

Toronto Star

Have an emergency? Text 911

Fri Feb 17 2012
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Section: Vitals
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People with speech and hearing disabilities will soon be able to communicate with 911 services via text messages.

During the three-month pilot project announced by the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission, volunteers registered with their phone provider will make test phone calls to 911, and the dispatcher will respond with a text message to the user's cellphone. The user can then text their situation back to the dispatcher.

The pilot programs are set to take place in Toronto, Peel Region, Vancouver and Montreal.

Mandy Conlon, the provincial accessibility coordinator at the Canadian Hearing Society says this is a big step forward in a 911 service that leaves many who cannot communicate by voice without easy access to emergency services.

"It may be a matter of life and death," added Canadian Hearing Society president and CEO Chris Kenopic.

The CHS worked with the CRTC, telecommunications companies like Rogers and Bell, and emergency services providers to develop the texting pilot program. The committee also considered options like instant messaging and real-time text (a service which relays conversations from text to voice and vice versa using an operator).

"This was a huge undertaking because the 911 platform didn't support texting," Kenopic says. "The system needs an overhaul which is both time-consuming and costly."

If the program is successful it could be implemented on a federal level, says Conlon.

The general public won't be able to text 911 for a long time, says Jody Robertson, a spokesperson for E-Comm, the Vancouver 911 services provider participating in the pilot program.

"It's going to take years to develop a reliable enough system," she says.

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