

The Commission of Deaf, DeafBlind & Hard of Hearing Minnesotans: MN dials-up texting services for all

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St. Paul, Minnesota (December 5, 2017) – Minnesota can declare today for the first time that people who are deaf, deafblind or hard of hearing have access to texting for emergency services from anywhere in the state.

Text-to-911 is now in Minnesota! It covers all 87 Minnesota counties, and not just in certain places, thanks to the work of the Minnesota Department of Public Safety Emergency Communication Networks Division (DPS-ECN). DPS-ECN worked closely with the state's independent Commission of Deaf, DeafBlind & Hard of Hearing Minnesotans (MNCDHH) and the Minnesota Department of Human Services' Deaf and Hard of Hearing Services Division (DHHSD) to ensure that the new system is accessible to Minnesotans who are deaf, deafblind and hard of hearing.

“For quite some time now in other states, Text-to-911 has been arriving piecemeal, county by county, or city by city,” said Jason Valentine, the state commission's board chair. “It's arrived and our great state of Minnesota took the smart approach by rolling it out statewide.

“Unlike some states, you don't have to worry about which county or city you are in. If you have an emergency anywhere in Minnesota, you have access to this service!”

Text-to-911 is coordinated by the Minnesota Department of Public Safety Emergency Communication Networks Division (DPS-ECN) as a vital alternative to calling 911 in an emergency.

The significant upgrade to statewide access to Text-to-911 is reserved as a first

option for people who are deaf, deafblind, hard of hearing, or have a speech disability.

This capability not only makes contacting 911 less difficult for many hundreds of thousands of Minnesotans, it also provides a way to get help when a person in danger needs to discretely contact emergency services

“In this era of heightened awareness everywhere about abuse and harassment, this significant technological expansion comes at a most welcome time,” said Aaron Gutzke, executive director of ThinkSelf, an education and advocacy nonprofit for deaf, deafblind, and hard of hearing survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault. “And quite frankly, it’s been long overdue.”

Callers are encouraged to notify a dispatcher whether they are deaf, deafblind, hard of hearing, or have a speech disability. They also must be ready to offer specifics about their location, given that the geographic pinpointing of the text sender is not communicated as precisely to the receiver as are phone calls.

The Text-to-911 blanket was laid over Minnesota after DPS-ECN installed the necessary hardware and software at all of the state’s 104 911 call-centers. State public safety officials also worked with dispatchers on how to use the new technology.

Lea Bourassa of Maplewood remembers back when the deaf, hard of hearing, or speech-impaired had but two ways to make a call: either through a TTY (a device that allows people to submit calls by typing in a special phone) or by asking a family member or neighbor who can hear to make the call.

One day in the early 1980s, Bourassa felt a pain her arm and turned to her 10-year-old daughter to call local police station staff, who ordered her to call 911 immediately.

“The doctors found out that I had a massive blood clot in my arm,” Bourassa said. “If Text-to-911 had been around back then, I might have been able to text for help myself. My husband and I are both senior citizens. I have Deep Vein Thrombosis (DVT). It is wonderful to know that if we ever need urgent medical attention, we now have the option of using Text-to-911 to get help.”

Ridge Euler of Rochester has deafblindness and has health difficulties. His home has

a pull cord for summoning emergency services. However, when he is out and active in his community, he would have great difficulty reaching emergency personnel if not for Text-to-911.

“When texting on my iPhone 6s Plus, I have the background black and the letters white, then I enlarge the font as much as I can,” Euler said. “I also insert magnifiers on my glasses, which helps me read my text. Text-to-911 when I am out would be the best way for me.”

The Minnesota Department of Human Services Deaf and Hard of Hearing Services Division (DHHSD) has six regional offices, and staff members at each one are prepared to take questions about how Text-to-911 works. Visit <http://bit.ly/2jw95jK> for locations and contact information.

About the Commission

The Commission of Deaf, DeafBlind & Hard of Hearing Minnesotans is a governor-appointed Commission that advocates for communication access and equal opportunity with the roughly 20 percent of Minnesotans who are deaf, deafblind or hard of hearing. For more information about the commission, visit www.mncdhh.org or join us on Facebook and Twitter. You can also reach us by calling 612-404-2441 or via email at anne.sittner-anderson@state.mn.us.