

A Citizen's Guide to Best Practices of the 9-1-1 System

By Bryan E. Wolfe

[For this installment of the Indiana Law Enforcement Journal, author Bryan Wolfe has prepared an article on 9-1-1 and emergency response services. What he writes is not only good information for a private citizen but also useful for police officers who must advise citizens on these issues.]

The online search engine Cha-Cha suggests that the average citizen calls 9-1-1 once or twice during their lifetime. Unfortunately, most emergencies do not make advance appointments or delay their untimely occurrence based on human convenience. Therefore, it is advantageous for all citizens to pre-plan and become familiar with best practices regarding the utilization of 9-1-1 emergency services.

Before an Emergency

Make sure your address numbers are clearly displayed on the front of your home and mailbox. The numbers should be made from a reflective material, and *visible from the street* not just on a sunny day, but during inclement weather or at night; if responders cannot quickly and clearly see your address, help *will* likely be delayed.

Determine your dispatch center's non-emergency telephone number and post it on your refrigerator or in another prominent location near your phone.

Do NOT program the number 9-1-1 into a speed dial button on your cellular or home phone. Many thousands of inadvertent 9-1-1 calls are placed by phones programmed into a speed dial button then being jostled around in pockets or purses. Know when to utilize 9-1-1 and when to utilize the non-emergency seven-digit number to your dispatch center. Is your call 9-1-1 worthy? If you are reporting a crime-in-progress, a crime which "just occurred" or if you are needing a Fire or Emergency Medical Service response, you should call 9-1-1. If you are reporting a non-emergency incident such as an incident where the suspects have already departed a scene and there is nothing fleeting or life-threatening occurring, call the non-emergency number for your dispatch center. For example, if you arrive home and observe a man you don't recognize run out your front door with your television set, you need to dial 9-1-1 immediately. However, if you want to report that your cousin stole your flat screen television last week and won't return it, utilize the seven-digit non-emergency number.

During an Emergency

When you dial 9-1-1, stay on the line and do not hang up. You might notice longer-than-normal silence before the phone starts ringing because 9-1-1 calls are routed differently than any other call you make. Do not hang up; the call will ring through. Remain on the line until you are told by the 9-1-1 dispatcher that it is okay to hang up.

Emergencies don't occur to most people every day, so your Adrenalin will be pumping. Take a deep breath, and begin to listen very carefully. If you focus intently on listening, you will be less likely to become excited and shout; since many dispatchers wear headsets, shouting is unpleasant for them. Do the best you can to speak at a normal speed and volume level.

The dispatcher is going to ask you questions that he or she needs to know and input that information *in a particular order* into a Computer Aided Dispatch system, or CAD system. Answer only the question

A Citizen's Guide to Best Practices of the 9-1-1 System

By Bryan E. Wolfe

asked, then stop talking and be quiet. Do not speak unless you are spoken to; this is critical because what seems like silence to you may not in fact be silence at all. Often, the dispatcher may be speaking on a radio to responding police, fire, or EMS responders to get help started to your location. It is important to understand that many times their voices will be muted to the caller on the 9-1-1 line during these radio transmissions; so while the caller only hears silence, the dispatcher may be listening to multiple users of a complex multi-channel radio system. If you begin talking, it might force the dispatcher to stop talking or listening to emergency responders, which in turn will delay help getting to your emergency.

Problems faced by 9-1-1 Dispatchers

NEVER provide a phone to a child to utilize as a toy – EVEN if the phone is no longer subscribed to an active cellular account. Unfortunately, many people provide their old cell phones to small children to play with, not realizing that *even though their phone can no longer make standard phone calls, the phone will never lose the ability to place a 9-1-1 call!* While some parents opt to simply remove the battery from a phone, providing phones as toys is not recommended.

If you are in a public place when an emergency occurs, take a moment to survey the scene around you. Are others already dialing 9-1-1 for help? Communicate with those around you. It is not necessary for more than one person to call for help for any particular situation. More 9-1-1 calls about an incident will not magically make help appear faster; in fact, more phone calls will only make the handful of 9-1-1 dispatchers busier answering those incoming calls, and quite possibly will delay their ability to actually start apparatus and emergency personnel to the incident.

Many times an individual (often an elderly person) will be hesitant to call 9-1-1 for assistance and will instead call a trusted friend or family member to report a problem. The friend or family member will then recognize the situation calls for an emergency response, and call 9-1-1 to request an emergency response to their friend or loved one's address. It is recommended to instruct the friend or loved one to hang up their phone and dial 9-1-1 immediately. Whether it is a medical emergency or a police response that is needed, the 9-1-1 dispatcher needs to ask questions that often only the individual in the midst of the situation will be able to effectively answer.

Social Media Myths about 9-1-1

Periodically, information will surface on social media suggesting that callers can dial certain other three digit numbers to reach particular emergency dispatch centers. Many of these numbers are International Emergency numbers used in other countries. Many telephone companies in the United States try to accommodate routing these same numbers just as a 9-1-1 call is routed, but these alternative numbers were never intended to be utilized in the United States and it is highly discouraged; utilize 9-1-1 if you need emergency assistance in the USA.

