



# 911 REALITY

## Dialing 911 from cell phones can delay emergency help

Calling 911 from a cell phone can cause potentially dangerous delays and pose several challenges for emergency dispatchers and public safety responders.

Unlike landline calls, which give dispatchers your exact address and phone number, cell phones don't provide a specific location, said Jennifer Disburg, operations manager at Metro Communications 911 dispatch center in Sioux Falls. Plus, cell phone service can be unreliable. Calls drop. Batteries die. Conversations break up.

Many cell phone users mistakenly assume GPS technology will quickly lead responders to their exact location. The dispatcher, however, must request the caller's GPS coordinates from the wireless carrier that operates the tower.

"We receive latitude and longitude, but getting that information transferred over in the system and determining an approximate location can take a couple of minutes," Disburg said. "Furthermore, it really only narrows it down to a certain number of meters."

When emergency responders are only led to a general area, finding the caller can be complicated if they are in an apartment building, business complex or busy neighborhood, she said.

It's like playing "Marco Polo" in the pool where you're blindfolded with just sound to guide you.

While dispatchers ask the caller for an address, some residents forget where they live in a time of crisis. Other times callers might not be able to speak if they're having a stroke or are choking. If you lose your connection or drop your cell phone while fleeing from a dangerous situation, emergency personnel may not be able to find you. Non-English speakers might need to wait for a translator.

Calling from a landline clearly provides a huge advantage, but if you must call from a cell phone, first tell dispatchers your location. If you're unsure of your exact address, at least say the town or neighborhood and glance around quickly to see if there's a noticeable landmark. Also say your cell phone number so dispatchers can call you back if you get disconnected. Then quickly explain the nature of the emergency.

While this may not be as simple as just dialing 911 from a landline, it's the reality of the current cell phone and 911 technologies.

Disburg said she regularly uses her cell phone to make personal and business calls, but she still has a landline in her home for security reasons.

"I refuse to get rid of my landline because I've seen the difference it makes when dialing 911," she said.