

4G Americas: Don't Rely on SMS in Emergency

By Monica Allevan Tuesday, October 12, 2010

Given various groups' interest in using SMS for 911 and teens' propensity to use text rather than make a phone call, 4G Americas decided it was time to compose a white paper on the limitations surrounding the use of SMS in emergencies. The 3GPP trade association released a white paper today, making it clear that SMS is not the answer when it comes to trying to summon help in an emergency.

SMS was never meant as an emergency services tool when it was originally developed years ago, explains 4G Americas President Chris Pearson. It was designed as a secondary means of communications using temporarily vacant capacity in networks. Voice calls to 911 are still the best and most reliable method of reporting an emergency and getting help, he says.

4G Americas isn't the first to sound the warning about using SMS for services it wasn't designed for. Industry professionals in the past have said it wasn't made for sophisticated financial transactions either. But some pockets exist where 911 via text is supported, and leaders in towns, cities, campuses, states and other entities across the country are looking at using texting as a solution in emergencies. 4G Americas' technical work group created the white paper to help explain the limitations of texting.

"The average person may not be reading our 76-page white paper, but we do feel that when regulatory officials and public safety are looking at critical 911 communications, they need to fully understand" the technical parameters, Pearson says. The association doesn't want someone in a real emergency to send an SMS to 911 and think they're going to get assistance – SMS is too unreliable. Plus, Public Safety Access Points (PSAPs) don't get location information with text messages like they get with voice calls.

SMS is "store and forward," not a real-time technology. Numerous examples abound where people received a text too late – Pearson himself sent a text to his wife not too long ago letting her know he was working late and would "be home in a while," but she didn't get the message until the next day, when he was on his way to the airport. Needless to say, she was wondering what he was talking about.

Pearson adds that the industry is working on developing a reliable, non-voice solution to contact emergency services that is not based on SMS.