

Special Report - 911 Upgrade

by Brittany Gray



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KALAMAZOO, Mich. (NEWSCHANNEL 3) - We can check into a location on Facebook, with just one click on our cell phone. Uber can pinpoint your location for a pick-up. But most 9-1-1 dispatchers still don't have those capabilities.

Cellphones can pose problems for 9-1-1 dispatchers.

"Probably the biggest issue is...not having a specific address of where that call is coming from," said Calhoun County Sheriff Matt Saxton.

Michigan works off of a legacy network that was in use 40 years ago. It was built for landlines and can't handle big packages of data.

But according to the Federal Communications Commission, it is estimated 70 percent of 9-1-1 calls nationwide are made from a cellphone.

That number climbs in Michigan to 80 to 90 percent.

"The average person believes why don't the dispatchers have that information. And in actuality when I initiate a 9-1-1 call from this device right here, the only information that gets sent to the 9-1-1 center is the caller ID," explained Jeff Troyer, the Executive Director of the Kalamazoo County Consolidated Dispatch Authority.

So, we decided to put the current system to the test.

Three separate locations in Calhoun County, using phones from three of the largest carriers: Verizon, AT&T, and Sprint.

One of our photographers agreed to be our caller, giving the dispatcher no information about his location.

And Sheriff Saxton agreed to be our deputy responding.

"He went down the road where the address was, couldn't see anything but so then, I don't know if you saw, but I switched maps," said Kim Grafton, with the Calhoun County Consolidated Dispatch Authority.

The FCC now requires all carriers to be "phase two" compliant, meaning they need to be able to give a more precise location of that call, which is supposed to be within 300 meters of the actual location.

But even that's not enough.

"Dispatchers are, they're like, they're like bulldogs," said Grafton. "They get a hold of something and they do not give up on it."

So those dispatchers work with what they've got.

"Different maps, the phone number that it came in from, previous histories logged into our computers, previous histories logged into any of the county computers. So any information that we have as far as the phone number and where it's showing to be. We work with all those references to try and help the officers and guide them," said Grafton.

In each scenario, Sheriff Saxton found our caller, but it didn't always happen on the first pass.

In our last scenario, our photographer was parked right off of I-94.

Rich feole, executive director, calhoun county consolidated dispatch authority

"Especially on freeways where you have exits, you have an eastbound, you have a westbound. You could be in several different areas within that 300 meters," said Rich Feole, the Executive Director of the Calhoun County Consolidated Dispatch Authority.

The 300 meters is, of course, required by the FCC.

The sheriff did eventually find him--behind a business.

Troyer tells us the technology is there, but moving towards an updated system that can handle the cellphone data takes time.

You might argue, Uber can do it, why can't our dispatch centers?

Troyer says they are two separate technologies.

Uber establishes a direct connection to a wireless device using the IP network that exists. It receives the GPS coordinates from the device, not a network connection.

"Our state 911 committee in the state has to submit an annual report to the legislator each year, and this year was the first time that I can remember that there were actually some legislative recommendations made to move Michigan toward next generation 911," Troyer said.

But Troyer says it comes down to two issues: the data is not readily available from the service providers, and the state needs to have a next generation 9-1-1 IP network capable of sending that data.

"We have to find a stable funding mechanism for the IP networks, they cost significantly more than what legacy copper networks cost. Especially the network that's in place today because it's been in place for so long," he said.

In extreme cases, when someone is in immediate danger, a 9-1-1 center can contact the carrier and request the exact location of that device.