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CRTC to mount trial run of 9-1-1 text message system

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Byline: Heather Yundt
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UNDATED - There could soon be a new way to reach 9-1-1 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 9-1-1 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 9-1-1 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.”

The trial comes as a result of a 2009 CRTC policy report that addressed accessibility issues in broadcasting.

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 that this can cause delays and the 9-1-1 operators cannot track the location of the call. Jody Robertson, a spokeswoman with E-Comm, the 9-1-1 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 BlackBerrys now. That's how we communicate,” she said. “This gives people mobility and the mobility to make a 9-1-1 call when they're not at home.”

She said there will be a learning curve for 9-1-1 operators and people with a hearing impairment when the service is fully implemented, because “people take shortcuts with texting” and operators will be

unable to use clues from noises in the background to determine the extent of the situation. That's why, Robertson said, the Vancouver 9-1-1 centre asked to be part of the trial.

“It's important for anyone to feel confident and comfortable to call 9-1-1. It is a life-saving service,” she said.

hyundt@postmedia.com

Twitter.com/hyundt