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CRTC launches trial of 911 text messaging; Test involves hearing, speech impaired

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There could soon be a new way to reach 911 services - text message.

The Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) announced Thursday that it would begin a three-month trial of a service that would allow people with hearing and speech impairments to communicate with emergency call centres via text message.

If implemented, pre-registered users would dial 911 in an emergency. Their calls would be flagged, and the operator would begin a text message conversation with them.

The three-month trial will involve 911 call centres in Vancouver, Toronto, Montreal, and Peel Region north of Toronto. Organizations for the hearing-and speech-impaired communities are recruiting volunteers to take part in the trial.

"This text messaging trial is one of several initiatives that the CRTC is exploring to improve the accessibility of communications services for the hearing and speech impaired," CRTC acting chairman Leonard Katz said in a release. "This trial will give us the technical and operational information we need before making a final decision on whether to expand the program nationwide."

Currently, Canadians with hearing problems can contact emergency services using TTY - a teletypewriter device that allows people to type messages back and forth when attached to a phone - but this service requires an operator to communicate the call. The 2009 report found this can cause delays and 911 operators cannot track the location of the call.

Jody Robertson, a spokeswoman with E-Comm, the 911 centre in Vancouver, said staff are accustomed to communicating with hearing impaired individuals through TTY, but that it is far from ideal.

"(TTY units) are big and they're bulky and everybody uses small Black-Berrys now. That's how we communicate," she said. "This gives people mobility and the mobility to make a 911 call when they're not at home."