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911 texting now available in Lamorinda

By *Nick Marnell*

You can now text 911 in case of an emergency in Lafayette, Moraga and Orinda, but the program still has a major hurdle to clear to offer seamless emergency texting service.

On June 13, the Contra Costa County Office of the Sheriff rolled out its Text to 9-1-1 program, which allows the county dispatch center to handle text messaging in addition to voice calls from your cell phone.

According to the sheriff's office, when texting 911, enter those numbers in the "To" field of your cell phone. In the body of the message, include the exact location of the emergency and whether you need police, fire or an ambulance. Keep texts short and simple, with no photos or videos, and do not include abbreviations, jargon or slang.

"Make the phone call when you can. It's so much faster," said Will Pigeon, Contra Costa County Fire Protection District assistant fire chief, communications division. Pigeon said that text notifications can take 10 minutes or longer before dispatchers can determine the exact details of the incident. The sheriff's office also recommends to text only when you cannot make a phone call.

The chief listed situations that especially call for emergency text messaging, such as an incident involving a person with a hearing or speech impediment, or during a cell phone call overload period when text messages can still get through. A person who hears an intruder inside the home may not want to risk speaking aloud, so texting 911 would be the prudent choice there. "Or in a hostage situation, with someone held at gunpoint and who cannot make a phone call," Pigeon said.

The county uses a web-based Text to 9-1-1 solution, and the dispatcher may not know the exact location of the caller. "We will know what cell tower the call comes in from with some reliability; however, the distance from the cell tower can be several hundred meters. A caller must be able to text us their location," said Jimmy Lee, director of public affairs for the sheriff's office.

Lee said that the Text to 9-1-1 program is temporary, until Next Generation 911 service is available nationwide. NG911, which has no target date for implementation, is a more resilient, digital system that allows voice, photos, videos and text messages to flow seamlessly from the public to the 911 network. Text to 9-1-1 is available only in English and is not available in every area of California. Should you text 911 in an unavailable location, you will receive this message: "Make a voice call to 911 for help; text to 911 is not available." Lee said that the state has requested that all agencies in California be Text to 9-1-1 capable by Dec. 31.

The ConFire dispatch center receives most of the calls for fire and ambulance from the sheriff's office communications center and dispatches appropriate personnel to all points of the county. The Moraga-Orinda Fire District contracts with ConFire for its dispatch service.

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