because what seems like silence to you may not in fact be silence at all. The dispatcher may be speaking on a radio to responding police, fire or EMS to get help directed to your location. It's important to understand that many times their voices will be muted to the caller on the 9-1-1 line during these radio transmissions, so while the caller only hears silence, the dispatcher may be listening to multiple users of a complex multi-channel radio system. If you begin talking, it could force the dispatcher to stop talking or stop listening to emergency responders, which in turn will delay help getting to your emergency.

3 PROBLEMS FACED BY 9-1-1 DISPATCHERS

By avoiding some common mistakes, you can help make life a lot easier for 9-1-1 dispatchers.

First, never provide a phone to a child to use as a toy—even if the phone is no longer subscribed to an active cellular account. Unfortunately, many people give their old cellphones to small children to play with, not realizing that even though the phone can no longer make standard phone calls, the phone will never lose the ability to place a 9-1-1 call. Some parents opt

BEFORE THE CALL

to simply remove the battery from a phone, but even so, providing phones as toys is not recommended.

Second, if you're in a public place when an emergency occurs, take a moment to survey the scene around you. Are others already dialing 9-1-1 for help? Communicate with those around you. It's not necessary for more than one person to call for help for any particular situation. More 9-1-1 calls about an incident will not make help appear faster; in fact, more phone calls will only make the handful of 9-1-1 dispatchers answering those incoming calls busier, and could quite possibly delay their ability to send apparatus and emergency personnel to the incident. An incident such as a motor vehicle crash or vehicle fire on a highly traveled roadway will often result in many dozens of 9-1-1 calls to dispatchers reporting the same details. Look around and attempt to determine if someone has already called 9-1-1.

Third, many times an individual will be hesitant to call 9-1-1 for assistance and will instead call a trusted friend or family member to report a problem. The friend or family member will then recognize that the situation calls for an emergency response, and call 9-1-1 to request that emergency responders be sent to their friend or loved one's address. Instead, you should instruct the person in need to hang up and immediately dial 9-1-1 themselves. Whether it's a medical emergency or a police response, the 9-1-1 dispatcher needs to ask questions that often only the individual in the midst of the situation will be able to effectively answer.

4 SOCIAL MEDIA MYTHS ABOUT 9-1-1

Periodically, information will surface on social media suggesting that callers can dial certain other three-digit numbers to reach particular emergency dispatch centers. Many of these numbers are international emergency numbers used in other countries. Many telephone companies in the United States try to accommodate routing these same numbers just as 9-1-1 calls are routed, but these alternative numbers were never

intended to be utilized in the U.S. and using them is highly discouraged. If you're in the U.S. and you need emergency assistance, dial 9-1-1.

5 OBTAINING EMERGENCY HELP FROM YOUR WORKPLACE

Know how to dial 9-1-1 from your workplace phone. Do you need to dial a particular number to obtain an outside line before you dial 9-1-1 for emergency assistance? Some workplaces, such as certain large corporations, post-secondary educational institutions or military installations, may want those requesting emergency assistance to dial a local "on-campus" number instead of calling 9-1-1 directly. Although it's best that a 9-1-1 caller can see an emergency so they can answer detailed questions about the situation, check with your employer or location to determine how they prefer you to obtain emergency assistance.

6 ACCIDENTAL (MISDIALED) 9-1-1 CALLS

If you accidentally dial 9-1-1, do not hang up the phone. Simply stay on the line and explain to the dispatcher that you accidentally dialed 9-1-1 and that there's no problem at your location. Depending on the agency's policy concerning misdialled 9-1-1 calls, you may or may not still have a law enforcement officer show up to ensure that no one is in need of assistance, but it's important to let the dispatcher know that it was an accident and that there is no emergency at your location. This simple action could prevent the needless injury of a first responder racing to make sure your incomplete call is not an actual emergency.

7 PERSONS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS OR SERIOUS CHRONIC ILLNESSES

If you have a loved one who has a chronic medical problem or special needs or disabilities (severe diabetic, severe epileptic, autistic, deaf, blind, wheelchair-bound, etc.) it is a good idea to call your local emergency communication center and ask them if they want to place information in their CAD system about your loved one so that it's

available in a time of need. It's important to note that a caller should never assume that the dispatcher is looking at or has access to this pre-provided information, because even emergency dispatch centers are not immune from computer or human failures. But it cannot hurt to offer to provide the information before an emergency occurs.

8 HOME SECURITY SYSTEMS

As a standard practice, most alarm companies offer subscribers "panic buttons" on their alarm panels, which afford them the opportunity and ability to simply hit buttons for police, fire or medical services and then await a response. Generally, these buttons are a dangerous nuisance. They are often poorly placed in locations on the keypad where residents accidentally hit them when attempting to activate or disable their alarm upon their arrival or departure from their home or business. Accidents like these cause unnecessary false alarms and could result in the needless automobile crash and injury of a first responder responding to the false alarm. In addition, children often enjoy pushing the colorfully labeled blue, red and green buttons, not realizing their actions set into motion an emergency response of many variations.

Although these silent panic buttons are valuable if a subscriber needs to summon assistance and is unable to speak, it's always recommended that when someone needs emergency assistance, they actually pick up a phone and dial 9-1-1 to speak with a dispatcher rather than simply hitting a button on an alarm panel.

9 MEDICAL ALERT DEVICES

Many different brands and styles of medical alert devices are available to consumers. Some are monitored by an alarm company, some ring into registered nurses while others simply dial 9-1-1. Sometimes these devices are worn on a necklace while other times the devices are a box that sits near a phone connection.

Unfortunately, there are very few regulations governing the industry that operates and programs these devices,

and the results are dangerous. Some of these devices utilize cellular technology, similar to cellphones that are no longer active but can still dial 9-1-1. Although this type of device is convenient since there's often no monthly monitoring or subscriber fees, they don't allow the emergency dispatcher to call back the individual needing assistance if their call becomes disconnected. Citizens who desire to use a medical alert device of this nature should make sure 9-1-1 dispatchers can call back the monitor and re-connect with the individual needing help before they purchase the device. Units that aren't monitored by an alarm company or registered nurse, or that cannot be directly called back by a 9-1-1 dispatcher are not recommended.

10 TEXTING FOR EMERGENCY ASSISTANCE

In today's tech-savvy and gadget-filled

society, texting has become a common method of communicating. Public safety dispatch centers are slowly adding this capability, but they're doing so with very restrictive budgets. As a result, only limited jurisdictions throughout the country have systems in place that allow users to text and/or send pictures or video to 9-1-1. As 9-1-1 centers across the country replace their older technology with newer equipment, these capabilities will become more commonplace; however, at this time, it's recommended that if you need emergency police, fire or medical assistance from your local first responders, you simply *call* 9-1-1.

ARE YOU READY?

Citizens have clear expectations of the dispatchers who take their call at a 9-1-1 center: They want assistance as quickly as possible. However, many citizens have never considered that dispatchers

also have certain expectations of the callers requesting assistance. Taking a moment to familiarize yourself with the best practices of the 9-1-1 system outlined above will allow you to meet these expectations and make you and your loved ones better prepared to face an emergency. In fact, it may just save your life. **||PSC||**

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