

NCDHH recently requested clarification on the recent media publication released about Text-to-911 with the City of Lincoln's 911 Center. After meeting with representatives from the Mayor's Office, their Public Safety Director, Tom Casady, has accepted our request to release more details about their 911 emergency call services accessibility plans for those who live or visit the Lincoln area. We thank Tom Casady for his article below.

911 and Lincoln's Deaf & Hard of Hearing Community

By

Tom Casady

Public Safety Director, City of Lincoln

During my entire career in public safety, Lincoln's emergency services have been prepared to accept text telephone calls from people with hearing impairments using TTYs or TTY software, or telephone relay services. We still are, and every workstation in our 911 Center is equipped with the interface to allow anyone to accept TTY calls. This process works just fine, so long as text calls are primarily used by those citizens who are deaf or hard of hearing. The 911 Center handles hundreds of thousands of incoming calls, and if a large percentage of those were coming in as text, rather than voice, we would have problems. We need to reserve text contacts for those people whose situation necessitates such a response.

I have a young adult daughter whose smartphone rarely leaves her hand. I can't call her, because she doesn't answer the phone. If I send her a text message, though, she's usually back to me in an instant. This is the way it seems to be with people under the age of around 35 or so. They've become accustomed to using text to chat with their friends, to contact their professor, even to order their take-out pizza or summon a taxi. What we don't want to happen is for young people, who do not have hearing issues, to incorrectly believe that a text to the 911 Center is the best way to report a prowler in their parking lot, or an injury traffic crash. Unfortunately, we are seeing a trickle of hearing people who are trying to do just that, and we are concerned that it could be a growing trend.

Right now, only TTY users can communicate with Lincoln's 911 Center via text, but this is changing. Telephone carriers are implementing text-to-911 solutions that will make it technically possible for anyone to send a text message to 911 the same way they would send a text message to a friend. The problem for us in Lincoln--and many other 911 centers around the country--is that we are not prepared to deal with a large volume of these messages on the receiving end, *except* those coming from TTY users. Think of how the typical 911 call from a hearing person is processed: the call-taker is wearing a telephone headset, and speaks to the caller, gathering information and asking questions. As he or she does so, the call-taker is keystroking the pertinent details into the computer-aided dispatch system, ultimately forwarding those details to a dispatch console, where the appropriate responders are radio dispatched to the incident. With a text message, the call-taker would need to both interact with the caller via a keyboard, and also transcribe that information into the computer-aided dispatch software. While this works fine

for TTY calls, which constitute a relatively small portion of the total, it would quickly overwhelm staff if text messages became the common way people tried to reach the 911 Center. Moreover, text messages would be arriving without the location information that we presently receive for TTY and voice calls.

As time passes, I suspect that the vendors of 911 telephone systems and computer-aided dispatch software will find new and innovative ways of overcoming some of the current obstacles to wider use of text-to-911. A major nationwide initiative to develop and deploy "next Generation 911" will be shaping a new future in 911 communications over the next several years. I'm looking forward to that, because the potential exists for this changing technology to enable some other valuable features, such as the ability of callers to attach images or even video. Imagine a witness to a hit & run accident being able to send a photo of the suspect vehicle directly to the dispatcher, for example.

For now, however, we need to consistently tell hearing citizens that the preferred way to contact 911 is with a voice call--not a text message. There are some very limited situations in which a text message to 911 by a hearing citizen would be appropriate--especially for a caller who is in a situation where he or she needs to remain silent. For the vast majority of circumstances, though, hearing citizens should make a voice call, and citizens with hearing impairments should continue to use their TTY, TTY software, or relay as the most reliable and efficient ways to communicate with emergency services.