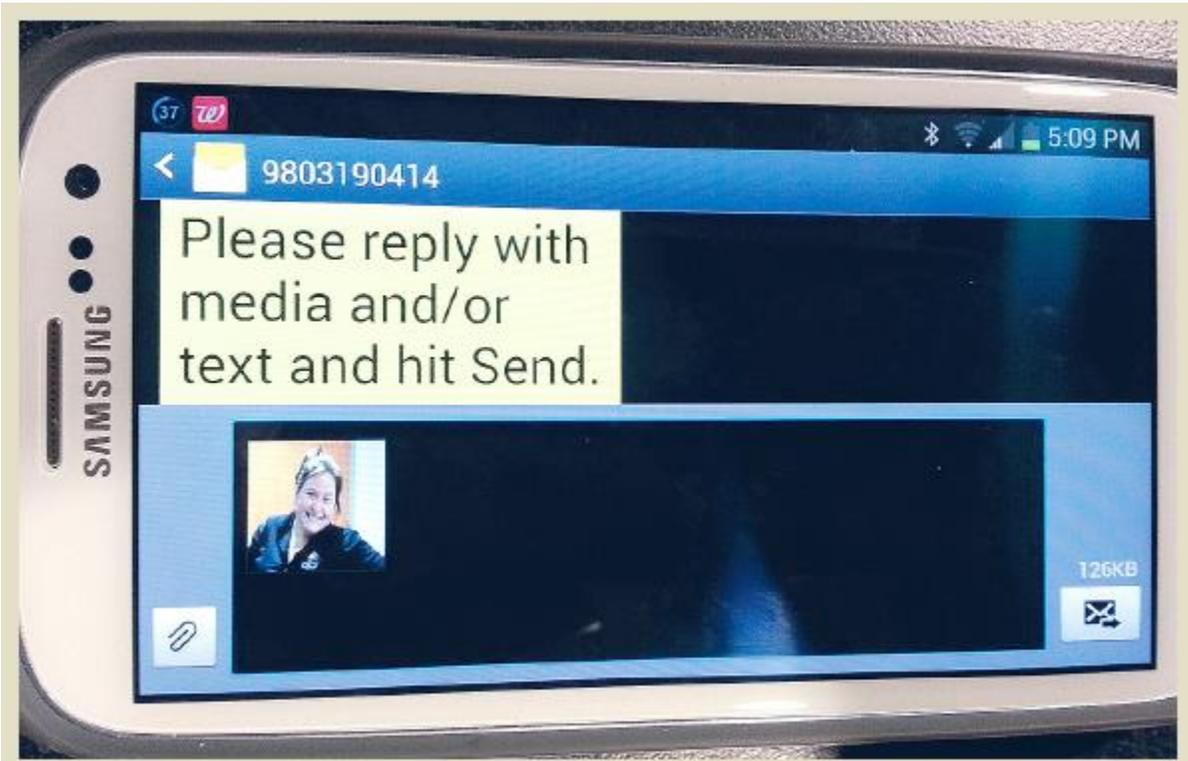


Counties evolve 911 in the Internet, smartphone age

By CHARLES TAYLOR, CHARLIE BAN Feb. 24, 2014



Photo

courtesy of Union County, N.C.

911 callers in Union County, N.C. can use their smartphones to send photos or video to the county's emergency communications center.

Union County, N.C. has launched a new generation of 911 technology that allows mobile phone callers to send images and video to the county's emergency communications center.

It's already proved its value several times since it debuted Dec. 6 last year, including helping to locate an attempted suicide victim, according to Larry Brinker, the county's director of emergency communications.

A caller to 911 uploaded a photo of a friend who had tried to cut his wrists. "We sent a picture to EMS so that they could look at the wounds, and then we sent to picture to law enforcement so they could keep a lookout for the person," he said.

"They were successful of finding him within a couple of hours of the call."

Here's how it works. A mobile phone or smartphone caller dials 911; if they have additional content to transmit with the call, the call taker sends them a link via text message. After clicking it, they can upload an image or short video from their phone. It all occurs while still on the phone with the 911 operator.

"As for incoming text and video, it's all controlled by the dispatcher, because you can't send in anything until I as the dispatcher send you a link," Brinker said. That prevents random data from being transmitted without proper identifying information.

As the migration from landline to mobile-only phone users continues, 911 call centers public safety answering points (PSAP), in industry lingo will need to be able to receive their communications seamlessly.

Generically speaking, Union County's is "next generation 911" (NG9-1-1) technology or more accurately a "new" generation, according to officials with the National Emergency Number Association (NENA), the NG9-1-1 standards-setting entity. NG9-1-1 has a specific definition and established technical standards, which lay a foundation for more widespread adoption of systems like Union County's. NENA, working with industry and governments, began developing the technical requirements for Next Gen 9-1-1 more than a decade ago.

The Federal Communications Commission defines NG9-1-1 as a system architecture to enable a transition to a broadband digital, Internet Protocol (IP)-based foundation for the delivery of multimedia 911 "calls" or "events," as they're coming to be known since they won't strictly be traditional voice calls. That information could include automatic-crash-notification data from cars equipped to transmit it, sensory alarms and building monitoring data, all of which could aid in emergency response.

"From a county perspective, next generation 911 provides a great deal of opportunity," said NENA CEO Brian Fontes. "Ultimately, I believe that the operational cost associated with the provision of next generation 911 will be less than the current process where each PSAP is provisioned to accept 911 calls."

That's what's happening in rural southern Illinois, where a collaboration that began with three counties in 2006 has grown to include 17 counties. The Counties of Southern Illinois Next Generation 9-1-1 Project, CSI for short, consists of Alexander, Clay, Franklin, Gallatin, Jackson, Jefferson Johnson, Massac, Perry Pulaski, Randolph, Richland, Saline, Union, Wabash, White and Williamson counties. They range in population from 5,600 (Gallatin) to 66,000 (Williamson).

Pat Lustig, Jackson County 911 director, is the project manager.

"We were all stuck in old technology and we need to transition to new technology," he said. The counties created CSI as a nonprofit entity to execute their plans.

