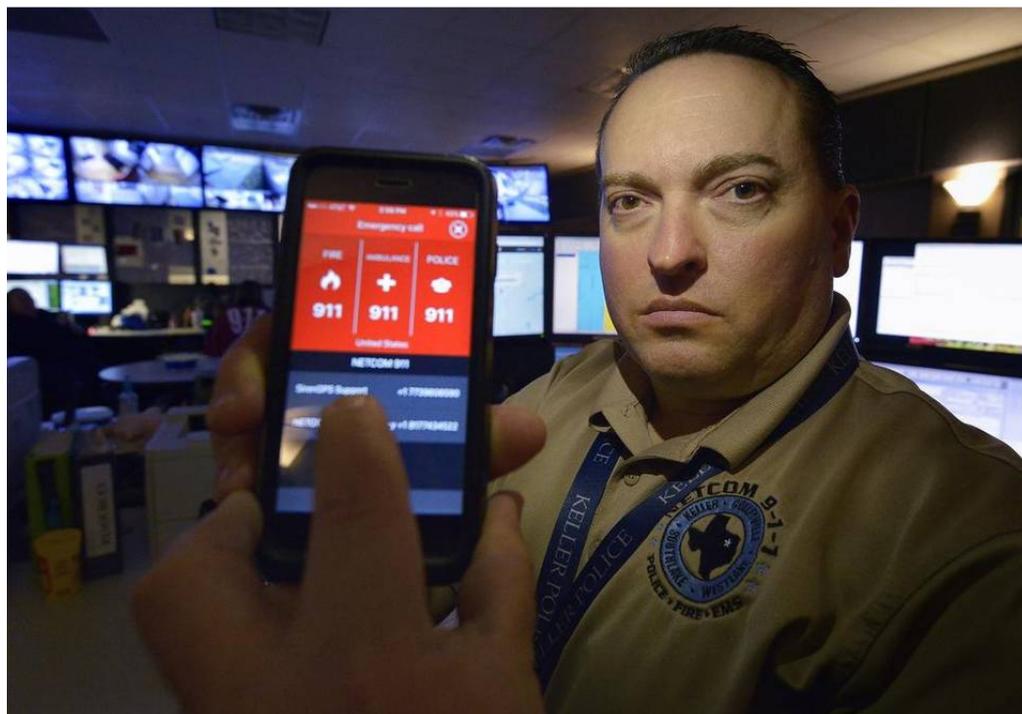


NORTHEAST TARRANT MARCH 10, 2017 2:12 PM

911 app used at Northeast Tarrant dispatch center could save more lives



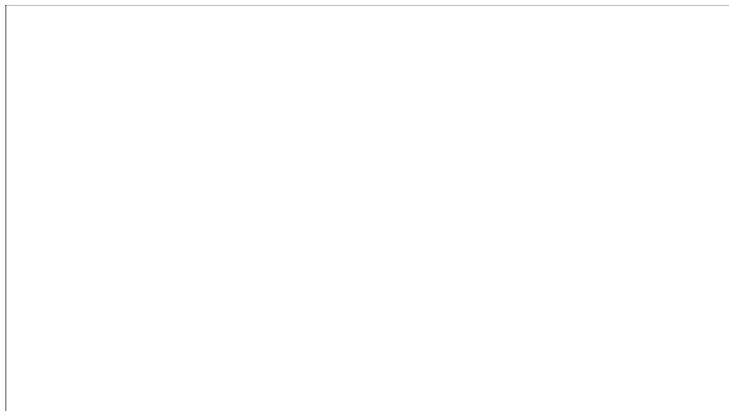
BY MARK DAVID SMITH
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KELLER — A 911 smartphone app is giving residents of Northeast Tarrant County better service, but few of them are taking advantage of the next-level technology, which could save lives by pinpointing locations better than traditional technology.

In December, the Northeast Tarrant Communications Center became the first dispatch center in the U.S. to use SirenGPS, branding it “Uber for 911.”

The app lets users call 911 in as many steps or fewer than calling traditional 911. It connects faster, gives more accurate location information and can instantly give dispatchers the caller’s name, address, medical history and emergency contacts.

