

Let's Talk 9-1-1

Join us Monday, April 29 at 2 p.m. for an online chat discussing the importance of 9-1-1. Steve Souder, Director, Department of Public Safety Communications (the 9-1-1 center) will answer your questions. This is a great opportunity to learn about 9-1-1, how it works and what the next generation of 9-1-1 will provide.

Stephen Souder : Welcome to the Ask Fairfax! chat on 9-1-1. I'm Steve Souder, Director of the Department of Public Safety Communications (the 9-1-1 Center). I'm looking forward to chatting with you and answering your questions on 9-1-1, how it works, what you need to know and the next generation of 9-1-1.

Rich : How can I find out if my cellphone transmits its location if I call 911? It's an old phone (may date back as far as 2001). I once e-mailed your people about this and got back a very complex reply, which unfortunately didn't help me. I'd be happy to bring it to the 911 center if they might be able to help me in person. Thanks for your help, and for all the good work you do.

Stephen Souder : Rich, you have a very interesting question. There are not many cell phones in use today that have been around since 2001. I would be happy if you would email me at steve.souder@fairfaxcounty.gov and I will work with you at determining whether or not your current cell phone is the type that will allow its exact location to be identified. There are two technologies that allow for this: one is the GPS global position satellite that will "read" the chip that may be embedded in your phone allowing for the latitude and longitude to be identified. The other technology uses a similar technique referred to as "triangulation."

Rich : When will 911 in Fairfax County start accepting 911 texts? Seems that a progressive county like ours is way behind the times on this...

Stephen Souder : Rich, your question is very timely given what we are all reading in the news relative to being able to text to 9-1-1 in the future. Locally and elsewhere in the nation, there are currently trials underway that are experimenting with this new way of seeking assistance by texting. One is occurring in the Tidewater area of Virginia and another in Frederick County, Maryland. Fairfax County has monitored closely these trials and all that has led up to

them. Currently, the trials only allow for a particular vendor (cell phone service provider like, but not limited to, Verizon) to conduct trials in a very limited basis. Texting to 9-1-1 is one of several new means to contact 9-1-1 that will utilize smart devices (smart phones, tablets, etc.) to communicate. Fairfax County is looking forward to providing text to 9-1-1 in the future and after the ability to do so is not limited to just one carrier.

dd20 : I would like to know how well cell phones work when dialing 9-1-1. In other words, can you locate the place of need (where the call originated from)? I was thinking of a potential incident where a child may call who doesn't know their address or a situation where a caller cannot speak well enough, but can dial the numbers.

Stephen Souder : Approximately, 75% of all 9-1-1 calls made in Fairfax County are from cell phones. Fortunately, technology has improved over the past decade and now we can, in most cases, identify the location from which the 9-1-1 call is being made. Actually, two locations are available to the 9-1-1 call taker: 1) the location of the cell site that first picked up the 9-1-1 call and 2) the actual location, by latitude and longitude presented on a highly detailed map in the 9-1-1 Center.

Matt : With the recent proliferation of "SWATting" pranks with high profile victims like Brian Krebs and Wolf Blitzer, is there anything Fairfax County can do to protect us from being assaulted by our own police? What is Fairfax doing to confirm the validity of information provided by 911 callers? What should a victim of a SWATting incident do?

Stephen Souder : Matt, SWATting 9-1-1 calls have been in the news frequently, particularly on the West Coast where many celebrities have been "SWATted." Fairfax has experienced two such calls lately, and the media reported one in Montgomery County Saturday evening. A person making a SWATting call could be located anywhere in the world and through technology available to them can make the call appear, by phone number and address, as if it were coming from an address in Fairfax County. Our 9-1-1 call takers are very proficient in soliciting information from callers; however, in a SWATting call, they're not actually speaking with a SWATter. The SWATter is communicating by text through a TTY method

commonly used by the hearing impaired community. Consequently, when we ask questions of the SWATter, a TTY relay service is the intermediary. As was the case in Montgomery County on Saturday, an astute 9-1-1 supervisor recognized the call as suspicious. As in Fairfax County's experience, the information provided by the SWATter raised enough concern that appropriate checks were made to ensure the public's and officer safety before entering the location reported.

