

9-1-1 service offers texting as alternate way to communicate with dispatchers

Written by Administrator

Wednesday, 14 May 2014 08:07 -

Verizon Wireless customers may now use text messages to convey emergency situations to 9-1-1 operators in Scott County and Indiana.

Beginning today (Wednesday), the Indiana Statewide 9-1-1 Board, working with Scott County 9-1-1 Director Carol Richey and the 9-1-1 staff, initiated the alternate form of communication, which could prove valuable in certain situations.

Verizon Wireless and its technology partner, Telecommunications Systems (TCS), are the first carrier to provide the service. Three other carriers, T-Mobile, Sprint and AT&T, have also voluntarily agreed to provide the 9-1-1 texting service. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has indicated it wishes all other wireless carriers to provide "Text-to-911" by the end of this year.

9-1-1 is a local service provided at the county level throughout Indiana. INdigital Telecom of Fort Wayne designed, built and operates the IN9-1-1 network for the State 9-1-1 Board, which provides service to 9-1-1 agencies such as Scott County's system.

Sending a text to 9-1-1 can be useful in several situations, advised Richey. "We emphasize, however, that texting is not always instantaneous, which can be critical during a life-threatening emergency. It may take slightly longer to dispatch emergency services when someone uses a text to 9-1-1 because of the time involved. Consequently, customers should only use the texting option when actually making a call to 9-1-1 is not a good option for them," the director noted.

She went on further to explain that providing location information and the nature of the emergency encountered in the first text message is imperative. "We cannot emphasize that enough. Indiana communication centers like our Scott County system can only receive an approximate location of the cell phone being used. We will not be able to speak to the person sending the text," she advised.

She also explained that texters cannot use abbreviations or slang when sending messages about emergency situations. Richey related, "We need the intent of the dialogue to be as clear as possible so that we can get the right kind of help to the texter as quickly as possible."

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More vital points texters should understand before sending a text message include:

- Customers must be in the range of cell towers in the area. If customers are outside or near the edge of a county, the message may not reach the Emergency Communications Center.
- Texts sent to 9-1-1 have the same 160-character limit as other text messages.
- Verizon Wireless customers who use Usage Controls should remove this feature to ensure full “text to 9-1-1” capability.
- Verizon Wireless customers must have mobile phones which are capable of sending text messages.
- This solution is available for customers who use the SMS provided by Verizon Wireless. It is not available for third-party text messaging applications that can be downloaded to a phone or for applications that do not use SMS technology.
- The texting function should only be used for emergency situations that require an immediate response from police, fire or emergency medical services. Non-emergency issues should still be communicated to the local municipalities’ communications centers through their non-emergency lines. In Scott County, that non-emergency number is 752-5550.
- SMS 9-1-1 should only be used to communicate between emergency help and the texter. No pictures, video, other attachments or other recipients can be attached to the text message.

As she noted, Richey said there are situations in which a text message can be helpful to 9-1-1 dispatchers. These include:

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- When calling 9-1-1 is not possible, such as when the caller is deaf, hearing-impaired or speech-impaired.
- If the caller is otherwise unable to speak because of a medical condition, such as a stroke.
- If speaking aloud would be unsafe, as in the case of a home invasion or an abduction.

“We are pleased to be able to provide this alternate way to our Scott County residents of getting a message about an emergency to the 9-1-1 Center. We ask that people consider their options if facing a critical emergency and use the best method of getting us the vital information we need to serve them,” stated Richey.

The county began text messaging as part of a pilot program that started in January, 2013. Over the past year, many improvements have been introduced, training has taken place and public safety has worked diligently to meet the May 15 deadline set by the FCC.

For more information about texting emergency messages, the 9-1-1 Center’s non-emergency telephone number may be used, 812-752-5550.