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911 slowly gets smart phone-savvy

Durham County is among a handful of emergency dispatch centers in the state that will soon be capable of receiving 911 emergency calls as text messages or streaming video.

Dispatchers across the state are updating their local emergency networks to be compatible with smart phones, but there's no guarantee that the public will be able to send text or images to 911 dispatch centers anytime soon.

AT&T, this state's biggest phone company, has already gone to federal court to prevent the advanced 911 calls from running over its networks in this state. And wireless phone providers are not expected to voluntarily lend the technological support necessary to send text and video messaging to dispatch centers.

Still, officials in Durham and Cabarrus counties say they could have advanced networks in place before the year is out. The counties of Surry, Stanly, Haywood, Brunswick and the cities Winston-Salem and Eden are also implementing advanced 911 networks for their residents. Wake and other counties have not signed contracts but are either reviewing bids or exploring options.

"We're just now getting to the point where we're finally starting to see things happen," said Richard Taylor, director of the N.C. 911 Board in Raleigh. "We are so dag-gone close."

Texting is the preferred mode of communication for some, but today a text message or digital photo sent to 911 will not arrive at a dispatch center because existing emergency networks are not equipped to route them to an assigned destination.

But two telecommunications companies - Synergem Emergency Services in Greensboro and Intrado Communications in Colorado - are signing contracts with local dispatch centers around the country to install networks capable of delivering text and images along with essential information: GPS coordinates.

James Soukup, director of Durham Emergency Communications, said Intrado began implementing a next generation network this month at the county dispatch facility.

Durham's advanced emergency communications networks will provide access to the hearing impaired and anyone unable to make a phone call, Soukup said. The new technology also will enable the public to send video and other data that could be used to respond to accidents and natural disasters.

"This is going to revolutionize the way 911 calls are sent," said Jim Clark, an engineer with Synergem. "Just imagine a bank robbery taking place. And you're there, and you pull out your camera phone and start sending streaming video of the bank robbery in progress."

But a network doesn't operate in isolation and requires support from the telecommunications industry. GPS coordinates, essential to the system's reliability, will have to come courtesy of wireless providers such as AT&T, Sprint Nextel and T-Mobile, but currently there is no federal requirement in place to compel the telecoms to include geographical coordinates for text or images.

Without the coordinates to tell dispatchers where the message is coming from, the dispatch center can't send help. Standard 911 calls from landline or wireless calls come with an address or coordinates because people may not know the address of a car accident or injury, or are too disoriented to provide vital information.

Coordinating a next generation emergency network may come down to intervention from the Federal Communications Commission or other authorities, Taylor said.

Until recently, providing phone lines for dispatch centers was subject to almost no competition. Now Intrado and others are looking to take lucrative business from longtime provider AT&T. The stakes are not insignificant. For instance, Durham pays \$545,791 a year to Intrado, while the Raleigh-Wake County Operations Communications Center pays \$732,000 a year for the service to AT&T.

The 911 networks require companies like Synergem and Intrado to be able to interconnect to existing phone networks. AT&T has refused to let Intrado piggyback on its network, saying Intrado is not a phone service provider. AT&T is suing the N.C. Utilities Commission in federal court to block the commission's ruling requiring AT&T to open its network to Intrado.

Intrado and AT&T are having the same dispute in other states.

Critics say AT&T is using the legal system to stall so it can buy time to design its own next generation 911 service to compete with Intrado and Synergem.

Durham was able to sign a contract with Intrado this year because the county's previous provider was Verizon, not AT&T. At the time, Verizon was selling its local assets to another phone company, Frontier, which began providing phone service in this state in June.

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