Anonymous User : Following up on Rich's question, why wouldn't Fairfax County want to participate in a text to 911 trial like the nearby locales?

Stephen Souder : The two trials mentioned previously are in relatively small centers, and the text call can only be answered at one call taker position. Fairfax County is one of the ten largest 9-1-1 centers in the nation serving a population of more than one million and handling more than one million calls each year. The county 9-1-1 center has 36 work stations from which 9-1-1 calls are answered. It is important that when Fairfax County accepts text 9-1-1 calls that we can do so from any cell phone service and answer the text call at any call taker work station.

Anonymous User : How does one become a 9-1-1 operator? What training is required? What kind of shifts do they work?

Stephen Souder : 9-1-1 call takers, in Fairfax County they are referred to as Public Safety Communicators (PSC), is one of the most challenging and rewarding positions. We are constantly looking to recruit applicants with a strong desire to help the public in their time of need and are able to multi-task and be quick decision makers. Our website, www.fairfaxcounty.gov/9-1-1, provides additional information about the position and how to apply to be a PSC.

Burke : When cell reception is out, what's the best way to get help?

Stephen Souder : Since the Derecho storm in June of last year and the resulting 9-1-1 outage, much attention has been given locally and nationally to the reliability of the nation's 45 year-old 9-1-1 network. Your question refers to cell reception which could be very geographically localized or specific to

one carrier. If either is the case, the best way to call for help is to call 9-1-1 on a telephone. The 9-1-1 outage in June impacted the entire telephone system, 9-1-1 and other, in the entire Northern Virginia region. Because of this, there was NO telephone service at all. This resulted in persons with an emergency having to flag down a police cruiser or fire truck or go to a police or fire station to report an emergency. The county continues to explore alternate means by which residents can call 9-1-1 or a ten digit number in the event of a similar wide area total telephone outage.

Harris : In these tough economic times, the county police and fire departments trimmed their budgets and programs. How has the 911 center been impacted and are service delays expected?

Stephen Souder : Fairfax County recognizes that 9-1-1 is one of the most fundamental services provided by government. In these difficult financial times, 9-1-1, because of its importance, has not been impacted.

Anonymous User : To whom should a resident call if they anticipate they may fall and need assistance and no one is at home to assist?

Stephen Souder : In the event of an emergency, always call 9-1-1.

Carlton : I see ads in newspapers and on television for Smart911. This is already available in Washington DC. Is Fairfax County looking into this valuable program?

Stephen Souder : Smart911 is a commercial service that Washington D.C. subscribed to last summer. Other 9-1-1 centers, locally and beyond, are closely monitoring its use.

Anonymous User : At tomorrow's Board meeting, the Board is being asked to authorize staff's comments in response to the Federal Communications Commission Notice of Proposed Rulemaking to Improve 9-1-1 Reliability. How will that prevent future 911 outages in the county?

Stephen Souder : As a result of the Derecho storm and the outage last June, the FCC launched a major investigation that resulted in proposed rule

changes in the way 9-1-1 system providers would be monitored in the future. Fairfax County has taken a very active role in this entire process and tomorrow will ask Board of Supervisor authority to comment on the proposed rule changes. The proposed rules are intended to make carriers more accountable for the reliability of the service the public relies on in time of need.

Sandy in Reston : I had to call the cops at the non-emergency number recently because my neighbors were being loud and noisy at 2 am. Why do I have to give my name and address? I am worried because I assume my neighbors could find out who placed the call if they ask you for the record?

Stephen Souder : When making a request for police, 9-1-1 or non-emergency, 9-1-1 call takers attempt to obtain as much information as possible to provide to the officers that respond, so that they can be of the greatest service to the requester.

Anonymous User : What constitutes an emergency?

Stephen Souder : Generally speaking, emergencies are considered immediate and life threatening. Emergencies should always be reported via 9-1-1 and non-emergencies on the non-emergency number 703-691-2131.

Stephen Souder : Thank you for joining me today to discuss 9-1-1. I've enjoyed answering your questions and please feel free comfortable in contacting me at steve.souder@fairfaxcounty.gov and visiting our website at www.fairfaxcounty.gov/9-1-1