ADVERTISING



The app worked Wednesday night during a five-hour 911 outage for some AT&T wireless customers across the country. NETCOM did not receive any emergency calls from AT&T customers during that time, but some SirenGPS test calls did pop up on dispatchers’ screens.

“The reality is Uber could find you faster and easier than traditional 911 because they use an app-based product with GPS technology, and that’s a huge problem when more than 80 percent of our calls are now coming from cellphones,” regional dispatch manager Warren Dudley said.

Often, on traditional 911 calls from cellphones, the location information shows up as the nearest cell tower, the news release said. The Federal Communications Commission will require cellphone carriers to deliver a “dispatchable” location — an accurate location within 50 meters — for just 40 percent of cellphone calls by next year.

Dudley keeps records of calls — tests and real ones — that show the imprecise locations dispatchers can receive from traditional 911 calls. Sometimes they show up as cell towers a mile away, sometimes they’re closer, but rarely do they give precise and accurate locations.

In contrast, SirenGPS delivers the caller’s pinpointed location for more than 90 percent of calls, and will work even when cell service isn’t available, a city of Keller news release said. Users can also upload profile information, such as medical history and emergency contacts, and indicate which emergency service they need.

The news release cited an FCC study that estimates using the app-based technology compared to traditional cellphone calls could save more than 10,000 lives per year in the U.S. That number is based on a study of the Salt Lake City area and multiplied to the scale of the country’s total population.

Obstacles facing 911

The Northeast Tarrant Communications Center fields 911 calls for Colleyville, Keller, Southlake and Westlake, serving almost 100,000 residents. About 5,000 have downloaded the app, said Mark Witt, a regional sales manager for SirenGPS.

Witt and the NETCOM cities continue to promote the app, urging residents to download it, just in case.

“NETCOM has information posted on the websites, they’re going to put fliers in the water bills and all are continuing to reach out to their communities,” Witt said.

Dudley said NETCOM gets about one call from a SirenGPS app a week. Northeast Tarrant is the first dispatch center to use the service, but Witt said about 20 others are interested in implementing it, and other, similar apps have been implemented in other parts of the country.

The possibility of multiple apps in one market is the biggest potential problem with privately owned 911 alternatives, said Kelli Merriweather, executive director of Texas’ Commission on State Emergency Communications.

“These apps are well-intended, but they vary across the board and we’re concerned the proliferation of options will confuse the public about how to call 911,” Merriweather said.

Dudley said he only intends for the dispatch center to work with one 911 app, and SirenGPS was considered the best option for NETCOM.

Apps like SirenGPS can be the right decision, but they may be a temporary solution to a much larger issue, Merriweather said.

The biggest problem traditional 911 faces, Merriweather said, is that it is “operating on a very old and soon to be obsolete infrastructure.” It’s currently using traditional phone lines and can’t use the IP-based digital networks that smartphones use to connect to the internet.

“It can’t interface with newer technology, and it can’t take advantage of the information that digital networks can provide,” Merriweather said.

At the national and state level, plans are in place to revamp traditional 911, putting it on digital infrastructure, Merriweather said. For the state commission, which covers about 300 Texas dispatch centers, mostly in rural areas, there’s a lot of work ahead as traditional 911 tries to convert to digital, called “Next Gen 911.”

Merriweather said Next Gen 911 is expected to be fully implemented by 2022. Users will be able to provide dispatchers with more accurate location and health information, and other things like photos and videos.

Dudley said that by the time Next Gen 911 is launched, SirenGPS will have also improved. He expects the app to continue to outpace traditional 911 technology.

‘More convinced than ever’

The city of Keller, where NETCOM is headquartered, also uses SirenGPS as its mass notification system. The contract with SirenGPS is \$14,400 per year, according to Keller spokeswoman Rachel Reynolds.

SirenGPS is intended to be a supplement to traditional 911, not a replacement.

“The beauty of this product is that it will run parallel to our traditional capabilities and improve our speed, accuracy and efficiency,” Dudley said when the service began three months ago. “It is going to revolutionize our ability to take care of our residents.”

On Friday, Dudley said he was confident in the safety of Northeast Tarrant.



It was a good decision for

“Technology is going to change all the time, and you can either work with it and understand it, or turn your head,” he said.

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