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TEXT-TO-911 IS HERE: LEARN HOW TO USE IT PROPERLY

Whether reporting a crime or an injury, 911 systems provide a quick and reliable way for Minnesotans to report emergencies. However, there are several scenarios where having to verbally speak with a dispatcher may be difficult or perhaps impossible. In situations such as a burglary, domestic violence, or mass shootings, speaking on the phone may endanger the speaker. The ability to text 911 rather than call could save lives by allowing victims to communicate with 911 silently. Another important purpose behind the push to deploy text-to-911 capabilities was the needs of the deaf and hard of hearing community. For individuals with hearing or speaking disabilities, making a voice call may not be possible.

Until last year, text-to-911 capabilities were not available in Minnesota. However, on December 5, 2017, the Minnesota Department of Public Safety (“DPS”) announced that Minnesotans could use text-to-911 capabilities statewide. Here are several things DPS advises to keep in mind when using a text-to-911 service.

First, an individual should only text 911 if unable to make a voice call. There are several reasons why a voice call is preferable to text. Despite the ability of many to rapidly type words on a touchscreen, oral communication is almost always quicker. Second, the technological capability enabling the determination of the geographic location of the device originating the communication is much better during a voice call than through a text. Third, language translation service is not yet available for text-to-911. Finally, if an individual tries to text 911 when they are outside of Minnesota, their text may or may not be received. In areas that have not adopted text-to-911 capabilities, the FCC requires all wireless carriers to send individuals a “bounce back” message. According to the FCC these messages must include two essential pieces of information: (1) that text-to-911 is not available; and (2) that the consumer should try to contact 911 using another means. An example of a bounce

back message is “There is no text-to-911 service available. Make a voice call to 911 or use another means to contact emergency services.”

If unable to make a voice call, DPS lists several tips to help ensure text messages are transmitted effectively:

- Enter the numbers 911 in the “To” field.
- Text message should include the caller’s location and type of emergency.
- Be ready to answer questions and follow instructions.
- Use simple words.
- Do not use abbreviations, emojis, pictures or slang. (e.g. BRB, IDK, THX, 2day and BTW, for example)
- Do not text and drive.

When texting 911 the dispatcher will likely respond and ask for permission to call back. For deaf or hard of hearing callers, or for callers otherwise unable to speak on the phone, inform the dispatcher of the disability in the initial text.

Finally, the same standard that applies to calling 911 applies to texting 911 - falsely reporting a crime is a crime. For mistaken or “pocket dialed” 911 communications, the caller should send a second text or call the dispatcher to let them know there is no emergency.

For more information about Text-to-911 in Minnesota, visit the DPS web page at: <https://dps.mn.gov/divisions/ecn/programs/911/Pages/text-to-911.aspx>