Obtaining Emergency Help from your Workplace

Know how to dial 9-1-1 from your workplace phone. Do you need to dial a particular number to obtain an outside line before you dial 9-1-1 for emergency assistance? Some workplaces such as certain large corporations, post-secondary educational institutions, or military installations may want those

A Citizen's Guide to Best Practices of the 9-1-1 System

By Bryan E. Wolfe

requesting emergency assistance to dial a local "on-campus" number instead of calling 9-1-1 directly. While it is best that a 9-1-1 caller can see an emergency so they can answer detailed questions about the situation, check with your employer or location to determine how they prefer you to obtain emergency assistance.

Accidental (Misdialed) 9-1-1 calls

If you accidentally dial 9-1-1, do not hang up the phone. Simply stay on the line and explain to the dispatcher that you accidentally dialed 9-1-1 and that there is no problem at your location. Depending on the agency's policy concerning misdialed 9-1-1 calls, you may or may not still have a law enforcement officer show up to ensure that no one is in need of assistance, but it is important to let the dispatcher know that it was an accident and that there is no emergency at your location. *This simple action could prevent the needless injury of a first responder racing to make sure your incomplete call is not an actual emergency.*

Persons with Special Needs or Serious Chronic Illnesses

If you have a loved one who has a chronic medical problem or one who has special needs or disabilities (severe diabetic, severe epileptic, autistic, deaf, blind, wheelchair-bound, etc.) it is a good idea to call your local Emergency Communication Center and ask them if they might like to place information in their Computer Aided Dispatch system about your loved one so that it might be available in a time of need. It is important to note that a caller should never assume that the dispatcher is looking at or has access to this pre-provided information because even Emergency Dispatch centers are not immune from computer or human failures – but it cannot hurt to offer to provide the information before an emergency occurs so that the center might choose to make an appropriate note in their Computer Aided Dispatch or Records Management System.

Police, Fire, or Medical Panic Alarms

As a standard practice most alarm companies offer subscribers "panic buttons" on their alarm panels which afford them the opportunity and ability to simply hit buttons for either police, fire, or medical services and then await a response. Generally, these buttons are a dangerous nuisance. They are often poorly placed in locations on the keypad where residents accidentally hit them when attempting to activate or disable their alarm upon their arrival or departure from their home or business. Accidents like these cause unnecessary false alarms and could result in the needless automobile crash and injury of a first responder responding to the false alarm.

Medical Alert Devices

Many different brands and styles of medical alert devices are available to consumers. Some are monitored by an alarm company, some ring into Registered Nurses, while others simply dial 9-1-1. Sometimes these devices are worn on a necklace while other times the devices are a box which sits near a phone connection. Unfortunately, there are very few regulations governing the industry which operates and programs these devices, and the results are dangerous. Some of these devices utilize cellular technology which mirrors cellular phones which no longer are subscribed to a cellular provider. While this type of device is convenient since there is often no monthly monitoring or subscriber fees, this results in an inability for the emergency dispatcher to call back the individual needing assistance if

A Citizen's Guide to Best Practices of the 9-1-1 System

By Bryan E. Wolfe

their call becomes disconnected. Citizens who desire to utilize a medical alert device of this nature should make sure 9-1-1 dispatchers can call back the monitor and re-contact the individual needing help before they purchase the device. Units which are not monitored by an alarm company, registered nurse, or cannot be directly called back by a 9-1-1 dispatcher are not recommended.

Texting for Emergency Assistance

Just as texting in today's tech savvy and gadget-filled society has become commonplace, so too have public safety dispatch centers with very restrictive budgets. Limited jurisdictions throughout the country have systems in place which allow users to text and or send pictures or video to 9-1-1. As 9-1-1 centers across the country replace their older technology with newer equipment, these capabilities will become more commonplace; however, at this time, it is recommended that if you need emergency police, fire, or emergency medical assistance from your local first responders that you simply call 9-1-1.

Citizens have clear expectations of the dispatchers who take their call at a 9-1-1 center: they want assistance as quickly as possible. However, many citizens might never have taken into consideration that dispatchers also have certain expectations of the callers requesting assistance. Taking a moment to familiarize yourself with the best practices of the 9-1-1 system outlined above will allow you to meet these expectations, and make you and your loved ones better prepared to face an emergency; it just might save your life.

About the Author

Beginning public service as a dispatcher in 1996, Bryan Wolfe graduated from the University of Indianapolis with a Bachelor of Science Degree in Criminal Justice, and also from the Indiana Law Enforcement Academy Class in 1999. Wolfe has served the Central Indiana public safety community in many capacities, including Dispatcher, Police Officer, Deputy Sheriff, Fire Dispatcher, Field Training Officer, Detective, Sergeant, and Director of Communications – becoming the 7th person in the State of Indiana to be certified as a COM-L. He has worked as a Watch Officer for the Indiana Intelligence Fusion Center, and a member of the Indiana Department of Homeland Security where he was awarded the Director's Excellence Award. A Certified Firefighter, Wolfe also has greater than 77 certifications in many public safety disciplines, including many in Emergency Management where during disasters has served in multiple positions in the State Emergency Operations Center. Comments may be e-mailed to bryanwolfe1@gmail.com.