

Have you heard that you can text 9-1-1 in an emergency? If not, you probably will start hearing a lot about it in the very near future. However, what you hear about this capability needs to be filtered through some facts that may not be as widely advertised.

On May 15, 2014, the four largest cellphone providers (AT&T, Sprint, T-Mobile, and Verizon) will voluntarily begin offering Text-to-911 service. Some smaller providers will also offer this service, but not all. Check with your service provider to verify if they are providing the service.

While Text-to-911 service may be provided by the carrier, it does not mean that Text-to-911 will be available in all areas. 9-1-1 Centers have to request that the carriers provide this service to their center before it will be available. If Text-to-911 is not available, either because the service provider is not providing the service or because the 9-1-1 center has not requested it, a bounce-back message will be received. These messages advise the "texter" that Text-to-911 service is not available and that a voice call to 9-1-1 should be placed. All carriers are required to provide these bounce-back messages as of September 30, 2013.

The Text-to-911 service that will be offered as of May 15th, is an interim solution to Text-to-911. It utilizes Short Message Service (SMS) protocol for delivery of the texts to the text control center (TCC). The text is processed at the TCC and delivered to the PSAP. Only SMS texts will be delivered to the TCC. Most smartphones utilize Multimedia Messaging Service (MMS) as the default protocol for text messaging. A smartphone user will need to enable SMS service on their device to Text-to-911. MMS messages, including picture and video messages will not be delivered to the TCC.

Anyone who has utilized SMS or MMS messaging has experienced the circumstance where a text message that was sent hours or even days prior is finally received by the recipient. Because Text-to-911 utilizes SMS protocol, these same types of delays can occur. Anyone utilizing Text-to-911 should be aware that, as with all text messages, 9-1-1 messages can take longer to receive, can get out of order or may not be received.. Users should also be aware that the texter's location information provided to the 9-1-1 operator will not be very accurate, due to technical limitations. The location information will provide the general area from which the texter initiated the text.

In Kansas, there are currently two methods of receiving Text-to-911, and both of these solutions have drawbacks. The first method is to receive the text messages over existing Telephone Device for the Disabled (TDD) equipment. A problem with this methodology is that a text conversation appears to the 9-1-1 equipment as a voice call. This means that a 9-1-1 line is tied up until the 9-1-1 operator either hangs up the text conversation or a timeout limit (usually 15 to 30 minutes) is reached. In a large scale event, such as a tornado or other disaster, large numbers of Text-to-911 messages could result in voice callers being unable to contact 911. Another major drawback in using TDD equipment to receive these messages is that the communications protocol used is slow. Every 9-1-1 operator that has used TDD knows that they finish typing their message and can then watch as it appears character by character on their screen.

The second method of receiving Text-to-911 is a dedicated, internet based, website that delivers text messages to the 9-1-1 center. The major concern with utilizing this technology is the inability to transfer the text message to another 9-1-1 center in case of misrouting of the call. Another concern is space limitations that exist in many of the 9-1-1 Centers within the State. Finding room to place another computer and/or monitor to dedicate to the website is extremely difficult in some Centers.

Once a 9-1-1 Center decides to make the request to begin receiving Text-to-911, the carrier will need to test in much the same manner that Phase II wireless was tested. Only after completion of this testing period will Text-to-911 go live.

Public education will be very important, should a Center decide to begin offering Text-to-911. The Coordinating Council recommends that public education be based on the theme of "Call if you can, text if you can't." Public education efforts should stress that Text-to-911 should be used by people who are:

1. Speech- or hearing-impaired;
2. In a situation where they would be exposed to danger if they were heard making a voice call (such as if they are hiding from a violent person);
3. In a location with insufficient cell coverage to place a voice call.

It takes much longer to convey the necessary information for a First Responder to be dispatched via a text message than by voice call. From the Text-to-911 trials that have been conducted, the average Text-to-911 "call" takes 7 minutes to complete while the average voice 9-1-1 call takes only 2 minutes complete. Old-fashioned telephone voice calls remain the surest way to get fast, accurate 9-1-1 responses.

Your public education effort should also include:

1. Text-to-9-1-1 is not available if you are roaming.
2. A text or data plan is required to place a text-to-9-1-1
3. Text-to-9-1-1 cannot include more than one person. Do not send your emergency text to anyone other than 9-1-1.
4. Do not text and drive!

PSAPs who may be looking to the Coordinating Council for recommendations on proceeding with Text-to-911 are encouraged to utilize the TDD option for receiving texts. This is a no cost option for PSAPs to receive the texts and demonstrates the PSAPs responsiveness to its citizen's needs and desires, especially the hearing and speech impaired community. The Council would further recommend that PSAPs

weighing this decision, do so on a regional basis, as opposed to an individual PSAP basis. Having a patchwork of bordering jurisdictions, some offering Text-to-911 service and others not, is going to cause confusion and frustration among the citizens of those jurisdictions. As always the Coordinating Council stands ready to assist PSAPs in any way possible.