



[For cellphone callers dialing 911, it's location, location, location](#)

By PAUL FEELY

New Hampshire Union Leader

Published Sep 4, 2011 at 3:00 am (Updated Sep 4, 2011)



(JOSH GIBNEY/UNION LEADER)

Supervisor Simon Fraser is hard at work at the Incident Planning and Operations Center in Concord.

The next time an emergency arises and you need to call 911 from your cellphone, chances are emergency personnel will locate you and respond.

The bad news? They may need your help doing so.

“When someone calls and says they are on a dirt road with a lot of trees, that’s not very helpful in a place like New Hampshire,” David Rivers, chief of operations for the statewide 911 call center, said.

“We wouldn’t even know what community to contact to send services. The most important piece of information we can get from a caller is

their location.”

National statistics show that almost a quarter of all American households have dropped landline phones in favor of wireless, but emergency officials caution that such a move, often made to cut household expenses, could come at the price of personal safety.

“Because the caller is not wired to a location, the 911 call does not present with a street address,” said Wanda Bowers, public information representative for the state’s Bureau of Emergency Communications and statewide 911 call center. “Instead, latitude and longitude data is provided by the cell carriers via satellites and towers. This technology isn’t perfectly accurate or consistent throughout the state.”

Bower adds: “Wired (landline) calls appear on the 911 dispatcher’s computer screen with a telephone number, street address and police, fire and EMS dispatch centers assigned to that telephone number. It happens instantly.” Perry Plummer, head of the New Hampshire Fire Standards and Training and



911 operators field calls at the Incident Planning and Operations Center in Concord. (JOSH GIBNEY/UNION LEADER)



Emergency Medical Services Division, notes that “there aren’t GPS units in the ambulances to put coordinates into.” “Sometimes they aren’t able to get a good location on a (cellphone) caller,” he said. It doesn’t happen often, but it has happened in the past. In those cases, we send as much apparatus as we have available to the area to beginning searching.”



911 operator Jeannie Brome fields a call at the Incident Planning and Operations Center in Concord.
JOSH GIBNEY/UNION LEADER

A rescue situation using coordinates from a caller occurred Aug. 3, when a four-person rescue team found a 20-year-old Candia man who became lost hiking in the 5,600-acre Pawtuckaway State Park. Two state conservation officers and two firefighters found Connor Vesey about two hours after his 7:30 p.m. call, using his GPS coordinates.

New Hampshire’s 911 system has been locating cellphones since the late 1990s. At the outset, 911 dispatchers only received data from the cell tower closest to the caller.

“Cellular technology has improved and is continually improving,” said Bowers. “All new cellphones sold in the U.S. today are capable of sending location data, latitude and longitude. Older cellphones that are not location-compatible do not send this data.”

Rivers said more and more calls are coming in from cell- phones.

“This past June, 78 percent of the calls that came in to the center came from cellphones,” said Rivers. “Last year at that time, it was 56 percent.”

In areas where cellphone reception can be considered spotty at best, calls to 911 can be bounced off several towers on their way to a dispatch center — occasionally one that’s out of state, Plummer said.

“Sometimes our 911 calls would be answered in Maine, especially ones from the south end of Dover, where the cell coverage was bad,” he said.

According to Bowers, when the state activated its 911 system in July 1995, New Hampshire had fewer than 50,000 cell- phone subscribers and Voice over Internet Provider (VoIP) technology was being offered for the first time. Sixteen years later, Bowers said wireless phones in New Hampshire outnumber wired phones nearly 2 to 1. Bowers said recent statistics show nearly 850,000 wireless



phones in use in the state, compared to 450,000 landline phones, with another 150,000 residents using VoIP technology for their telephone service.

“With these VoIP providers, if you move or use the service when you travel, it can be a problem,” said Shane Young, a 911 operator in the call center. “If you have a VoIP in New Hampshire and you move out of state, or call from another state, it will give your location as New Hampshire.”



Comments

Spike said:

Along with your coverage of street naming in Epping--which requires local knowledge--I think centralizing 911 response at the state level will do for us what having a gigantic, centralized "grid" did for the reliability of electric service. If this were a good idea, why wouldn't it be a better idea to have all emergency calls go to Washington, D.C.?

[\(Report Abuse\)](#)

September 4, 2011 7:13 am

Michael Layon said:

Spike-quit giving the big government statist ideas they might actually implement! The idea to centralize 911 in DC is so illogical and slavish I'm confident there are few elected representatives who would vote against it today.

