

911 Worth a Thousand Words

By Reg P. Wydeven
August 20, 2011

Technology is a wonderful thing. Without it, life would be much more difficult. For example, a friend of mine ran into 1980s professional wrestling icon The Iron Sheik in a Milwaukee tavern. In exchange for a mere \$20, the Sheik put him into his signature move, the Camel Clutch. Normally, such an account would seem way too awesome to be true. However, because my friend had his camera phone, photographic evidence corroborates his legendary tale.

With a click of his phone, my friend secured his place in the hall of fame of coolness, for his photograph is worth a million words. Knowing this, and the fact that nearly fifty percent of 911 calls are made from cell phones, the Federal Communications Commission is overhauling the 911 system. Dubbed "Next Generation 911," the new system allows anyone with a mobile device to reach 911 in case of an emergency, in any mobile fashion, including text messages, videos, photos, or traditional voice calls.

In addition to making 911 more accessible, the FCC intends the new system to be able to determine the exact location of the mobile device calling for help.

Next Generation 911, or NG911, was introduced by FCC chairman Julius Genachowski at the Association of Public Safety Communications Officials conference in Philadelphia. He explained the need for the upgrade, stating, "It's hard to imagine that airlines can send text messages if your flight is delayed, but you can't send a text message to 911 in an emergency."

Genachowski went on to say that, "The unfortunate truth is that the capability of our emergency response communications has not ... kept pace with what ordinary people now do every day with communications devices," so "the shift to NG911 can't be about if, but about when and how."

The genesis for NG911 was the 2007 Virginia Tech campus shootings where trapped students could not text 911 to call for help. Telecommunications experts claim the industry continues to evolve, as texting with cell phones has replaced talking in the teen demographic.

In response, Genachowski wants a program where a first responder has "instant access to multiple video streams and sources of information during an armed robbery," or a car accident victim "could send pictures of injuries and the scene to 911, which EMTs could review in advance." Once on the scene, he elaborated, "EMTs could send critical information back to the hospital, including on-site scans and diagnostic information, increasing odds of recovery."

According to Genachowski, dispatchers would be able to "access hospital capacity data, real-time road and traffic conditions, and video of the crash scene from traffic cameras to decide who to dispatch and where crash victims should be transported."

The only problem with the lofty program is obtaining funding. This may be the biggest roadblock for NG911, for implementing the program will require the FCC to coordinate a massive effort with many local, state and federal government agencies and law enforcement.

Another potential problem may be misinterpreting the photographs. For instance, if 911 operators received a picture of the Iron Sheik applying the Camel Clutch to a hapless victim in a bar, they would probably assume it was an emergency, when in fact, it would be one of the coolest things of all time.

This article originally appeared in the Appleton Post-Crescent newspaper and is reprinted with the permission of Gannett Co., Inc. © 2011 McCarty Law LLP. All rights reserved.