[\(Report Abuse\)](#)

September 4, 2011 9:22 am

Howie Howe said:

911 is a farce! What it really is is nothing more than an answering service for the Police Dept. In Manchester now, if you dial them direct, the Police use a computer voice menu answering system that you have to work through the menu to actually reach a real human, and often what you get is voicemail. Calling 911 means you explain to them the problem, they call the Dept and tell them they have a call from your for them, then you have to repeat all over again what the emergency is - in other words 911 is a call screening service.

And does this speed up response time - hell NO! I live five blocks from the MPD, usual response time to police calls is 1.5 hours. To give you another example, the other day I went to pay my MetroPCS phone bill at East Side Plaza, the store was wide open, nobody was there, at 10:30 AM a sign was hanging on the front of the counter saying "I have gone to lunch and will be back in 30 minutes" - a lady was there who said she had been waiting almost that long, and along with another gentleman who said he had waited 20 minutes before deciding to leave, had wandered through the store to see if something was wrong, or somebody was hurt. Nobody was there so she called 911 to report what she felt was suspicious. I waited with her for about ten minutes, then I called 911, and go to the Manchester PD to report the same thing. Five minutes later the clerk returned and she scolded him for leaving the door unlocked when he said he was out delivering phones to customers. It took another fifteen minutes for him to call his boss to let him know what happened, and for both of us to pay our bills. I left and still there had been no Police response - while she stood there complaining out loud about how surprised she was that the police had not responded already, and I told her she was wrong for ever thinking they would respond quickly. Constant experience with the MPD in responding to 911 calls proves me right. The only thing 911 is good for is logging the time of the report, it does nothing to guarantee a response in a timely manner.

Now as to cell phones, both of us called 911 using our cell phones and told them clearly where we were. GPS is great and effective only when the caller does not know where they are, but so many today that live here have out of state cell phone numbers, which I find often as a Property



manger for several landlords. So to think that bouncing off an out of state tower is the only problem with cell phone contact with 911 would be deceiving, and further does not address the use of disposable phones which could be used to misdirect services. Timely response is the key to the whole issue, and that supposedly is what 911 was created to guarantee.

[\(Report Abuse\)](#)

September 4, 2011 9:39 am

Jim Richmond said:

First, great job to the Union Leader and Mr. Feely for exposing this serious problem with our state's 911 system. Our emergency response system clearly needs an upgrade. I'm sure the folks answering the phone are doing the best that they can, but we have to get them better tools.

At a minimum, dispatchers should see the caller's address and location on a map anytime GPS information is provided. Off the shelf software that can perform this translation has been available for at least a decade. From there, it would seem that dispatchers should be able to electronically send the caller's information to emergency responders to avoid verbal communication errors. I wonder what best practices for this are in other states and how we compare?

Certainly, our current system can't represent the state-of-the-art. If that's true, I'd bet anything that the cost-per-life-saved for an overhaul of this system would be so small that it could easily be justified.

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September 4, 2011 3:29 pm

John Rowe said:

Having spent 2 years in Florida recently, I have noticed they have the same problem. Cell phones are not reliable, and many towns have duplicate street names, confusing 911 dispatchers. It would seem GPS location would be more reliable. I have On Star service in my car which gives me instant access to 911 with GPS location for any emergency, mine or someone else. It will automatically track and locate any vehicle that is stolen with GPS, and it monitors the vehicle's computer for impact and engine problems.

[\(Report Abuse\)](#)

September 4, 2011 8:32 pm

Steve Johnson said:

Most VOIP providers like Vonage and Ooma make a big deal about updating your location address. If you don't, that is on you.

[\(Report Abuse\)](#)

September 5, 2011 9:04 am

Alan Yates said:

You guys bounced around the issue and usually end up blaming 911 for slow response times. 911 connects you and then the ball is in the agencies court. Mr. Rowe, On*Star doesn't give you instant access to 911. It gives you access to an On Star operator who then has to dial 911 for you. It's still a good, albeit expensive, choice. As for having electronic transfer of ANI/ALI, (automatic number indicator/ automatic location indicator) New Hampshire's two 911 call centers have this and have had it for years. New Hampshire's E-911 system is one of the absolute best in



the nation. I was a police officer in Georgia for 25 years and know how that big a state can really generate 911 calls. Every town or county there seems to have a 911 center. When I went to work at NH 911 in 2001 I was literally amazed at the dedication and professionalism that the Emergency Medical Dispatchers working there demonstrate on every call. There have been uncounted lives saved and situations resolved through their efforts. I am retired from NH911 now but I still admire their efforts and dedication. Some of you folks who criticize and complain should call Wanda and ask for a tour. I think you would be pleasantly surprised. I thank Director Cheney and Assistant Director DeNutte and all of the staff at New Hampshire 911 for the job they do.

[\(Report Abuse\)](#)

September 6, 2011 7:29 pm